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Le Bicolore

Maison du Danemark

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I, Look at Me, First, Front, Position, Opening, Stage, Icon, Force, Influence ...the titles chosen by Berlin-resident Danish artist, Christian Falsnaes for his works speak for themselves. Over the last ten years, he's put human relationships front and centre in his artwork, exploring how the artist relates to the members of the public who take part in his performances, where all reactions are allowed and the full range of human emotions may be displayed. He has no hesitation in questioning his own 'position' as an artist, to borrow a word taken from one of his works, offering the public an unscripted adventure instead, enabling them to experience what it's like to be in his 'position'. Christian Falsnaes places himself at the heart of the process: he appoints himself conductor and troublemaker-in-chief at the same time, like a guide playing his cards close to his chest. Simultaneously omnipresent and obvious yet somehow discreet, he casts himself in every possible role – artist, lead, ordinary joe. With the artist drawing back the veil on truth, the public experience freedom as restriction, joy as fear, exultation as awkwardness and rejection as release from enslavement in ways that can be spectacular, or, alternatively, seemingly - though misleadingly so - banal. Whilst he regularly works with other performers, especially women – for example, Minni Katina Mertens and Kareth Schaffer - Christian Falsnaes often plays around with his own identity, analyzing it to make use of his own appearance. He likes to underline he is a young, European man of Caucasian ethnicity, tall and slim, clad in an entirely everyday, heteronormative fashion. Going against the tide of performance art and especially body art, which, since the 1960s and 1970s has placed nudity, costumes or the body transformed by action at the centre of the process, Christian Falsnaes advances under cover of his mask-that-is-not-a-mask - his very conventional look. He uses his very ordinariness to make it easier to create ambiguity, a sense of things jarring, creating a feeling of uncertainty amongst the members of the public taking part in the adventure they're invited into: how could you not trust such a clean-cut young man? What could possibly arouse suspicion about someone who could be a brother, cousin, good friend or boyfriend of any number of us?

In Christian Falsnaes' performances, the artist is in direct contact with the public. There's no separation and rarely a stage. The decor is the venue, often an exhibition space. Likewise, there's no special sign, no alarm, announcement or even notification of the performance's beginning. The artist has become famous for his performances with members of the public who have not been primed, in other words, the audience members don't even know that they are going to be part of the audience, let alone when or how they might participate. In *SYNTAX ERROR,* performed three times in 2013[1], a young man in a polo shirt interrupts the typical monotony of a speech marking an exhibition opening. The heckling of the first individual, actually the artist himself, is quickly emulated by a group of men already in the exhibition launch audience, causing a kind of chaos. These actors end up coming together in the middle of the crowd of visitors to begin a contemporary urban dance number, seemingly transforming struggle into choreography, before departing the venue as they came, leaving the crowd dumbstruck and wary, oscillating between fear and fascination. What just happened before our very eyes? Anything could have

happened in this pivotal moment, but what exactly? What should we have done? This sums up the performance's ambiguity for the spectators. When the young men's actions become increasingly exuberant, they represent a self-confidence, a swaggering virility filled with anger and pride behind which men are driven to hide, through which they express themselves and which does nothing at all to face down their fear or allay others' fears. And yet, these movements also evolve into a societal choreography, the transformation of anger into dance and a highly energetic, cathartic expression of the collective self. Between fear of chaos and relief, do we not surreptitiously experience the impulse which all of us could feel from one day to the next – to get up, to rise up and break out of the norms imposed on us by our position in society?

