

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

FANNY GONELLA IN CONVERSATION WITH CHRISTIAN FALSNAES.

Christian Falsnaes is a Danish artist who studied in Vienna and lives in Berlin. His work addresses themes such as group behavior, social control, identity structures and popular music. These fields gather in his practice, which takes its roots in the history of performance yet also includes media such as painting, text, music and video.

What is the first artwork you ever did, and what is the most recent one?

I had been painting graffiti on the trains in Copenhagen for several years and I wanted to expand this practice into a wider field. That's pretty much how I got into art. This is probably also where my interest in painting and performance started. The most recent artwork I did was a painting as well, or rather a series of paintings called *One* that were created by the audience during the opening of the exhibition in which they were shown.

Mass-media and painting equally play a central role in your work. The intersection of these two fields makes me think of Bob Ross, the man who painted in front of thousands of people on TV for years or, in a different way, of Matthieu Laurette who chose to out himself publicly as an artist and began his career on the occasion of his participation as a candidate in a TV-show, or Andy Warhol's appearance in an episode of *Love Boat*. What is your approach of the relation between mass media and art?

I like the idea that the act of painting can be a theatrical event. If a concert or a soccer game can be shown live to thousands of people, why shouldn't the production process of a painting be? The art world and the mass media can be viewed as two different contexts and I think exciting things can happen when art enters the field of mass media or the other way around, in fact when these borders are blurred.

Laurie Anderson did performance pieces and had a number one hit at the same time, so she was able to make her ideas and her practice exist in different contexts.

That's also why I upload my videos on youtube, I want them to reach an audience beyond the art world, to be viewed in different conditions and to live a new life online. Even though most of my works are created for the art context, I like the idea that an audience who is not necessarily involved in the current art discourse could relate to them.

These two areas are overlapping more and more, as the celebrity factor is pervading most layers of society and acquiring a quality of its own. In that sense, what did you think of Jay-Z's performance at Pace Gallery?

I think it is a boring performance that reproduces clichés one would associate with performance art. Jay-Z rapping does not become a challenging and intriguing piece solely because it takes place in a white cube, has an extended duration, plays with physical exhaustion and has art celebrities in the audience. The video suggests that the audience reacts emotionally

because Jay-Z has such a strong personal aura or presence, but to me the fact that he's already famous is central in that situation. I find the celebrity aspect quite uninteresting. People cry when they see Justin Bieber as well, but that does not make Justin Bieber a great performance artist. I find it much more interesting to analyze and demystify the mechanics of idolization rather than to reinforce them. I have thought a lot about how that strong emotional connection between the artist and the audience is established, and have done several performances around that subject.

Your performances involve the audience in very different ways and, consequently they generate very different relations and reactions. Is it this potential that makes performance appealing to you?

In performance I feel that I can combine different aspects of my work in one form and bring many of my reflections together.

A performance is the closest you come to a *Gesamtkunstwerk* because it can include any media and has a live dimension as well.

Of course performance allows for a direct interaction with the audience and their immediate response. That makes it challenging but at the same time very rewarding because it's instantly noticeable when you've succeeded in translating your idea into a situation. But there is also a more indirect component to it. In fact I like the idea that the audience does not see the result of an artistic process, but rather that they are an integrated part of that process themselves. Yves Klein said that his paintings were the ashes of his art. I try to let the viewer be present when it still burns. This is one of the possibilities you can probably only witness in performances.

Have you ever experienced censorship?

Yes, several times. In Italy, I had a video with an erected penis censored because the institution I showed at was afraid of the Catholic church.

Another video was censored in Austria because it showed people painting on a Viennese subway.

I also had several videos deleted from youtube. I've never been happy about those incidents since they have restrained my intentions. I am never after pure provocation, but I like to include shocking or challenging moments that go against accepted social behaviors or the audience's expectations and my works have always felt weaker when I've had to exclude those.

