



# Unlearning reality · dissolving self

An Installation by Jes Brinch at Stalke Galleri, Kirke Sonnerup, Denmark March 25. to April 28. 2006.

Unlearning reality - dissolving reality was an installation about unlearning a frozen view of reality, and dissolving the ego. A parallel theme was cultural relativity.

A large part of the objects in the installation was bought in Vietnam, and several objects was produced in Vietnam for the exhibition. The whole thing was built into a total installation in the exhibition space a week before the opening. The installation combined a conceptual and spontaneous method of working, and the result was a poetic, dreamlike and humorist installation, which is hard to describe. Anyway I will try to describe the elements of the exhibition, and the ideas behind them, since it is hard to get a precise impression based on photos alone.

The first thing seen was two banners on each side on the hallway, entering the exhibition space. On the left was a banner with the text LIFESTYLE, a concept that defines most Danish people's lives. A Danish design chair, a ladies hand bag, a work out bike, and a design lamp by Poul Henningsen could be seen as silhouettes on the banner. These objects are symbols of a typical Danish life, with status objects and weight problems.

On the right was a banner with the text SURVIVAL, as a symbol of reality in Vietnam. Normal Vietnamese people have neither got the time or capital to worry about lifestyle, and would typically have problems with gaining weight, in contrast to Danes who needs to loose weight. The entrance was a conceptual introduction to the exhibition, and the thematic of cultural relativity.

# LIFESTYLE



LESTER



SUBURBAHAL



The first thing seen when entering the actual exhibition space was a fashion show with a catwalk with 4 marching child-mannequins, all in tailor made brown suits, with light brown shirts and brown ties.

In an organic shaped window in the wall behind the catwalk was another mannequin doll as the boss in a synthetic brown leather suit, monitoring the fashion show. In front of the catwalk was a girl mannequin as a choreographer for the other dolls, carrying the Danish newspaper Jyllands Posten under her arm.

Further in the space stood a Vietnamese alter with a mannequin of a woman in bridal dress standing on top, surrounded by electric lotus lamps, synthetic flowers and oversized gold coins for prosperity.

The room was lit by ultraviolet light, which made objects painted with neon colour appear as glowing, and gave the entire space a unreal red/violet light, in combination with the big red silk lamps that hung in the center of the room, flashing in sequence.

The installation was accompanied by a soundtrack, made in collaboration with Mads Steen in Vietnam. The soundtrack combined a reproduction of the Vietnamese soundscape made by mouth with pieces of traditional Vietnamese folk music. The result was a humorist and poetic sound portrait of Vietnam.





These mannequin dolls are made in Vietnam, but strangely resemble nazi-ideal children. Western lifestyle is idealised and misunderstood in Asia, exemplified in the dolls.

The dolls were bought in Hanoi, and had tailor made suits in Hoi An, Vietnam.

In front of the catwalk stood a girl mannequin doll, as a choreographer or stylist for the other dolls. She carried the Danish newspaper Jyllands Posten under her arm, as a commentary to the so-called “Muhammad crisis” that happened just before the exhibition.





To the right is the boss of the dolls, dressed in a synthetic brown leather suit, checking if his employees do a good show on the catwalk.

On the previous page the girl carrying Jyllands Posten under her arm is seen next to a Vietnamese coffin, mounted on cut out wood flames, with spirit-hands and feet. The coffin is an obvious symbol of death and impermanence, which is why it was included in the installation.

I decided to continue to work with the coffin after the exhibition, since it invited to go in depth with the topic of death. This later resulted in the exhibition DEATH, where the coffin was the focus point of the installation.





The bride is placed on top of the alter as a reversal of the traditional conception of women as being inferior to men, and a break of taboo at the same time. Alters are reserved for Buddhafigures, pictures of gods and dead ancestors.







The previous page shows a motorbike made of paper in the installation. The Vietnamese make burnt offerings of status symbols made of paper, to ensure that their after life is good so the dead don't return and cause trouble. The paper objects can be contemporary objects such as motorbikes, cars, houses, kitchens, TV's with video and karaoke equipment, fashion clothes, wrist watches and fake dollar bills, and traditional symbols of wealth, power and happiness such as emperors clothes, booths, swords, spears, all made of paper.



To the right is three works consisting of words embroidered on silk brocade. The text is

**BIRTH KARAOKE DEATH**

It is a cynical humorist commentary to contemporary Vietnamese copy-culture, and a shallow life with karaoke as its only content.





Fontex<sup>®</sup>  
20 mg  
Fluoxetin

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NOKIA

Mobile phones are a global status symbol, found in both Danish and Vietnamese culture.



Anti-depressive medicine is a symbol of Danish lifestyle, where depression is more common than poverty.





On the floor was a modern Zen garden, consisting of a dollar sign from which grew synthetic peach trees. The trees are surrounded by electric lotus lamps, blinking in different sequences.

On the wall above the garden is a 2-D helicopter, cut out in wood and covered with silver glimmer.

The helicopter is a symbol of the Vietnam war, know from Vietnam war movies. Wrecks of American helicopters can be seen on war museums all over Vietnam.

By covering the helicopter with disco-glimmer its connotations was inverted from threatening to gracious.





# COLONIAL HISTORY OF VIETNAM

130 X 195 cm. Fluorescent acrylic on canvas. 2006.

The story begins in the lower left corner with the arrival of the French naval fleet to Vietnam around 1850, the following invasion of Vietnam by the French army and defeat of the primitive Vietnamese defence forces, from left to right in the bottom line of the painting.

