

Art

INCONVERSATION

SUPERFLEX with PHONG BUI

by Phong Bui

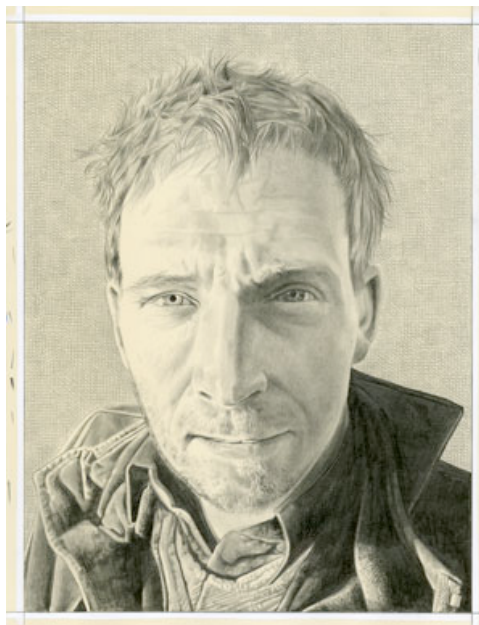
Just a few hours before the January 22 opening reception of their exhibit *Flooded McDonald's* at Peter Blum Chelsea, which will be on view till March 22, 2010, Jakob Fenger and Bjørnstjerne Christiansen paid a visit to Art International Radio to talk to Publisher Phong Bui about their lives and work. (This edited version also includes the extended talk with the third member, Rasmus Nielsen, on the following day.)

Phong Bui (Rail): Even though I've been aware of Superflex in the last decade or so, and knew that you've been showing in different venues including the Gwangju Biennales, São Paulo Biennale, Kunsthalle Basel, and many other institutions and galleries, I first learned of your collective through your participation in Utopia Station, which was curated by Molly [Nesbit], Rirkrit [Tiravanija], and the inexhaustible Hans Ulrich [Obrist], for the 50th Venice Biennale in 2003. I know that Superflex was founded in 1993, when you were probably in your early twenties. Otherwise, do tell us a bit about your background, how you all met, and how Superflex came into being?

Jakob Fenger: As you said, Superflex started in 1993, while we were at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen. I guess one of the reasons was that we had a common interest in things that were so to speak "outside" of the art academy. In art school everything looked a bit too classical to us in term of discussion and production. So from the very beginning we were looking at different structures in the rest of the society and how to apply those structures to our work rather than the traditional application. Also very early we preferred to think of our projects as "tools," which could apply to different situations. In other words, our work could function in an art context but it could also function on a very practical level in another situation, such as a daily function in our everyday lives. For example, our "Biogas" project, which is based on the use of organic waste to create gas for cooking as well as for lighting, would be something that art institutions could use on a theoretical, discursive level but



Still photo from "Burning Car" (2009). Courtesy of Superflex and Peter Blum Gallery.



Portrait of Jakob Fenger. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui

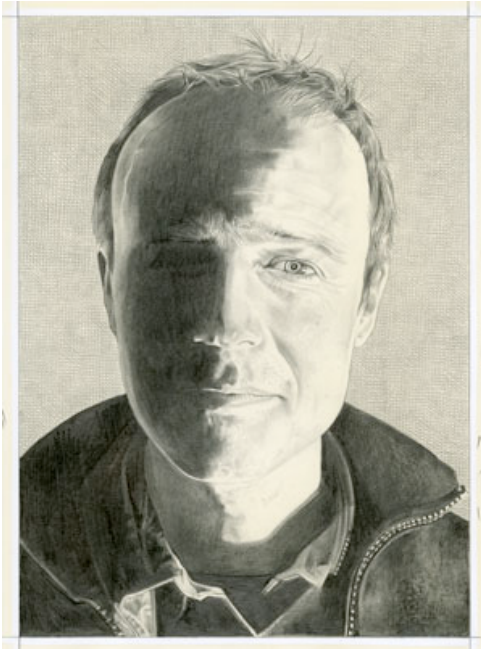
at the same time a family in Tanzania would use it for generating energy.

Rail: How about you, Bjørnstjerne?

Bjørnstjerne Christiansen: I can just add that the reason for founding a group, wanting to be in a collaborative process, was initially because we were already friends. Also, I think that, unlike with an individual practice, where you have your own idea and you work from one direction and you're confronted with that idea when you present it to the public, in a group you are confronted every day, every moment. Every idea is discussed, bounced off of one another, and that aspect is one of the main reasons for me to be a part of a group. I like to have my ideas confronted, bounced off other ideas, and so this collaborative process is also a part of the way we'd like to think and develop our ideas.

