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# RED HOOK JOURNAL

Press Releases

## **Aesthetic Autonomy**

**Philip Ursprung**

### **On Phil Collins's *you'll never work in this town again* (2004-ongoing)**

Would I participate in Phil Collins's performance *you'll never work in this town again*? Would I consent to being slapped in the face and then photographed? To having my portrait distributed as a work of art?

Would I tolerate people witnessing my astonishment, people both laughing at and pitying me as if I were a hybrid between a slapstick comedian and contemporary version of an 18th-century academy catalogue of expression des passions? What would my reaction be, if I signed a contract agreeing that the artist could hit me after counting to three—only to be hit earlier, when he reached two? When was the last time I was slapped in the face? (As a child, by other kids, and once or twice by my teachers, who, in 1970s Switzerland, were still allowed to hit schoolchildren.)

Is violent art possible? There is a long tradition of real and symbolic self-mutilation in performances—think of Viennese Actionism and performances such as Günter Brus's *Zerreissprobe* (1970)—but these do not contain violence in a juridical sense of deliberately hurting the body of another. Since antiquity artists have dealt with violence as a subject matter and of course there are acts of violence in the lives of artists, as in the lives of others. Yet the art world generally appears as a civilized, good-mannered realm in which one speaks in a soft voice, dresses well, usually doesn't slap and hardly ever shouts. The days when drunken painters fought at Max's Kansas City in New York are long gone. Chris Burden's performances, such as *Shoot and You'll Never See My Face* in Kansas City, which probably inspired Collins's performance, have become a part of art history.

While the consented slap in the face disrupts the usual distance between individuals, no curator could sue Phil Collins for abuse. This slap in the face would certainly hurt, but it is a consensual act. This slapping is staged. It is a component of a work of art, part of a formal and well-balanced composition of several parts: the agreement; the tacit knowledge that the artists might hit earlier than was agreed; the anticipation of the act; the experience of the actual slapping; the clicking of the camera shutter; and the (possible) distribution of the image afterwards

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Slapping under these particular conceptual circumstances points to a different kind of violence from the solely physical: it refers to relationships of power and authority that rule in the “civilized” art world—relationships that are themselves forms of exploitation and violent by nature. Behind its polite façade, the art world can be tough. Careers are difficult to plan, and frustration, envy, and disappointment are par for the course. The art world’s hierarchies are characterized by competition and exploitation. Many artists belong to the precariat, and many employees of private galleries and public institutions are notoriously underpaid and radically distinct from the economic class of collectors and trustees whose property they curate, which leads to a tenuous relationship.

Another complex relationship, and one that also pertains to Collins’s series, exists between artists and curators. In a response to the economic shift that took place during the 1960s and 1970s—namely, the increasing role of distribution and the declining importance of production—mediation became a primary resource in the art world. The question of who managed mediation became fraught: artists, curators, critics, and dealers struggled over the control of meaning, value, and symbolic capital. The many panels, interviews, and manifestoes of that time were emblematic of the desire to mark terrain and to claim influence in a deregulated field. A highlight of this battle was Robert Smithson’s boycott of documenta 5 (1972), during which he accused of Harald Szeemann of being a “warden-curator” eager to imprison the artists in white cells.

What Collins’s work proves is that the mistrust of curators has not diminished their position between the threshold of production and the art market. Even if curators’ jobs are under pressure, their functions, in the view of most artists, remain powerful: they are in control of who does and does not work in their town. It is a sign of curatorial power that they can afford to be slapped. “You’ll never work in this town again” is a menacing phrase whose consequences many curators could inflict on an artist, while even the most influential artist could not succeed in destroying the career of a curator.

Yet what exactly do the curators gain by being slapped? The experience of “presence” and “immediacy” (cherished goods in a world of mediation)? Or, visibility—on book covers, in journals, at previews? To be part of Collins’s project is a sign of insider status. Because Collins’s work has already been acknowledged and lauded by others being chosen as his subject means that one is, likewise, “in.”

But does the artist breach contract and rupture this sense of inclusion by hitting earlier than agreed upon? Is this a reason to throw him out of town? Probably not, since most participants will already know that he hits on two. The curators, claiming to have a connoisseurial, insider’s, knowledge of the work, would probably be disappointed if, in their case, he did not hit them early. In the tradition of trompe l’oeil, the participants experience esthetic pleasure precisely because they are (and want to be) tricked.

The complexity and sheer number of ideas that Collins’s performance provoke point already to the power of this work to produce meaning. Without the work of art, there would be no work for the mediators. Sometimes, as a mediator, one forgets this simple fact. It is good to be reminded. So perhaps Collins’s slap is of the sort that one administers when someone faints or falls asleep. Perhaps it is less about violence and more about waking up.

*Two more texts on Phil Collins’s you’ll never work in this town again (2004–ongoing): Cheeky Business by Wendy Vogel and Off to a Bad Start by Jennifer Allen.*

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