Søren Berner
interviewed by Nadja Baldini

Nadja Baldini: In 2005 you started doing performances in various exhibition and public spaces. What is your background as a performance artist, and how does it motivate your practice?

Søren Berner: My activity already started in the 1990s. What drove me in the beginning was that I became aware of graffiti. I was living next to a train station and always saw what was painted on the trains and walls. I had the opportunity to get in contact with somebody who did graffiti, and suddenly I saw myself being up late, drawing sketches and going out in the night painting spots that I found needed another touch, needed a soul. But graffiti writing also has very clear boundaries – how the styles should be, how the outline should be – and I was very opposed to that. From the beginning, my goal was to break those boundaries. In 2001, my friends and I did a performance where we went to the subway station at rush hour with spray cans and elephant hats and started spraying while people were standing on the platform. But no paint came out; we just made the sound with our mouths – *pshshshhhh* – and called it "Invisible Wholecar." This was, let's say, the first different interaction that probably carved the line for another way of using the public space. Starting from graffiti, I began to open my eyes to the public space in a completely different way. On one side, I moved away from the spray can; on the other side, I started using my body, and this is what you might call the "performative." In 2002, I applied to the Art Academy in Amsterdam and got more into doing performances, but very few of my teachers understood what I was doing. In the ateliers, you would normally have paintings; one guy made video and another sculptures. I showed my teachers a rap text that I wrote, being dressed up as Superman. They could not understand it at all and had no clue why I was there. Some of the things were, of course, very different to what they considered art, but I now see that this was also due to their lack of knowledge. There had been a lot of stuff going on in the 1960s that was basically what I was doing without being aware of it. Luckily, I had two good teachers who saw this and gave me some good input.

NB: Your recent projects all take place outside the museum space and involve different audiences and communities. I'm thinking, for instance, of your three-week workshop with fifty children in Copenhagen last spring. What made you move away from the exhibition space and engage yourself in other contexts?

SB: Here again, I think, it is the opposite way around. I started outside the exhibition space and then found some entry into it. Having done this for more than fifteen years, I established relations with a lot of different galleries, off-spaces, and museums that invited me to exhibit my work. Exhibiting meant doing performances – rarely would there be anything to buy or anything other than leftovers to look at. Last spring the Nicolai Kunsthalle in Denmark invited me in connection with a project involving art and children, and my first reaction was to use the public space with the children. They were pre-school kids aged between four and six. I think the idea came from not being able to remember public space myself.

NB: What did you do with them?

SB: I created different stations, or perhaps you could call them workshops – I haven't really found a word for it. I created different scenarios that took place in the public space. First, I took a big piece of wood, big enough for all the children to sit around it, and painted a very rough background, just a green landscape seen from above. Then I asked them to draw what it looks like where they live – some painted a house, a street, and a tree, whatever. The day after, I cut up the wood in similar small pieces, so each piece became abstract. When I asked them what they saw their imagination exploded. They saw everything in these small abstract wood pieces, and I recorded my whole conversation with them. Everybody picked the pieces he or she liked, and we built birdhouses out of them. Then we walked out into the public space, each with his or her birdhouse, to find spots that they liked and said: "Ok, we'll hang them here," or "I want mine up there," so together with my assistant I was climbing trees to hang the birdhouses

up in all kinds of places in the city. I think we ended up having thirty-five of them hung up throughout the city. In that way, we were creating a walking path, and all the children would remember where they put their houses. This was one part of the workshops where we tried to play with, let's say, the awareness of public space. In another workshop, we would go and ring doorbells with the children.

NB: Isn't this something that children do anyway?

