

Petzel

Patricia Maloney, "Interview with Christian Jankowski," *Art Practical*, January 9, 2014.



ART PRACTICAL

Bad at Sports

Interview with Christian Jankowski

By Patricia Maloney, Bad at Sports

January 9, 2014

Bad At Sports is a weekly podcast about contemporary art. Founded in 2005, the series focuses on presenting the practices of artists, curators, critics, dealers, various other arts professionals through an online audio format.



I sat down with Berlin-based artist Christian Jankowski over lunch in San Francisco in early November as he was editing the first video in the series *Silicon Valley Talks* (2013), produced for and on view as part of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA)'s offsite exhibition *Project Los Altos*. *Silicon Valley Talks* takes on the familiar format of TED Talks—an energetic speaker giving a short presentation on his/her area of expertise to a live audience—but disrupts the form in key ways. While the invited speakers are visionary thinkers and entrepreneurs who have shaped the technological landscape of Silicon Valley, their selected topics are much more commonplace: fly-fishing, drinking, raising children, and falling in love.

Petzel

Patricia Maloney, "Interview with Christian Jankowski," *Art Practical*, January 9, 2014.

Further complicating the talks, at least for the occasionally perplexed audience members, speakers deliver their monologues using the technical language of their fields. The end results are subtitled videos installed in the storefront where the performances were filmed, along with the sculptures that served as seats for attendees. *Silicon Valley Talks* is on view through March 2, 2014; a complete list of speakers can be found [here](#). Jankowski's upcoming exhibition, *Heavy Weight History*, will be on view at Lisson Gallery, in London, from January 31 through March 8, 2014.

What follows is an abridged excerpt from our conversation; the full interview can be heard as Episode 435 on *Bad at Sports*. —PM

Patricia Maloney: How did you land on the idea of inviting people who are renowned figures in Silicon Valley to deliver presentations using technical language on subjects completely outside their area of expertise?

Christian Jankowski: They usually, of course, talk about other things. I was interested in working with language as a kind of collage. They implanted tech language in their talks, using many words I never heard of before. This way, new meaning is created by changing the intention of words; language becomes metaphorical, or so abstract that it is almost poetry. That was my inspiration.

PM: Technology is so pervasive in the Bay Area; more and more of our everyday experiences are infiltrated by its language. I am cognizant of its pervasiveness because I live here. For example, when Harry Saal describes children as "bit pockets," I realized there are so many technical terms that I've heard in casual conversation that come up as people are talking about their work; it is both foreign and ubiquitous at the same time. My impression of *Silicon Valley Talks* was that you are homing in on that influence.

CJ: Language is alive and always transforming. It is like art. Forms are revitalized by new inventions and materials. New words and new meanings are created alongside new technologies. You can see how technology has evolved over the past thirty years as some new words have made it into our vocabulary and others have been totally forgotten. Will [the language of Silicon Valley] get into the vocabulary of my mother? Maybe, maybe not. Playing with the relevance of words is a part of it, but only half. The other half is the context and the content of each talk. I told the speakers not to push the interests of their companies but talk about gardening, about getting old, the education of children, falling in love; there were so many options to choose from. But even what they choose is already the first aesthetic decision. In a way, these are also portraits of people who shape Silicon Valley.

I was also looking at the very strong formal elements of TED Talks that are in use all over the world now. They have this casualness, this codex of how people dress and how they behave. It has shaped business language as well; now people communicate with each other in a less formal way. This has become a

Petzel

Patricia Maloney, “Interview with Christian Jankowski,” *Art Practical*, January 9, 2014.



Christian Jankowski. *Silicon Valley Talks*, 2013; installation view. Commissioned by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art with generous funding provided by Adriane Iann and Christian Stolz. Courtesy of the artist; © Christian Jankowski. Photo: Andria Lo.

convention, to pretend to be best friends with everyone and dress down—but you have to dress down. You couldn’t show up in certain parts of Silicon Valley in a suit. Business-wise, they may not trust you or give you a chance to become part of their culture.

PM: It’s not just about language, then. It’s all of the behavior, attire, and means of relating. In essence, it’s about coding. Not just how coding forms but how it is translated and received, and the way you associate with one group or another because you are coding in the same language.

CJ: This project is also an invitation to create a new language that you shape and that can be different from the language of someone else. By changing words in the original script and substituting tech terms, they are creating metaphorical talks. Even if someone else takes the same word, they use it differently, and they arrive at two completely different meanings for the same word that provoke completely different images for the audience.

PM: You are describing the elasticity of language. Words can be pliant and take on new implications to expand their meaning. There are all these different ways people can recognize that new meaning. At the same time, in this piece, and in a lot of your work, you point up where language gets fixed. [You’re looking at] the structured ways in which meaning gets exchanged or conveyed from one person to the next, which has a lot to do with how we recognize each other.

For example, the performance that I sat in on, Philip Rosedale, who is the founder of Second Life, spoke about falling in love. He described two people meeting in a chance encounter in a hotel lobby who

Petzel

Patricia Maloney, “Interview with Christian Jankowski,” *Art Practical*, January 9, 2014.



Christian Jankowski. *Casting Jesus*, 2011; performance at Santo Spirito, Rome. Courtesy of the Artist and Lisson Gallery, London. © Luise Müller-Hofstede.

experience an instant attraction. He details the physiological changes that happen as they see and then meet each other, but in very [clinical] terms.

