

Jesper JUST

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This text investigates the path of Danish artist Jesper Just, who represented Denmark in 2013 at the Venice Biennale. Using a selection of his films, exhibitions and performances, it examines some of the main

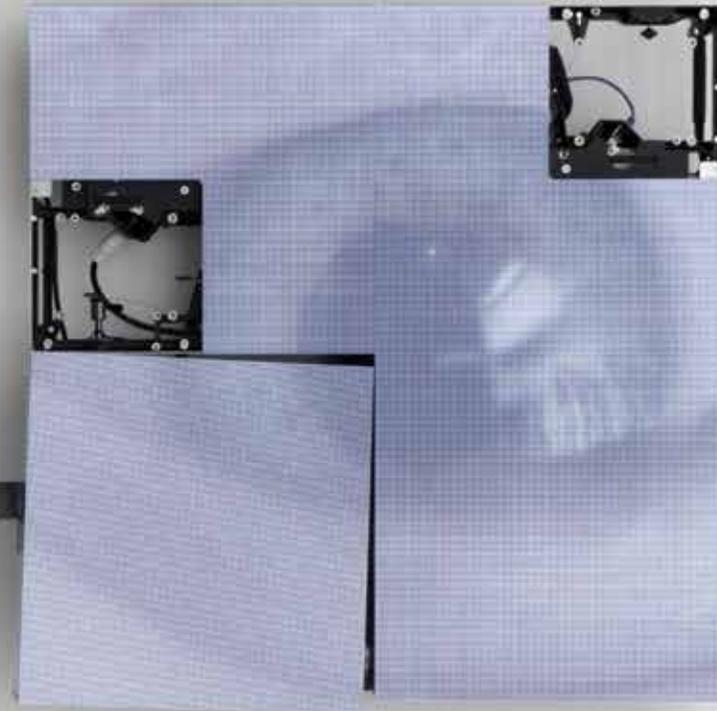
themes of the artist's practice. It focuses specifically on the relationship between video and the cinematic traditions and the cultural industry, together with the way in which Just explores—via the exhibition—a pos-

sible renewal of the relationship between viewer and art piece, towards a kind of total art which, thanks to the themes and devices chosen, places the individual rather than the work at the center of the artist's practice.









Corporalités, installation views, Perrotin, New York Photo: Guillaume Zicarelli
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Jesper Just's films feature refined images and slowed timing that could be found in cinema, but their unusual rhythms and soundtracks function as dialogues, moving them away from the seventh art. The more attentive viewers will not miss the fact that the spaces of Just's films outline actual film settings and that the image is only one of the languages that make up a more complex system that ends up enveloping the viewer. When Richard Wagner took on the romantic myth of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the total work of art theorized by the German painter Philipp Otto Runge, he proposed expressing the unity of life in the communion of the arts at the service of the artistic experience. If Jesper Just's work initially appears more fragmented and less dramatic than Wagner's, such a notion of total art is perhaps not so far from his conception of art and even less from his films, his performances and his settings.

Jesper Just clearly deconstructs the language of cinema and the distribution of roles by creating a new balance between subject, project, actors and viewer. This overturning of values partly explains the language he uses in his films, but also the device he sets up and the balance he establishes between story and experience.

As a director, Just does not impose a strict direction on his actors but instead gives them a certain acting autonomy. However, he investigates the stereotypes of cinema: "it's more the action or lack of action of the films that then breaks these clichés rather than any radical performance on the part of the actor."¹ The consequence of this is that the actors must accept becoming part of a mechanism destined to obstruct the cinema device and thus allow the film to become an art piece. The characters, for example, seem to be more sensitive to the environment in which they are placed, and their personality expresses itself in the relation with architecture. When asked how he builds a new story, Just does not necessarily speak of an anecdote but more often of a place, an atmosphere or an environment that become the basis of his reflections and on which he develops a form of "architectural performance." This often implies the absence of dialogues allowing for a transposition of the spectator's experience who intuitively shares the actor's experience. The body, the movement and the gaze constantly relate to the environment in which the film is shot and to the exhibition space. This performative function of architecture is expressed in particular in films such as *Intercourses*, which premiered in 2013 at the Danish Pavilion of the Venice Biennale. Actors dwell in a Chinese reconstruction of the city of Paris, a sort of odd and cannibal tribute to the French capital. The characters roam the city, and it is through the incongruity of the place that the question of the individual is placed at the center of the film. To Gauguin's formula "Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?" one may add the question of the environment, of what architecture reflects about us or, to a certain extent, the questioning of the information provided by that environment. A reference to the idea of meeting, the word 'intercourse' embodies this relationship because it conveys the idea of an individual's communion with the environment, in particular through architecture. This architecture, which ends up resembling a Potemkin village designed to conceal misery, questions the value of the idea of reproducing models of life and society. A film set, in short, which Just aims at deconstructing.