Rail: And you, Rasmus?

Rasmus Nielsen: I first met



Portrait of Rasmus Nielsen. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

Bjørnstjerne in high school, deep, deep in the countryside of Denmark. Jakob, I had initially met during the cold war in the Soviet Union while I was working on a potato farm in Siberia, in a sort of peace project. Jakob was touring Siberia with his band named Soul Only, and they came to a nearby city to play and were treated like the Beatles. I took a few pictures of the band and later on, when we all went to school for documentary photography, I remembered those images. However, I did not speak to Jakob in Siberia since the crowds were completely going mad with the band.

Rail: Seriously?

Nielsen: Yeah, this was about six months before the wall fell in 1989, and there was a kind of strange euphoria which we at that point did not understand but I guess the band dug into that.

Portrait of Jakob Fenger. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.



Portrait of Bjørnstjerne Christiansen. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

Rail: How did the band sound? Good?

Nielsen: Well, in Siberia they must have sounded like the future, which might not have been the case in Motown. Anyway, after studying documentary photography we started at the Academy of Fine Arts and ended up in the sculpture department. Not that any one of us was necessarily interested in sculpture, but it was where you could get larger studios. And it was very quiet and nobody really went there. It was then that we installed a telephone and registered ourselves as the company “Superflex” on that address.

Rail: Was it a four-year program?

Nielsen: It was six years. During the first year we were trying to figure out how to frame the philosophy behind the collective. We went to stay in a house in the forest in Sweden, which was a psychedelic experience, and somehow we came out of the forest knowing what we had to do, the only problem being that we did not have a name for it. However, on the way back to Denmark we sailed with a trucker ferry called Superflex Bravo. The whole crew had orange jumpsuits with the name printed on the back, as if the captain had been watching too many Kraftwerk movies. We liked this and decided to use the name Superflex but to quit the Bravo since we wanted to sound a bit serious.

Rail: That’s cool.

Nielsen: There was some initial confusion at the Academy due to the fact that we registered the company with this address. Was this legal etc. Furthermore, we would invite economists and engineers as tutors. Basically we were thirsty for another kind of input.

Rail: So from the outset you came up with this notion of social and economic integration; I can’t help but be reminded of a few previous models. One being, of course, the SI [Situationist International], who as a group advocated for life experience as an alternative model to the Capitalist order. Their idea of constructing situations, or setting up in order to achieve such goals was very appealing. Don’t you agree?

Christiansen: We were aware of SI, as we were of the Fluxus movement, which was very strong in Denmark, and included Henning Christiansen and his wife, Ursula Reuter Christiansen, Eric Andersen, and many others. There have been other types of collectives that we also looked at, but as a whole we learned and took different aspects that fit into our own practice—that of not criticizing but questioning, creating models, examples where you can intervene in or reflect society, or even go much further by actually creating a product or object that you can enter into an economic or political system, or personal system, a one-to-one system. So in that sense there’s a link to an action-minded aspect that is an important part of most of our activities. With the “Biogas” project, for example, we don’t criticize our relationship with Africa, Asia and so on, we actually go there and propose our project to the people in each country, and thereby take part, offering the people in their respective cultures opportunities to criticize us, which I often think is equally important, so we are not dogmatic, we don’t have a manifesto, we only work with the situations we are in. It’s the direct or practical application that really is our primary concern.

Rail: That makes sense. However, in spite of SI’s interest in Marxist ideas and their Freudian counterpart—I mean the notion of play, freedom, and critical thinking being simultaneously infused—they have a very broad, universal value, which can apply to what most artists want to achieve in their work. What about Beuysian concepts of social sculpture?

Nielsen: We of course knew about Beuys and his idea of social sculpture, but it appeared to us that

those ideas needed a kind of agent to actually work; otherwise they would stay in the swamp of cute ideas. And since we could not stand the romantic notion of the role of the artist we decided to form a company that seemed to us the most flexible identity you could have in a capitalist society. It would also allow us to be conceptual shapeshifters and appear in various contexts. Now the task was just to get used to that kind of schizophrenia and remember what hat to wear when getting up in the morning.

Fenger: The world has changed quite a lot since the Berlin wall came down in 1989. Before, capitalism and socialism were competing against each other and on at least a theoretical level one could be dreaming of being “outside,” but today everything is capitalist. Actually, Denmark was probably one of the few successful socialist countries years back—there were actually structures that somehow were contrary to capitalist thinking—but that’s all gone now. So I guess, in the beginning, to work so closely with the idea of a company, for us, in a way, was also a way of signing out of the well-kept dream among artists of “the alternative.” I mean the reality today is that the alternative melds into the same one pool of our current economic system. The biggest dream of another society starts when the system collapses.



