
RED HOOK JOURNAL

Press Releases

Off to a Bad Start

Jennifer Allen

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

I was there at the beginning: 2004, the International Artists Studio Program in Stockholm (IASPIS). Phil and I had residencies, and I remember meeting him in the computer room. He made a joke about his name, although today no one would confuse him with the English pop singer.

And then:

“Can I slap you?”

I didn't say anything.

“And take your picture—it's for a work. Come on . . .”

It's not the kind of question people ask you every day—well, maybe in some Berlin bars, but not in the art world and certainly not at a residency program in mild-mannered Stockholm. I felt as if he had already slapped me by making the request. I declined.

I soon got a second chance at an IASPIS event known as the Stockholm Slapping Sessions, which attracted a small crowd that ended up turning into witnesses and participants. I declined once again, but I remember others being slapped in the face and then photographed, speechless and flushed. Some laughed out loud in shock at the force of Phil's blows.

But these reactions—which turned the intimate violence of his gesture into a shared slapstick moment in which everyone there had a good laugh together—were missing from the final photographs, which I saw much later. These were silent stills, devoid of both the *thwack* of the slap's impact and the ensuing collective laughter, and devoid of Phil's swift hand and the giggling onlookers. The subjects were people I had met in those diplomatic encounters proper to the residency experience; their faces had become part of an anthropomorphic map of the Swedish art scene. In Phil's portraits, they looked alone, stripped

of their surroundings, titles, accomplishments, dignity, and adulthood.

Only a camera could capture that split second of disorientation—the cheek still burning red—before life rushed back in. The celerity of photography made portraiture into a speeding time machine, transporting the subjects back to childhood and its humiliating punishments faster than any psychoanalyst's couch. Who wasn't thinking about the times they had been slapped or had witnessed someone else being slapped? Indeed, I remembered my father slapping my mother when we came home very, very late from the Canadian National Exhibition fairgrounds. We approached my father on our porch, unaware that he was fuming over our tardiness—my mom, brother, and I all smiles—and he slapped my mother. Just like that. Just like Phil. So, sure, we were all laughing at IASPIS around Phil and his camera and his swinging hand, but we were also remembering such childhood scenes and perhaps adult scenes. The ha-has and hee-hees made everything worse.

By the end of the evening, I hated Phil.

Nevertheless, I spent most of my free time with Phil, at IASPIS and at the Art Hotel where we were staying (he had that little house in the back). And I enjoyed my time with him thoroughly because he is an excellent listener and knows how to keep secrets. I was taken aback by his public presentation in Stockholm of his work, including scenes from the video installation *they shoot horses* (2004): that disco marathon with young Palestinians dancing in a pinky-orange room until they collapse from too much hustling and boogie-woogie. To conflict-ridden Ramallah, Phil brought the easy leisure of disco dancing. To Sweden, the capital of the welfare state, he brought gratuitous assault and battery. In both cases—peace invading violence, violence invading peace—he exhausted his subjects. In Stockholm, it took a split second to run them down; in Ramallah, it took seven hours. Everything was captured on a camera for the rest of us to see later in other places, with other people.

I left Stockholm with a conundrum: How can someone be so charming and such a shit?

I'm not sure if I have an answer even today, years after our initial encounter. Phil's interest lies in our naïve willingness to be photographed and filmed, and in exaggerating the naïve cruelty of our exhibitionism and voyeurism because, quite frankly, we don't see any cruelty at all in photographing and filming anymore, apart from cruelty captured in the images themselves, still or moving. Even long after deconstructing the objectivity of the genres of photojournalism and documentary, we still seem to believe that being photographed or filmed is a kind of neutral, passive, everyday act, instead of a radical transformation of the subject into a public good or product, able to be visually consumed by anyone, anywhere.

In a way, Phil may believe that the photograph steals your soul; he just wants you to feel this loss, physically, deeply, emotionally, forever. He wants you to feel hate and love about the *act* of photographing and filming, instead of just hating or loving what the pictures show. He leaves us with a scar that lets us finally see all the other scars left by the flashes and spotlights.

I'm not sure if Phil ever worked in Stockholm again after slapping all those Swedish art bigwigs. And I don't care. I just want to meet him for a beer and tell him some new secrets.

Two more texts on Phil Collins's you'll never work in this town again (2004–ongoing): Cheeky Business by Wendy Vogel and Aesthetic Autonomy by Philip Ursprung.

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Posted May 30, 2012. © Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College.

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