The fact that Jesper Just was playing with the codes of cinema became clear early on. His education in the fields of painting, drawing and photography, prior to video, might have allowed him to spontaneously free himself of the rules of cinema. It is no coincidence that the film *No Man is an Island* (2002)—which portrays a man improvising a dance in slow motion watched by the actor Johannes Lilleøre, moved to tears—looks more like the footage of a happening or an experimental film. The artist uses these codes nonchalantly to better crack them, in particular through rhythm, the apparent absence of progression, the centrality of emotion versus narration. The artist shows that he knows that the story is built from images that are not seen, from what can be inferred and supposed. In most cases, Just refuses to write an identifiable and linear story. If some may detect a connection here with David Lynch, the cryptic or esoteric absurd is not found in Just. Above all, the artist aims to introduce an ambiguity, intended to maintain a confusion and contradiction that open up fields of interpretation which allow the viewer to project and shape a personal experience. Among the technical devices used by the artist, we immediately note the presence of overlapping points of view, in particular in *This Nameless Spectacle*, produced in 2011 by the Val-de-Marne contemporary art museum (MAC VAL). With a wink to the history of cinema, the film is inspired by a technique used in 1927 by Abel Gance, based on the superposition of different points of view of the same scene. The division into two horizontal screens forces the viewers to concentrate and choose how to follow the story, because the concurrent movement of the two screens prevents them from perceiving it in its entirety, causing a frustrating feeling. The proliferation of screens in Just's exhibitions, often combined with a destructured, interrupted and fragmented writing, makes simultaneous access to the whole narrative impossible. In this film in particular, the artist questions the political and social dimensions of the landscape, both from the point of view of the film and its object, i.e. in this case the disabled body, the healthy body and the way in which cinema reinforces such perceptions. Jesper Just chooses devices that he renews constantly and, as we will see further ahead, going beyond the experience that the viewer has with his own body, he focuses on architecture by creating powerful installations and ecosystems that in the end overwhelm the viewer.

Jesper Just's practice constantly challenges categorization. After accepting RoseLee Goldberg's challenge in 2005 to produce a piece, *True Love is Yet To Come*, for Performa 05 in New York, the artist has turned the deconstruction of art genres into a central element of his research. In this sense, *Interpassivities* is a piece representative of the attempt to shatter the typical principle of the 'viewer/art piece' relationship. In this choreographic work, premiered in 2018 as part of the Next Wave Festival at the Brooklyn Museum, the viewer becomes a performer. Entering a large room, they sense the beginning of the work thanks to a few musical notes and the movement of a female dancer, who starts making gestures. After a few minutes, a group of workers arrive to disrupt the space, moving the pallets that make up the floor and conditioning the gestures and movements of the dancers as well as those of the viewers. The sound arises from the floor and viewers can feel its vibrations, while the presence of a mechanical piano is revealed through the removal









of the pallets and videos are projected on the walls. The space of this performance-ballet-concert-projection is built to destabilize, divert, deconstruct the automatism of the use of cultural and artistic objects, and thus produce a change in the behavior and status of viewers and performers. A landscape is projected into the exhibition space. In this video, Kim Gordon, the iconic Sonic Youth bass player, makes music by beating on the border wall between the United States and Mexico with a stick, while the floor of the exhibition keeps moving and changing, giving new meaning to the unpredictability of the border imposed on all those taking part in the exhibition. This exhibition project symbolizes the performative fluidity explored by Jesper Just exhibition after exhibition, in his quest for a union between body and mind, between the self and the other. The work entitled *Cadavre Exquis*, created and hosted for the first time in Copenhagen in 2019 by the Teater Revolver with CPH: DOX, takes this experience even further, since the viewers are inside the scene—the spectators become the actors. They realize that they must act out a role and/or think about the personality they play in everyday life,² thus extending the experience of art into their lives and systematically involving and mixing bodies.

