

A

smile

TEXT
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for

you



Jeppe Hein, *Light Pavillion*, 2004. Courtesy of Johann König, Berlin, 303 Gallery, New York.
Foto/Photo: Keizo Kioku.

To dare to ask about happiness

What does happiness mean to you?

Jeppe Hein's straightforward question, which opens the exhibition at Bonniers Konsthall will surely surprise many. Happiness is not one of contemporary art's most popular subjects. Which is not to say that happiness is not much discussed in our time. Promises of eternal and immediate well-being are made every day by serious and not-so-serious experts, psychologists, philosophers, lifestyle journalists, fitness gurus, and coaches. However, usually these promises come with the stipulation that something must change, whether that be a way of thinking, living, or eating. Nowadays, we even treat happiness like a project by choosing a lifestyle or buying a product.

Therefore it is no surprise that Jeppe Hein has decided to tackle happiness. His work is always concerned with the present moment. It is a reaction to the present, reading and response to it, often with playful humour, sometimes with cutting irony, but always quick and attentive. His interventions within rooms – such as a spontaneous fountain that squirts the observer, a wall that unexpectedly moves, or a light sculpture that turns off when someone approaches it – become contemporary, material comments, in which the observer is given the role as the partner in a conversation.

Hein's exhibition at the konsthall began with an open invitation in a va-

riety of media – Facebook, newspaper ads, and posters hung around the city – asking everyone to share what happiness means to them. This request emphasizes the dialogical nature of Hein's work, and also his disarming openness to the variety of influences and art forms that meet and intermingle. His work is based on a humble and anti-hierarchical approach, open to both influences of the history of Western art and to other places and cultural traditions. In Jeppe Hein's world, the circus, the carnival, the newspaper, and the bar are all possible springboards and influences.

What does happiness look like? How does it smell? What colour is it? An important key to Hein's work can be found in how these questions are formulated. He starts with a tangible physical reality, and his work is always the result of a material practice. Happiness is expressed as a sensuous experience: a smell, the memory of a taste, the feel of a material. Feelings, thoughts, and experiences take a physical form and give the viewer an immediate experience that is impossible to avoid. This physical aspect is highlighted in this exhibition through the engagement of the senses: sight, touch, and hearing.

In *A Smile for You* we encounter many of Hein's earlier works and materials, and the expressions that he has made his own and constantly returns to. Here we find mirrors in whose reflections viewers must meet themselves, and in which, like in a funhouse mirror, our perceptions of space and of our own bodies are reversed and distorted. Here we also meet elements like water and fire. Fire is associated with fireworks and the euphoria of the carnival, but also with danger and destruction. Hein uses wa-

ter to create fountains, whose surprising cascades are more reminiscent of the playground than the controlled water displays of classical gardens. The movement of water is another re-occurring theme in Hein's work, which itself is constantly moving and changing. Even walls and benches can move, playing with the conventional notion of the stability of sculptures.

Jeppe Hein's work moves between sculpture and architecture, with many of his pieces taking place in public environments outside of traditional art spaces. There are clear references in these pieces to traditions of minimalism, to the use of industrial materials and spaces, and to the dependence on the interpretation of the viewer in order for a work to be complete. The references also embrace the games played with the language of minimalism starting in the late 1980s. At that point artists like Felix Gonzalez-Torres and later Janine Antoni, Ingar Dragseth, and Michael Elmgreen started to use edible and perishable materials and erotically charged objects in order to include the political, the procedural, and the sexual in the traditional aesthetic idiom of minimalism. Hein's conversation with the minimalist tradition also makes room for humour and laughter.

