

HIGHLIGHTS

Having made the
transition from
street graffiti
to performing
in the white cube,
**CHRISTIAN
FALSNAES**
explains to
Raimar Stange
how his work
continues to address
authority, social codes
and the relation
between the artist
and the audience.



HIGHLIGHTS

Biography

CHRISTIAN FALSNAES is an artist born in Copenhagen who lives and works in Berlin. Recent group exhibitions include "Formations of bodies" at KW Institute of Contemporary Art, Berlin; "HerStories" at Bonner Kunstverein, Bonn; "Grundfrage" at Crac Alsace, Altkirch; and "Either/Or" at Haus am Waldsee, Berlin.

Current & Forthcoming
CHRISTIAN FALSNAES's upcoming projects include a solo show at PSM, Berlin and a presentation at Art Basel Statements in June.

RAIMAR STANGE I've heard you were active when you were younger as a graffiti artist in Copenhagen, and then later on in Zurich's squatting scene. How did you get into art?

CHRISTIAN FALSNAES I grew up in an unintellectual environment in the suburbs of Copenhagen, where there was nothing but a train station, a shopping mall and a lot of concrete. The only significant signs of something more appealing to me were the paintings on the trains that drove through town, so I wanted to be a part of that at any cost. After several years of painting on trains, something that is a very performative activity, I started to develop an approach to graffiti that was more focused on the performance aspects. I guess you can say that I started to develop an artistic language. A coincidence brought me to Zurich, which presented me with an opportunity to participate in a festival that was organized by a group of artists who squatted an abandoned factory. I stayed for some time and did projects, exhibitions and performances with that group before I moved to Vienna and applied for the Academy of Fine Arts.

RS Could you elaborate on your use of graffiti in art contexts? How did you emphasize the performance aspects?

CF I became much more interested in the circumstances under which a painting is made than the way that it looks. A train is not a neutral surface and paintings on trains are informed by a number of different restrictions that you have to deal with: adrenaline, time pressure, security, surveillance, architecture you have to break into and so on. The painting itself, the traces, were interesting to me mainly as a record of how someone had dealt with those circumstances.

RS Why did you move into making art later on?

CF I guess you mean why I started to do projects within art institutions? The art world, with all its rituals, dynamics and specific behavior has become the context that I work with. I can do and show things that I would not get away with in other contexts and they are looked at differently. That opens up a lot of possibilities. Also, the art world provides me with an audience.

RS Okay, but at the same time, you are not working "illegally" on the street, unprotected but free — instead you're safe in the elitist, white cube ghetto, which is saturated with its own history, rules and commerce. Is this a problem for you?

CF Every context is saturated with history and rules. Every context has its limitations and restrictions, whether physical, social or conceptual. That goes for the street as well. A context free of restrictions can only be imaginary, and my works need some sort of interaction with reality.

That being said, I do make illegal works and projects in public space and other contexts away from the white cube, but I still perceive these activities as art. It feels natural for me to participate in art and the discourse around it, despite its problematic aspects, because I feel related to its history. I try to use and manipulate the contextual security that the art world provides, to see it as a material, rather than to feel limited by it.

Kaleidoscope # 20 / 2014



HIGHLIGHTS

Author
RAIMAR STANGE is a
freelance curator and art
critic based in Berlin.

RS In the fine art context you stopped producing images and paintings and instead started to concentrate on performances. Why?

CF I have not decided against pictures and do not limit my activities to performance. I do, however, find humans interesting and the human being is the main material of performance. I work with group dynamics, authority, social codes and rituals, which are all subjects that can be thoroughly investigated in performance.

RS In a recent exhibition at Haus am Waldsee in Berlin you attacked the guests at the opening, along with a horde of young men. Obviously you wanted to scare people. Do you aim to activate a kind of corporeal experience?

CF In this case, definitely yes. The performance I showed there, *Syntax Error* (2013), is a very physical piece. On one hand that's due to the display of raw physical power, but even more because it creates a kind of emergency situation where certain default reactions are activated. That is the power of performance — to create an experience rather than an image. In a state of emergency, perception changes; adrenaline is pumping and you have to react instantly to deal with it. That individual moment of choice is important for me. The situation has changed; how do I react? At Haus am Waldsee, people seemed paralyzed. They could have chosen to interfere or to try and stop us, but in situations where one cannot rely on the usual social codes of the context, people look to each other for justification. So a strange choreography unfolded, with me and my group running around, screaming, dancing and throwing stuff while the audience stood motionless and silent around us.

RS An artist like Tino Sehgal refuses to document his performances. You, on the other hand, show them later as video. Do you go against your own desire in this respect and obey the dictate of the art market to produce commodities?

CF As already mentioned, I have no dogma about only doing performance, because I do not want to limit myself in terms of which media I can work with. Video is an integrated part of my practice. The different media relate to and influence each other, but should be regarded as different things.

Regarding the art market, performance might historically have been seen as an escape from the dictate of the market, but today there is a market for performance as well as for video and painting. In post-industrial capitalism there is a market for everything.

RS Do you think your art could be described as political art?

CF I would not say that I make “political art” as that is somehow a vague and confusing term. I do not promote any political agenda. I think the critical potential of my art is to point at the formation of power and hierarchy rather than to produce political statements. I work with the relation between the artist and the audience and that touches issues related to identity, body, politics, social relations, history, iconography and language. There is a strong element of self-critique in my works as well. I investigate the authority of the artist and the white heterosexual male and use myself as well as the audience as material. I acknowledge that I am an integrated part of the subjects I deal with.

All images courtesy
of the artist
and PSM, Berlin

Existing Things, 2010
Performance at COCO, Vienna, Photography by eS&L

Opening, video still, 2013
KW Institute of Contemporary Art, Berlin

There and Back, video still, 2010
Skånes Konströrelse, Malmö

Kaleidoscope # 20 / 2014

