

RUNE PEITERSEN IN CONVERSATION WITH CHRISTIAN FALSNAES

Anybody invited to realize a project in 1646 is asked to engage in conversation with a previously unknown correspondent.

This conversation takes place via e-mail and stretches through the whole period during which the artists develop their initial idea into final results. 1646 invites the correspondent at the other end of this contact to figure his/her way through this actual process.

In trying to picture what result the artists' work is going to, such exchange can become a reflection on the amount of otherwise untraceable choices of the moment which make up to the artists' practice.

This issue is part of the exhibition by Christian Falsnaes, *First*, September 2 2016 in 1646.

This artist
Christian Falsnaes

This correspondent
Rune Peitersen

Concept and design
Nico Feragnoli

1646.

Boekhorststraat 125, 2512 cn, The Hague
The Netherlands

<http://1646.nl> - info@1646.nl

AUGUST 19, Rune Peitersen [RP] - Christian Falsnaes [CF]:

Kære Christian,

The nice people at 1646 asked me to engage in an email conversation with you, regarding your upcoming exhibition there. At first, I hoped we'd be able to do it in Danish, but unfortunately, they prefer that we do it in English. Hardly surprising, of course, it would just have been nice to write some Danish :-)

I decided not to google you beforehand, so I must admit that all I know about you is from the announcement on the 1646-website. According to the information there you're a performance artist (or an artist who makes performances?), so perhaps I am wrong in talking about 'an exhibition' at 1646?

Looking forward to hearing from you and seeing where this conversation leads us!
Best, Rune

CF - RP
Hej Rune,

Yes, so they told me. It would have been fun, though a bit unusual, for me to write in Danish, but it seems like English is fine for both of us as well :)

To answer your question, I do not see myself as a "performance artist". I work across different media and do not limit myself to any specific production- or presentation format. As I do mostly work with the art context and the exhibition format though, it is safe to say that I will indeed be doing an exhibition at 1646.

I look forward to see where the conversation leads us as well!

AUG 21, RP - CF
Hej Christian,

Sounds good, let's get started!

I was wondering if you could tell me some more about how you work with 'the exhibition format' and how that will play a part in the exhibition at 1646? Also, is the exhibition already planned out or are you still developing it? And - I'm curious - have you already been to 1646, do you know the space?

AUG 27, RP - CF
Hej Christian,

I finally got round to looking at your site and reading about your work - sorry it took so long.

Initially, I had been hoping that I could get you to clue me in on your practice and work by asking you some simple questions, which would lead to a common base from which we could go deeper. I thought that kind of conversation might serve as the best introduction for the eventual readers as well. Nevertheless, having now looked at your work, I realize my initial questions were probably too simple and generic and your possible answers would probably have had to be either too comprehensive or too bland - neither being conducive for a good discussion. My bad.

So, having now seen the documentation of some of your work, I must admit I have become quite a fan and am really looking forward to seeing what you have planned for 1646. I'm not sure I have the full command of the theoretical terms and discourse needed to analyse it properly, so I'll just start out by talking about some of my observations and associations regarding the works. Perhaps you can then expand on some of the issues.

First, on an almost personal note, I was intrigued to read about your early encounters with 'art' in the form of graffiti, and how you describe that as '...a back-door into art' ('proper' or 'real' art?) I followed the same route, 10 years earlier, but with a completely different result. Your utilization of the performative and bodily aspects of painting trains is extremely compelling and energizing. To some extent, I imagine the rage and desire to question authority are motivational factors which you have brought with you from 'the yard' - and your approach seems to be so much truer to the emotional payload of the graffiti-writer, than the silly graffiti-on-frames-in-fancy-galleries, which became trendy in the mid-80ies. (Btw: is that a guy in a MOA t-shirt in 'Syntax Error'? - nice touch!)

Having said that, you clearly have also taken the initial motivation or frustration of the writer much further. The overarching themes of your works seem to deal with questioning authority; sometimes by embracing it, sometimes by confronting it -and perhaps ridiculing it? One of the first things that came to my mind were the Stanford and Milgram experiments. They too use a certain amount of performativity and try to question or establish certain patterns of authority. I couldn't help but wonder if the issues raised then by the social sciences are now being raised in the arts, and, if so, whether that's because the reflective capabilities of the art-world provides a refuge for issues not discussed in the increasingly privatized and monetized world of scientific research, or because we are experiencing similar problems today with authority which we need to find new ways to address. Here I'm thinking of the increasing move towards right-wing rhetoric about the need for a strong state and leader, but also the evermore emotionally driven behaviour of 'the people'. You

mention it yourself in an interview, that there's more emotion present at a football match or a Beyonce concert, than at an opening at an art gallery. I wonder if emotion in itself is something to strive for; there's also a lot of emotion at a Donald Trump rally or a Jerry Springer show - both of which came to mind when watching 'Front'. Emotion also opens up to mass manipulation and behavior, the hallmarks of fascism - and also very present in 'Front'.