In Christian Falsnaes' performances there is both the unexpected and the risky. The artist can anticipate reactions, but not predict them with certainty. Performances tread a fine line, with the threat of things spinning out of the artist's control always lurking in the background. Participants' attitudes can go back and forth between rationality and self-control (but is this control not more apparent than real?) and feelings which are difficult to master.
This emotional spectrum is central to what the artist is investigating. Paradoxically, to achieve this effect, the performance must be prepared down to the last detail. This takes the shape of scripts with instructions for Christian Falsnaes and any performers accompanying him, composed essentially of a description of a series of situations. However, these situations may also feature instructions about language or behaviours, for example, how to talk to a crowd in a way that's friendly, authoritarian or aggressive, as well as recommended words and any accompanying body language. Musical content, sometimes original, may be used to support events as they unfold. The scenario must be clearly set out so the performer knows exactly what they must get the other participants to do, but it also needs to allow enough leeway to deal with an infinite number of different situations.
Although the structure and framework in which the performance takes place are set down in minute detail, the situation can change completely depending on the number of participants – from a dozen or so to several hundred. Of course, participants' initial reaction to the work is crucial. Potentially even more important is how the public responds to the script and how these reactions bring changes to the original script. This process reveals how 'languages of art', have changed, taking to the extreme Nelson Goodman's analysis of the 'allographic' [2] distinction of a work of art in the modern day. The work of art is now a concept which expresses itself and writes itself through instructions and notations, as in the performing arts, and which adopts a configuration containing both similarities and differences each time it appears, depending on time and place. It's an 'open work', as Umberto Eco described it[3]: the recipient participates in creating the work. Without an audience, there can be no work of art. The public is not only the viewer and the subject but also the co-author.
The public's reactions are the material and the work's canvas changes with them. Art is a shared experience to which each individual brings their own interpretation and their own energy: the work is both unique and collective. It is a theatrical performance without the theatre a 'theatre without theatre' [4] which doesn't exist unless the public agrees, tacitly or explicitly, to make the transition from the role of spectator to actor. With each performance, Christian Falsnaes forms a temporary theatrical troupe. We must leave behind the reason we came in the first place as well as society's expectations of how we should behave, abandon our codes of conduct and allow ourselves to be guided by others. With an unprepared audience, these decisions are sometimes made by default. Sometimes, we only understand what we've experienced during the performance after the event, leaving us with questions: what exactly have I just experienced? How did I let myself get carried away like that? We might notice that a friend or acquaintance who went through the same experience and performed the same actions as we did actually experienced and interpreted it differently to us. In fact, it's a very common phenomenon Christian Falsnaes encourages us to consider: our individual lived experiences ensure we don't all react alike. Above all, we all swap one role for another multiple times every day without wanting to acknowledge or question this. Our actions are constantly guided by societal norms, the values and culture surrounding us. We never stop playing a role in the realities of our work, family and personal circumstances. Are we active, independent beings or simply actors in the daily play of our lives? Christian Falsnaes wants to get us to examine ourselves, our freedoms, our constraints and contradictions, both individual and as a society, in those very moments when we are witnesses, interlocutors or, despite ourselves, active participants. He doesn't help us come up with answers, rather he forces us to confront the ways in which our reflex actions and instincts show up our feelings, values and standards as having fallen short, encouraging us to face up to our own responsibilities. It's our job to tear down stereotypes, to consider our reactions during the performance, to understand our role in the creative process as it unfolds, to confront our complexities head on. His works' power lies in the simplicity of its start point – that of the encounter between the artist and other members of the public.

Through its use of immersive and collaborative experiences, Christian Falsnaes' work challenges traditional artistic conventions. He has successfully incorporated his work into two narratives in the history of art of the 20th and 21st centuries: that of collective creation and that of performance. Seeking to push the boundaries of the roles played by the artist and the public, Christian Falsnaes suggests we prioritize self-exploration and our interactions with others above everything else. He stresses that, unlike the traditional approach where the actor holds up a mirror to the spectator, here it's not the artist's body which is centre stage but the audience's body and identity which are the subject of discussion. It's the spectator, not the artist who is put to the test. He has dedicated himself to continuing the tradition of performance art, it being the most appropriate place to express the deconstruction of power relationships and the demonstration of newly gained freedoms, as shown by the major role of performance art in the history of female artists. At the same time, he turns the question of authority on its head, abusing the artist's 'position' of power himself. For example, in the performance 'Position', everyone is involved, directed by the artist and his increasingly vociferous orders which the public no longer even thinks to challenge. They have become like willing victims who shout, run, interact, caught up in the flood of words and energy of a leader whose charisma quickly reveals an autocratic side. 'I work upon authority and how you take control of a group. Here, in the space of a few minutes, we run the gamut of feelings from anguish to sexual arousal. The manipulation of emotions by a leader is obviously a very sensitive topic which can now be examined in a safe artistic context. I'd like to successfully make connections between the emotionally involved nature of life and the analytical distance created by art[5]', explains the artist.