SB: But not at this age – they are not allowed to walk outside alone. I had printed out Google maps so we could look at the city again from above and look for backyards, and we would just go, ring door-

bells, and ask if we could come and play in people's backyards. We managed to get the key, get into the backyard, and even into one person's apartment and have lunch there. For the children it was absolutely no problem, but the two pedagogic assistants from the kindergarten got so embarrassed – no you can't do that, no no… – that it turned out a much greater experience for them than for the children. What I thought would be mind-blowing for the children was in fact mind-blowing for the pedagogues. They talked about it for days afterwards and told all their friends. One of the pedagogues who took photos of the action surprised me with a photo book printed in hard cover with a really nice layout consisting of a chronological photo series of the "Door bell back-yard event." He showed it to me six days later, and of course that book became an important part of the process. I also had a copy sent to the friendly man who let the fourteen children dine in his living room. I guess it is hard to plan such things in advance. I created four or five different stations that all took place in the public space. I tried to play with the borders; not only of the outside but also the inside world, and I did that through questioning. I would ask them what is forbidden, for example, and they would say that you are not allowed to cut off the head of a police officer, that you cannot cross against a red light, and so on. So we would talk about what is forbidden and what is not forbidden in Denmark and in other places. When I asked them "What *can* we do?", they said "shopping," "buy food," or "cross on a green light," but mostly they would continue to answer the "what *can* we do" question with: "You cannot...put a bomb under a car,"

NB: You seem to be particularly interested in research and cooperation with scientists from other fields. On the one hand, you borrow scientific methods, create questionnaires, lead interviews, and produce knowledge; on the other, you take a critical standpoint towards the result orientation of exactly these methods by pleading for an open-ended process. How would you define your own artistic practice?

SB: I guess it's one way of producing so-called knowledge, or an attempt to produce knowledge. I like to take methods that are known in the scientific world or use a practice that they use, because this also creates a space for communication. I go into a field, as I went into graffiti, and take huge advantage of the freedom of not being a scientist or a graffiti writer. I use their methods for the production of what I call knowledge, but I don't stick to them, so

the outcome is completely different. For me it's a critical way of looking at how knowledge is produced and seeing where the problematics are, but I can also carve it into how things have to look like. So this is what I find interesting about working with scientists. Their knowledge inspires me, and I generally like to work with others rather than alone because I think it is the connection between people that creates sometimes a good, sometimes a bad feeling, but always an experience. When I work with people in a different field – not only science – I immediately start to question that field to see where the boundaries are. I think that is generally true for what I do. I like to work with people. I tried to sit in my own atelier and produce my own art, but it doesn't work for me.

NB: To which extent are you interested in the self-empowerment of the participants? What is "real" participation for you?

SB: This is a good question, as this is exactly what distinguishes what I do. It is definitely not about participants coming and fulfilling my idea of a concept, a performance, whatever. They are not my workers. They don't work for me, and I don't give them orders. This is very important to me. Otherwise it is not a participatory project for me; it would be my hiring people or just having an audience whom you don't pay, but who would do it for me, my self-ego. This is probably the breaking part of it – it would simply mean creating my own artwork by using people for it. Instead, it is about the process of working with people on the same level, even though we probably are at different stages, different places, but we should all benefit from it. Sometimes one benefits more than the other, or benefits from different things. But these things can also come back to you ten years later, and you benefit from them in a completely different way. Let me give you one concrete example. I'm very interested in the distinction between participatory projects that just create works

for the artist and participatory projects in their real sense, where you have participants participating in a project in which everybody has something to say and can bring in their ideas, and something might come out of it which may of may not be an artwork. That for me is real participatory art practice.

NB: How important is it for you to declare what you are doing as art?

SB: I have tried different ways, and I have done works where the people involved would not immediately notice that they are part of an art project. This had several reasons. First, it may have been, let's say, a test or a try-out where I wasn't sure myself if it would be an art project or not. So, I did stuff that afterwards turned out to be an art project, but the participants I worked with had no clue. I guess most of the time it is a very open process. But mostly when I work with participants it is with a mutual understanding that what will come out of it might in some way be an art product or an art practice.

NB: And what would be the role of the artist?

SB: I think I cannot define it. I cannot say what the role of an artist is, and I don't think it is my job to say what that role is. What I can say is that I constantly try to extend or break the boundaries of any field I'm working in. For example, in the current project at Baden, where we produce sounds and do interviews with the students, I go – maybe in a philosophical way – into questions as to what the conditions of producing radio are. When can we call it radio, when can you not call it radio? Is it only radio when it is broadcast over the air or as a podcast? When do we have to use other terminology to talk about auditive works?

NB: What about the socio-political aspects of your work? Do you expect your artistic work to have a changing impact on society?

