

## **Rub your Body against a Stranger**

Interview with Christian Falsnæs

*Twenty minutes into a Christian Falsnaes performance I find myself dancing cheek to cheek with a man I have just met. We are dancing on a stage of an auditorium in Akademie der Künste in Berlin and the only sound dictating our subtle dance moves are the breath and giggles of hundred strangers also having been persuaded to leave their comfortable audience seats by an insisting Falsnaes.*

“All of you can go.... No! Not you! No no no! Don’t sit there. Come closer.” (...) “I will not start the performance if you sit down there.” The performance “Rise” in Akademie der Künste is representative of Christian Falsnaes body of work: make the audience aware of their role as an audience by dictating in an authoritative manner what they should (or should not) do, how they should behave and how they should interact with each other: “What interests me in performance is human relations. I have been working a lot with the relation between the artist and the audience as a power relation as well as all the rituals surrounding it”, explains Falsnaes when we meet after a busy Berlin Art Week for the young Danish artist.

During Berlin Art Week Falsnaes had a solo show, “Performance Works”, at PSM, performed for the opening of the art week with “Rise” and had the piece “Justified Belief” included in the exhibition “Schwindel der Wirklichkeit” at Akademie der Künste. Falsnaes calls “Justified Beliefs” a performance generator: “The structure generates different performances all the time. It is a performance generator just there in the space. And depending on who goes into it and how they react to it, different performances occur. The voice and the instructions are very neutral. So there is a lot of space for interpretation. It is about how different people react and interpret these instructions in different ways.” “Justified Beliefs” consists of five headphones with a voice giving different instructions within a two hour time span to the audience and to two hired performers, then it loops. When I visited the exhibition there was a woman in her fifties lying on the ground in her panties, being massaged by a fellow audience

member in the performance generator. Falsnaes who is strongly associated with his performances as a person investigates a new way of exposing the audience here: “The authoritative figure is an abstraction because it is just a voice”, says Falsnaes. He has removed himself as much as possible from the piece in order to let the situations that occur be in focus. The performance generator was first presented at Art Basel this year and during the art fair, Falsnaes got the idea for his latest piece “Performance Works”.

“Performance Works” presented as a solo exhibition at PSM gallery explores another relation for the artist: “I thought it would be interesting to go into the relation between the artist and the buyer. The artist and the commissioner. A lot of the decisions you take as an artist are dependent on the people commissioning the work”, says Falsnaes. He has therefore turned the gallery space into what it also is: a sales space. But there are no actual art works in the gallery, only five folders with information on five potential performances. Falsnaes explains: “The performances will only take place if somebody buys them or commissions them. And then that person has to take a lot of decisions that will impact how the piece is realized. All of these decisions from the buyer regarding where, when and how is an integrated part of the work.”

The absurdity in the emptiness of the white cube at PSM emphasizes the sales process and it represents this situation as performative. The exhibition in itself becomes a performance with the gallery’s staff (and at times Falsnaes) present to guide and sell: buy the right to curate your own Falsnaes performance, buy the authorization to perform a Falsnaes performance, buy a painting created in collaboration with the artist, buy a performance for your eyes only or buy a drawing you yourself redraw after a Falsnaes drawing; the original will be burnt.

With this piece Falsnaes directs his attention from exposing the art audience to exposing the art market. Falsnaes explains: “Historically performance was an escape from the market of art. But today a certain market for performance has developed. You are still part of the art market. The way performance works today is influenced

by the art market. I am not necessarily interested in judging it. I am interested in making it a theme or making it visible.”

From an empty white cube to a full black box: Falsnaes is performing for the first time in a black box for his performance at the opening of Berlin Art Week. And the five hundred audience members are not as easy to control as usually. It is an Indian summer night for the opening and we are all sweating on stage in Akademie der Künste. The last gesture being asked of us is “to dance exaggerated”, not like we “would usually dance”. “Now stop! Look at each other”, demands Falsnaes. I see wild sweaty stares soon turning into self-awareness and shyness. An audience member having refused Falsnaes’ dictatorship yells to us on stage confrontationally from her audience seat: “Why did you do it?” One of us replies promptly: “Because it felt nice!” And it did indeed feel nice to rub my cheek against the cheek of a bearded stranger. After the performance a group of around thirty audience members refuse to leave the auditorium and insist on getting an explanation. Falsnaes, refusing to “step out of character”, is just as persistent, demanding them to leave and threatening to call security.

We were given instructions to act in a certain way; it could be as a festival audience. An audience crashing the stage, eager to be close to our idol, eager to be close to each other in this ecstasy. Our actions could have been related to a concert. But the content was missing. The music was missing. And those against our actions, against the performance, refusing to leave the space, they recollect a different content. The memory of what is no longer there remains, as it often does, especially in performance art.