

# PETER HERLUF BONNÉN

BORN FREDERIKSBERG 1945

*Peter Bonnén is the son of an architect. His mother was the modiste Tone Bonnén, who received a permanent testimony of praise in the form of a poem by the Danish writer Suzanne Brøgger (1981). His partner is a Tivoli stallholder, the daughter of a confidential clerk and a female entertainer. There is thus fertile soil for vision and fantasy in Bonnén's everyday life, and his artistic work leaves no room to doubt this.*

*From 1961 to 1962 he was trained in the then recently established Experimental School of Art known informally as Eks-skolen. It was founded in Copenhagen by the art historian Troels Andersen (b. 1940) and the artists Poul Gernes (1925–1996), Roger Martin Pring (b. 1929), Jens Jørgen Thorsen (1932–2000), and Richard Winther (b. 1926). In reaction to the French art that had been a major influence on Danish artistic life for generations, these artists turned toward Germany and the United States and their most recent abstract expressionism and pop art. Teachers and pupils resolved all questions of form and content employing an open-minded approach with which they aimed in common to make art conscious of itself and to launch it into the community. The actual work process was considered more important than the result, and the collective was placed above the individual. In association with the school there were experimental exhibitions such as happenings, various non-traditional undertakings, and considerable publication activity. In addition to Bonnén, a large number of various artists have been associated with Eks-skolen, such as Per Kirkeby (b. 1938), Bjørn Nørgaard (b. 1947), Stig Brøgger (b. 1941), and others. The school has never actually closed, but most of its activities faded out at the beginning of the 1970s.*

*Peter Bonnén made his first appearance in 1962 with assemblages made up of motorcar scrap and slates. The following year he exhibited for the first time in "The Summer Exhibition" (Sommerudstillingen).*

*The Danish Arts Foundation (Statens Kunstfond) was established in 1964. The foundation is an institution whose aim is to promote Danish creativity in the fields of pictorial art, decorative art and design, literature, and music. It achieves this partly by awarding grants to artists, purchasing works of art, and financing the decoration of public buildings. The year following its establishment, the Kunstfonden purchased Peter Bonnén's nonfigurative Skulptur i 6 dele (Sculpture in 6 Parts). This led to an antimodernist movement, Rindalism, started by the abattoir worker Peter Rindal, who did not believe that the state should provide funds for the purchase of incomprehensible and apparently useless works of art.*

*Sculpture in 6 Parts became the start of the sculptor's characteristic form figures executed in iron or COR-TEN, steel, in which two or more blocks or columns erected in pairs form a sculptural environment. In addition, the individual blocks are often further split and placed with their fractured surfaces facing each other at a precisely calculated distance that is not so great as to prevent it being*

clear that the two parts of the sculpture belong together; the distance between them is so small that a tension is created between the parts. They look as though they are about to be joined together by magnetism but are relentlessly held apart by imaginary energies. The spaces between the parts of the sculpture thus become the significant fields of tension in the sculptural group, intensifying the observer's experience of extreme mobility.

From 1964 and throughout the 1970s, Bonnén was occupied with concept and pop art, often with a humorous undertone. He also executed a number of minimalist sculptures in fluorescent acrylic. In 1975, he planted a field of corn on Nikolaj Plads, a square in the center of Copenhagen, as a kind of rural art manifestation.

In 1988, Bonnén made his first appearance as a painter. The simplification down to the absolute minimal that is characteristic of all his work is also encountered in his paintings, which consist of module-like divided surfaces fitted together to form large overall systems.

However, it is as a sculptor that Bonnén will be remembered, not least for his monumental 1985 decoration of the park surrounding Western Zealand County Council Offices (Vestsjællands Amtsgård) at Sorø, consisting of two tall groups of sculptures executed in reddish brown COR-TEN steel. The groups are dispersed in uniform column-like formations and anchored in a precisely calculated rhythmical arrangement that is static and dynamic in equal parts.

One of Bonnén's latest and perhaps most fascinating works is a mighty, multivalent granite sculpture consisting of three black blocks hacked out of one gigantic mass of granite and worked in a varying play of polished hard surfaces (on the fronts and backs) and soft-looking rough-hewn sections (the outer and inner surfaces).

The sculpture towers like a colossal portal in three tempi and sizes. The largest measures 12½ feet high x 13¾ feet wide (3.8 metres x 4.2 metres). The gigantic pieces of stone are placed in a carefully contrived relationship both separating and uniting them, maintaining a witty and ceaseless dialogue between the stones themselves and the spot on which they stand.

Between 1964 and 1967 Peter Bonnén was an energetic and enterprising chairman of the Summer Exhibition (Sommerudstillingen). He has been a member of the Council of the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts for a number of years, and from 1980 to 1983 was president of the Academy. Since 1973 he has headed the Society for Art in the Workplace (Foreningen Kunst på arbejdspladsen).

Bonnén has been awarded various grants and distinctions, including a Danish Arts Foundation Three-Year Bursary (1974–1977) and the Eckersberg Medal in 1989.

S.L.

LITERATURE: Jens Jørgen Thorsen in *Kunst*, no. 1, 1970; interview with Peter Bonnén; Grethe Grathwohl, *Peter Bonnén*, Galerie Asbæk, Copenhagen 1978; Leila Krogh in *Kunst i rummet*, Copenhagen, 1989; Pia Kristine Münster in *Weilbach*, vol. 1, Copenhagen 1994.