Still photo from "Flooded McDonald's" (2008).
Courtesy of Superflex and Peter Blum Gallery

Rail: Not to mention that because of the government-subsidized policy, artists are given full support—to the point that their drive to create is so slight. This, of course, applies to other socialist countries, especially in Scandinavia.

Christiansen: This is why when an artist is in a situation that’s up to him or her to create, they can develop or reconstruct that situation to the needs of their work, and it doesn’t matter if they have a few bucks in their pocket, as long as they can find ways to make it work. At the same time, I must say that the support system we have in Denmark allows a certain level of experimentation that, for example, American art students do not have, mostly because they have to pay to go to school, and after school they have to immediately “find a job” to support their work or show their work right away at a gallery.

Rail: Especially since the 80s onward. It’s a tremendous pressure, which I’m not quite sure is healthy for the artist’s longevity or maturation.

Christiansen: Yes, I agree. We’ve been teaching at Cal Arts in L.A. so we know how it works, but in our case, we’re able to take full advantages of the subsidized system, although it makes some others very passive. But to get back to Beuys’s idea of social sculpture, it was part of many available sources that evolved over time. Of course the concept of social sculpture, economic ideas of creating the student party, and ideas of performative action were all important to us when we were starting out. But we all felt, by the same token, that Beuys became a victim of his own passion for a messiah-like figure, which doesn’t interest us at all.

Rail: That’s how Willibald Sauerländer, the preeminent German Medievalist scholar, felt as well. He was fascinated with the work but was skeptical of Beuys the man. And in any case, what can you tell us about the less romantic offspring of Beuys, namely Rirkrit, who had collaborated with you on the “Social Pudding” project in 2004?

Nielsen: Well, around 1999, there was a Thai engineering company who had heard what we, Superflex, were working with biogas, so they contacted the Danish embassy in Bangkok. The embassy

then contacted us, and three people from their company flew to Copenhagen to meet with us. They were mostly interested in technology that deals with pig shit in the area of Bangkok because biogas energy produces energy out of shit, but it also cleans the shit. And in cities you need to clean the shit as a necessary part of waste management, otherwise you have diseases and all kinds of urban disasters. In any case, they invited us to Bangkok, and they took us around to pig farms, and we all thought it was thrilling in that we, being art students, got invited to talk to companies about how to deal with pig shit and actually participate in the transfer of technological know-how. [Laughs.] So in the daytime, we would go around to pig farms and take notes and make drawings, trying to rise to the task. Then at night, we went to this artist bar in Bangkok where everyone would hang out, and it was there that we met Rirkrit. First we stayed for a month, then we decided to move our office to Bangkok for six months, during which time we did a few projects with Rirkrit, including “Social Pudding.”

Christiansen: With Rirkrit it’s a very natural relationship, in that it evolved from our similar interests. Take “Super Channel,” for example, which was an Internet TV platform where we opened up 30 different studios with different communities. That was in the late 90s. “Social Pudding,” on the other hand, came out of an invitation from *Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst* in Leipzig, though Dr. Oetker, who is a well-known pudding producer, funded the project. We wanted to show the structure behind the museum by getting the museum involved in reproductive processes or process-based activity as well as questioning the economic system behind. It’s our way to generate dialogue.

Rail: One can say that what you’re bringing to the art world is the possibility of artistic production as a potential business model that has never been explored before.

Nielsen: In a way, yes. But I think it also has to do with a reaction against just being obedient citizens of capitalism, a system in which we are just supposed to be disciplined consumers and not to build or make things ourselves. So when we say, “everyone is a potential entrepreneur,” it doesn’t necessarily mean that we should all start building big businesses. It’s more about being playful with the notion of not just being an obedient consumer but being creative in terms of defining your own work.

Rail: I don’t know who is the brain behind the visual/graphic presentation, but in looking at the “Social Pudding Corner,” I identified with Robert Smithson’s corner glass piece. The mass-reproductive labels that appear on the box recall Warhol, while referencing Sol Lewit’s serial and modular form. Who is responsible for such effective graphic synthesis?

Christiansen: In our collaborative process, it doesn’t matter where the idea comes from as long as it survives our mutual feedback. In this particular instance, we have all used the corner format in our other works individually; we thought that it was a good project to revisit as collaboration.

Rail: How many editions are there?

Fenger: It’s only an edition of 3.

