

KUNSTHAUSBASELLAND

Jeppe Hein in Conversation with Ines Goldbach

Ines Goldbach: Dear Jeppe, starting at the end of May, we will be showing your *Appearing Rooms* at Freilager-Platz on the Dreispitz in Basel for several months. This is a water pavilion that, in similar iterations, has already enthralled me in places like Munich and Nuremberg. I was fascinated not only by the immediacy with which you invite visitors of all ages and from a wide variety of backgrounds to become part of the fountain installation by simply „stepping in“ and allowing themselves to be inspired, but also by the fact that you seem to realize these large-scale projects without having any explicit expectations as to how people will respond to them. They are more like an invitation you extend to an interlocutor, without giving the impression that you are asking for or expecting a specific reaction or interaction. Does this correspond to a general (artistic) approach of yours?

Jeppe Hein: I don't expect any particular reaction or interaction with any of my works. I am more interested in stimulating and inspiring people, perhaps luring them out of their comfort zone, speaking to their senses, and engaging them in a dialogue. I cannot predetermine or even predict how they will respond and behave; people are much too different for that.

IG: Before we continue, I just wanted to give a short description of the project. *Appearing Rooms* is a programmed water pavilion that has the effect of a labyrinth. It comprises four external water walls in the shape of a square, and it is subdivided into smaller rooms by four independent walls inside the structure. The water walls, which reach over two meters high, rise and fall at random, delineating all possible rectangular configurations of the space in ten-second sequences, constantly changing their shape and appearance. Visitors can move from room to room within this water-shaped structure and thus find themselves in differently designed spatial constructions. Their position shifts between inside and outside the emerging spaces and even the pavilion itself.

Visitors can't control or completely understand the rhythm and sequence of what appears before and around them. How important to you is this element of surprise—or of being taken by surprise?

JH: This element of surprise used to be very important in my early works. I thought this was necessary for people to overcome their inhibitions about art. Pieces like *Smoking Bench*, *Invisible Moving Bench*, *360° Presence*, and *Appearing Rooms* are good examples of this.

Since then, the social dimension of my work has become more important to me—what happens between the people experiencing my works and how I can inspire them to incorporate the ensuing dialogue, empathy, and joy into their everyday lives.

That being said, the surprise effect still plays a major role; such a happy jolt is usually followed by a relieved laugh, and this positive reaction triggers something in you that I am continually trying to harness.

IG: For me, the title *Appearing Rooms* evokes the possibility that something might show itself, but also that something could disappear; the water enables things to be seen but also conceals them, depending on how high the water walls are—on how they rise, become smaller, allow people in, or even make it possible for them to “hide” inside the work. Could you tell us more about the title, perhaps also in relation to similar works such as *Hexagonal Water Pavilion*?

JH: Some of my work titles describe their form or function. *Hexagonal Water Pavilion*, for instance, alludes to the work's hexagonal floor plan. There are also more conceptual titles such as *Appearing Rooms*, which references the emerging and then vanishing spaces created by the water walls. In this case, I felt it was important to refer to the water pavilion's liquid architecture, which fabricates temporary places that vary in position, shape, and size.

IG: A few years ago, there was a study here in Switzerland, in St. Gallen to be precise, on the average time visitors spend in exhibitions and museums. The question was: how long does a visitor linger in front of an artwork on average? According to the study, the answer was less than 3 seconds, which is quite sobering. When I now think of how I have experienced your water pavilions in different places and countries, and how I would like this experience to translate at Freilager-Platz in Basel, I find that there is a great opportunity here for slowing down, something that we so often expect and desire. I am also thinking of all the young people who have been living, studying, and residing in this area for a number of years—including

children, teenagers, students, families, and senior citizens. It could be a chance for them to finally stop and enjoy being in an environment and space that is rather sealed with concrete, instead of quickly rushing across it towards another place. Would you say that this moment of pause and reflection, this way of fully inhabiting the present moment, is a fundamental aspect of your work?

JH: Absolutely. By making playful works in public spaces, like my water pavilions, I can create a dialogue with people on a completely different level. And really, this is something all of my works strive towards. I actually wouldn't so much talk about lingering, pausing, or standing still; what is important to me is "being in the moment." I hope to enable people to consciously experience and enjoy the moment through my work.

IG: Your *Appearing Rooms* have been around for almost 20 years now, which means that you must have experienced them in many different places and countries as well as worked with a wide variety of responsible parties and institutions. Were there any particular experiences involving this work that surprised you over the course of almost 20 years? And even if we're not talking in terms of expectations, would there be something you would like to happen while *Appearing Rooms* is presented in Basel over the coming months?

JH: Even if it is not really surprising, I always find it interesting to see the different roles people assume when they interact with my water pavilions. There are people who just watch the show and enjoy each other's company. Others come right in with their bath towels. And there are those who jump into the water fully clothed. It always takes place in a different setting and that's also something I always find exciting to see. I am very happy that there's now a lot of joy to be found in Basel and at Freilager-Platz, and that people can experience everything that art can be. Knowing that *Appearing Rooms* will be there all summer really warms my heart!

IG: Thank you very much for this interview and I am now looking forward to the coming weeks when *Appearing Rooms* will open at Freilager-Platz on the Dreispitz in Basel!

Jeppe Hein
Appearing Rooms
PUBLIC ART
@FREILAGER-PLATZ #1
26.5.—
3.9.2023

PUBLIC ART@FREILAGER-PLATZ is an initiative by the FHNW Academy of Art and Design Basel (HGK; Claudia Perren, Director), House of Electronic Arts Basel (HEK; Sabine Himmelsbach, Director), Kunsthaus Baselland (KHBL; Ines Goldbach, Director), and Interessengemeinschaft Freilagerplatz (IG, Chairman Peter Driessen). It pursues the shared aim of enlivening Freilagerplatz with alternating, publicly accessible art in order to sustainably increase its visitor appeal and strengthen the neighborhood. The plan is to present different outstanding artistic works each year, whose impact will be felt in the Basel-City and Basel-Country cantons as well as far beyond. The internationally renowned and socially committed artist Jeppe Hein will kick things off with his water feature *Appearing Rooms*. This project will mark the first time that a fountain sculpture has been installed on the Freilager-Platz, offering residents in particular an invitation to stop by and enjoy their time. #1 is the responsibility of Ines Goldbach, Kunsthaus Baselland. It is the first cross-institutional project of this kind and marks the imminent move of the new Kunsthaus Baselland to the Dreispitz, scheduled for completion by the end of 2023.