Whether queer, belonging to a certain race, subject to physical and aesthetic standards, the body is often placed at the center of Just's works, aiming in particular to decipher normativity and reflect on discrimination against disability. If some aspects of the video that gave the title to the exhibition *Servitudes* at the Palais de Tokyo in 2015 raised issues related to the condition of disability, by destructuring the exhibition space with the use of several screens, Just made it impossible to fully and thoroughly perceive the piece from a temporal point of view, hindering an ideal and integral perception and allowing the viewers, according to their intentions, to make their own montage of the film. Jesper Just also challenged the spectators physically, by making sure that the exhibition could only be accessed using a sloping wheelchair ramp. In the film, a woman tries to eat a corn cob with her hands bridled by rehabilitation devices. Are her hands hindered, assisted or replaced in their action? In any case, it is clear that the relationship between body and technology has become a topic of increasing importance in Just's latest works.

In the film *Corporealities*, recently shown at the Emmanuel Perrotin gallery in New York, the relationship between body and technology seems to become the focus of Just's research. The film is an extension of *Circuits (Interpassivité)*, premiered at the Brooklyn Museum in 2018, and again produced with the American Ballet Theater, but projected onto five fragmented LED screens. The image is exploded, fragmented in an apocalyptic atmosphere of devastation or deconstruction which emphasizes the incongruity of the athletic bodies. Using an electric medical device intended to stimulate muscle contraction, the supernatural, idealized and oversized bodies of classical ballet dancers are reduced to passivity and move only under the impulse of the stimuli of an electric current synced with a composition by Gabriel Fauré, *Pavane op. 50 in F-sharp minor*. This particularly moving piece, both romantic and modern, is played here electronically and without feeling, in the form of a MIDI

(Musical Instrument Digital Interface) file. The body, undergoing several transformations, moves like a robot both to compensate for injuries or deficiencies, but also to adapt to the ideal of physical power, perfect body or eternal youth, with ever higher standards. What happens when there is no longer intention, and movement is controlled by the machine? The artistic direction is here reduced to a computer program that dehumanizes will.

This exhibition expresses one of the central focuses of Just's work, that of the body's ability, its potential but also its limitations. When dancers are not dancing, actors are not speaking, when gestures are hampered by muscle rehabilitation devices, Just is reflecting on functionality, utilitarianism and productivity, themes that also concern the viewer in first person. This explains why most of the artist's films and environments give the impression of sending messages much stronger than their actual experiencing, because they introduce and foster doubt. If Just does not go so far as to speak of sabotage, he claims to be interested in "what is left behind in the wake or what falls between the cracks, co-existing between different spheres." "Because," he continues, "perhaps it's encouraging a form of failure in traditional use or intent, in order to expose other mechanisms at play."

If it has often been said that Jesper Just's videos are based on a non-narrative principle, it is because the artist systematically replaces verbal speech with emotional speech, thus endlessly multiplying the effect of the story. The fundamental principle of the use of emotions in Just's work is based on the idea that "emotions are constructs, developed and emerging from previous personal experience, in an interaction between the brain, the body and one's culture." All the logic of the relationship with the body and with the construction of an environment that favors a catharsis also derives from such relationship between individual and emotion: "Your brain will investigate if what it is encountering is something you have experienced before, in order to best prepare your body how to react." In this way the artist rejects the idea of the universality of the work of art, because the emotion is primarily individual: that is why the whole device around the film and the film itself rely heavily on participation, interpretation but also appropriation.

For Jesper Just, "the films are not just projections, but almost become embodied, like a sculpture, or an architectural element." It is by using immersion, narrative cutting, ellipsis, silence, fragmentation, physical participation, interval, that the artist conceives actual installations that challenge the visitor's body and mind. If Richard Wagner's total art was able to reach—through a huge image, the negation of technique, the disappearance of the orchestra and the plunge into darkness—what could have become cinema, on the contrary Just's ambition is to move away from it and, perhaps, to reach total art by allowing the visitor to fully take part in both a physical and mental experience.

1. All Jesper Just quotations are from a conversation with the author (2-3 February 2020).

2. Irene Campolmi, *Folding the outside inside, performance*, in *Jesper Just's Artistic practice (2005-2019)*, in *Jesper Just. Servitudes. Circuits. Interpassivities* (Milan: Mousse Publishing, 2019), p. 27.