Jeppe Hein has created a new piece for his exhibition at Bonniers Konsthall. It is a progression of the piece *Distance* from 2005, in which balls rolled along a track through an exhibition hall, and the movements of the balls were triggered by sensors that detected the movements of viewers. At Bonniers Konsthall wooden mallets rather than balls fly around the room, hitting metal bowls, and create a soundscape throughout the exhibition space. The bowls are the type of

singing bowls used in Buddhist rituals, during meditation, and for relaxation outside of a religious context. The influence of Eastern tradition is a new line of thought in Hein's work, and it is another interesting connection to the history of minimalism, in which Zen Buddhism has played an important role. Today, as well as before, there are elements of popular culture with their roots in Asian tradition – for example, yoga, meditation, and alternative medicine. Strong influences from Asian traditions of design and thought can also be found in contemporary art.

Hein's signature playful tone turns much darker when you reach the heart of the exhibition. A number of watercolours hang in the centre of the gallery. Each one is a kind of diary entry made by the artist during a burnout period. Through them the viewer is able to follow the artist from the paralysis of deep depression to the first signs of recovery. The naked desperation and vulnerability found in these paintings changes our reading of the exhibition as a whole and also indicates a decisive turn in Hein's work. The search for happiness can be seen as a way of finding a new path when all other doors seem closed. The first step might be to follow a movement, catch a scent, or see a colour. And to begin to live again could be to dare to ask the question of what happiness is. ◀

A Smile for You is on view between April 24th and July 28th. The exhibition is part of a larger collaboration with Jeppe Hein and Wanås Konst on the theme of happiness. The collaboration will also include a publication and an educational program.

Jeppe Hein, *Appearing Rooms*, 2004. Courtesy of Johann König, Berlin, 303 Gallery, New York, Galleri Nicolai Wallner, Copenhagen.
Foto/Photo: Kathryn Palin.