The second row of images starts from right towards left and shows a French officer carried by his Vietnamese subjects. This followed by a picture of the first Vietnamese nationalist peasant rebels who fought the French colonial powers with primitive swords and bamboo spears. This followed by a picture of the cruel methods of punishment the Vietnamese were subjected to, followed by a picture of a French bishop dressed as a Vietnamese mandarin, and the decapitation of a rebel. Christianity was a tool to suppress the Vietnamese, which is why the last picture in the row is the French church in Saigon.

The third row starts on the left, and show the Japanese occupation of Vietnam, and the Japanese surrender to the allied forces. Right after the Japanese withdrawal after the Second World War the French colonial power was back in Vietnam. In 1954 the French army suffered a decisive defeat at Dien Bien Phu, illustrated by the French soldier surrendering and the two Vietnamese soldiers raising the Vietnamese flag on the roof of the French general staff's bunker at Dien Bien Phu. This is followed by the American Navy landing at the beach at Danang in 1965. After that is a motive from a Vietnamese propaganda poster showing a small Vietnamese woman who has caught a big American pilot, who's plane has just been shot down. He is lowering his head in shame, while she is pointing at him with her AK-47. The image was a symbol of Vietnam's war against USA, and we used it as inspiration for the flyer for the exhibition.

The fourth and topmost line on the painting shows a B52 bombing Vietnam, and the escape from the South Vietnamese Presidential Palace in 1973, where a lot of people tried to get aboard a helicopter on the palace roof. Two other images show a tourist at the beach in Vietnam today, and another tourist transported in a rickshaw. Tourism is the contemporary version of colonialism, which is why it is represented on the painting. In the upper right corner is a Vietnamese woman on motorbike as a symbol of Vietnam now and in the future. Full speed ahead – but towards what?

Everything on the painting is based on historical material, from French etchings and historical photos to modern press photos.



On the previous page is a painting which is also a paraphrase of the picture of the female Vietnamese soldier who caught an American pilot, bending his head in shame. On the painting a lot of dollar bills are added as a commentary to the greed for dollars in contemporary Vietnam.

35 X 50 cm. Acrylic on canvas. 2006.

To the right is a detail photo of light and objects from the installation. Light chains representing glowing firecrackers and cardboard dogs for prosperity in the year of the dog 2006.



# Unlearning reality – dissolving self

Jes Brinch Interviewed by Christian Falsnaes 2006.

**Christian Falsnaes:** The first impression I got when I entered the installation was a confusing perceptive overkill. I needed to spend some time in the room before I could begin to perceive and analyze the individual elements. At first, everything seemed to be an unordered chaos of impressions. Is this a general picture of human consciousness?

**Jes Brinch:** The installation wasn't merely made up of conscious combinations of objects, which could be deciphered directly as a rebus. Most parts were combined quite spontaneously, in an improvised way of working, both when I bought the objects in Vietnam, and when I build the actual installation in Denmark. Some parts made sense, and other parts didn't make any logical sense at all. But according to my experience this reflects human consciousness fairly well, since consciousness contains anything from logic to total contradiction at the same time. You can say that the portrayal of human consciousness was the subconscious theme of the exhibition.

**Christian Falsnaes:** About this approach of using spontaneity and improvisation as a conscious part of the process, I think that is interesting because your art seems to belong to a conceptual or politic tradition that is normally not associated with spontaneity and improvisation. Do you believe that this approach can be used to somehow go beyond or transcend the borders of conceptual thinking?

**Jes Brinch:** Working spontaneously can be a way to break rigid conceptual thinking which can be useful at times, but I honestly combine as many different ways of working as possible not to become bored with doing art. I have worked with art long enough to be bored stiff with all the rigid art historic definitions, and prefer to integrate whatever I like in my projects, and to change between different styles and modes of expression to get as much variety as possible. I see no dichotomy between improvisation and conceptualism, and no reason to limit creativity with labels. If I work with public art, I would normally do an artwork that could be deciphered and understood right away, but if I am doing an exhibition where the audience has enough time to understand complex works, as in this case, I think it is an advantage to do a very varied work that is visually generous.

**Christian Falsnaes:** The installation on one hand shows a cliché of how a western person imagines an Asian reality. On the other hand it gives a vision of a strange and unreal dream world that does not seem to belong anywhere. What is the relation between subjective perception and social conceptions? How subjective can perception be?

**Jes Brinch:** Most of the objects I bought in Vietnam for the installation was chosen mainly because they were typically Vietnamese, or bizarre seen from a conventional western point of view, or simply because I thought the objects were funny, and in this way inspiring to work with. I find both the Western concept of Asia comical and the Asian perception of the West comical as well. The one doesn't really understand the other, either way, and keeps these strange and unrealistic ideas and pictures of the other.

The Asian perception of the West is quite wrong, and the Western perception of Asia is equally wrong. But somehow this "wrong" view of reality can be quite constructive, and a tool to show the relativity of what we define as reality.

I think that any society conditions the individuals inhabiting it with society's conventional image of reality. As Danish citizens we are taught how to perceive reality, and how to create an acceptable product out of the raw material of experience, thus creating a socially acceptable reality, as well as a conventional personality suitable for navigation within the Danish society. The same happens in any other nation, according to different social customs. But the effect is the same; a conditioned individual, subscribing to the conventional image of reality, and able to act "properly" within society.

**Jes Brinch:** Our raw experience, before it is turned into “reality” may not correspond with the socially constructed image of reality at all. By raw experience I mean our direct sense-experiences, through which we experience the outer world, as well as the inner world of thoughts and feelings, out of which we construct a self. If we are able to create a socially acceptable image of reality and a functional personality we are awarded. If not we are punished.

I assume that the common sense image of reality and our personality are tools for social navigation only, and nothing inherently real. If we believe in our socially constructed image of reality and self to be inherently real, we are conditioned heavily by it, and are doomed to live our life by society’s conventions from birth to death, which in my opinion is worse than death.

