

PRESSBOOK

Jesper JUST
Art Asia Pacific

October 2017

OCT 10 2017

DENMARK USA HONG KONG

UNCOMFORTABLE GAZE: PROFILE OF JESPER JUST

BY YSABELLE CHEUNG



Portrait of **JESPER JUST**. Photo by Nina Mouritzen. Courtesy Galerie Perrotin, Hong Kong/Paris/Seoul/New York/Tokyo.

In Jesper Just's latest video, viewers linger on an image of a bollard fence that runs along the border between the United States and Mexico. As the camera pans out, we see even, mossy pastures on either side; as it closes in, we see individual, rusted posts, punctuated by slices of grass. The camera fixates for a long time on these scenes, past the point of comfort. But then the meandering shots are suddenly interrupted: a dirty blond female, wearing a gray hooded zip-up jumper and a candy pink tutu walks along the fence, knocking the structures with a stick. With these decisive whacks, the hollow bollards—which the audience might have initially only seen as a divisive wall—are rewritten as instruments, keys on a changeable scale in which pockets of stirring wind, paired with the protagonist's irregular drummings, can elicit varying pitches.

In just six minutes, *Continuous Monuments* (*Interpassivities*) (2017), screened at Hong Kong's Galerie Perrotin as part of the artist's solo show, overturns viewers' attention and expectations of the film-watching experience: what appears to be the opener of a political documentary turns out to be a feminist, musical abstraction. This "breaking of links" is a cinematic device that is key to Jesper Just's oeuvre; rather than building a narrative that is cohesive and entertaining, suspending our disbelief from start to end, he takes only the basic formal elements of glossy high-definition commercial films—lighting, music, action, drama—and forgoes other aspects, including narrative, character development and plot.



JESPER JUST, *Continuous Moments (Interpassivities)*, 2017, still from video. Courtesy Galerie Perrotin, Hong Kong/Paris/Seoul/New York/Tokyo.

Jesper Just was born in 1974 in Copenhagen, Denmark, and graduated from the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in 2003, where he studied primarily video art. In his earlier, autobiographical works, he grappled with tropes of masculinity in Hollywood flicks, enlisting white, male characters similar to himself. In these Nouvelle Vague or film-noir-esque works, Just toys with the assumptions of the audience by placing one or two male characters inside a scene—a snail’s-pace-moving car in a carpark, or the dim, rouge interiors of a strip club—and leaving them there. Some characters openly cry, or walk around, or kiss each other. We are unsure if the men we are watching on screen are father and son, friends, strangers or lovers; there is no back-story. With the narrative’s threads left dangling and unraveling, we, as the audience, can’t remember what feels and looks right and what doesn’t.

Just has recently expanded these interests into an exploration of representation of women in mainstream media, specifically the presence of middle-aged women. “Much of my work builds on cinematic codification and clichés of sex and gender and then distorts or defies them,” he explained. “I at times acknowledge the existence of the male gaze, but by both exploiting and evading expectation, it causes the viewer to experience a slight shock or confusion, which in one sense may make them aware of the tendencies and bias. It also places more agency back with the character.” He pointed out the female character in *Continuous Monuments (Interpassivities)*, played by visual artist and musician Kim Gordon, best known for being the bassist, guitarist and vocalist of the no wave band Sonic Youth. Never once looking at the camera or pandering to the male gaze, Gordon defiantly makes her own noise, evading expectations of gender norms and systematized ideals of beauty in her tutu-and-hoodie combo.



JESPER JUST, *Servitudes*, 2015, still from eight-channel video installation: 9 min (each). Courtesy the artist and Galerie Perrotin, Hong Kong/Paris/Seoul/New York/Tokyo.

