Face to face

AN INTERVIEW WITH BRITISH ARTIST WILLIAM HUNT

TEXT **MERIT ZIMMERMANN** · PHOTOGRAPHY **SABRINA WENIGER / THE ARTIST**

Picture this: You're watching a video of a man who is knowingly and intentionally driving a car into a concrete barrier at high speed. Imagine that the crash is captured from several camera angles simultaneously and played back in minute detail. At the moment of impact, a reservoir of white paint explodes from the backseat of the vehicle, covering the driver with a layer of muted colour in slow motion. A few nerve-wracking moments later, he emerges from the wreckage shaken, but unharmed, before breaking out of silence and into a song that's as tragic as it's absurd.

Suffice to say, it's a pretty weird scene. But what's the point of it all? Is the intentional infliction of psychological and physical distress simply for singing's sake? Or are there larger meanings at stake in the musical performance? Perhaps the song is given an emblematic status through its framing: Could it be that we, as spellbound viewers, are more emotionally engaged with the performative gesture when faced with a frightening spectacle? In search of answers, we hunted down the certain someone responsible for the video that got us thinking. Lucky for us, he wasn't very far away.

William Hunt is a Düsseldorfer-by-choice. The London-born artist moved here eight years ago and isn't planning on leaving anytime soon. In the art world, he is best known for performing melancholic musical pieces under extreme conditions. Past works have seen him singing and playing; underwater, suspended upside-down from a ceiling and squashed by a piano. To find out what makes this artist tick, we met William Hunt over a cup of coffee and talked to him about his practice, face-to-face performer-audience relationships, body politics, and much more.

THE DORF When did you first become interested in performance art?
WILLIAM HUNT My background at art school was in the sculpture department. As an art form, sculpture is a more involved production process than, say, painting. If each idea wanted a new medium, you'd have to move out of the studio and back in with new materials. As someone who is not the most organised, I found it quite stressful to conceive and action the plan for what I wanted to create – so I became more interested in the working process than the end result. On my foundation course, I'd already spent a lot of time building things in the outdoors so in a sense this experiential way of working always resonated with me and eventually enabled me to find the content in the work through doing the work. During my masters at Goldsmiths, I had a very good tutor who taught me to have the confidence for my work to just be what it is. It then became a discussion about: How do you go about making a performance? What was great is that I didn't have a preconceived concept of artists that I particularly liked or was trying to emulate. This tabula rasa allowed me to find and develop my own artistic voice.

TD How do you define performance art?
WH I think it was Marina Abramovic and Ulay who said that performance is "real space and real time" for both the audience and the performer, so basically what that means is: Everything that's happening in front of the audience is also happening for the performer and vice versa. There's no acting, no conjuring up of a fictional space.

TD In the art world, you've made a name for yourself with musical performances under extreme conditions. Do your ideas issue from impulses beyond rational thought?

WH Definitely. I think fantasy or imagination are probably the best words to use. As a kid, I'd lie in bed and project my imagination onto the ceiling, conjuring up a world that's only optical, I likewise create a mental image of my performances. Once I have a bonkers idea, it's a question of: Is it feasible? Rather than rehearse my performances, what I do is develop and test very rustic, basic technology such as the hoisting system in my upside-down piece "The Impotence of Radicalism In The Face of All These Extreme Positions". When I have a feeling of a performance and an emotional context to work in, I develop a piece of music that is in tune with and adds another element to that expression; both mentally and physically. I try to allow my body to communicate beyond itself.