CJ: It's almost as if two people already have a code to talk to each other through the way the eyelashes blink up and down, or how a look is registered by someone else. So very emotional and human interactions are reduced down to these [metrics].

PM: People associate Silicon Valley with the locus of the most bleeding-edge technologies. Then you go to Los Altos and think, “This is what the future looks like?!” It's so quaint.

CJ: I remember my first time to San Francisco, maybe ten or twelve years ago, I drove to Silicon Valley, almost like to a tourist attraction. It sounds like Hollywood or Transylvania; you don't expect to see vampires, but you have expectations of what it means to go there.

PM: And then you arrive and realize it's just a bunch of people wearing hoodies and jeans and flip-flops, and it's incredibly suburban.

Those preconceived ideas are what you play off of in various projects—the expectations and anticipations that people come into a certain situation with—and you blow that up in their faces. While at the same time, you are not radically stepping outside of those preconceptions. I am thinking of *Casting Jesus* (2011), in which different actors are auditioning to play the role of Jesus and evaluated by a panel of jurors who are associated with the Vatican. Each of the actors looks very pious, but they're also really attractive. And one thinks, “Right, of course the Son of God is hot.”

Petzel

Patricia Maloney, "Interview with Christian Jankowski," *Art Practical*, January 9, 2014.



Christian Jankowski. *Silicon Valley Talks*, 2013; production photo; Harry Saal. Commissioned by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art with generous funding provided by Adriane Iann and Christian Stolz. Courtesy of the artist; © Christian Jankowski. Photo: Chris Tipton-King.

CJ: Even to use the word "Jesus" or "Silicon Valley" in the title of these projects immediately generates an image for audience members. It keeps the context for reading the work. Everyone has an opinion about Jesus, but how does it happen that someone implants this idea of what Jesus looks like, since we've never seen a photograph? It's through iconography, and this iconography operates similarly to what I said earlier about language: The image of Jesus had to be revitalized and updated through the aesthetics of the times. To put Jesus in a reality-casting show is part of the iconography that is understood by and attracting a young generation. I think it is quite smart that the Vatican opened itself up to them in this way. I hope that in Silicon Valley, people might become more sensitive to the possibilities of their language and use it not only to build machines or this purely manufactured [reality], but also to make poetry, to occupy this beautiful realm of imagination, to provoke new images for the spectator.

PM: Something that allows for different possibilities and untethers the language so that words can take on new potential. But oftentimes, you rely on humor to create this kind of disruption in meaning. Sometimes it is really subtle, and other times, it is foregrounded. I wonder about the sensitivities that the people who participate in your performances have to that approach. It's a fine line between disrupting expectations and making fun of what's being coded.

CJ: Many times, I am disappointed when art journalists put my work in a certain box. I'm not producing these works to be humorous; it's a side effect. I like comedy as a genre; it is sometimes much more difficult to make good comedy than good drama. But the point of comedy is to produce a good laugh, and that is not the point of any of my works.

PM: I always think of humor as a rupture and not in terms of comedy or entertainment or going after a laugh. Instead, humor is about revealing an absurdity. As I was saying earlier, it is about creating

Petzel

Patricia Maloney, "Interview with Christian Jankowski," *Art Practical*, January 9, 2014.

awareness of preconceptions, and then not allowing one to be on solid ground anymore about those preconceptions. It's destabilizing.

CJ: That's a good point; that's what I'm interested in. That's a big function of art. Many people are afraid of the kind of art that has the potential to destabilize or question the power structures of systems. Applying some element of humor allows for the possibility of creating something of which no one has ever heard and which can be disruptive to aesthetics or forms or conventions without hurting anybody.

PM: There's a significant disconnect now between the art community and the tech community. I'm simplifying it to say that the great wealth that exists in Silicon Valley could do much to support the production of culture in San Francisco. But the question of how do you get the tech sector to support the art community is the same question that faces this country around health care. How do you get healthy people to buy insurance so that there is funding to support coverage for those who are sick and can't afford it? How to convince those who are creating wealth in one sector to support those sectors that don't have the same resources but need them?

CJ: I think they just have to meet each other. I am absolutely for encounters at eye level. It is a very crucial and strange moment right now, when you hear that many of these tech companies are so successful. Real estate goes up and up; everything is so expensive and almost killing this alternative scene. I see the risk of what's happening here. The tech industry is bringing a lot of wealth into the Bay Area, and it has also a certain responsibility to give back. But it needs to happen on both sides. Yesterday, I was looking to the SFMOMA curators to mingle with the community [in Los Altos]. We're talking about what will be the second-largest museum in the country, square meter-wise, but some of my talks were attended by twenty people, most of who were friends of the curators. Something in the communication went wrong, because it was meant to be a performance for the community. And because the audience gives information back to the piece. I recognize that the energy level is different for the speaker if there is an audience rather than if you just do it for the camera. It's really this moment of reception. The reading of the artwork is already included in the artwork by having the audience there.

I am trying to multiply audiences. There are separate audiences for a television evangelist and for an artwork in a gallery. I like that you can look at my work from different vantage points, with different perspectives and values. By mixing it up, you can recognize the values and imaginations of different audiences more so than just by looking at something by yourself. It destabilizes, as you said, the ground for the audience and for yourself, as well.

<http://www.artpractical.com/column/interview-with-christian-jankowski/>