

# Public Art Projects: less is more on the platz

Artists Jeppe Hein, Gabriel Kuri, John McCracken and Valentin Carron on the concepts behind their work

## Jeppe Hein

Danish artist Jeppe Hein likes messing with people's minds, making art that turns passive visitors into participants. According to the independent curator Neville Wakefield, Hein's sculptures and installations are "hermetic mind games". *Loop Bench*, 2006 (Johann König, 2.1/U6, sold to a public collection, €150,000), located opposite Hall 2, invites audience participation. The opposite of a conventional piece of street furniture, fairgoers are invited to navigate the swirls and bends of the sculptural obstacle course, with weary visitors forming part of the work as they congregate at the eccentric resting place.

**The Art Newspaper:** Is this the first time that *Loop Bench* has been on show?

**Jeppe Hein:** No, it was previously on view at the Liverpool Biennial in 2006. The piece was located away from the city centre in a poor, working-class area. It developed into a space where people could get together, and fast became a meeting point.

**TAN:** How do you think fairgoers will react to the piece?

**JH:** Everyone could use a break during an art fair; [it] offers a place to have a rest. One of its main aims is to encourage a dialogue between people, spaces and architecture. A 2006 Public Art Project of mine (*Appearing Rooms*, 2004) created a dialogue between the fair and the urban space of Basel and I hope that this piece does the same.

**TAN:** Should people sit on it or just admire it?

**JH:** People should definitely use it. They can sit or lie in different spots and adopt different perspectives. You can look over somebody else, sit next to or behind someone. There are many possibilities. It's almost like a kind of stage.

## Gabriel Kuri

Mexican artist Gabriel Kuri takes everyday objects and transforms them into playful, provocative installations, prompting the viewer to reassess the physical properties of the piece and question the meaning of mundane items. *Hard-pressed Wire*, 2009 (€35,000, unsold, Galleria Franco Noero, 2.1/M7), consists of a tropical juice can propped up by a wooden beam against a spotlight billboard. It refers to the frenetic tone of the news media and conveys a sense of physical compression.

**The Art Newspaper:** Why have you called the work *Hard-pressed Wire*?

**Gabriel Kuri:** It refers to what happens physically and sculpturally with the piece—tension and pressure—as well as to an urgent message—the billboard as a form of public address: pressed wire as it is used in news lingo.

**TAN:** And the concept behind the piece?

**GK:** I like to think of a lot of



Clockwise from top: John McCracken's *Liftoff*, 2009; Valentin Carron's *Untitled*, 2009; Jeppe Hein's *Loop Bench*, 2006; and Gabriel Kuri's *Hard-pressed Wire*, 2009

my works as coming together through dialectical oppositions. Communication-concealment: a blank billboard as a form of address; volume-flatness: bi-dimensional surface, flattened can; materiality-semantics: the message board sculpturally propped up by a beam.

**TAN:** How do you think visitors to Art Basel will respond to the work?

**GK:** Speculation of this kind is a very inexact science. I do not know. However, I look forward to seeing how people will respond; this is why I agreed to participate in one of these outdoor projects.

**TAN:** Is the work a departure in any way?

**GK:** I think it is based on prin-

ciples that are present in a lot of my works. I don't often work at this scale, outdoors, so in that sense it is a departure.

**TAN:** Can art be amusing?

**GK:** I like it when art is good and it also makes you smile. I also don't mind if good art is didactic in its own way, and there is no better way to learn than through a sense of humour.

## John McCracken

US artist John McCracken calls his sculpture, "blocks, slabs, columns, planks. Basic, beautiful forms, neutral forms". The Southern Californian rose to prominence during the early 1960s, first making his minimalist mark by producing plywood

sculptures, covered with fibre-glass and finished with shimmering polyester resin. His latest work *Liftoff*, 2009 (\$575,000, unsold, David Zwirner, 2.0/R4), stands in the Messeplatz, its polished stainless steel column reflecting the Art Basel fairgoers as they come and go.

**The Art Newspaper:** What is the story behind the title?

**John McCracken:** "Liftoff" is a word I like, and it's a word and concept that I felt was appropriate for this piece, as it is so notably vertical.

**TAN:** Why is a mirror-polished finish integral to your works?

**JM:** It lends beauty to form, and because of reflectivity it connects a sculpture to its

surroundings—makes them one, in a sense. It also enables a sculpture to seem at times to disappear, which, along with appearing, I like.

**TAN:** It's been said that you "investigate the space between painting and sculpture".

**JM:** I often use colour—and steel can be considered a colour too—typically associated with painting. My leaning works, such as the "planks", touch both the wall, the realm of painting, and the floor, pretty much the realm of sculpture. I also make wall pieces, some of them in painting-like forms, and I most often use flat planes to define forms. Also, one can kind of "see into" my works as one can do with paintings. So there is a degree of

partaking-of-both-worlds character to them, although they are actually three-dimensional objects, hence sculptures.

**TAN:** How do you like to think of your contribution to minimalist sculpture?

**JM:** I have tried to make work that is simple in terms of form, and that has physical beauty, mystery, a degree of openness in terms of interpretation and that has a definite presence. Work that is not only down-to-earth real, but that also implies other-dimensionality, and work that is also positive in nature: ideal-oriented. I try to make work that is minimal and maximal, and beautiful.

**TAN:** As your stainless steel commissions are mainly made for private collectors, how do you feel about *Liftoff* being seen by thousands of people in Basel?

**JM:** Although some of my works are in private collections, I make them for everyone. And I consider collectors to be curators of a sort who can bring works to everyone. So I feel very good about the Basel situation. The more potential viewers—and the more interactions with and through the work—the better.

## Valentin Carron

Martigny-born artist Valentin Carron's mammoth wooden cross, *Untitled*, 2009 (Galerie Eva Presenhuber, 2.1/R4), overshadows the Messeplatz, striking a note of sobriety to Art Basel. Carron recontextualises the Christian symbol, and the national symbol of his native Switzerland. Appropriation often plays a part in the artist's work: for a 2007 exhibition at the Kunsthalle Zürich, he re-created a fragment of a Gallic-Roman marble statue at the Gianadda Foundation in Martigny (*Captain Legacy*, 2006).

**The Art Newspaper:** What is the concept behind your monumental cross?

**Valentin Carron:** Crosses were all around my area, they appeared in the classroom as a small black object in the middle of a white wall and were visible on long mountain walks. It deals with the dryness of a minimal form and a romantic idealism.

**TAN:** A religious symbol in such a commercial setting makes it strangely unfamiliar. Was that your intention?

**VC:** It's just a basic sculpture. You notice first its height, the pedestal, its vertical presence. And it's a good meeting point.

**TAN:** Which artists have made an impression on you?

**VC:** If I have to name a few: James McNeill Whistler, Francis Picabia, Lucio Fontana, Donald Judd and Léonard Gianadda.

**TAN:** What other works are in progress?

**VC:** I just opened a show at Eva Presenhuber Galerie in Zurich and I'm working on an artist's book edited by Lionel Bovier.

All interviews by Gareth Harris