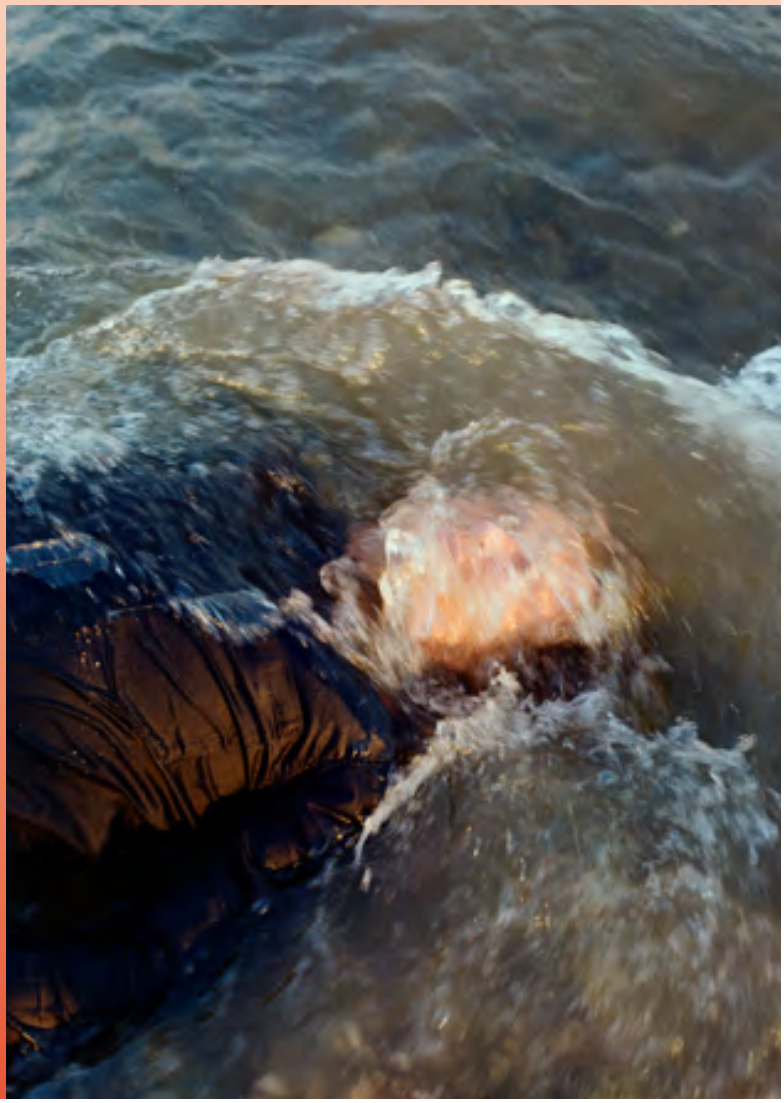
TD Your performances aren't per se masochistic but they do reflect some desire to suffer. Do you think that your representations of pain might hinder viewers from comprehending and possibly resolving the narrative coherently?

WH A criticism that's been put to me recently is that I exhibit too much pain in my performances. But for me, the state of being imperilled is a way to get and to keep the audience's attention. To wake them up and to bring them closer together. How I justify what I do and why I carry on doing it comes down to this: There's an emotional experience of the world and a collective endeavour that I want to lie in sympathy with – whether it's an old man walking slowly to reach his destination or a heroic mountain climber: The hard work that humans do and the emotional struggles inherent to human existence inspire me to not shy away from enduring. However, my performances don't involve task-based repetition over sustained periods of time because I want to reach audiences with consumable content. As regards narrative resolution, I think that the best artworks always leave viewers feeling open. You only come back to ponder something when you don't fully understand it.

TD In 1949, psychoanalyst Theodor Reik observed four components to masochism: Fantasy, Suspense, Demonstration, and Provocation. In 1967, French philosopher Gilles Deleuze added to the mix the contractual underpinnings of the relationship between the viewer and performer. From the perspective of this theory, would you say a masochistic logic undergirds your performances?

WH I've been asked this a lot. Having looked into this subject, for me, I think that all these texts use a simple but not constructive argument: All narratives can demonstrate elements of masochism but this label isn't necessarily a reasonable reflection of the story itself. I would agree with the points raised by Reik and Deleuze

"With my performances, I like to question the audience's own voyeuristic tendencies in a light way."



but I'm going to reject the title of masochism. Perhaps there's something more interesting about victimhood…

TD You've stated that performance isn't comparable to theatre because it's "real space and real time in front of an audience"; nevertheless there appears to be a narrative structure to your performance: First you undergo an intense psychological and physical challenge and then you perform a somewhat tragically comical song – "from superman to everyman" is how the curator Ellen Mara De Watcher aptly put it. So my question is this: Do your performances partially rest on theatricality, stage, and narrative or do they stand in direct opposition thereto?