There are many more themes to pick from your work; I'm also interested in your notion of the prosumer and the issues regarding authorship and responsibility of an artist, but for now I'd be interested in hearing your response to the opening remarks above. AUG 30, CF -RP
Hej Rune,

I thought your question was fine, but indeed very open. I just didn't get to answer before now because of my current intensive travel schedule. That seems to be quite good though, since you've had the chance to have a more extensive look at my work.

I am not surprised to hear that you also have a background in graffiti. It is quite amazing how many people from the scene that I now meet at art fairs and biennials etc. It definitely seems like the graffiti scene have provided a formative environment for a lot of artists. I agree with your opinion on "graffiti-on-canvas" as an approach to turn graffiti into art. In my opinion graffiti on canvas focuses on the most uninteresting aspects of both: The recognizable aesthetics or "style" of each context. I have never been a big fan of art that tries to look like art. The same goes for graffiti that tries to look like art.

For me, the core values that I brought from graffiti into art (btw. I do not define art as something more "proper" or "real" than graffiti, I merely use the term "art" as referring to a presentation context) are related to the potential of self-definition and anti-establishment. The idea that you do not have to accept whatever social frame you are placed within, but rather that you have a certain freedom to form and change your context yourself, is very appealing to me. That is something I feel is present in graffiti.

You are right that a big part of my work evolves around questions of authority. To say that I ridicule or question authority though, might be a bit too simple. I do not necessarily see authority as something negative. Power relations are a part of the way human interaction functions. I believe that we do need authoritative structures in some form, in order to organize society, but at the same time I also believe that it is important to be aware of these structures in order to deal with them consciously. The relation to social sciences is interesting, even though I see my work as something fundamentally different. In the Stanford and Milgram experiments, participants were subjected to a constructed situation in order to achieve something different (a scientific result). In my work, the situation itself is the result. It is not pointing to or aspiring to be anything else than art and

the reactions, emotions and behaviour of the participants within the work is itself the purpose. I believe that experiencing as opposed to reading or hearing about provides a different kind of reflection. My works allow you to consciously experience participation in a constructed situation that is its own purpose.

The context of art provides a space in which highly problematic topics can be dealt with and looked at. In my works (As opposed to the Milgram experiment for instance) you know exactly what you participate in and what your role is. I always try to make the construction as visible as possible. As a spectator of art, as an exhibition visitor, you're accustomed to a reflected and analytical distance to what you see. The exhibition format facilitates that mode of viewing. You question whether or not emotion in itself is something to strive for, but I see a critical potential in the ability to enable strong emotions in a setting where you are conscious about how and why those emotions are triggered. The element of manipulation is certainly present, but at the same time I don't think one should underestimate the exhibition visitors and their level of reflection. I find the idea that you allow yourself to be manipulated in order to enable a specific experience - the experience of being a part of an art work - quite interesting.

You mention at the end of your mail the concept of the prosumer. I think the exhibition format provides an excellent context for investigating and discussing the development from a society of consumers to prosumers, as the exhibition - contrary to the church, the theatre and the cinema - is reflecting the individualized and democratized society that we currently live in. Each exhibition visitor enters the exhibition as an individual and decides for themselves when to come, where to look, how long to stay etc. Therefore the decisions of each individual is an integrated part of experiencing the exhibition. I try to make these decisions an integrated part of my works. I try to address the viewers directly by making them an integrated part of the exhibited work itself. That of course opens up the discussion about authorship that you hint at as well.

AUG 31, RP - CF
Hej Christian,

Thank you for your extensive reply! It made it very clear to me how you see yourself and your work and what your intentions are. There are a few lines of thought I would like to hear more about and I also have a few questions regarding the relation between the art scene and public, and the 'outside' world.

You talk about the possibility of 'self-definition and anti-establishment' as being an important drive. This certainly seems to play a very big role in your works, not only as a motivating factor but also in what you want the visitor to take away from the experience of your work. I think this is very clear, and as I mentioned earlier, I think it is one of the strong aspects of your works. And, I agree, authority is not inherently

negative and also an intrinsic part of human relations. This makes it very important to choose whom or what you lend authority to, wisely. In order to do this, you must of course be (made) aware of the dynamics, power-structures etc.