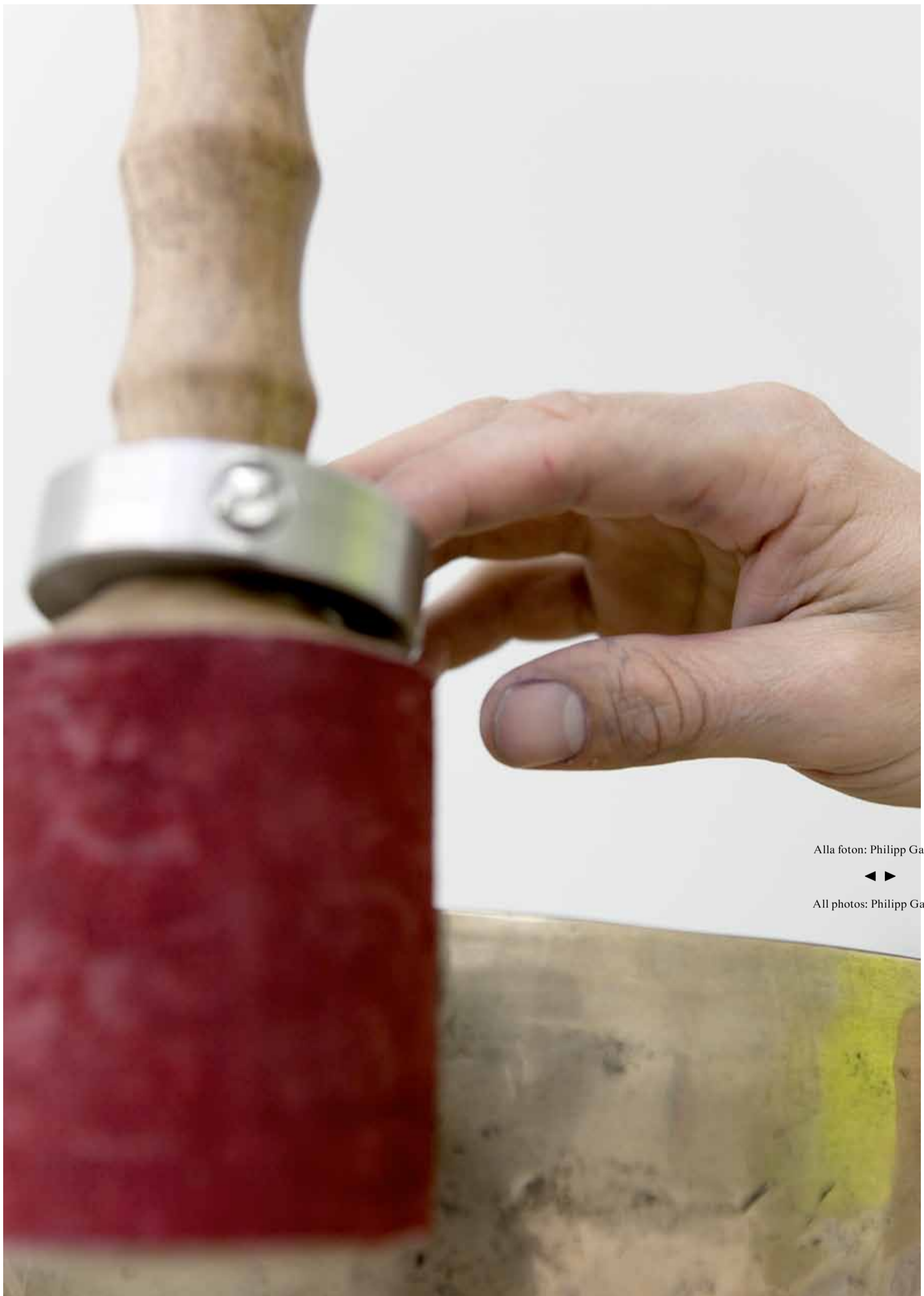


Lycka enligt

Jepppe Hein



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Alla foton: Philipp Gallon.



All photos: Philipp Gallon.



In Thailand Jeppe Hein met a monk who played music on a traditional Buddhist singing bowl, which led to a key element in one of Hein's latest installations – a track of singing bowls. Here in his studio, Hein is showing how the bowl can be used for painting.

Happiness according to Jeppe Hein

Imagine you are an ordinary businessman riding a train to northern Denmark. You are very busy. You have surrounded yourself with work tools – two cell phones, an Ipad, a stack of papers – and you're working on all of them at the same time. You're multitasking. You're always a bit stressed, but that's what keeps you focused. By now you might have noticed the stranger, dressed more casually than you, sitting across from you. To your surprise, he leans forward and introduces himself as Jeppe Hein, artist, and says that he'd like to ask you something. You're stuck on a train, so you have no choice.

"Are you happy?" he asks.

This example is taken from reality. This is how a meeting with Jeppe Hein (born 1974) might end up – a bit on the transgressive side. And however you might choose to answer his question, it will end up as part of what might be called artistic sociological research.

For the last few years this young Danish artist has been nurturing a burning interest in joy and happiness. He has thrown himself into the subject of happiness with scientific precision. What is joy?

What needs to take place in your life in order for you to be happy? Is happiness a legitimate goal? How do you give joy to others? He is so consumed by finding the answers to these questions that he expects to be occupied with them for "the next 15 to 20 years." "I think many people value the wrong things in life," says Jeppe Hein. "It's the small things that matter. True joy can only be found in one place. And that's inside of you. The problem with our society is that people don't dare to look at themselves and see who they are. People aren't honest with themselves."

But after more than a decade of fast-paced work – burning the candle at both ends so to speak – Hein finally burnt out.

Jeppe Hein's preoccupation with happiness is not completely unexpected. For many years, he pursued other priorities in his work – and in his life as well for that matter. But after more than a decade of fast-paced work – burning the candle at both ends so to speak – Hein finally burnt out. Before that, in addition to the time he spent creating work, it was not unusual for him to fly 150 times a year to openings

and exhibitions, or back and forth between Copenhagen, where he lived with his family, and Berlin, where he kept his studio and had fifteen employees. Then one day three years ago, it all just got to be too much. Hein wasn't just affected by a stress disorder, he was *completely* burnt out. For the next year, he cut off almost all contact with his studio and spent his days trying to rebuild himself from scratch – one day at a time – with the awareness that he never wanted to become the old Jeppe again. For the first three months he slept for almost 18 hours a day.