WH What's great about being an artist and staging things in a museum or a gallery space is that there aren't any theatrical conventions: No stage, no seating, no lighting, no curtain – all of the trappings are eliminated. In performance, you have the opportunity to engage with as much or as little as you like. When you choose to bring in props, they become part of the mise-en-scène in an actual, and not in a theatrical, way. An exhibition space is not steeped in fiction, so performance requires a different approach to the arena, its architecture, and broader context.

TD In "A Moment's Hesitation" (2012), you state that "you're not a dad or a husband" but "William Hunt the performer" when entering a performance space. How do you get into this mindset?

WH To keep up with other artists and to be engaged in the cultural conversation, you have to commit. Energy levels and psychological security go in waves but ultimately it's a question of how to set challenging, yet realistic benchmarks that will push you to the n'th degree. But it's not about pushing boundaries for the sake of boundary-pushing alone. It's for the sake of art.

TD Your live actions usually lead to sculptural, photographic or video outcomes. Would you say that documenting performance betrays the promise of its own ontology?

WH Yes and no. I've always liked filmmaking but of course, performances are better when they're not recorded because cameras make audiences check their behaviour. It's a different kind of situation when I don't include cameras in the audience show: There's a higher level of emotional interaction and, because all my faculties are heightened, I pick up on the vibe of the room – whether that's subconsciously or consciously. If I don't, or can't, pre-record my performances, I knowingly use the camera as a prop, as was the case with "You're Gonna Pay For It Now. Now You're Gonna Pay For It", which took on the aesthetic of a sitcom recorded live with a studio audience.

TD Performance artists use their bodies as a medium. In your opinion, is the human body itself inherently political and, if so, is performance art always a form of political practice?

WH Political with a small 'p', not party politics, yes, absolutely: Performance is a political space. In my practice, there's an undertone of politics because I align myself with certain arguments and try to bring awareness to particular concerns. Besides, my performances are often brought into connection with the aesthetics of emotion, which segue into Expressionism and body politics. But the simple fact that I can get away with not looking political is in itself political because I'm a man and the (art) world is a patriarchy.

TD What performance artists have had an impact on your practice?

WH What's tricky about this question is that artists don't necessarily impact me through their work. It can be something they've written or said that inspires me and

