



Whether you're being doused with water or getting lost in mirrors, there's nothing passive about Jeppe Hein's work. **William Yeoman** reports.

# Smoke and mirrors

**Y**ou walk across the threshold. Suddenly a wall of water shoots up in front of you. Then another, and another, until you're enclosed in a trembling, cool, translucent room. You move forward and one of the walls drops, allowing access to yet another room. How many are there? And who are these children skipping through the walls like water sprites?

The scene changes. You're lost in a labyrinth of rectangular mirrors which owing to the gaps between them throw fractured images of yourself, your companions and the outside world back at you. Eventually you manage to find your way out, confused but elated.

You need to sit down. Across the room, there's a leather bench with another large mirror before it. But as soon as you're comfortable, a cloud of smoke envelops you.

Alarmed, you jump up and stumble into another room where a wall of neon lighting promises salvation. Alas, as you approach it seems to shrink from your gaze and switches itself off, reawakening only upon your departure.

Welcome to the surreal world of Berlin-based Danish artist Jeppe Hein, who is coming to Perth as part of PIAF's Art:City, billed as "a dynamic program of visual arts events and installations (designed) to transform our perception of the city's spaces by day or night".

Hein's experiential, interactive installations, which form part of a new exhibition inside and outside the

Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, certainly fit the bill.

Born in 1974, Hein studied at the Royal Danish Academy of Art and the Stuedelschule in Frankfurt. His work, which has been displayed at the Venice Biennale, the Tate Liverpool, London's Southbank Centre and New York's PS1, often features mechanised components which depend on the viewer for their activation.

The result is a genuine dialogue between subject and object, thus transforming the viewer's perception not only of the artwork but of his or her relationship with the urban environment.

"Public spaces are becoming less and less public," says Hein, citing as an example the removal of public benches from major cities to discourage people from remaining too long in one place.

**"Everyone will go there and have fun."** Jeppe Hein

"People's social activity defines part of a city's energy. If you reduce public space, you're creating a problem. I want art to be a tool for a conversation between space, architecture and people."

That's the rationale behind Hein's Appearing Rooms, an outdoor water sculpture in which 2.3 metre-high fountains of water rise and fall in response to the movements

**Magical mix**

Jeppe Hein (above) likes to create a sense of fun with his very public art, including (from top left) Spiral Labyrinth 1, Smoking Bench and Appearing Rooms.



of participants, the appearing and disappearing rooms creating a kind of ephemeral architecture.

“It sounds completely stupid but it will change the city,” he says. “Because it will change the energy. Everyone will talk about it; everyone will go there with their children and have fun; everyone will use it as a tool to create a dialogue between themselves and architecture.”

In the same way, *Spiral Labyrinth1*, which features a series of long mirrors arranged at intervals in two spirals, changes the way space is perceived. “It becomes confusing as to where you actually are,” says Hein. “And if somebody else is with you, are they inside or outside the labyrinth? You don’t know.”

This blend of fun and seriousness of purpose, as well as the blurring between architecture and sculpture, is typical of Hein’s work.

And you have only to think of such works as the *Self Destructive Wall*, *Shaking Cube* or *Bear the Consequences* — in which an enormous flame shoots from the wall as the viewer walks towards it — to realise that Art with a capital “A” is less important than communication.

“The interesting thing when you work with a public space in particular is that no one knows it’s art,” he says. “So it automatically becomes easier to connect with people.”

Jeppe Hein’s work is at PICA, Northbridge, from February 12 until April 5 (Appearing Rooms outside, 11am until evening; other works inside from 11am until 6pm).