Christiansen: Actually, in 2005 at Art Basel Miami Beach we had a whole production set up to produce the pudding on-site, including the packaging and so on. The idea is that everyone is invited to come to the Pudding Social, to exchange and create his or her own pudding. It’s one of the ways we hope that all aspects—from social, business, personal to everyday activities—can converge. For an art fair audience, that was quite unusual.

Rail: Obviously it’s impossible to talk about all of your projects, but can you elaborate briefly on your other social and public interventions? For example, “Free Shop” (2009), which was set up in five locations?

Fenger: Actually a lot of different locations, but in five different cities. It takes place in already existing shops, but added is that everything is free for a certain time, and when you enter as a customer into the shop what you see is all normal. You go and do your shopping and when you go to the counter, the moment you ask to pay, your total turns out to be “zero.” And there’s no explanation or indication whatsoever of who’s behind that “zero,” so it’s just like this kind of strange situation where you’re supposed to pay but you can’t, because it gives a total of “zero.” The second time we did that was in Tokyo, and in several different shops like convenience stores and grocery shops. In a normal shop most people choose what they want, they pay, and they leave. But in “Free Shop” all of a sudden when you create another system that is not known to the customer, some can get really angry, mostly because there’s a power invested in the process of buying. It’s like, “I have the power to pay and the power to buy; don’t change that,” on one hand, and there are others who get super happy because they get things for free.

Rail: Were there any who got greedy?

Fenger: Maybe in Norway there were a greedy few.

Rail: Really? In your neighboring and similar socialist country! [*Laughs.*]

Fenger: In Japan we had one situation where a person stepped out of the shop and he was calling his friends and saying, “It’s for free!” and then when he came back in, and after walking and looking around for a good while at different products, he only took this one small rice bowl which, you know, costs nothing. So that was the moment where you can take whatever you want, but maybe you don’t want it.

Rail: Or maybe he was exercising his Zen Buddhist restraints.

Christiansen: We occasionally would do a few projects that we refer to as “Non-material interactions,” where in each case, it deals with different behaviors in specific situations.

Rail: On one hand, there are your socially interactive, public performative works that mostly take place in highly developed urban environments. On the other, there are the direct, hands-on projects that are more economically based in less developed areas. We spoke about the “Biogas” project earlier, but what can you tell us about the “Guaranà Power” project? How did you get the locals involved?

Christiansen: It was not an attempt to go to a third world country and provide any kind of perfect structure or market system per se. Both projects actually come out of mere coincidence. Guaranà is a caffeinated berry that grows in the region of Maues, located in the middle of the Brazilian Amazon, and we were invited to do some research on it. We basically were dumped somewhere in the Amazon where anything could happen. Immediately, we began to walk around and try to understand the situation while checking out the land and culture. One morning a group of farmers come to our hotel and they told us that they are these Guaranà farmers who would like to speak to us because they thought that we were some kind of NGO [Non-governmental organization] who could fund them. We said we were not, but that we would like to exchange with them. And through that situation, this whole project evolved, and ended up becoming a soda product that we are now selling in Denmark and other places, and the farmers are profiting fully from the product. It was a way of showing that even for a small group of farmers, there was a way to challenge these normal structures, that it’s possible to create their own structures, and that they don’t need to rely on the big companies in Brazil. Similarly, the few times when we were invited to curate exhibits in different museums, or biennials, which usually locks us in to a certain budget for production, we always try to create other economic possibilities within that limitation to create something else. In the case of the “Guaranà Power,” we wanted first to show the structure, how the actual production and distribution worked and

so on. And we could have stopped with that, but then we wanted to go further into an actual economic system, which is just as real and challenging, especially when we're thinking of it from the aesthetic point of view. How to present it as an artwork that can break down those conventional constraints.

Rail: Has it been generating a little bit of profit for Superflex? And is it an ongoing project?

Fenger: For the farmers, mainly.

Christiansen: And it is ongoing, as many of our other projects are. We generally take the time and opportunities that come to us, and when we can realistically work on any of those projects, we do. The ultimate goal is getting feedback from the people we work with, which also includes respective viewers of the work shown in the context of an art gallery. Otherwise, we're more invested in further development of Superflex to not only show what we have done in the past, but our continuation.

Rail: You defined your concept of "tools" as "all beings are potential entrepreneurs." Again, this resonates with the Beuys idea of "everyone is potentially an artist" or "everyone is an artist." So, instead of working solely in the business/corporate sector, which you clearly don't, has working in the art world increased your visibility?

Fenger: Some of the people we work with, especially those who are not from the art world, see the art world as a free place to do experiments. For example, one of the engineers we worked with on the "Biogas" project would otherwise never have had such an opportunity to experiment if he was just working for some big company. That actually is our advantage. We always take starting points from the art world, and then hopefully it can go beyond that boundary.



