

PERFORMATIVE PROCESSES OF  
VALUE CREATION



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Since the 1960s, at the latest, the contemporary work of art has left traditional aesthetic categories behind to test new constellations of subject and object, space and time, material and signs in a performative process that often expansively extends into life and the everyday. Since then, in addition to self-contained work, events have been produced in which the dichotomy of viewer-subject and art-object has been repealed and replaced by a feedback loop, ranging from subtle to overt, between the physically present actor and the audience. In this open artistic process, which maintains its own temporal structure, artist and work cannot be separated from each

other in principle; rather, the artist himself becomes a medium.

Above all, performances in the 1960s were often objectless enactments centered on the physical presence of the performer, with an occasionally contingent path of development. Instead of a rehearsed stage performance, which, in principle, could take place without the presence of an audience, interplay existed between the actor and the audience's immediate reaction. Ideally, this created a democratic, anti-hierarchical space in which the border between artist and spectator, production and reception seemed to dissolve temporarily. The departure from the commodity form of the classical work of art also moved the performance closer to conceptual art forms, in which it is never clear what an adequate viewer's reaction actually looks like.

Today's performatively-oriented works, and here the artistic practice of Christian Falsnaes is an incisive example, build on this heritage, but in his case bind the feedback loop influencing the event to popular cultural formats between casting show and telegenic edited talent competition as well as to the economically shaped, continuously optimized, and evaluated concept of performance (in relation to the economic sphere).<sup>1</sup> Above all, the economic definition of performance plays a central role with Falsnaes as a mechanism of evaluation and commentary on production and distribution, and in particular those of the art market and those active there. It's about achievement competition, and value creation, even if a cheerful atmosphere of collective activity prevails. This activity, however, is not self-sufficient; instead, it resembles a form of immaterial work that becomes independent from its actual producers as soon as it materializes objectively.

Therefore, it is perhaps misleading to discuss Falsnaes's works solely from the perspective of the performative aesthetic. They also fall into the realm of an expanded sculptural practice that allows the artist and the audience activated by him to do something that produces an object-like result: either a concrete material form, for example, in the sense of an artwork such as *Portraits* (2017) created under the guidance of Falsnaes, or a video work that is not only the documentation of an event, but the product which the performance itself resolutely works towards, for example with *Icon* (2018).

If, in this context, the artist also calls the audience his "material," this labeling certainly contains a cynical connotation. In the performance-related terminology of neoliberal profit maximization, with its continuous evaluation of work processes, it has long since become the norm. The audience follows instructions for action, may participate in a given process and experience themselves as performers in a public, yet art-specific situation. However, this ends his contribution. The documentation of the event is later presented to a secondary audience in a comparatively classical way: as a video work in which a viewer-subject meets an art object.

1. See *Texte zur Kunst. Performance Evaluation*, Issue No. 110 / June 2018, in particular the contribution by Sabeth Buchmann, *Feed Back: Performance in the Evaluation Society*, pp. 34-53.

In the 1960s, the abandonment of the ephemeral performance of the work of art as a material product available to the market, which was still idealized at the time, of the work of art as a material product available to the market is hardly relevant for Falsnaes against the background of ubiquitous exploitation possibilities of performative productions in the digital field. On the contrary – his works would not function without their precisely calculated use of attention economy, via documentation integrated into the work concept from the outset, which can also become an independent video work, and its institutional presentation. Even the fact that performance

once softened institutional boundaries of art by activating collective capacities for action, developing new body practices, addressing gender injustice, and publicizing intimate experiences of pain and vulnerability can hardly be asserted any more here: more than ever before, artistic performance is an exhibition object that, despite its intensive recourse to the outside, has reinstalled itself all the more strongly in the art system.<sup>2</sup>

Concerning the actor/public relationship, the contingent feedback effect declares and transfigures the core of Falsnaes's artistic performance, ultimately becoming an efficient division of labor, performance actually becomes performance (in relation to the economic sphere). His works, based on a prefabricated script, assign him the role of motivating the audience into active participation with the promise that they will become part of a work of art. The viewers, freed from their passive role, will overcome the limits of their socially regulated habitus and – entirely in the sense of the performative arts of the 1960s – experience a supposed moment of liberation. However, this is only presumed, in so far as an essential feature of Falsnaes's practice is that it is quite perfidious. In his confrontation with authority, hierarchies, group dynamics, and collective compulsion, he situates himself outside the group and manipulates its actions. Thus, voluntary participation in a collective process ultimately becomes the participation in a directed energy aimed at provoking certain social behavior in contexts where it is less at home. The resulting photo or video material emphasizes this transgressive moment, however not in the sense of a border-crossing liberation of the self, but as seduction by a skillful entertainer who persuades his willing audience to do more or less borderline things: to undress to the point of nudity at an art fair, willingly follow an infantile party entertainer, collectively fabricate works of art. The notion that Falsnaes's performative works bring informal forms of action or even being into the institutional forms of art proves to be wrong.

The actual legacy of the claim to liberation of the 1960s and 1970s, which was later declared a "performative turn," obviously lies less in the reference to an agenda of the performative than in the interpretative examination of explicit models that have since become art history. For his three-part series *Portraits*, Falsnaes asked the

audience at an art fair to cut the clothes off of his gallerist, a collector couple, and himself, and to collectively make a collage from the fabric pieces using the wooden frame provided. The three resulting works portray the symbolic actors of the art market – artist, gallerist, collector – represented by their destroyed clothing, in which the social capital of their wearers manifests itself. Overall, *Portraits* is clearly situated within the institutional framework of the art system and makes use of its conventions. The work refers to art historical genres such as the commissioned portrait of the collector, the patron, and shifts the focus from the body in its exposed physicality

2. See Keti Chukhrov, *Institute der Performativität. Zu einem zentralen Paradigma der zeitgenössischen Kunst, oder unterwegs zu einer Ethik des Performativen*, in: *Springerin. Hefte zur Gegenwartskunst*, Issue 3/2018, pp. 16-22.

to the clothed body and the wardrobe that forms the material of the resulting work.