Since the publication of Gustave Le Bon's *Psychologie des foules* (The Crowd: a Study of the Popular Mind) in 1895, we know that individuals in a large group behave differently compared to when on their own. While studies have been made of the irrational behaviour of crowds, social psychology also has a long history of exploring how feelings of belonging, identity and conformity create a herd mentality: regardless of group composition or structure, individuals cannot escape these feelings or help being influenced by them. In *Justified Beliefs*, a performance created in 2014, we don't realize that two of five members of the public who carry out instructions received via earpiece are actually actors. By no longer making any distinction between performers and spectators, by blending reality and fiction and by suddenly placing the public in an unexpected situation, Christian Falsnaes poses questions about how individuals' reactions are affected by group dynamics and especially the impact of authority. However, our personal involvement in and experience of the performance enables us to have an emotional and physical understanding of it preceding an intellectual or even a moral one. Everyone is placed in a position where they start asking where their boundaries lie and question the rules we're given and the rules we impose upon ourselves, where they must choose between compliance or rebellion.

Can identical situations generate different reactions? Does a performance using an identical script performed in two different circumstances express the same things? This question led Christian Falsnaes to enact a new performance of *Opening*, which debuted at the KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin in 2013 and the Musée d'art contemporain de Rochechouart in 2015[6], with one key change, that of the sex of the performer. The audience was free to take part (or to decline to do so) in the filming of a video clip featuring pop-style songs by the artist: *In And Out* was written and recorded by Christian Falsnaes in Berlin and *Ride the Wave* was composed by Christian Falsnaes and Kareth Schaffer accompanied by Mathias Hauser (Shriduna) on the guitar at Rochechouart. After the first part, during which the audience was invited to attempt a simple dance routine against the backdrop of these very danceable pop songs, the performer leads the group through the streets of Berlin and the courtyard of the château de Rochechouart. After this, the audience is invited to take part in a re-enactment of Yoko Ono's famous performance art piece *Cut Piece* (1964) in which she invited people to cut pieces from her dress as she sat motionless on stage in an encounter that was simultaneously extremely intimate and frightening, one way of highlighting the presence of violence in society, especially towards women.

The feeling of closeness between the audience and the male and female performers, respectively Christian Falsnaes in Berlin and Kareth Schaffer in Rochechouart, makes it easier for the public to take part in this act until no clothes are left to cut up. Each piece of clothing was stapled to a frame to create a jointly produced painting. The artist poses the question: will participants act differently towards a man compared with a woman? The two works made from fabric – one in colour, the other black and white – are two abstract portraits of the performers. Similarly, the videos of the two performances become two group portraits of two different audiences who were offered the same experience in two very different venues – a young, on-trend audience in a capital city and a more family-oriented audience in a gallery in a rural setting. After this, the last act in this performance, the exhibition curator gives a talk, setting performance art in the context of art history as a whole, notably through their reference to Yoko Ono, and shares the ideas underpinning this work with the audience. After the performance, these discussions provide an opportunity for debate, some people having felt uncomfortable at what they saw as the domination on display, others, on the other hand, said they felt liberated through participation in a feminist act. It's the performance audience itself which decides how the work is received and interpreted, a response which is necessarily collective and equivocal.

