

"In a way, we are all disturbed in our daily lives"

A conversation with the Berlin artist Christian Jankowski about his art in times of pandemic, about people working in systemically relevant professions, the relevance of art and about an UNO art lottery

INTERVIEW BEATE SCHEDER

In mid-September, the artist Christian Jankowski caused a sensation. In several TV shows, he made people appear in protective clothing, ghostly moving in the background. These were people working in so-called "systemically relevant professions". Jankowski, who has often dealt with professions in his art, wanted to draw attention to their special situation.

The pandemic also had consequences for his profession: He was unable to travel to the Bangkok Art Biennale, which he will participate in in 2020, and his solo exhibition at Fluntum was temporarily closed. He is currently working on a catalog in Berlin - and as one of 100 artists* he donated a work for the art lottery for the benefit of UNO refugee aid. Tickets can still be purchased until November 24.

taz: Mr. Jankowski, the reason for our conversation is the UNO art lottery for the benefit of refugee aid. What can be won from you there?

Christian Jankowski: I contributed a photographic work that was created during a performance at the Montevideo Biennial 2012. The participants, who actually came to see a performance, were led up the mountain of Montevideo with masks in covering their eyes, not by just anyone, but by journalists from the city. These journalists simultaneously provided assistance and reported in their newspapers. This resulted in a picture that is somewhat reminiscent of Bruegel's "Blindensturz": a group of blind people is captured in the media in their time.

The work is called "Orientación".

The performance actually has a lot to do with orientation. Up on the mountain, the participants were asked to turn to the east. Everyone has their own compass needle inside of them, but after they moved to their inner East wearing an eye mask, everyone naturally looked in different directions. This photo came to my mind when I heard about the campaign.

Why?

Because the work shows people who are on the move and need help - and other people who are trying to help. The journalists in this case.

The action with which you recently drew attention to yourself also has to do with journalists: In various TV programs such as "heute journal", you made angelic people with systemically important professions appear. How did you come up with this idea?

In the pandemic, these essential workers suddenly came to light. For me, they were the people I still saw outside my family circle. In general, I am very interested in professions, and

in all my work specific perspectives on life and the world play a decisive role. Mine, too, has changed massively due to Corona. Suddenly Berlin, my studio, my apartment became the central starting point for my thinking. Also, for this work, which was created for the Bangkok Art Biennale.

This biennial has been running since October, could you travel there?

Of course not. Even during the preparation, I could only communicate with the Chinese co-curator via WhatsApp and Skype. Many of these communication formats are not entirely legal in China. Suddenly, communication and accessibility were no longer certain, even digitally. The virus, however, was potentially lurking everywhere. All of this led to the fact that I became more and more interested in the system-relevant aspects, because the system was obviously no longer secure. I wanted to let those talk in the mass media, who were suddenly talked about so much by others.

What were the reactions?

Especially after the appearance in "heute journal" there was a lot of discussion on Twitter. In any case, it caused a disturbance. And that fits well. In a way, we are all disturbed in our everyday lives, insulted, insecure and forced to rethink. I wanted to transfer this moment of global uncertainty into a multifaceted work.

How did you find the essential workers you were working with?

I started with my letter carrier. He stood here, delivered a package and I asked him: "Can I do an interview with you? It was exactly the same with the pharmacist who has her pharmacy down the next corner and who performed for me in "Soko Leipzig". Across the street at Edeka works Björn, who later haunted "Aspekte". In earlier works I have chosen magicians from Belgium or Vatican staff as protagonists. Corona brought those into my focus who were still directly accessible for me. The influence of people who inscribe themselves in the works and become co-authors, is fundamental to my work.

Speaking of professions: To what extent has the pandemic changed your own?

Before Corona I lived more out of a suitcase. I still travel, but the time I spend in zoom meetings, Skype or team conferences has increased dramatically. I personally don't have less to do. I'd say I can adjust well to different situations, improvise with what's there, even with stories lying around in my own biography.

For example?

I have now opened an exhibition in Bucharest with the curator team Quote - Unquote at Suprainfinit Gallery: "Healing Games". I made a work for it together with my brother. The two of us sawed four figurative sculptures with chainsaws from large tree trunks, put them on rolls and did a family constellation in the gallery space. Dad, mom and ourselves, the two brothers. Formally, they remind me of German Expressionism and Baselitz. With a Romanian therapist, however, we accompanied this process therapeutically and thus of course charged the work with additional meaning.

Is your brother also an artist?

No, my brother has been unemployed for many years. Since childhood I have never had such an intense time with him as now, when we saw the sculptures together for a few days and nights. It was an extremely physical work, but also a return to childhood, which was suddenly the focus of attention through our conversations and being directed towards each other.

After all, family is also a topic that has become more prominent due to the pandemic.

My brother was the "keeper of the family history", as the new work clearly showed. What was created in Romania is on the one hand a single story, but of course everyone has dad, mom, sometimes siblings. The visitors are invited to move the sculptures and create new constellations. By the way, the therapist now also comes into the gallery with his patients and uses them as a practice.

Was the exhibition in Bucharest able to open normally?

Nothing works quite like normal anymore. Recently, this has been called Soft Openings, which ran from 3 to 11pm. I was surprised how much was going on there.

Did you receive many cancellations?

Some were postponed. But not much has been cancelled. Shortly after the invitation to the Bangkok Art Biennial, I met the collector Markus Hannebauer. He joined us as co-producer for the work for Bangkok and invited me to his Berlin exhibition space Fluentum. So, I also had a lot to do over the summer.

Many of your colleagues* have been hit hard by the crisis, also financially. What do you think the state should support more here?