It is hard to answer how subjective perception can be. It is possible to doubt that there is any subjective perception at all, and it is also possible to assume that everything is subjective perception only. I am not conducting a philosophical investigation beyond my intellectual capacity, but just trying to explain the thoughts that generate the ideas for my art works. And I do take my subjective experience and point of view as a starting point for my work, as it has proved to work better for me, than trying to illustrate borrowed philosophical discourses or whatever.

**Jes Brinch:** I am sure you have some views on subjectivity as well, which is reflected in your question. So let me ask you: How subjective do you think perception can be?

**Christian Falsnaes:** Well, it is a difficult question and I cannot provide a solution. I would say that it seems most consistent to me to assert that perception is mainly social, understood in the way that our view of reality is shaped by language, norms, science and other forms of social interaction rather than pure external data. I do not believe that every man is “an Island unto himself”.

It is very difficult to imagine how “raw experience” should look, since all experience is shaped by perception. It is logically possible, as you say, to assume that perception is completely subjective and that we have absolutely no access to any common reality, but to do so probably leads to some very theoretic constructions (modern epistemology) that it does not make much sense to maintain. Most likely, the views on reality that we accept are the ones that make our learned perception look most coherent.

Christian Falsnaes: I don't want to start a technical epistemological discussion about the subject. That would be a process of generating definitions, which is something I would, per definition, not try to do. Also, I am an artist, not a philosopher. For me, the most interesting aspect of the question about perception is the questions it generates when you start to realize that your perception may not be completely subjective. That is the point where you might start to question the "truth" that seems so indubitable at first, and start to play an active role in the conditioning of yourself instead. You will maybe not achieve a complete liberation from structures of perception, but I think it is possible to shape those structures and choose which ones you wish to subordinate to. The first step, nevertheless, necessarily has to be some point of realization. A general question regarding subjectivity could be a way to achieve such consciousness about ones "perceptive" situation. If one understands, for instance, that perception is changing along with culture, science, technical development and language, it makes sense to assert that perception in its present form should not be regarded as universal.

Jes Brinch: How can perception be social? Perception is just perception of raw sense data. Perception means the act of sensing, not judging nor creating a socially accepted worldview. That happens after perception, as we process the raw sense data, and try to make them into a coherent product that makes sense according to social rules, creating our "world view". Perception doesn't have any value as such. We ascribe value to our perceptions after the fact, when we judge our perceptions and create a worldview.

Therefore I think it makes sense to talk about direct perception, just experiencing the sense data directly, without judgment or conceptual evaluation. Direct perception is what makes it possible to experience and understand other realities than one's own, since conceptual thought need not enter perception and create a world view out of it. With non-judgmental direct perception there is room for any number of different realities.

I ask this question not to contradict you, but to clarify the concepts we use.

**Christian Falsnaes:** Even if you contradict me, I find that perfectly ok. We do not have to agree, but it is important that we make ourselves as clear as possible. Hence, I will try to explain what I mean with “social perception”.

The act of perceiving, as I see it is not only a process of collecting raw data of the “external” world, but very much to generate meaning. Quantum physics seems to imply that the world, outside my mind, is nothing but empty space as well as a flickering chaos of elementary particles that appear and disappear randomly. Nevertheless, I perceive the world as a highly structured place full of objects. I do not only “see”, I see colours, persons, space, time, material etc., and I believe that my seeing these things is conditioned by other humans confirming me that this is what I see. I cannot remember what my perception used to look like when I was a newborn baby, but I am quite sure that it looks different now, mainly because I have learned to process the data that my mind obtains in order to see what I am actually seeing.

Normative judgment of that data is yet another level of interpretation that somehow makes my world-view even more coherent with that of others. To see without judging is, of course, a way to question a part of my social conditioning, but I have to question what I see as well. Without dealing with technical details about how stimulation of the sense apparatus is turned into pictures of “the world”, I think it is enough to say that at least my certainty about these pictures is a matter of social interaction rather than exchange between my mind and a non-human world. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to separate the way I create meaning out of the data that my senses collect from the data itself. That is what I mean with perception being mainly “social”.

**Jes Brinch:** Thank you for the clarification. I do agree that it is difficult to separate the way one creates meaning out of the data that ones senses collect and the data itself, but I don't think it is impossible. I think it is possible to rest in non-judgmental direct perception when meditating, based on my own experiences. But of course it may be an illusion. I can't prove it.

**Christian Falsnaes:** One of the basic assumptions of the exhibition is that it can provide a more “free” approach to everyday life and perception to live in a foreign and unfamiliar country, mainly because one is not so accustomed to the structures and norms there. Is it really possible to perceive another culture without pre-defined conceptions, and how far does this freedom of perception reach?

Jes Brinch: Yes, I think it is possible to perceive another culture without pre-defined conceptions; otherwise I wouldn't live in Vietnam. The most important is simply to relax, and not get stressed because everything is different from what one is used to. Time is also an important factor, as well as having an open mind. One needs long time in a particular place to understand it, as well as time to learn the language and local customs; otherwise one just gets a set of snapshots. 3 months is a minimum in Vietnam, and most people just spend a week. A lot of tourists go to Vietnam to be confirmed in their perception of the world, and thus experience nothing other than they expect. Tourist agencies cater to this, and make tours that show a staged version of Vietnam, that confirms all of the common western preconceptions. Other tourists again are very open minded and sit down in the market places, eat the local food, enjoy the smells and new impressions, and are able to experience Vietnam in a more open and sensual way than the common paranoid tourist, afraid of having a diarrhea of anything else than hamburgers. When I arrived in Vietnam I spent a long time learning the language, which is actually not as hard as most westerners say. I saw a lot of museums, read a lot of books about Vietnamese culture and history, and none of it really fit the reality I saw on the streets, and experienced from communicating with Vietnamese people. I did my best to understand Vietnam and everyday reality here without imposing my ideas on what I saw and experienced, using openness as a basis for communication. I think it has worked well, and given me a basic understanding of contemporary Vietnamese culture in the areas where I have lived. But then again, I never wanted to adopt Vietnamese culture as a substitute for my conditioning by Danish culture. My aim is to de-condition myself by living in a different culture and dissolve my self, as is suggested in the title "Unlearning reality – dissolving self". I do feel freer and happier here, and less dictated by the social perception of reality in Vietnam than I did in Denmark, which at times felt like a prison.