Which role is most enjoyable: the didactic artist, the entertainer, the guru-dictator or the outcast? (note: Here, I'm referring to a piece the artist did for a group show at the Bonner Kunstverein, for which he successively played each of these different roles)

All of them can be both frightening and enjoyable. In the working process I am my own starting point more than anything else and I think the different roles that I embody are indeed different aspects of my own identity. I don't regard identity as something established or fix.

I work on developing and performing a specific behavior, with its voice and body language, that will be able to give shape to the situation I want to generate. I'm interested in pointing out how easily the changes in my behavior

can shift a situation and that's one of the reasons why I work with these roles, even though I think the term role is a bit misleading because it sounds like acting. I am not really acting when I do performances. I often behave in ways that are not enjoyable for me if the situation requests it, but I of course really like the position of the entertainer because it is satisfying to entertain and to be loved by the audience. Somehow there is an entertainment dimension to my work, which might be regarded as cheerful as first sight, but I rather use it for its significant ambivalence. It allows for a build-up a tension between the enjoyable character of the action and my own almost authoritarian position, and makes it almost impossible to have a one-sided view on the work.

If you could choose your next reincarnation, as what kind of animal, personality, character or figure would you like to live?

If I could reincarnate back in time, it would be as a philosopher at Plato's academy in Athens. I would love to hang around with Aristotle and discuss the categories and the metaphysics, take part in the discussions that led to such a defining discourse. That is a decisive period for Western civilization, today. I find it incredible how influential sentential logic has been to our way of seeing and speaking about the world. I had a professor at the university of Copenhagen, Søren Gosvig, who said that the non-contradiction principle formulated by Aristotle may very well be the only certain knowledge ever produced in the history of philosophy. I think he could be right about that.

These philosophical approaches seem to inform your work just as much as popular culture does and that you confer them equal importance. What is influential for you in the field of music?

I like pop and dance music. Songs that are well produced and easy to listen to. I do not have a record collection so I listen a lot to hit radio. Somehow, I guess that it's a way for me to be in touch with the current musical production as mass media broadcasts and consequently defines it. The idea of a common or widespread taste is something that plays an important role for my work, in the sense that it addresses to the widest audience possible. Yet, my favorite musician is probably Mike Oldfield. His music is very unique and completely beyond all common categories. Despite the fact that his music varies enormously in quality, there is always an abundance of compositional ideas, musical creativity and skills that makes me absolutely love it.

Music videos can also be very sophisticated, I especially have in mind two of them that came out recently. Are you more Kanye West (*Bound 2* with Kim Kardashian) or Pharrell (*24 hours of Happy*)?

Definitely Kanye West. I like the *Bound 2* video somehow. It is pretty over the top and almost disgusting, but I like that better than a well behaved video. I think it is interesting in a hip hop context, even though it reproduces certain stereotypes. I looked a bit at Pharrell's *24 hours of Happy* and it is well done and beautiful and it is a nice idea that it relates to the time of the day that you look at it, but it is so smooth and pretty. That is the reason why I don't like Pharrell so much. He is way too straight for me and never breaks the codes. There is no real vision and everything seems to be done exactly how it is supposed to be done to fulfill all expectations. It is as if we are not allowed to experience moments of doubt, embarrassment or uncertainty. The video should apparently feel relaxed and let's-all-dance-and-have-fun, but it is so carefully choreographed and casted that it ends up looking like a car commercial. Therefore it very quickly becomes boring, dull and uninteresting for me to watch.

One of these videos was obviously conceived for the internet, the other one got probably viewed mostly online. How do you see the relation between the digital world and the physical one?

I see the digital world as a part of the physical world. Computers and screens are physical and so are the people using them. The online social interaction follows different rules and rituals, but it is still a form of social interaction. I cannot think about displaying art without thinking about the internet. I think it is a great thing if a work can function online as well as in an exhibition space. I know that my works will exist on the internet in some form. It is beyond my control, but I might as well be conscious about it.



One, performance/ oil on canvas, DREI, Cologne 2013



Rational Animal, performance, Galleria Civica di Arte Contemporanea, Trento, Italy, 2008