Of course, I think art is systemically relevant. Even if I can understand that someone who is on a ventilator does not feel the same way. I think art is fundamentally important for our culture and society. It is not by chance that my exhibition in Romania is called "Healing Games". Art is also a "Healing Game", an invitation to find different, original ways to meet the everchanging world. Concerning the fate of colleagues, everyone should be supported by the state in my opinion. As much as possible.

Side Notes:

Christian Jankowski, born 1968 in Göttingen, studied at the University of Fine Arts in Hamburg. Today he lives and works in Berlin. His art has been exhibited worldwide, most recently at the Bangkok Art Biennale 2020, among others. Solo exhibitions currently at Fluentum in Berlin ("Sender and Receiver" - currently closed) and at the Suprainfinit Gallery in Bucharest ("Healing Games"). In 2016 he curated the 11th Manifesta in Zurich.

On the occasion of its 40th anniversary, UNO refugee aid is organizing the art lottery "HEART - 100 ARTISTS. 1 MISSION". 100 artists* donated works in DIN-A5 format. Christian Jankowski is one of them. Until November 24, tickets of 40 euros each can be purchased. On November 26, the draw will take place via livestream: www.uno-fluechtlingshilfe.de/kunst/

CHRISTIAN JANKOWSKI *HEALING GAMES*

October 30 — November 19, 2020
SUPRAINFINIT Gallery, Bucharest

Talk therapy informs and infuses more and more discourses outside therapists' offices. From personal development coaching to social media and entertainment or political analysis, therapeutic speech enters the scene as a linguistic agent and decodes choices, habits or individual biases, online and offline. It makes unconscious choices familiar and explainable through patterns of talk, action and thought. It dismantles automatism by highlighting the shadows in which shame, joy, guilt or desire hide for every individual.

Healing Games is the solo exhibition of artist Christian Jankowski, whose practice touches on dialogue at both a personal and a collective level, through a newly commissioned work, *Family Constellation*, and through previous works that echo concerns from related fields.

For **Family Constellation**, Jankowski asked Romanian Clinical Psychologist Alexandru Băţinaş to lead three online therapy sessions in the gallery space throughout the artistic working process. The artist invited his younger brother Jochen Jankowski to Bucharest for two weeks, both taking part in the sessions to discuss their relationship, family dynamics and the role of art as a possible healing game. Creating a new image of their "Ursprungsfamilie" (family of origin, a German term used in psychotherapy to describe genetic predispositions and likeness amongst members of a family), Jochen works on and orchestrates the shaping process of four wooden sculptures in the exhibition space, representing each member of the family: the mother, the father and the two brothers. The entire sculpting development is informed by the discussions with the therapist and by the brothers' old and new perceptions of their family. The siblings' collaboration in chainsaw carving resurfaces movements of consciousness, giving access to memories that are subtly unearthed throughout the sculptures' making. Fixed on four-wheel platforms, they allow the artist to move the heavy characters according to the ever-changing family dynamics.

Unlike most of the artist's previous works, where the investigation matters derive from the local context and are directed outwards, this project points to his kinship in uncontrollable, affective ways. *Family Constellation* accesses the unfamiliar through the familiar, exploring family relationships as a method of voyage and hybrid encounter.

The video and the series of plexiglass objects document Jankowski's therapeutic intervention and complement the sculpture ensemble in the personal and collective psyche, engaging with specialists of fields situated outside the art realm. The script is never the product of one author, but rather the result of meetings and dialogues between the numerous voices involved.

Family Constellation is an elaborate installation that combines various media produced in Bucharest in the autumn of 2020, and alongside the other works explores the potential of dialogue and (un)familiarity as a catalyst in (self)healing processes.

For **Shame Box** (1992), Christian invited a number of passers-by to write down their greatest shame on a sign and sit behind the signage in the storefront window of his Hamburg studio, presenting it to the outside world. The display of intimate emotions becomes a public installation, a therapeutic gesture for participants and viewers alike. **Visitors** (2010—2019) is a series of neon works that reproduce messages left by the public in museums' visitor books. Jankowski selects the messages that lead to the destabilisation of the certainties of language, captures the mute dialogue between the producer and the viewer and redirects an impression, turning a reaction into an image that is open for interpretation.

Christian Jankowski (b. 1968, Göttingen, Germany) studied at the University of Fine Arts, Hamburg. In his conceptual works, he focuses on performance, film, video and photography, but also employs a variety of media, including painting, sculpture and drawing. Jankowski initiates collaborations between contemporary visual art and other professional worlds such as those of religion, business, politics and entertainment. Protagonists from many fields inscribe themselves in Jankowski's art. Jankowski's art is carried out in close exchange with mass media formats and their production mechanisms. The focus lies in the collective invention and the questioning of its power: testing the image.

Jankowski has been featured in numerous group exhibitions such as the Bangkok Art Biennale 2020 and solo exhibitions including *Sender and Receiver* (Fluentum, 2020), *Weather Flag* (josegarcia, mx, 2020); *Floating World* (@KCUA, 2018), *2017* (Petzel Gallery, 2018). In 2016, he curated the 11th edition of Manifesta, becoming the first artist to assume this role. Christian Jankowski lives and works in Berlin, Germany.

Healing Games is part of **Quote—Unquote**, a long-term interdisciplinary and collaborative research platform which explores the mechanisms, uses and effects of (public) speech and language in contemporary society, through artistic practice and its intersections with other fields of activity.

Quote—Unquote is conceived and articulated by **Infinite Conversation** Association / curatorial unit (Dan Angelescu, Irina Radu, Cristina Vasilescu). Visual identity by Gabriel Barbu

Website: www.quoteunquoteplatform.com

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