



Wing

Before becoming an artist, Jankowski played in a series of bands, including Funktastisch and Fonzo's Delight.

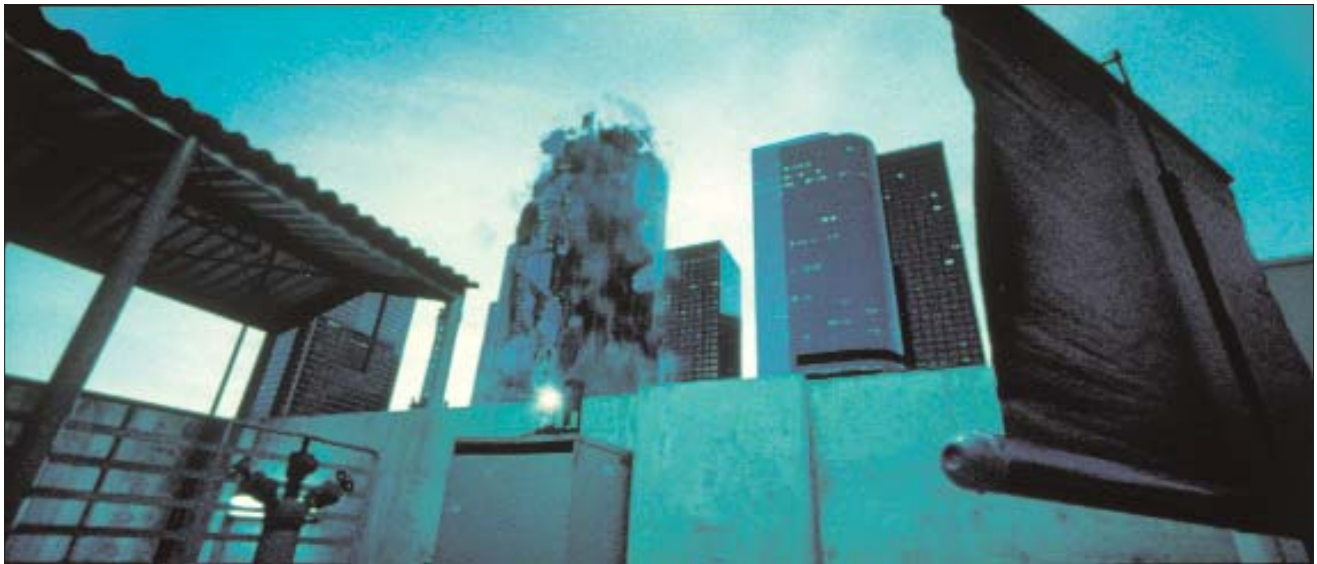
and a Prayer

In performances and films produced with such unlikely collaborators as televangelists, fortune-tellers, and special-effects wizards, **Christian Jankowski** dares to leave crucial elements to chance

Ten years ago, Christian Jankowski borrowed his mother's car and set out for Antwerp to participate in a show curated by artist Guillaume Bijl. In his final year at the Hochschule für bildende Künste in Hamburg, Jankowski was creating performances that had already caught the eye of such art-world figures as curator Kaspar König, but it was the Antwerp exhibition that would truly launch his career. Before Jankowski could begin his ascent to international renown, however, he first had to disappear completely.

In Antwerp the artist hired magician Wim Brando to transform him into a dove onstage during the opening of the exhibition, held at the city's Lokaal 01 gallery. For the next three weeks, the bird lived inside a cage in the gallery, serving as the artist's proxy, its actions documented in detail by exhibition visitors. **BY MARC SPIEGLER** Jankowski the man vanished from sight, making no contact with his family or friends. At the close of the show, on the artist's 28th birthday, the magician returned to the gallery and Jankowski reclaimed his human form.

Yet the life he stepped back into would soon scarcely resemble that of his student days. That same year, Martin Klosterfelde, a young dealer with a space in Berlin's Mitte district, asked Jankowski to recreate *My Life as a Dove* for his gallery, marking the artist's first solo show and establishing an affiliation that endures to this day. After seeing the piece at Klosterfelde, legendary Swiss curator Harald Szeemann included it in the 1997 Biennale d'art contemporain in Lyon and then commissioned a new work for the 1999 Venice Biennale.



ABOVE A building collapses in a special-effects sequence created by the Brothers Strause for *16mm Mystery*, 2004. **RIGHT** An Italian TV fortune-teller predicts a bright future for the artist in the video montage *Telemistica*, 1999. **LEFT** Jankowski's avian alter ego from *My Life as a Dove*, 1996.

Jankowski's first proposal for Venice was farfetched, even by the artist's own eccentric standards. He hoped to become blood brothers with French actor Pierre Brice, who portrayed the stalwart Apache chief Winnetu in a series of 1960s films based on German author Karl May's novels of the American West. The plan foundered when Brice brushed aside Jankowski's offer to have the ritual performed in a Venetian hospital.