Jes Brinch: But what is your opinion? Do you think it is possible to perceive another culture without pre-defined conceptions?



**Jes Brinch:** Somehow your opinion that it isn't really possible to experience another culture without pre-defined conceptions seems a bit pessimistic to me. Why shouldn't it be possible to experience another culture without pre-conceptions? You imply that because one is born in Denmark and have received a Danish set of conditioning it is not really possible to experience things without Danish values and views of reality. I think we are much more flexible than that, and have capacity to de-condition ourselves from whatever we want, if we do it consciously, and are prepared to sacrifice the socially constructed ego at the same time, thus allowing space for fresh experiences. I think you are describing similar experiences with moving abroad, but I would like to take this one step further, without returning to the old Danish reality tunnel after a year or so, but instead leaving the whole thing behind to experience everything totally fresh. And anyway, how hard can it be to understand people in other cultures? After all I don't think that "they" are different from "us". We are all humans, all societies are created by humans, and all cultures interact today, so we are closer than we think.

**Christian Falsnaes:** At the entrance to the installation, one walks through a room with a word written on each side, "Lifestyle" on one side, "survival" on the other. This can be seen as a comment on the attachment to material objects in Denmark in relation to the fight for survival in Vietnam. At the same time, I see it as a contradiction that fits very well with the other text-pieces in the exhibition and our previous discussion about the human mind. In one of your drawings for instance, it says: "gain, loss, pleasure, displeasure, praise, abuse, reputation, disrepute". What is your intention with the lifestyle/survival conjunction and how, if at all, does it fit with the rest of the exhibition?

**Jes Brinch:** The Lifestyle/Survival dichotomy is an introduction to the two different cultural contexts that I have been working in, in Vietnam and Denmark, and the different worldviews and existential conditions in these two parts of the world. As a person with a Danish background I see Vietnam different than the Vietnamese do, and tend to notice objects that illustrate the cultural differences and different values between Denmark and Vietnam. I find it hilarious that the Vietnamese drive Honda Dream motorbikes, and even sleep on them in the streets. The Honda Dream motorbikes are also made in paper and cardboard as a burnable offering to one's dead ancestors, to secure that the ancestors have a good afterlife.

**Jes Brinch:** The mannequin dolls on the catwalk are also very Vietnamese in the way they try to look western in a totally wrong and outdated way, making them look almost like Nazi-ideal kids. In an indirect and more poetic way these object illustrates the cultural differences. I made the two banners as sort of a headline for the installation, to state the idea clearly, thus allowing me to work more freely with the object combinations, which are not based on text or language but more on the symbolic meaning and value of the objects.

The drawing with the text “Gain, loss, pleasure, displeasure, praise, abuse, reputation, disrepute” is actually the so-called 8 worldly concerns that one should leave behind, according to Buddhist philosophy. Since I think this is a brilliant line of thought I used as basis for a drawing.

**Christian Falsnaes:** I didn't know that this text comes from Buddhist philosophy, but I think it gives a good picture of the structures of life. In my opinion, you could very well add “survival, lifestyle” to that text as well.

I know that you practice Buddhist meditation and that it is an important part of your life and the way you perceive the world. Can you tell a little bit about the overall influence of Buddhism in your artistic work? Is it possible to explain and communicate a spiritual experience through art, or do you merely use the conceptual ideas of Buddhist philosophy as a source of inspiration?

**Jes Brinch:** Well, I wouldn't say that I make Buddhist art, or that my art in general builds on Buddhist philosophy. My art starts form my own life and my own experiences. My thoughts, ideas, emotions, fears, dreams, problems, and so on are my main material.

But I have been trying to practice meditation since I was 17, for my own sake and not as an artistic endeavor or an art project. Meditation is a practical way to let go of the habitual thoughts and the ingrained view of reality and one self. If meditation should work it can't have a goal, such as making art, or getting ideas for art projects. The aim is to rest in non-action, relaxed and aware, with out trying to change anything or achieve anything. Meditation can't be used directly to make art, without ruining the meditation by turning it into a tool for a practical aim. I am influenced by the non-conceptual style of meditation, which goes completely beyond thought, values and culture. I see no reason to adopt other culture's hang-ups, whether it is “Buddhist” hang-ups or not. The aim is to de-condition one self, not to get a new set of conditioning.

Jes Brinch: Years ago I tried to keep my interest in meditation and my work with art separate, since I thought my private interests had no business in art, and out of fear that talking about meditation would be considered as some kind of ridiculous New Age thing. But at some point I realized that it would be more motivating and dynamic to integrate my private life and my work as an artist, without any artificial borders. So now, since meditation influences my life, it also influences my art. This inspiration is translated to art through my person and experiences. I try to put my interest in a new and fresh context, avoiding religious references or anything remotely New Age.

I have been thinking a lot about whether it is possible to communicate a spiritual experience through art or not. I would like to do it if it was possible. But I am not sure it is. One must understand that what we call “spiritual” is relative. One person may get a “spiritual” experience from sitting quietly and gaze at the clear blue sky, while another may prefer to dance for hours in smoke and strobe light.