Luckily the Hein-machine was so well-oiled that exhibitions and commissions had already been planned for more than a year in advance, and therefore, the little factory of his studio could continue on for quite a while without its leader. Hein's right hand, Stephan Babendererde, was able to hold down the fort. During the painstaking process of rebuilding his wrecked psyche, Hein sought out help from therapies sometimes called "alternative." He underwent psychoanalysis and began meditation and yoga practice.

– It's awesome. Good for your back and for your breathing, says Jeppe Hein of yoga. He says that if someone had asked him a few years ago if he did yoga, he would have laughed because "of course I don't do that."

Jeppe Hein did have relapses, but he kept his head held high. It was just his brain and body's way of telling him he was going too fast again. He slowly started to feel better. He thinks it probably helped that he is basically a very positive person.



– I've never considered myself beat. I think 90% of those who are affected by stress do, he says.

In 2012 Jeppe Hein travelled to the small country of Bhutan, the land of the thunder dragon, which lies in the Himalayan Mountains between India and China. Bhutan is the only country in the world that considers the happiness of its citizens a national goal. Instead of measuring success with gross domestic product, Bhutan uses something called gross national happiness as an index of progress. On a later trip to Thailand, Hein met a German-born Buddhist monk who played music on a traditional singing bowl, which led to a key element in one of Hein's latest installations – a track of singing bowls!

When asked about who inspires him, Jeppe Hein always mentions the American conceptual artist Dan Graham and the Danish-Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson, who was a kind of mentor to Hein early in his career. Hein's sculptures and installations are located at the intersection between technology and audience interaction. His interactive fountains and his modified social benches both challenge and enable the audience by creating a space for people to meet. They strengthen the spontaneously occurring communities that arise when a desire for play and creativity is awakened.

Jeppe Hein's previous works were primarily social sculptures intended to engage the audience and maybe shake them up a bit too, but his newer work has acquired another dimension – a therapeutic one. Now his work also leads towards self-reflection, and it reveals Jeppe Hein as an artist whose practice parallels

the market for alternative treatments, with all of its implications, from healing to self-help literature. This is an area that the established art world has generally considered itself too *fine* for. But that's not something Jeppe Hein pays attention to.

Suddenly it occurred to me that the show should just be about happiness.

JEPPE HEIN

– I just try to be as honest with myself as possible, he says. And as for the art world: it's become less and less a part of my identity. Since I rearranged my life and found my balance, it's no longer a priority for me to knock around to openings and exhibitions. It's about daring to be totally open and honest with myself. And I know damn well what I'm talking about because I've been through so much anxiety and depression and pain in the last few years.

Two years ago Jeppe Hein showed his most honest and personal exhibition to date: *I am right here right now*. On the wall in the back room of Hein's gallery in Berlin, Johann König, were hung 900 watercolours, which Hein had painted therapeutically

while he was sick. Through them you could follow his recovery day by day. Since he's dyslexic, he wrote things like "Uha...not easy to...day..." "I was happy 4. sek to day," "So much pain indside" or "Sorry I am... a littel briandead at the moment." It was his gallerist who convinced him to exhibit these watercolours, and Hein agreed to do it even though it is an unusual move for an artist who normally works in a more minimalistic field.

It turns out that people can handle words like *honesty* and *joy* and *happiness*, even if under most circumstances those words are considered a little ugly. Last summer while trying to find a theme for his exhibition in Sweden, Jeppe Hein was at a meeting with a variety of curators and museum people.

– The people that I had around me had enormous amounts of drive, but they seemed to be missing joy. They looked so tired and burned out, said Jeppe Hein.

– Suddenly it occurred to me that the show should just be about happiness. And when I said that it was as if a kind of energy was released around the whole table. 'Yes! That's exactly what it should be about,' they said.

And so it was. ▀

Jeppe Hein was born in 1974 in Copenhagen, Denmark and now lives and works in Copenhagen and Berlin. Hein has had participated in and had solo presentations at Tate Modern, London, 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, Centre Pompidou, Paris, and MOCA, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.
