

Unsuspecting exhibition visitors become part of Christian Falsnaes' performances. In his work, he deals with the notions of ritual and group mentality, including himself and the role of the artist. What happens when people – especially those who are used to the rituals and dynamics of highly codified social fields such as the art world – have to give up control?

# THE AUDIENCE IS PRESENT

Text by Arielle Bier / Portrait by Andreas Alexander Bohlender



Can experience be materialised? Danish performance artist Christian Falsnaes thinks so. His "rule making/rule breaking" approach to art targets the problematics of learned social structures and power dynamics in society. We met for coffee in his home studio in Berlin as he prepared a Groundhog Day-style video installation for the Kestnergesellschaft in Hannover. In the work "First", a new video is created each day by the first visitor of the museum. They are guided through a performance for the camera, which is played for subsequent visitors, and is then deleted at the end of the day to start anew. Falsnaes employs directives to underscore the significance of individual will, turning the reactions of his audiences into material for their own self-reflection.

**In your recent work "Available", you literally put yourself "on call" for your audiences. Can you tell me about the piece?**

In one version of the work, a mobile phone is placed within the exhibition, and I make myself available for calls throughout the opening hours of the institution for the duration of the show. When someone calls, I give instructions to perform in the space. That's an interesting aspect of the mobile phone era, having access to intimate connections at all times. Whenever I gave a talk, did an interview, or made a public appearance during that time, I warned my audiences, and if somebody called, I integrated it. Sometimes, instead of giving instructions, I did brainstorming sessions and worked with the callers to develop ideas for the next visitor to perform. For a whole week I made people paint the walls in the gallery, making a big collective painting, and for another week we worked on dance choreography. Every visitor played a small role in a larger narration.

**When did you first realise you could manipulate audiences and that it would become your signature?**

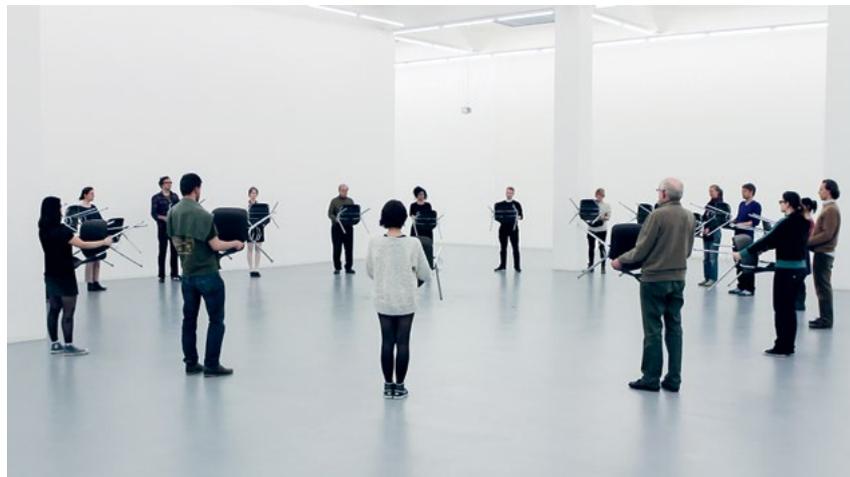
The first performances I did were not participatory. I often stood in front of audiences and created images or actions for people to watch. I had ideas for more complex pieces requiring nearly fifty people, and I thought, why not incorporate the audience? I soon realised that the interaction was interesting in itself,

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"Masculine demeanor as a consequence of social power relations between artist and audience", 2013.  
Photo: video still



so I started testing it to see how far people would go. Society as a whole is organised by instructions and orders. Normally we don't recognise them. But when you create new rituals, especially in a place like the art world, where everything is reflected upon or viewed and analysed in a specific light, then suddenly these mechanisms become visible. People know that it's an art performance and that's essential. For example, I have a work called "Justified Beliefs", which was shown for the first time at Art Basel in 2014. Audiences were invited to put on headphones and then received a constant flow of instructions. It created this feeling that everything you do is okay because the voice in the headphones tells you to do it. It's so easy to step in and out of the piece because the moment you take off the headphones, you're out. The moment you put them on, you're in. As a participant, you know that the other people wearing headphones also made a decision to participate, so everything you do within that frame feels authorised. This power of group dynamics is an important topic to me. At certain times participants are told to take off their clothes, perform expressive dances, or to touch each other intensely. In Basel, I was amazed that nearly twenty people each day, including collectors, stood around naked in the booth. The framing provided security for experimentation.

**Would you consider your work as anti-establishment?**

Making people aware, and reflecting on how social rituals in society work, already has anti-establishment potential. Hierarchies, authority, structures, and rituals aren't necessarily bad. That doesn't mean that the way society is organised is good either. It's important to be conscious going into specific rituals, and to think about why you choose to accept them. Joseph Beuys thought of his social and participatory practice as democratic, tearing down the hierarchy of the artist and so on. I, however, noticed the opposite: that in order to make an audience participate in your work, you need a high level of authority to make people follow you. This aspect of the participatory or social practice, where power relations are involved, should be investigated. I've recently been interested in hiring women to conduct my performances because they are so centred on questions of authority, hierarchy, and power. It's interesting to see how they function if it's not a male taking control. For example, I'm very inspired by the artist Marianne Wex. She investigates the way power structures of society are intertwined with body language.

**How do you prepare for an exhibition. Do you rehearse?**

With my exhibition for the Prize of the Nationalgalerie at the Hamburger Bahnhof, for example, I hired instructors and conducted a workshop to teach them how to deal with the work. But you can't really rehearse per se, that's not possible. It will never be the same as when the viewers actually come to the exhibition. The biggest challenge is finding the balance between forming the structure in a way that the result is controllable, and allowing enough interpretation and freedom for the work to be playful.

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Previous page and above: "Existing Things", COCO, Vienna, 2010  
 Photos by eSel.at, courtesy of PSM, Berlin

"Justified Beliefs", Art Basel, Statements with PSM, 2014  
 Photos: Kostas Maros, courtesy of PSM, Berlin

**Are you trying to elicit a "break from reality" within the structures of your work?**

I think these structures become a part of reality. It's a weird situation, that's also what makes it interesting and comes back to the potential of art. People know they are participating in an artwork. At the same time, the emotions, group dynamics, and the social relations between visitors are real. That's why I don't think it lays outside of reality. It's not a theatre piece. That's the problem I often have with theatre — you try to behave as if the audience isn't there, whereas in my works the situation is completely transparent. It's never about creating an illusion, but about dealing with the specific situation you're in, which is what makes it fundamentally different from theatre.

**You also create paintings and sculptures from your performances. How do you relate the immateriality of performance to the materiality of objects?**

Immaterial artworks don't exist. Human beings are material as well. It's not about the medium but the kind of experience facilitated. I am interested in the body in general, and the social body more specifically, but not in exploring the borders of my own body.

**Do you draw distinctions between what defines actions in performance for exhibition and in daily life?**

If you take the broadest possible meaning of the word, then I think we're always performing. The distinction between a performance in an exhibition and the outside world is not about the actions that are being performed, but more the context that surrounds it. Within that space, everything acted out is part of the performance. Society needs rituals. It's very human to look for rituals to participate in. I think that's part of the reason that art fairs, biennials, and big museum shows have become so culturally significant: because the exhibition format can provide a ritual for the individualised visitor in post-industrial society. But in order for art to maintain that, or to further that culturally significant position in society, the visitor needs to be the centre of the exhibition. The exhibition has to evolve from a place where significant objects are stored to a place where significant experiences are enabled. That's something I try to do with my works. ●



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