And if we talk about meditative experiences it is in a way quite ridiculous to speak of communicating a meditative experience through art or objects; because who is it that meditates? Is the artwork that meditates? Does a painting meditate? Or does a sculpture, a found object, a video projection or a text on the wall meditate? No. Objects don't meditate. It is mind that meditates; your mind. Not the object.

In the beginning one finds it easier to meditate in quiet surroundings, which are positive and supportive, such as nature. For this reason quite and serene art works seems to be identified with spirituality. I think this might also have some reminiscences of the Christian conception of the Garden of Eden and the Christian good/evil and heaven/hell dichotomy. Having some more experience with meditation one understands that it can be done in other circumstances as well, and that dynamic situations might give more intense experiences. This is where the strobe light comes in and we enter hell, still in perfect meditation. So it is not the situation that is meditative, but the mind of the spectator. And the spectators can potentially meditate anywhere they like, and have “spiritual” experiences anywhere, in the street, parking lot, supermarket or where ever. Nobody needs a gallery, church or temple to meditate.

So since “spiritual” experiences are utterly personal I think it is hard to communicate. What is “spiritual” to me might not be “spiritual” you or my grandmother at all. And we haven't got any common symbols either. To me a cross symbolizes the ideological and religious aspects of colonialism, and an utterly stupid religion. But to my grandmother it symbolizes her faith in Jesus that kept her alive through a long life with an alcoholic husband. So for her it is the pinnacle of spirituality and very positive, but for me negative and useless. I would rather sit in the street than in a church and leave my “spirituality” untouched by thoughts, ideologies and value systems.

**Jes Brinch:** So to communicate something “spiritual” through art, one would have to avoid all the common symbols of organized religion and spirituality, and invent a new set of symbols, or maybe avoid symbols all together. At the same time one would have to find something common to everybody that would qualify as being “spiritual”, maybe even redefine the concept of “spirituality” as such. This seems like a job for a new savior, not for me.

So I prefer to do meditation by myself, and let my meditation experiences inform my art in the same way anything else informs my art as well. It will be indirectly, simple and probably not “spiritual” at all, since I don’t identify myself or my experiences as being “spiritual”.

**Jes Brinch:** That was a very long answer to a quite hard and complex question. What do you think about communicating spiritual experiences through art? I would like to know your ideas on the subject as well.

**Christian Falsnaes:** You confront me with the problem of my own question, namely the vagueness of the term “spiritual”. It is not very clear what “spiritual” means, since it, as you also observes, has a different meaning to different people. I think a religious account of spirituality is too narrow, so instead I will describe a spiritual experience as something that goes beyond a pure material account of reality (though this is a quite vague description as well). In accordance to my understanding of a spiritual experience, working with quantum physics or painting a wholecar might generate spiritual experiences as well as meditation, prayers or any mystic practice. It is, just as you say, something quite relative and subjective, but on the other hand, all experience is relative. Of course, trying to provide a conceptual analysis of the term would be a waste of time, so I will try not to do that.

I somehow like the term “spiritual” because it can include a wide variety of interpretation; contrary to a term like “metaphysical” that excludes all activities outside the frame of philosophical and scientific discourse. Exactly the fact that it is unclear and undefined gives it a certain potential.



Jes Brinch: I really like your definition of expanded spirituality, and if that were the common meaning of the term “spirituality” it would be great. But just go to any bookstore and see the term “spirituality” used as a definition of something entirely different from what you talk about.

I do think it is possible to communicate about spiritual experiences through art. Symbolic communication is also possible, as you say using symbols and circumstances leading to that experience with the aim of encouraging the recipient to aspire similar experience. This is a metaphoric way of communicating, and still indirect. The spiritual experience is not transmitted as such.

It is no problem to communicate about something, but to communicate the spiritual experience itself is much harder, if not impossible, which was what I thought your original question was about. I have made art projects that communicate about meditative experiences in text, installations, photo collages and paintings, so of course I think that is possible.

Returning to the concept of “spirituality” I see a problem in the dichotomy between ordinary materialistic life on one side and “spirituality” on the other side, as if they are two opposites that can't be united, or one is good and the other evil. I think we create this enormous and unrealistic idea of spirituality because we are unsatisfied with our everyday life. Spirituality thus becomes a compensative dream world but nothing real and useful.

What you define as “expanded spirituality” for me means meditation. Meditation is an everyday event, nothing special, and the main point is to integrate it in everyday life. So I only intend to make “spiritual” artworks in the event where it is directly relevant to everyday life and nothing special or artificial.

Christian Falsnaes: Yes, maybe you are right in saying that communicating about an experience is a more proper way to explain the possibilities of art.

That the word “spirituality” is understood mainly as something referring to new age practices, should not be a problem for us as artists. A part of our power lies in our ability to create and shape discourse. Hence we can contribute to the understanding of a word like “spiritual” if we want to. I think the term could also refer to a general movement away from identification with the body.

**Jes Brinch:** But why should “spirituality” refer to getting away from the body? What is “un-spiritual” about the body? I think this is an ancient Christian dichotomy that perceives the body as being unclean and the spirit as being pure, which is a load of bullshit that ultimately leads to repression of one’s sexuality. A brilliant thing about Tantric Buddhism is that it integrates body, breathing and mind. One does yoga movements, and works with the breath and the mind at the same time. And the ultimate realization is supposedly that body, breathing and mind are one thing, and not three different things in conflict. So spirituality is actually in the body, not somewhere else away from it.