In contrast to the image of Gordon is *Servitudes* (2015), a nine-minute long take of young starlet Dree Hemingway (great-granddaughter of novelist Ernest Hemingway). The film exploits society's obsession with beauty and femininity in its framing of Hemingway, who, although dressed conservatively, oozes a nubile glamour associated with her modeling and acting career. The work was screened across digital billboards in New York's Times Square for the "Midnight Moment" project in partnership with Performa 15 (for which he also created an opera), and is a reference to the usual hyper-sexualized portrayals of women dominating the area. Taken from a larger, eight-channel project of the same title, in which issues of disabilities and social difficulties feature, the film depicts Hemingway struggling to eat a raw ear of corn against a ploddingly slow interpretation of Chopin's *Prelude Op. 28 No. 17 in A Flat Major*, while wearing Continuous Passive Motion (CPM) devices on her hands and arms that restrict as well as guide her eating. Occasionally, Hemingway looks at the camera with shockingly intense, provocative sensuality, seductively rubbing away the maize juice dripping down her chin, and then suddenly looks away, fumbling with the corn again. Just explained how these actions, seemingly sexual yet painfully awkward, confused the "Midnight Moment" organizers: "They were afraid of it because it was ambiguous; they were not sure what it was about." That the setting is inside the new One World Trade Center, opened in 2014, brought up another concern with the organizers that the film carries vague political intent—but according to Just, this is exactly the type of empty expectation and embedded association that he is playing upon. He insisted that there is no political narrative.



Installation view of JESPER JUST's *Servitudes*, eight-channel video installation: 9 min (each), at "Servitudes," Palais de Tokyo, Paris, 2015. Courtesy the artist, Anna Lena Films and Galerie Perrotin, Hong Kong/Paris/Seoul/New York/Tokyo.

Ambiguity and expectation have also appeared in what Just calls his "spatial interventions" for which he builds mazes, situations or rooms in which the visitor must pass through or interact with in order to see his films, ultimately altering the viewing experience. For example, at the Danish Pavilion for the 55th Venice Biennale, Just created a site-specific installation that was an expansion of the urban landscape seen in the five-channel film, *Intercourses* (2013). In this work, he was interested in the idea of facsimile cities, in particular a fake Paris situated in Tianducheng, China, that was the setting for the film. Visitors meandered through installations of heathery bamboo plants accompanied by fluorescent magenta grow lights near the film; outside, visitors familiar with the pavilion were surprised to see new aerated concrete blocks covering the original exterior of the site. These intersecting yet narrative-less elements worked with rather than added to, *Intercourses'* subtle discussions around artificiality modeled on ideal cities, and "disallows the work to over-explain or dictate its meaning or order to the viewer. In many ways, the viewer has the most agency in determining how the work unfolds and its impact depending on how she or he moves throughout the space, listens, sees, pauses, or ignores."



JESPER JUST, *Intercourses*, 2013, still from five-channel black-and-white video installation: 10 min (each). Courtesy the artist and Galerie Perrotin, Hong Kong/Paris/Seoul/New York/Tokyo.

At some point during our interview at Galerie Perrotin, Jesper Just himself paused in his lengthy explanations of his work and flicked back the beige blinds that separated the exhibition space from the outside world, where yet another typhoon was swirling not far away and rain was beginning to fall in fat, heavy drops. Across the city, dozens of screenings of Hollywood blockbusters are just beginning in darkened theaters, and viewers are sinking into their luxurious soft-backed seats with popcorn and the safe knowledge that their expectations will be met. In the gallery, notes from *Prelude Op. 28 No. 17 in A Flat Major* floated across the space, mingling with Kim Gordon's hollow rapping on bollards, and Dree Hemingway bites down sharply on corn. "I want you to slow down, take a moment...from everything that is out there," he said, looking out at the restless streets of Hong Kong with hundreds of umbrellas already up and at the ready. "Think about it: what is it I am really watching on the screen?"

Jesper Just's "*Continuous Monuments (Interpassivities)*" is on view at Galerie Perrotin, Hong Kong, until November 11, 2017.

Ysabelle Cheung is managing editor at ArtAsiaPacific.

To read more of ArtAsiaPacific's articles, visit our [Digital Library](#).