



In the New Terminal at LaGuardia, an Argument for Public Art Amid a Pandemic

By Laird Borrelli-Persson June 16, 2020

This is no time for throwing pennies in a fountain and hoping your wishes will come true. Change is the result of action. Yet even in an atmosphere charged with pain and protest, there needs to be room for idealism and optimism. Goals must be imagined before they can be achieved, after all.

Last week, at the new Terminal B at LaGuardia Airport, the Berlin-based Danish artist Jeppe Hein unveiled new work that seems to distill that sense of optimism. With air travel limited and with many regions still under some form of lockdown, what could be more cheerfully forward-looking than a public art exhibition at an airport?

Hein is “wonderfully imaginative” says Nicholas Baume of the Public Art Fund, the organization that—in collaboration with LaGuardia Gateway Partners—commissioned the works. His work, continues Baume, “solicits a sense of wonder, and delight, and joy; and, of course, those are all things we desperately need in our lives right now. So it’s sort of serendipitous that [Jeppe] was chosen for the airport.”

Hein’s cheering, colorful works, *All Your Wishes* [balloons] and *All Your Wishes* [bench] speak to a feeling of release, of opening up, of airiness—the promise of “lifted” restrictions. His perpetually buoyant balloons with their shiny mirrored surfaces invite blue-sky thinking, while his loop the loop benches resembles a ride you might find at Copenhagen’s charming Tivoli Gardens. Baume points out that Hein’s benches turn “everyday, utilitarian, urban street furniture into a sculpture—but a usable sculpture.” Hein’s idea, he says, is “that art can be both a wonderful imaginative experience but at the same time perform a function, and in fact perform a function in a way that enhances the social experience of public spaces.”

Hein has repeatedly explored the idea of being in something together. Last September, he conducted a weeklong interactive project, *Breathe With Me*, in which the audience was invited to create two long, downward brushstrokes to match their exhale. The work began at the United Nations and later moved to Central Park. “I had thousands of people breathing the same air, and being a part of each other, and knowing that we’re breathing the same air around the world and we are connected,” says Hein.

It's important, says the artist, that his work allows each viewer to “embrace their sense of wonder; offer them new perspectives on [themselves], each other, and the spaces we have in common; and create the conditions that foster moments of joy, empathy, and fellowship. I think this is important for New York now and in the future, as for all places where people live.”

Here, Hein talks to *Vogue* about the pandemic, storytelling, and being “a complete optimist.”

Your work suggests that you are an optimist; is that so?

Yes, definitely. I think I'm a complete optimist. I also think that we artists can change the world together, and I think we can inspire a lot. I grew up in the countryside in a very small social democratic country, with hippie parents and an organic farm. I would say there was always a bit of fighting in the background for attention from my parents and from the people around me. [Eventually] you find the structure, depending on who you are as a person. If you're negative, you're getting a negative feeling back quite often; if you're positive and laughing when you're a child, you get the same thing back, more or less. It was a nice tool to learn how to be together with people when I was younger. My goal in life is actually to create more empathy and happiness in the world with small experiences [that encourage] people to explore themselves and their surroundings.

Why have you chosen to create interactive work?

Many years years ago, I started to do interactive works where people somehow became the artwork. It quite often happens that you start to interact with [my works] just because you're just close to them. You mirror yourself, or you look into the mirror and you see someone else and you get shy because you don't want to have eye contact with someone. So there are all these small dialogues. I think that my work is positive and trying to create intimacy and openness, [to ask you to] open your heart, actually. I think this is a very political statement, although I'm not trying to be a political artist. It's [an idea that] is very up-to-date.

I like to inspire people to look into themselves to find out who they are, to ask, Who am I, and where am I going? I think it's a very complicated situation in the whole world [right now because of the pandemic]. One thing that's happening is that you have the mirror right in front of you. You have to look at yourself and ask, Who am I? I have to say [this] with very careful words: I think that something very positive could happen from this and it could bring a lot of new thoughts in the world.

What are you working on now?

A lot of the art fairs are not taking place, so I'm trying to do my work and at the same time inspire people on my Instagram. I do a lot of watercolors and small things, and I show vulnerability—which I think is a very beautiful word, actually. I'm a man, I'm 45, but I think I'm very open and show when I'm feeling sad, or I'm frustrated, or not feeling well. It's important,

especially at this time, to show vulnerability, to show that you can be hurt. I learned that when I show that, and show people my open heart, you just grow and get stronger and stronger. I'm trying to be very honest and very open.

Can you talk to us about change?

I wrote a sentence last week which I kind of liked: "Let's change us." We are so afraid of changing our lives, its structures, our habits, but we can only change ourselves. I have a small T-shirt brand. One slogan reads: You can only change yourself. I did this a couple of years ago, but I think it's fitting very well right now because quite often we're looking around ourselves and trying to change the surroundings, our friends, our kids—fit them into our schemes, our schedules, our way of living—but it doesn't really work. You have to find your own way and then things will happen. My work is about activating, but a lot of people don't want to change and don't want to play.

Please tell us all about your glorious balloons. Do they float?

There is no gas inside, they just look like it. The balloons are made of glass fiber and they have a chrome surface. They are very beautiful and very delicate. You don't really see it, but they are attached with one screw to the ceiling and hang with a magnet so they dangle a little in the wind.

I started with the balloons 15 years ago. You can give a balloon to a friend, or make it a present to a kid, or whatever. It can have so many meanings, [like with] weddings and parties and so on, but it's a lot to do with love as well. Sometimes you see a balloon flying away when someone has lost it. I personally always think about the story behind what happened: Who lost the balloon? Was it a child who started to cry, or is it a wish someone wanted to send out to the world?

The balloon is a very nice way of opening peoples' hearts. They look at it and right away they feel very fascinated. They want to touch [it], they want to see if they can hold it, they go close to it, and then you have this very beautiful surface which is reflecting the surroundings and you, so you become a part of the artwork. For me it's about creating a dialogue between people and creating a smile on your face.

I'm trying to open a small door in each one of the people [who are] seeing and experiencing my work, and give them space or room for whatever they are feeling. I'm not going in saying, "You should feel like that," or "No, you're not allowed to think like that," because that would just end the story. If I can add something to that story, and just accept it, then it's very beautiful, I think.

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