**Christian Falsnaes:** First of all, the proposal of explaining spirituality as a movement away from identification with the body does not necessarily mean that I think such movement is “good” or “right”. I am not completely sure about my own viewpoints on these questions; I merely try to approach a definition of the term “spiritual” in order to be able to integrate it in a more usable way in my language. Furthermore, I think there is a difference between getting away from the body and moving away from identification with the body. Contemporary culture seems very obsessed with the body. Society (at least in western world) is focused on outer representation in a way that makes identification with that outer representation, the body, difficult to question. To identify with the body implies a determination, since the body is only changeable to a very small degree. One example of body identification could be gender specific thinking. To say that “I” act or think in a certain way because “I” am a man, hence cannot act differently is a point of view that represents a strong identification with the body. A spiritual or philosophical way to deal with that determination could be to assert that “I” am not only my body, but also my mind, my actions, my perception of reality or whatever ways the individual practices and theories might find to explain and describe what “I” can be. Even though the Christian attempts to find such way have had some strong moral implications, I do not think that has to be the case. To say that “I” am not only my body, or that my body does not have to impose a determined perception of myself, my surroundings and my fellow humans, does not have to mean that my body is something “bad” or “not pure”. It only means that my view on that body has something to say as well.

**Christian Falsnaes:** One of the things I believe to know about Buddhist meditation, is that it, among other things, is supposed to help the meditating person accepting a rejection of the subject/object dichotomy. If I were to find myself in the state of accepting such a rejection, however experienced, I would have to accept that my perception of myself could not be separated from my perception of everything else. Since there would be no “me” and no “else”, it would be a radical turn away from having a general feeling of identification with my body. A more embracing way of describing “spirituality” could be to say that the term refers to a general movement away from identification with a cultural, moral, social or material context. In this way it would not produce immediate associations to Christian repression of sexuality. What do you think?

**Jes Brinch:** I think you are making a good point. Identification with something is the problem, whether it is identification with the body, gender roles, social position, nationality, race or whatever fiction one can identify with in order to construct an illusory identity.

As far as I understand Buddhist meditation, I would say that speaking of a rejection of the subject/object dichotomy in meditation is a bit strong, and could imply some sort of struggle. Maybe it is rather a matter of simply letting go of the subject/object dichotomy, and in this way experience an integration of subject and object in a very soft and mellow way, without any struggle at all. A rejection is conceptual, and thus unable to transcend concepts and conflict. But anyway that’s just fine-tuning of what you are talking about, and basically I agree with you, whether we reject or integrate subject and object.

**Christian Falsnaes:** I want to return to the exhibition and ask you something concrete. As I just explained above, I think that the exhibition touches several levels of content and allows several ways of interpretation. The political aspect is quite present along with the philosophical (or spiritual) content, but I guess that they are interconnected.

One painting shows the history of colonialism in Vietnam, and I find it interesting that you show a tourist in that context. How does the tourist belong to that picture and what is your general approach to deal with the contemporary situation of Vietnam? Is the exhibition political?

**Jes Brinch:** The exhibition isn't only political, or only anything else. It's a mix of many different things, poetic observations, political opinions, jokes, serious statements and so on. But in this particular painting the subject is the colonial history of Vietnam, which I thought deserved a serious treatment, since it is a heavy topic. The painting shows the French invasion of Vietnam about 1850, the Japanese invasion in 1940, the American invasion in 1965, combined with pictures showing how each colonial power is defeated, and the poverty and suffering of the Vietnamese, who practically won every war with bamboo sticks, even though the invading troops were equipped with high tech weaponry at the time of invasion. This of course cost a lot of lives, most Vietnamese.

In Vietnam the colonial history is still present. You see reminiscences in everyday life, as French architecture and French cafes run with an arrogant colonial attitude, acting as they still own the country, underpaying their staff. The general American tourist is more humble, and often comes to Vietnam with an apology for what the Americans did during the war.

Vietnam has been independent since 1975. But since it is a country in development very dependent on foreign cash, it is an easy country to take advantage of. This is especially visible in the tourist sector. Tourism is the contemporary version of colonialism, making entire areas in to artificial service centres for tourists, with all that it entails from servants and taxi drivers to hustlers and prostitutes. I hope that there is a future for Vietnam beyond cheap labour and tourism, which is positively symbolized by the young woman on a motorbike in the upper right corner of the painting.

**Christian Falsnaes:** How do you avoid that your making contemporary art in Vietnam becomes a kind of colonial attitude as well? Many western art projects in the third world seem to have an imperialistic aspect, even though (or maybe because) they try to be enlightening or create dialogue. Do you exhibit in Vietnam at all?

**Jes Brinch:** I think it is possible to live and work in other cultures without being colonial first of all by respecting the culture and people that one is among. The main point is one's attitude. Being conscious about colonial history may also be useful, so as not to repeat the mistakes of the past.

I rarely exhibit in Vietnam. I just live my life, create my art, ship it to Scandinavia for exhibitions and relax. I have far better possibilities for exhibiting my work in Scandinavia than Vietnam. I haven't bothered to do much careering on the Vietnamese art scene, since I have been through the entire mill 10 times before in Denmark and don't want to go through all that again. Also there is censorship of public exhibitions in Vietnam, which may or may not be a problem, but at least awkward to a western artist. Anyway it just makes it easier to exhibit in countries where there isn't. And I don't feel it is my responsibility to fight for artistic freedom in Vietnam, that is a challenge for the Vietnamese artists. I respect the circumstances I live in, and try to get the best out of it.

But please explain what you think is colonial about making contemporary art in Vietnam, and give me an example of an imperialistic art project. I would like to know your points of view.