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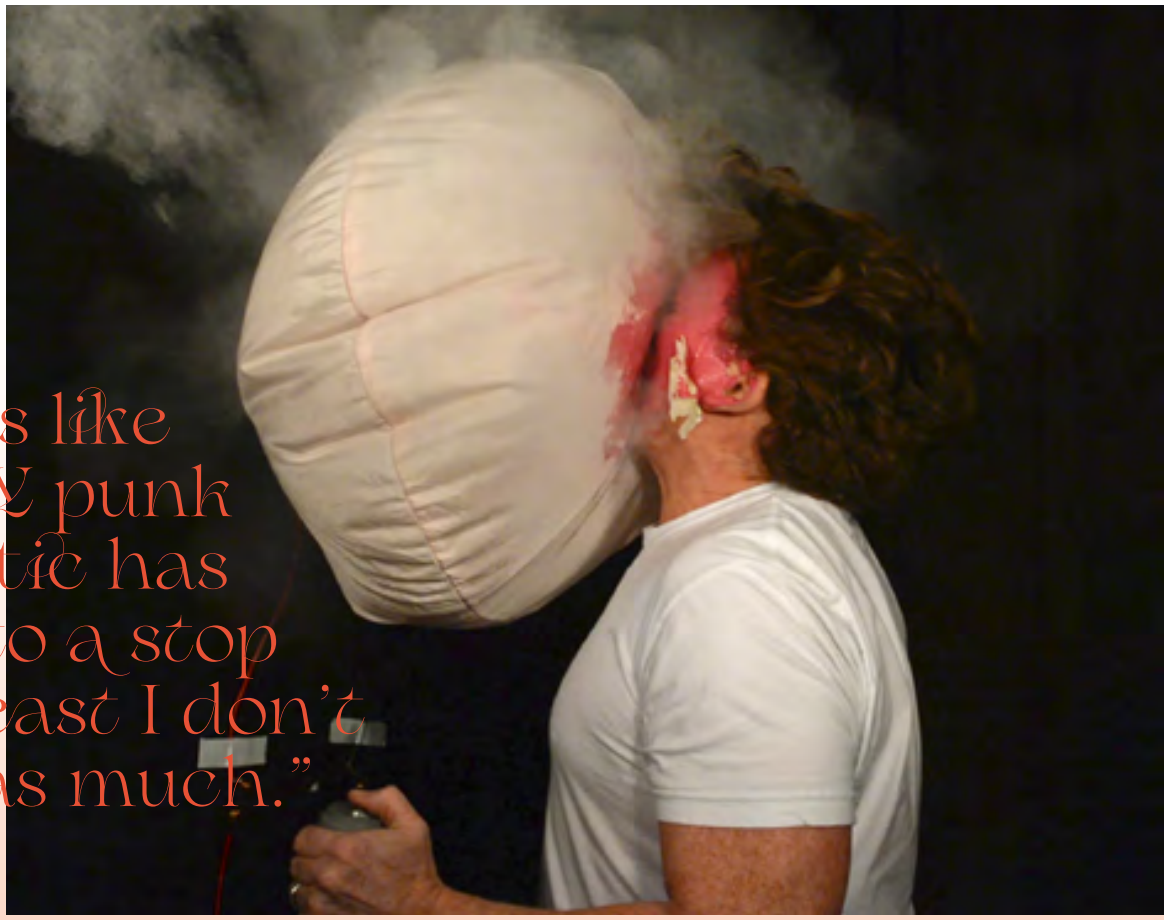

"It feels like the DIY punk aesthetic has come to a stop or at least I don't see it as much."

what's so great about words is that they're not in direct competition with you. For example, at art school my tutor Stuart Brisley introduced me to a great book called "The Encyclopedia of Stupidity", which I read endlessly. He was a very well-spoken English man, who was great at articulating the nonsense of doing something without making it feel irrational. What I learned from him was that if you have some semblance of control and ownership, then your work can springboard a bit further. As regards to other artists, I liked Bas Jan Ader a lot at one point but have moved through and beyond him somehow. I also looked to Carolee Schneemann, but for me, it was less about specific people and more about the strength in vulnerability of a body as seen in a black and white photograph from the 1960s. Ultimately though, I'd go with Giacometti because the optics of looking at his sculptures are so performative.

TD You were born and raised in London but Düsseldorf is your home of choice. Why did you come here and what made you stay?

WH My wife is originally a Düsseldorfer. London's economic situation became tough for us with two children, so we looked at other options. With relatives here, Düsseldorf was a natural place to try. The reason we stayed is that it's worked out well for both of us and our careers; besides, Düsseldorf is an amazing city that punches well above its population size. The museums are enormous and host exciting travelling shows that go around the world. A lot of my international friends come through Düsseldorf to exhibit. There's an incredibly rich cultural scene – everything you could want on a manageable scale. I was very lucky to build a career in London and then move to somewhere that has allowed me more space to work.

TD What do you miss about London?

WH The nostalgic sense of home. But on a day-to-day basis, I don't miss very much at all.

TD What do you cherish about Düsseldorf?

WH I love the Rhine. Unlike the Thames in London, it's not just an ugly old river that offers people a breathing space in the city. To walk over a bridge that crosses the Rhine in winter, you have to ask yourself: Have I got the right clothes? Am I really going to do this? It's much more of an epic thing.

TD Your three words to describe Düsseldorf are:

WH I've got four words: It's not a 'dorf'.

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