With the Biennale fast approaching, the artist realized he had wasted months on a fruitless fixation and drove to Venice looking for inspiration. Watching local television in a hotel room, he conceived *Telemistica*. While taking a crash language course, Jankowski started calling up television fortune-tellers, asking them in fumbling Italian whether his participation in the show would succeed, and using outdated Beta video-recording equipment to capture footage from the live shows. Then he edited all the call-in clips together. The finished video montage juxtaposes the garish look and histrionic style of Italy's popular television with Jankowski's earnest anxiety about his art at a moment when, he recalls, "I really felt in a similarly desperate situation to the others calling in about their love lives and illnesses."

As the fortune-tellers predicted, the piece—shown as a video loop at the Biennale—was a success. To this day, *Telemistica* remains a favorite among Jankowski's fans, because it embodies all the elements that distinguish his films and performances: his willingness to expose himself, his unpatronizing interaction with culture at large, and his daring in making chance a crucial factor in his work.

Jankowski, who grew up in a middle-class family in the uni-

versity town of Göttingen, played guitar in a series of bands in his teens and early twenties. "Then I got my first video camera," he says, "and got more and more into visual art." Although he was never a professional musician, Jankowski has the easy manner of a pop star, handling his art-world status without ostentation. With a busy itinerary of productions, site visits and openings, Jankowski leads the nomadic lifestyle common to today's successful artists, his creative practice tied to his Apple laptop rather than to any geographic location. Now living in New York, he also teaches at the Staatlichen Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Stuttgart one week per month. There, his classroom doubles as his bedroom; clothes hang off metal shelving units, and he sleeps atop a mattress thrown down on the floor beside his suitcase.

The day we meet in Stuttgart, Jankowski has decided that rather than holding a seminar, he will have his students watch him go about the business of being an artist. Besides sitting in on our interview, they will discuss the details of the invitation cards for Jankowski's simultaneous winter shows in Los Angeles at Regen Projects and MC (his New York dealer Michele Maccarone's West Coast gallery), and listen as he confers with Maccarone. Amid the flurry of activity, Jankowski seems unfazed by the increasingly obvious impossibility of finishing all of his tasks.

"Christian is never frantic, but he's always pushing things

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He started calling up television fortune-tellers, asking them in fumbling Italian whether

forward, and he doesn't sleep, so why should anyone else?" says Klosterfelde, whose gallery, along with Maccarone's and Lisson Gallery in London, represents the artist's work, which sells for between \$15,000 to \$100,000, generally in editions of five. (The artist also works intermittently with Regen Projects in Los Angeles, Galerie Cosmic in Paris, Milan's Gio Marconi, and Sue Crockford of Auckland, New Zealand.)

As I leave him long after sunset, Jankowski is taking his students out for an Asian meal; whether he will sleep that night before flying to England at dawn remains unclear. Yet Jankowski

says. "But he doesn't just use people outside the art world as incidental elements or random personalities. He takes the logic of one system and then creates a fascinating collision with another system—Christian's system."

Jankowski also has an instinct for extracting art from unlikely situations. In 2000, first-time director Lars Kraume asked him for permission to reproduce two of his performance pieces as the art of one of the characters in his film *Viktor Vogel—Commercial Man* (released in the United States as *Advertising Rules!*). Jankowski agreed, but asked to bring his



LEFT Jankowski and Pastor Peter Spencer on the air in *The Holy Artwork*, 2001. **RIGHT** A child takes on the role of artist John Baldessari in *The Matrix Effect*, 2000.

seems to thrive on the pressure. "When I'm too much in my own world, it becomes hard to say, 'Now is the moment where we start working,'" he explains. "But if I come to Hong Kong to work, I know I have one week. And after one week, either there

is a new piece or there is not a piece."

More often than not, Jankowski's productions seem to court disaster, then coalesce at the last minute. To create *The Holy Artwork* (2001), for example, he needed a televangelist willing to let him come up on stage during a live broadcast. It was only on the Sunday before his opening at San Antonio's Art-Pace that he was able to find a willing collaborator and tape the piece. In it, the artist walks onto Pastor Peter Spencer's rostrum and suddenly collapses as if possessed, while the preacher, stepping around Jankowski's prone form, delivers an extemporaneous sermon—televised as part of Spencer's weekly religious service—on artists and godly inspiration.

"It's a little hair-raising working with him, but also a big adventure," recalls Nicholas Baume, now chief curator of the Institute of Contemporary Art Boston, who helped Jankowski realize *The Matrix Effect* in 2000 for the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut. In this video, children read from a script based on interviews gathered by Jankowski, taking on the characters of the museum's former curator, Andrea Miller-Keller, and several artists, including Sol LeWitt. "Christian's work is very avant-garde, less about the perfect performance than lack of understanding and mistakes," Baume



own film crew onto the set. Reading through the script, the artist selected certain places where, once Kraume was happy with the footage for the scene, he would ask the actors to answer a question on the nature of art. The resulting video, *Rosa*, is an alternate version of

Viktor Vogel in which the characters suddenly break the fourth wall, stare at the camera, and start philosophizing about art. (Its premiere at the Berlin Film Festival coincided with *Viktor Vogel*'s theatrical release.)