**Christian Falsnaes:** First of all, making contemporary art in Vietnam is of course not in itself colonial. What I believe to be a potential problem related to cultural exchange between western world and third world countries, is not so much colonialism in the traditional sense of military and economical power, but more a kind of cultural imperialism. To make an exhibition in a third world country is a different gesture because the historic relation and the power position of the western artist to the audience are different compared to an exhibition in Europe. Contemporary art, I presume, can easily become a power tool to export a set of beliefs imposing a cultural domination. Historically, colonialism has been followed by a cultural influence where the original culture, with its art, language and norms, is neglected and the culture of the dominant country is absorbed. When cultures interact, there is always a cultural exchange, but in the case of colonialism, the positions are uneven. Hence the exchange is uneven as well. The Vietnamese obsession with western symbols could be seen as an example of how people in a repressed country acquire the attributes of the dominant culture. If an art exhibition merely exports western aesthetics and ideology, even if it just establishes English as the primary language in which to communicate, it can be said that it has a cultural imperialistic attitude, or at least an imperialistic aspect.

**Christian Falsnaes:** I was participating in an exhibition in Kenya earlier this year, just giving some old works without thinking specifically about the context. Later on, I suddenly started to wonder about the issues described above, subsequently wondering if the group of Austrian contemporary artists showing their positions to an African audience, was merely exporting a certain way to make art, hence a kind of ideology: “This is how it should be done!” Even though the individual works of that exhibition might look different, they all had the flair of “contemporary art”, that is, western contemporary art.

On the other hand it seems perfectly ok to show how “we” are working. It is after all a cultural exchange. The problem, I guess, lies in the power relation and the position of “us” to “them”. Because of history and the current economical and political world situation, that makes the case complicated.

I do not know if it is a problem at all, or if my thinking in this way is a part of my unconscious belief in my own cultural domination, but these considerations were reflected in my question. Do you understand the concern? What would your view on the subject be?

**Jes Brinch:** The discussion about cultural colonialism is important, but I think you are making some sweeping generalizations. Everything western isn't necessarily colonial. We can't just take things for granted, but have to question several aspects of culture and its value, whether it's your own culture or another culture. Is culture necessarily good? If alcoholism among men and domestic violence is a significant part of Vietnamese culture does this mean that it shouldn't be changed because it's Vietnamese culture? Is it colonialist to be critical of the destructive parts of another culture? Who has the right to criticize? Sometimes culture is a collection of bad habits and ways of legitimating destructive behaviour. If that's the case I think it is better to change the cultural habits, and wherever the better alternative and inspiration comes from, be it east or west, doesn't matter. But of course this shouldn't be an excuse to open a McDonalds in Hanoi, but rather to create some real and constructive alternatives, through education and poverty reduction for ordinary people.

Jes Brinch: The French impact on Vietnamese culture can be seen in the field of fine arts, particularly in Vietnamese painting. The Vietnamese painters are still painting in the style of French painting during the colonial period. They copy the French masters such as Degas, Monet, and Picasso, and show little awareness about contemporary art and a massive lack of imagination. Most painters are male, and have taken over the ancient French artist myth completely, thinking of themselves as geniuses that can drink and behave as they please because they are artists. This is possible because there is a big market for their paintings representing Vietnam as a sentimental fiction, and tourists buy their romantic paintings in the colonial style. To change this and make Vietnamese artists aware of new and more dynamic ways of making art education is needed. Financial support alone will change nothing, just inflate the tourist market. The Vietnamese fine art education is made by a French artist during the colonial period, and hasn't changed since then, so it's terribly old-fashioned based on a master-apprentice relationship, traditional crafts and copying masterworks as the main training. It's an education expert in erasing imagination. So a thorough renewal of the fine art educational system is needed as well. If the fine art education is updated hopefully Vietnamese contemporary art could reflect contemporary Vietnamese society and not just a sentimental fiction.

During the American war Vietnamese fine arts was actually more interesting than now. Art was considered a tool for propaganda and made after a Russian aesthetic model, which was much more interesting than the art which is produced now. When the free market was introduced in Vietnam in the 1980's the artistic style went back to the French colonial style, because it was easier to sell to tourists, sadly enough. The war drained the country, and the years after 1975 has focused on rebuilding and developing the country, which is still continuing. In the aftermath of war, fine arts doesn't have first priority, hunger, health, education, housing and general development comes before fine arts, which is the last thing to get attention. Survival comes before lifestyle considerations such as fine arts, which is only natural. You want to be able to eat before you consider making art.

So before Western contemporary art can have any impact in Vietnam the economic and educational standards have to be raised. What we consider contemporary western art presupposes a certain economic standard. It can only exist in an affluent society that can afford the luxury of criticism and an entire field of useless activities. I think this is often forgotten in a lot of Western art projects in non-western countries, and maybe also in the project you talk about in Kenya. If Western artists stay for a while in the country they exhibit in, and understand the cultural context I can't see why it shouldn't be possible to create artistic statements that are meaningful to the local audience. But if you just fly in a bunch of artists that are on the spot a few days to install their pre-made work it may very well be incomprehensible to the local audience, and a very superficial way of doing exhibitions. Unfortunately there is rarely time to go in depth on the international hip art scene, so it results in a lot of shallow career crap instead of good exhibitions.

Christian Falsnaes: You are right in saying that contemporary art can be a field for critical investigation and debate, but the question remains on which premises this field is created.

I am, by the way, not so sure that political correctness is the norm in the art world. It seems to me that gaining wealth and fame is a much more present motivation among contemporary artists than reducing poverty and providing education, but I might be wrong.

I want to ask you one more of the “big” questions. We have been discussing art and its potential in relation to some different subjects, and I think you have some general views on art that I would like to hear explained a little more. You use, for instance, the description “shallow career crap instead of good exhibitions”, but what is a good exhibition in your opinion? Also, your description of the Vietnamese art scene is an example of a not so interesting artistic activity, but what conditions should be fulfilled for an artistic activity to be interesting?

