

CHRISTIAN FALSNAES

Exploring the power (and danger) of communal performance, the sublime potential (and menace) of the group dynamic, the Danish artist Christian Falsnaes creates heightened moments of ephemeral, bodily, collective experience in which normative rules and societal customs are radically overturned. Playing with audience expectation and presumption, with the simultaneously democratic and authoritarian capacity of collaborative participation, Falsnaes has formed an ardent, commanding artistic persona that compels his audience into unusual acts and atypical behaviour, into positions and places which they might otherwise eschew. More recent works have begun delegating this creative orchestration to secondary figures in a more positivist approach, so Falsnaes remains integrally dependent on his human counterparts for the production of his artworks (be they installations or YouTube videos, paintings or collages). Seeing his participants as artistic material in themselves – and including them, of course, in his list of mediums – he plays with the infinite possibilities of

individual and group response, and of the human and the social body. Yet what is key to this relationship is not simply the fact of participation but the artist's desire to investigate the very status of participation itself. Examining both the role of the artist and the audience, the positions of authority and acceptance, the complex rituals and conventions of contemporary art (as both aesthetic and culture), Falsnaes aims to isolate and emphasise the seemingly natural modes of power integral to his work – playing with control and chaos, regulation and rebellion, hierarchy and anarchy, in an intoxicating, impassioned, yet intensely analytical oeuvre.

Many of the themes key to Falsnaes' contemporary practice – in particular, his interest in action and authority – can be seen to have emerged through his involvement within the graffiti subculture during his youth in Copenhagen. Whilst the residual graffiti image was, for Falsnaes, understood as a critical aspect of the act itself, it was the work's performative presence (rather than its aesthetic or style) that for him reverberated most

deeply. The act of production and bodily implementation of graffiti, the endorphin-fuelled excess and pleasurable uncertainty, the heightened group dynamic and collective effervescence, all these factors surpassed the base materiality of the image to form an aura, a vibration, that could linger far beyond the lifetime of the pigment itself. Undertaking a series of public, post-graffiti interventions that played with this status during the early 2000s (such as the viral performance *Love and Security* with Søren Berner and Amos Angeles), whilst going on to study both Philosophy in Copenhagen (2001-3) and Painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna (2005-11), Falsnaes soon began exploring ways of retransmitting this performative and transgressive charge within the more traditional setting of contemporary art. Whilst projects such as his 2008 work *Rational Animal* explored both normative and subversive masculine behaviour whilst still keeping the artist at the centre of the action, Falsnaes nonetheless found that incorporating the audience into his performances could enable him to develop more unpredictable yet socially revelatory outcomes. Including human agents enabled him to develop actions in which he could focus not simply on the undertaking of performance but on the unique interactions inherent in each attempt, in which he could create an intense collective sensation whilst interrogating the structural basis of performance itself.

Two of Falsnaes' most notable participatory works, *ELIXIR* (2011) and *JUSTIFIED BELIEFS* (2014), can be seen as archetypal examples of this simultaneously emotional and rational, experiential and conceptual approach. In the first work, *ELIXIR*, Falsnaes aimed to address our passive mode of consuming art through creating a socially affirmative adventure: a transformative, alchemical, collective engagement. Dividing his collaborators into two groups, an active group situated in a white cube and a passive group in an adjacent cinema space (who were watching the former participants through a live-streaming video), Falsnaes impelled his audience through a series of rituals to create a bounded collective, the eponymous *ELIXIR*. Latterly coming to break through the walls of the gallery ('the existing order's uninterrupted discourse about itself', as Falsnaes recounts) before entering the cinema space, *ELIXIR* then incorporated the passive group into the collective. Parading into the street, where they illegally graffitied an adjacent wall, the entire group were finally brought back to the gallery where Falsnaes led a collective

meditation. Seemingly anarchic, the performance works through a careful balance between frame and freedom, structure and improvisation. Taking a dominant disposition in order to enable not constrain personal liberty, using hierarchy and authority to develop a moment of true equality, for Falsnaes what is key is to find the balance between direction and uncertainty, a scripted playfulness in which the material and the result are innately uncontrollable yet carefully composed.

In *JUSTIFIED BELIEFS* however, a delegated piece in which the audience heard Falsnaes' commands through a set of wireless headphones and performed them alongside two actors specifically hired to follow the choreographed instructions, the artist aimed to focus more on the level of enablement which the wider frame of action could permit. Instructing his participants to strip nude within the piece (amongst many other enjoinders), over 20 people per day followed these instructions at the works presentation at Art Basel. Yet even more interestingly for Falsnaes, participants found it impossible to exit the frame without exiting the entire installation; the authority of the voice was such that rather than listening and disobeying, it was only by removing the headphones and departing the structure that could one disregard its directions. As in many of his other works, Falsnaes was here able to utilise the wider framing of art to create very real social relations, exploiting the authority of the context to create a level of engagement fundamentally different from the everyday, a creative counterbalance to our morally structured world. Understanding that emotional reactions and experiential responses remain equivalent no matter their framing, understanding that everything is performance, he thus creates a balance between manipulation and liberation, expression and realisation, *communitas* and structure, using the institutional milieu to cloak his socially interrogative, socially emancipative experimental acts.



ELIXIR, 2011
Performance
PSM, Berlin



ELIXIR, 2011
Dimensions variable
Installation view (detail),
PSM, Berlin

JUSTIFIED BELIEFS, 2014
Performance, 5-channel
audio installation on
wireless headphones,
2 performers
2-hour loop, Edition 1/3
+ AP
Installation view, Art Basel
Statements, Booth with
PSM, Berlin
Private collection, London