This seems to work very well within the confines of the art world, with its informed, reflective and well-educated public, but I wonder how it translates beyond the art world. And whether the art world really is, as you say: "...a space in which highly problematic topics can be dealt with and looked at.?" I certainly agree with this as an ideal situation (and have actively argued for this in the Dutch debate on the role of art in society over the last 5 years), but when observing an average art fair, it seems it's all about monetary transactions and shady investments - capitalism at its most authoritarian. Is the idealistic (utopian?) narrative of arts critical potential really more than a story we tell ourselves in order to soothe our consciences? Or does it really have the potential to break out of its own establishment and spill into the world of political and economical authority?

This brings me to the prosumer. I agree that the exhibition format (and the growing emphasis on career and artist 'superstars') can be said to reflect the development towards a hyper-individualistic society. But it seems to me that it then also becomes an extension or part of a capitalist paradigm in which the individual has been transformed from a citizen to a consumer and now into a prosumer (and in this transformation has lost both agency and an idea of the collective). Is the prosumer more than the next-generation consumer? Does a prosumer really produce anything outside of the predetermined boundaries of consumption?

And while the idea of the prosumer - through a process of 'hyper-democratization' - may help to actively break down certain notions of authority (traditional political parties, scientific fact etc.), it seems that the underlying power structures (capitalism, production, consumption) remain intact, and in some cases are reinforced by the uninformed, but loudmouthed prosumer (rightwing politics and values, climate change denial etc.) In your own works you may not know the exact outcome of the work (in both a physical sense as in the individual experiences of the participants), but you're still very much the celebrated author even when you relinquish the lead role - that too can be seen as reinforcing a certain narrative: the white male selflessly lending his genius to another.

So basically, while I recognize and share your ideas about self-determination and anti-establishment, I wonder if we (as in all of us in the art world) aren't simply complicit in upholding the very structures we criticize. Can true self-determination and anti-establishment really find a place within our present societal structures, and would we really applaud (or recognize) it if it manifested itself (e.g. by claiming a piece of disputed land and chopping off peoples heads)?

As you may have guessed the above also deals with questions I've been asking myself for a while (sorry, to dump

it all on you, but I guess your work brought it out :-)). I fully accept that I may be misinterpreting or exaggerating your statements and works completely - I just realized today that this is my first time as the guy doing the interview...

Good luck with the preparations, and I look very much forward to meeting you on Friday!

SEP 2, CF - RP
Hej Rune,

Thanks again for your thoughtful response and great questions. I would have loved to have more time to go in depth with the discussion, but since the opening is tonight and I'm already pretty late, I will have to answer quite briefly.

You ask me how well my work translates beyond the art world and I'm afraid that is something I cannot answer. It may seem like an easy cop out, but I leave it to the participants to carry the experiences they make into their lives. It is not only because I feel unable to change societal structures outside the realm of the art world, but also because I do not see that as my role. I agree completely on the vast majority of the art I see being all about investment and career hierarchy (especially, but not only at fairs), but I don't think you can blame the context of art in itself for that. Rather, I think that the artists have a big responsibility regarding the exhibitions they make. A lot of artists don't care about the public, but that does not mean that there is no critical potential in the exhibition format. I maintain the position that the art exhibition has potential as a frame for relevant social rituals. For me, that potential lies more in a kind of heightened awareness than in the presentation of concrete (political) agendas.

Whether or not the rise of the prosumer brings about a democratization of power or simply a more sophisticated form of consumption within the existing structures of capitalism, you have to accept it as fact. I think art needs to reflect the development society (in good or bad), but also to point at the potentials of that development. The individualization provides a conscious form of agency that has critical potential, but I believe that the challenge is to provide a social aspect. That is why meeting, exchanging, touching as well as the formation of group rituals are such important parts of my practice. I think society needs spaces that facilitates such experiences and the museum is a space where individuals enter with a raised awareness of themselves and what is presented to them. To use that space to form social interactions and reflect on those seems relevant to me, but I am of course aware that I might just provide another product. I am also a part of the market.

Regarding my own role as the author of the work, the white male in the lead role, I do not try to hide or delete that position. Rather, I want to highlight it's mechanics and make it as visible as possible. That is one of the reasons

why I do not like the focus on charisma and "presence" in performance art, because I feel that a lot of performances (and performance artists) utilize the mechanics of the mythical leader, celebrity status and so on, instead of investigating and showing how these mechanics are constituted. By delegating the role of the leader or the performer to the exhibition visitor, I don't expect to break down the authority of my own position. I rather attempt to share the experience of being either submitted to or taking a position of power in order to be able to reflect on it's influence.

I hope I have been able to answer at least parts of your very well thought out and sincere questions and I hope we will get a chance to discuss further in the future.

Thanks a lot and see you later!

Best
Christian