Christian Falsnaes is part of a long-standing tradition of political, interactive and transgressive body art. He stresses that his work is in keeping with a narrative of human behaviour which has been rapidly evolving in recent decades with the development of social media conventions, the new reality of our digital lives and the impact this has on how we behave towards the world around us: 'The material is not my body and my identity, but the body and identity of the exhibition visitor. This replacement also relates to the current shift in society, the consumer now being a "prosumer", always in control of what and when he or she consumes, like in social media compared to TV. I think the museum is the ideal place to investigate that shift, because of the freedom to move around as you want and take your own decisions, as opposed to the theatre, where everybody needs to come at a specific time, for a specific time period' [7], he notes. Christian Falsnaes' remarks draw attention to the issue of interpretation and whether, in the social media age, how we relate to our own image or to our behaviour being recorded has changed. The participants consider the issue of consent throughout the entire process, even as their performance is recorded on video. In *Feed*, an internet term par excellence, the real-time video installation requires an instructor and a cameraman to assist visitors as they perform in front of the camera. Although visitors' every action is shown in real-time on a screen in the room, what is filmed is not recorded and will never be shown elsewhere. For the artwork to be a collective endeavour with permission successfully obtained from all participants to act with the greatest possible freedom, one of the absolutely critical requirements of these deeply political works is access to a supportive, avowedly public space. This kind of safe place could be an arts venue or museum which meet the requirements in terms of openness, support and expertise. Paradoxically, this feeling of safety and freedom enables the artist to help us to fully understand our choices because we feel sufficiently confident to sense the ambiguity of violence – the fact we can go from victim to oppressor once liberated from the rules of social etiquette and inhibitions relating to our body, as happens during dances and celebrations. In short, it's about the body gaining the upper hand over the mind. The artist stresses the role of cultural institutions as a vital place where everything becomes possible, a shared, collective space for making new discoveries, experimenting and encountering new people. Here Christian Falsnaes can write the rules of the game, whilst also offering us the chance to reject these rules. In *Stage*, visitors to the exhibition are invited to get up on stage and put on a headset through which they'll receive instructions for a dance routine to perform. This act turns the stage into a pedestal, visitors into a living sculpture. As he plays around with art media in this way, Christian Falsnaes likes to say he's a painter rather than a performer. Rather unexpectedly, here he follows in the footsteps of one of the greatest performance artists of all time, the US artist Carolee Schneemann (1939-2019) who talked of her work as 'kinetic painting'. *Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions for Camera* (1963) was the decisive moment when she went from model to being her own medium, her body transformed before a triptych painting, the act frozen in time in a photo shoot she directed. In *Up and To Including her Limits* (1976), she drew upon huge sheets of paper, balancing naked upon a tree surgeon's harness suspended from the ceiling. Carolee Schneemann pushed the boundaries of what we regarded to be action painting beyond those reached by the generation before her, led by Jackson Pollock (1912-1956), who gained lasting fame for his employment of the drip painting technique, captured for posterity by photographer Hans Namuth (1915-1990). Painting has become a physical movement, the physical movement an unbroken link with the artist's soul, the work of art an existential adventure. Christian Falsnaes isn't afraid to take his place in this story: 'I am interested in abstract expressionism and the idea of gesture and expression: that through dance or painting people can express something fundamentally human. The history of abstract expressionism is so closely linked to the handwriting of the artist, but what I try to do with this work is to change the position of the artist with the viewer' [8]. To this illustrious tradition of gestural brushstrokes, Christian Falsnaes adds another tradition with more working-class roots, the hand movements that produce graffiti, the medium he actually came from. Nonetheless, he strives for each painting to be a collective creative effort and for everyone to play their part as in the paintings composed of cut up pieces of cloth in *Opening,* or the large art installation in *Front*, fruit of a performance during which a large wooden structure is spray-painted, torn down, paraded around then rebuilt collectively as the audience applauds. Who is actually the originator of the artistic act? In the series *One*, participants become painters of abstract art, guided by the artist. In *Existing Thing* (2010), one of the artist's first planned performances, the crowd uses Christian Falsnaes as a paintbrush, all to the backdrop of *Lose Yourself* by the rapper Eminem. Do you stay in control or let yourself go? 'Not being able to control everything, this play between control and freedom, feeds so much content into my work' [9]. Perhaps Christian Falsnaes' guiding principle, his central theme is first and foremost the freedom to express oneself, the freedom to be an artist and the freedom to simply be. In this grey area between revelry and restraint, between submission and freedom, between populism and democracy, he offers us the chance to experience what it's like to decide for ourselves what might be shared, in art, in this life that we live in community, not isolation.

1. SYNTAX ERROR (2013), 3-channel video installation. Performance given for the exhibitions *Enten/Eller* at the Nikolaj Contemporary Art Centre, Copenhagen, *Entweder/oder* in the Haus am Waldsee, Berlin and *Question Fondamentale* at Crac Alsace, Altkirch.

2. Nelson Goodman, *Langages de l'art*, Nîmes, Jacqueline Chambon, 1990. First published in 1968.

3. Umberto Eco, *L'œuvre ouverte*, Paris, Seuil, 1965

4. *A Theater Without Theater*, Barcelona, Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona; Lisbon, Museu Colecção Berardo, 2007.

5. Ingrid Luquet-Gad' With "Position", artist Christian Falsnaes really gets hold of you', *Les Inrocks,* 13th September 2016.

6. Christian Falsnaes, *Opening*, 2015, Installation with two videos and a picture consisting of black and white clothes which have been cut up, mounted on a frame, Collection Château de Rochechouart – Musée d'art contemporain de la Haute-Vienne.

7. Anna-Lena Werner, 'Interview: Christian Falsnaes', *Artfridge*, 16th March 2017.

8. Anna-Lena Werner, 'Interview: Christian Falsnaes', *Artfridge*, 16th March 2017.

9. Anna-Lena Werner, 'Interview: Christian Falsnaes', *Artfridge*, 16th March 2017.

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