What should art contain? What can it contain? I want to ask you what you think the potential of contemporary art is and why do you think it is or can be important?

Jes Brinch: I am no authority on defining what is good or bad art. I look at art from a subjective point of view and try to enter a dialogue with what I see, which is what I think everybody should do if they want to get something out of art. By dialogue I mean trying to understand the artwork, questioning and examining it. Often a bit of research is necessary, which could be reading any texts that may be provided with the work, or finding the keys or entrances into the work, whatever it might be. If one does that effort with an open mind, some artworks prove to be very interesting and rewarding to try to understand, and others prove to be shallow works, that it wasn't worthwhile to use the effort on. I think it is more important to discuss what an artwork is about, than whether it is good or not. And if one wants to enter a dialogue one should not be afraid to express one's own opinions as well.

Personally I think it is interesting if art tries to create a picture of the time and conditions it exists in. For this reason I don't find it very stimulating to watch Vietnamese art today reproducing the French colonial art. I think the challenge for Vietnamese artists today is to try to find a way to express the conditions they live in right now, in a contemporary language, with symbols and expressions from the reality they are in now, and not 50 years ago. I think a spectator now would like to know how it is to be a Vietnamese person in Vietnam right now when they look at Vietnamese art, what problems people have, what their values, ideas and dreams are now, not what the French thought 80 years ago.

**Jes Brinch:** Art can mirror the times and society it exists in, and reflect our values and understanding of our world, and debate it critically at the same time. Art can offer this discussion within a stimulating sense experience, and not only as dry objective facts, which is a fantastic thing about art.

To give food for thought is probably the closest I can get to a generalisation of what I think is good. I find it easier to have a concrete opinion about a particular art project, and discuss its actual form and content and its implications, instead of trying to make opinions of art as such, since it is a very wide field, and therefore often end up in vague discussions about nothing concrete at all.

**Christian Falsnaes:** In saying that you find it more important and interesting to discuss the content of a particular artwork than to discuss art as such, you actually say a great deal about your view on art. This was what I was asking for, so I find your answer clear and good.

I am myself often bored with formal discussions about art that is not connected to content or something with a scope that reaches beyond the sphere of the academic art world. Hence I clearly understand what you are saying, and I think that it is important to say as well, since a big part of your audience and the people reading this interview probably have some connection to the art realm. We do, however, not have to enter a discussion about art and the art realm, but I believe that it is good to touch the subject, even though we might only treat it briefly. Let us leave it like this, so we do not end up in a vague discussion about nothing concrete at all.

For me, the interview comes to an end. I feel that I got answers to the questions I had regarding the exhibition, and we got to discuss some of the themes that it treats.

My last question will be about the future and the direction you want to take with your work. You have a quite impressive amount of exhibitions behind you, but what will you be doing next? Will you keep on making exhibitions and producing artworks?

You speak a lot about the situation and the contemporary art scene in Vietnam as well. Do you wish to work more on having an influence on people and artists in Vietnam? I do not know if you have any ideas about what direction you want to take, but it would be interesting to hear if you have.

Jes Brinch: I imagine myself to be working with art as long as I can, until it becomes impossible because of old age or whatever. I rarely plan more than a year ahead, since things change a lot, and improvisation often proves to work better than long term planning.

I don't seek influence on the art scene in Vietnam, or on any art scene for that matter. Influence isn't important to me. I try to live my life as freely as possible, since I believe that to be the best foundation for making worthwhile art projects. So my major consideration is quality of life, not careering. Quality of life for me means living a meditative lifestyle, with out stress and too many worries, combined with the possibility to produce and exhibit art works, at a natural and unhurried speed, not having to force creativity, just letting the ideas appear spontaneously as a reflection of a good life, not as a product of a career strategy or a deadline. So a meditative life with creativity as its natural expression is what I aim at, and probably will continue to work on. This can lead to any kind of activity and art projects, and is just a description of the general direction my life and art is going in.

I hope this answers your question. It has been a pleasure to do this interview with you. Thanks for the good questions and interesting discussions!

Christian Falsnaes: Thank you. It was indeed an interesting discussion. I hope it will be interesting to read as well.



Previous page:

**REALITY CAN BE CHANGED FROM WITHIN.**  
Gouache on paper in Vietnamese frame. 2006.

This work on paper shows two eyes in a dark room from a vision is projected in the shape of text spelling **REALITY CAN BE CHANGED FROM WITHIN**. The frame is a Vietnamese alter frame, normally used for framing pictures of deceased family members.

**EIGHT WORLDLY CONCERNS**  
Gouache on paper in Vietnamese frame. 2006.

This work on paper shows two eyes in a dark room from a vision is projected in the shape of text. The text shows the so called eight worldly concerns about gain, loss, pleasure, displeasure, praise, abuse, reputation and disrepute, which one should avoid according to Buddhist philosophy. The frame is a Vietnamese alter frame, normally used for framing pictures of deceased family members.

## Unlearning reality - dissolving self

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Tekst and design by Jes Brinch.  
Interview by Christian Falsnaes and Jes Brinch.

Photos by Torben Zenth, and a helicopter shot by Sam Jedig.

Thanks to Sam Jedig, Christian Falsnaes, Torben Zenth, Benjamin Hoelstad, Ivan and everybody else who helped with the exhibition in Denmark.

Thanks to Mads Steen, Vu Thi Trang, Phan Van Thang and everybody who helped with the preparations in Vietnam Vietnam.

A special thanks to Danish Arts Council's Committee for Visual Arts for support, without which the exhibition would not have been realized.

The project is sponsored by the Danish Arts Council's Committee for Visual Arts.



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