SB: I think it is out of the question that it has an impact, but what kind of impact it has will always have to be seen afterwards. It is a very good question, but it is also a very difficult question, because I guess I couldn't do anything if there would be no impact. If you look at it in a very strict way, I would say that there is an impact in everything you do. When I get the time to read art history, I can see that some works had an impact fifty or a hundred years later, so it is not for me to answer that question. Anything you do has an impact on something else, at least that

is how I see it. I expect all the things that I do to have some impact – on me, on society, or on a system outside of my own.

NB: In view of the increasing commodification of knowledge and education, where and how can art develop a critical potential?

SB: The critical, political potential has always followed and inspired me, from political philosophy to critical political standpoints and actions. I grew up in a very left-wing collective in a huge house, a commune with ten parents and I don't know how many kids. My mother would carry me to demonstrations in support of houses that were going to be torn down. That is the childhood memory that I have, with very active people from the circus - I even joined the circus group at different festivals or street shows as a six-year-old - from the art scene and a lot of Communists living in our house. That definitely had an impact on me. I lived there until I was nine, and then we moved to the countryside, which was very different, but at least for these first nine years I grew up in a very leftist, Marxist-inspired environment, and when I look back now I have to admit that a lot of those thoughts, a lot of my passion, a lot of my beliefs come from that. There is no question that this played a very important role for me. From graffiti I quickly went into writing political statements on walls, doing political acts in the public space, writing what I thought was wrong with society in a political sense. So this has always followed me.

NB: Are there particular people or projects that have inspired you?

SB: I did some actions with the Voina Group, the Russian street artist group, and with the Yes Men, whose work is very political. There are many projects that inspire me. The Danish artist group Superflex have done very interesting projects, especially the project they did in collaboration with the guarana farmers' cooperative in the Brazilian Amazon. They wanted to produce a guarana power soft drink and ended up fighting with big brands like Coca Cola who own the monopoly. They are very good graphic designers and put up sort of a little guerrilla fight against these giants. For another project in a village in Tanzania they built huge orange balloons that served as toilets. The methane gas that was produced was used for cooking and making the households self-sufficient, and afterwards the artists managed to transport these huge orange balloons filled with shit into the museum. The consequential performances

by Tino Seghal also inspire me. The very strict way he proceeds, not leaving any trace, only doing oral contracts, is an interesting path to choose. I am also very fond of Ryan Gander. My most political activities, however, I keep to illegal activities and, of course, I cannot put my name on these. So, they might not always be straight in the arts. Pussy Riot is a good example. They did a concert and went to jail, to work camps, really horrible. This is in a Russian context where you have to do something more, but I also did stuff for which I would get a prison sentence here in Europe. Sociologist Niklas Luhmann has inspired me a lot, even though I probably only understand five percent of what he wrote. Still, I have read his "System Theory," and the way he talks about systems has at least forced me to think differently. You could say he disturbed my system so that I started to look at things in different ways. In general, philosophy and sociology have always played an important role in my practice.

Captions
1–3 Søren Berner, „Workshop", Winterholiday – Live Art for Kids, Nikolaj Kunsthal, Copenhagen, 2014. Photo: Henrik Harder Bak (pedagogue).
4 Performance by Søren Berner, "Samtalekøkkenet" (Kitchen Talk), Nikolaj Kunsthal, Copenhagen 2013, Photo: Mikkel Mortensen
5 Søren Berner, „Father i should have listened", Performance and Installation, Helmhaus, Zürich, 2012. Photo: Courtesy of the artist

*The Danish artist **Søren Berner** (b. 1977) works on the interface between visual art, performance, music, and activism. He has realized numerous performances in public spaces and participatory projects in Zurich, Vienna, and Copenhagen. His works are characterized by a critical reflection on the process of research and knowledge production and, at the same time, stand out through an improvised and actionist way of intervention. Søren Berner is currently working on a radio project with young students at a vocational school in Switzerland. In collaboration with the musician Balint Dobozi, they together produce sounds and interviews in which they reflect on their work and everyday realities and share their dreams, fears, and visions of the future. Søren Berner tries to open up new ways of agency through collective action and the critical examination of the conditions and institutions that shape us.*
        http://www.sorenberner.com/