As is generally the case with Jankowski's projects, the *Viktor Vogel* actors did not rehearse these extra scenes and did not retakes. "As you repeat things over and over, it becomes more unlikely that a deep experience takes place on-camera," the artist explains. "All the pressure of a unique moment gets lost. So often, I try to set up two experiences simultaneously—the unrepeatable moment and the media context for that moment."

Because Jankowski's work depends so much on other people's participation, his considerable charm—a mix of attentiveness, sly humor, and congeniality—plays a key role in his success. Commissioned to write a catalogue essay on Jankowski for the 2002 group show "Art and Economy" at the Hamburg Deichtorhallen, curator Ali Subotnick visited the artist as he was creating a new video piece for the exhibition. In the video, *Point of Sale*, Maccarone switches roles with the owner of the electronics shop that shares a Chinatown building with her gallery, each repeating answers the other had given in response to questions about their business.

Subotnick expected Jankowski to be a slick, somewhat controlling type. Instead they became fast friends. "Somehow I found myself working on the interview questions and writing cue cards for the video," she recalls. "I was shocked when I looked up and realized that I was helping him make a piece. That's one of the amazing talents of Christian: he gets people to offer themselves up and eagerly join him in his endeavors."

For all his charm and seeming luck, Jankowski works relent-

his participation in the Biennale would succeed. Their answers became his artwork

lessly on every aspect of his productions, from conceptualization through final cut. “Even something of Christian’s that looks roughly edited involves a series of very precise decisions,” says Ceri Hand, who curated his show at the Foundation for Art and Creative Technology in Liverpool last January. “He knows more about film history than most video artists, and that comes through even in the pieces that look like they were shot through a bathroom window.”

An avid movie fan, Jankowski has adopted Hollywood tropes in his own work. In 2004 he convinced six German film-industry figures to appear onscreen in *Hollywoodschnee* (Hollywood Snow). Each was given a few brief scenes to play, and then asked to recite a personal statement on cinema. At some moment during the speech, a special effect would intrude on the scene—snow falling indoors, a sudden inferno, a drenching rain-storm. In one sequence, production director Andrea Wilson strides into an empty bar, sits down, orders a White Russian, and starts speaking. Suddenly glasses lined up on the bar start exploding. “I had to trick Andrea into wearing sunglasses so no shards would go in her eyes,” Jankowski recalls. “The whole idea was that the actors are surprised by the special effect. Sometimes we even installed other special-effects machines to confuse them. I wanted to see in their face that they expect anything could happen and capture that precious moment when they think, ‘Here it comes!’” (Only one participant, Alfred Holighaus of the Berlin Film Festival, was told what would happen—because it was impossible to surreptitiously wire his body with the exploding squibs that simulate bullet wounds.)

Jankowski’s most lavish project to date has been *16mm Mystery* (2004), for which he worked with the Brothers Strause, the special-effects experts for the blockbusters *Titanic* and *Terminator 3*. Having secured a hefty budget, the artist dictated that an unspecified event take place at the end of his scripted scenes—something to be determined by the special-effects men, effectively giving them power over the final moments and artistic impact of his piece.

Featured at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center’s “Greater New York” show last year, the short clip casts Jankowski as an elegant, black-clad assassin type who walks calmly into a parking garage and sets up a projector and a collapsible screen on the roof. He starts the projector. Nothing happens. Suddenly, a building a few hundred yards away shatters exquisitely, like a cracked sheet of ice.

Among those who know Jankowski’s work, this piece most often stirs debate, because of its slick production values. “I always tell my students that video needs to look professional, but with Christian I’d like to see him back in the streets with a Handycam,” says curator Stefan Schmidt-Wulffen, one of Jankowski’s advisors at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste and now rector of Vienna’s Akademie der Bildenden Künste. “I miss the improvised aspects from his earlier works.”

Playing the Hollywood angle to the hilt, Jankowski had Klosterfelde build a full-scale screening room complete with theater seats for the debut of *Hollywoodschnee*, shown alongside *16mm Mystery* during the 2004 Art Forum Berlin. “Christian doesn’t understand the meaning of the word ‘no,’” says Klosterfelde, sounding strained just recalling the episode. “He finished the final edit of *Hollywoodschnee* four hours before the opening. We didn’t even have time to transfer it onto film. But that’s how Christian’s at his best, constantly pushing to make the work better, until five minutes before the opening.”



German film distributor Claus Boje’s monologue is interrupted by an unexpected explosion in the movie *Hollywoodschnee* (Hollywood Snow), 2004.

Even after the fact, Klosterfelde reveals, Jankowski has re-edited some older works before allowing them to be shown again in museums. His unflappable exterior notwithstanding, such a working style is not without its stresses for Jankowski, who admits to sometimes having “freak-out moments” and nightmares over how all the necessary elements can possibly fall into place when he has left so much to chance. “But that’s the nature of working to build high-pressure moments,” he points out. “To me, it’s part of the performance idea, just like the last week before that first live gig with your band, when you play every night just to get a few songs right.” ■