Abstracting from this context, however, one clearly notices the proximity of the instruction to a legendary performance from the 1960s: Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*. First performed in Kyoto in 1964 and subsequently, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, *Cut Piece*, with its invitation to the audience to cut the clothes off the artist sitting motionless on stage, is regarded as an important feminist work, thematizing an aggressive male gesture against a passive female body. Ono later described the work as an act of giving and taking. In fact,

her instruction does not necessarily stipulate the gender dichotomy manifested in the first performance; later versions also included male performers to give *Cut Piece* a universal perspective. A version in which Ono asks the audience to cut pieces of clothing off each other with scissors has also been documented.<sup>3</sup>

In a direct comparison between *Cut Piece* and *Portraits*, some significant shifts can be observed not only in the aesthetics but also in the performative agenda. In *Cut Piece*, the artist, sitting on stage, urges the audience into active action. Falsnaes's performance does not stop with the one-off invitation, but instead repeatedly encourages the audience, whose attention is much more distracted due to the art fair surroundings anyway, to participate. The sexually and voyeuristically charged component of successive nudity and the tension and vulnerability that can be seen in historical shots of *Cut Piece* meets a seemingly calculated exhibitionism with Falsnaes. And while the participants of *Cut Piece* can take the piece of fabric they cut off with them like a trophy, in the case of *Portrait* the pieces of fabric remain with the artist and become part of a work that is jointly created, yet authorized by him alone. Even though the public is part of its genesis and contributes to its added value, they are not involved in its potential capitalization. This radicalizes a fundamental hierarchy necessary for the concept, which is also present in *Cut Piece*, despite audience activation, when the artist decides that the performance is over and thus withholds the position of director for herself.

Falsnaes also takes up the relationship between gender roles – a central theme of *Cut Piece* despite all statements to the contrary – as a reference to the authoritarian gesture inherent in many emancipatory works. He is the one who says what should be done; he determines how the result of this action is realized. On the occasion of a group exhibition at the Bonner Kunstverein in 2013, he incited ten women and ten men who had signed up for the action to create a performance of dance, throwing their hands in the air, screeching, and so on, reminiscent of the fun at a boisterous party. He used four different strategies of influence, which are applied in his performances as a whole: the role of the teacher or lecturer who argues; that of the entertainer who creates a collective sense of us and celebrates himself and the audience; that of the leader who gives orders;

and finally, that of the aggressor who almost attacks the audience. The cinematic recording of this action following strict direction by the artist was cut into a 4-channel video work and became a part of the exhibition. The title of the work – *Male Demeanor as a Consequence of Societal Power Relations Between Artist and Audience* – also lends the work a direct gender-specific interpretation through an allusion to a photograph by Marianne Wex. (*"Weibliche" und "Männliche" Körpersprache als Folge patriarchalischer Machtverhältnisse* ["Female" and "Male" Body Language as a Consequence of Patriarchal Power Relationships]). Between 1972 and 1977, Wex

photographed male and female passers-by to show normative patterns of behavior related to their respective postures.<sup>4</sup> She grouped the photos, separated by postures and body parts as well as by gender, into series, which she combined with advertising photos, celebrity portraits, porn images, and reproductions of antique sculptures as a reference to gender-specific body images. The vertical arrangement of the pictures explicitly emphasizes the hierarchy resulting from patriarchal power relations: the photographs of men are categorically above those of women. Falsnaes, on the other hand, makes no secret of his charmingly broken, but if necessary demagogical-

ly-charged position of authority: he gives the order. The breaking of normative patterns of behavior by the audience as "material" is not directed towards hierarchical gender relations (these hardly play an explicit role in the uninhibited performance of the participants), but consciously cements the male artist's claim to authority, whose social power relations of adaptive habitus, in contrast to institutional hierarchies, have rarely been questioned, one thinks, for example, of artists such as Joseph Beuys. Criticism arises here, to some extent, through an explicit affirmation of behavior that has long since been sanctioned in some areas of society.

The final question remains as to why so many enthusiastically participate in Falsnaes's performative processes of value creation. One reason could be an asymmetry of perception. The art business still stands for the promise of the performative, to abolish rules, social restrictions, and institutional frameworks in favor of a collective space that can be experienced for a short time. Idealized as a sphere of the social and of exchange beyond social hierarchies, the institution of art stands for the other of a present entirely trimmed for efficiency. This illusion is broken if Falsnaes consistently relies on a different form of performance and the economic penetration of supposedly social group action. The "participation" component, the voluntary integration into the scenario controlled by the artist, is designed in such a way that the critical insight into the pitfalls of an art spectacle influenced by the economy of entertainment is ignored in the euphoria of experience within a more or less protected space. Only when the event later finds its way into the art world as a work do the promises of the performative, with their focus on collective presence, their suggestion of an open artistic process and an action experienced retrospectively at the moment of its emergence, actually prove to be only a means to an end.

4. Wex later published the photographs in book form: Marianne Wex, *Let's Take Back Our Space: "Female" and "Male" Body Language as a Result of Patriarchal Structures*, Frankfurt/Main 1984.