Still photo from "The Financial Crisis" (2009). Courtesy of Superflex and Peter Blum Gallery

Nielsen: I'd say that we've both exploited and been exploited by our various projects over the years. Again, a good example is our "Biogas" project with the engineering companies in Thailand. While we were customizing our concept for pig farms in Thailand, we would also exhibit the work in museums. It sounds quite maddening but we actually like this applied schizophrenia.

Rail: Let's shift the subject to your first solo debut at Peter Blum, where you're showing all three of your films for the first time. First of all, "Burning Car" was a very intense 11-minute film, in that we rarely see a car being burned in its entirety, from the beginning to the end. I also felt like the cinematography, both from afar and close up, as well as the sound, was so hypnotic and simultaneously integrated.

Christiansen: When we wanted to make "Burning Car," we discussed it with Tuan [Andrew Nguyen], who was our student from Cal Arts. We all agreed to make the film in Vietnam, where he has an excellent production company, which we've been working with for a long time, especially with the three films. But you're right. We only see glimpses of cars burning mostly from the news report on T.V.

Rail: I certainly remember seeing cars getting burnt along with occasional explosions here and there during my years growing up in Vietnam, especially in 1968 during the Tet Offensive and the Battle of Quang Tri in 1972, but I never did watch the whole thing, mostly because I was on my feet running from such horror.

Nielsen: The last five years, because of several unrest situations in France, Holland, Athens, and

Copenhagen, and also recently in Iran, the images of a burning car becomes all of a sudden the symbol of social unrest or organized society in chaos.

Rail: Definitely. That's certainly the case in your film. I mean, it's quite gruesome when you see the close up shots of the paint bubbling up from the heat, but at the same time it's utterly hypnotic and picturesque. I'd say that up to a certain point in the 80s close-ups were no longer available in the media. We remember this more clearly from the bombing of Baghdad in 2003. As we all have observed, it was shot completely from a fixed distance, almost recalling Turner's epic painting, "The Burning of the Houses of Parliament." At any rate, "Flooded McDonald's," which runs for 20 minutes, is a more ambitious film in that every single object was made by hand, plus it resonates with all sorts of images from Hurricane Katrina, our inability to cope with the climate change, as well as apocalyptic and biblical references, if you want to read that into it.

Fenger: Just like with the "Burning Car," which gives you the possibility of viewing this thing happening slowly, from beginning to end, floods are something you see in the media quite a lot. Not just Hurricane Katrina but also the whole concern with global warming, of course, has a strong effect on culture and food production. As we talked about before, there's no real alternative economic system at the moment, so sadly we just have to wait for this system to collapse before we can change it and do something else. And there's excitement in that situation.

Nielsen: "Flooded McDonald's" is an epic and dark story, with mythological, apocalyptic and biblical references, but we wanted to make it as subtle as possible. It's a slow narrative of the destructive process, which we read and hear from the media every day.

With the "Burning Car" we get to see this icon of political unrest that has been going on in Europe. In Paris, for instance, nearly 9,000 cars got burned in a week. The same thing happened in Copenhagen, and many other places in Europe.

As for "The Financial Crisis," we wanted to treat the ongoing financial crisis as a psychosis and have a hypnotist guide us through our worst nightmares. Hopefully, there are effective subtleties in all of these films.

Rail: Is there a particular period of McDonald's that you were trying to approximate?

Christiansen: The funny thing is that even though some of us might never go to a McDonald's, we know how all McDonald's look, and what kind of characters are within the McDonald's imagery. We know that sometimes they adopt a certain look wherever they're based. But for us, we wanted to create one that everyone can identify with wherever you are in the world.

Rail: Strangely enough, the sinister image of Ronald McDonald, the fast food chain's clown mascot, was once called "Speedy," and he had a hamburger-shaped hand and wore a chef's hat, at least in 1940, when McDonald's was founded. It must have changed in the late 1960s. Anyway, I thought the long sequence of the electric flickers and the chair underneath the water with all the debris floating around it, were important attributes to the whole film. However, like all of your three films, which more or less require an extended viewing experience, "The Financial Crisis" is a bit different in that it's broken up into four sections.

Christiansen: It was produced both for last year's Frieze Art Fair and for Channel 4 on national TV, and it was shown in four separate segments that fill three-minute slots, at 8 pm each evening during one week. So it has never been shown in all the sessions together until now at Peter Blum.

Fenger: With "The Financial Crisis," it was the first time we had the chance to show it on TV with a million and a half viewers, within TV speed, which condenses and quickly disperses all the news they

need to tell you. All of a sudden you have this hypnotist slowing everything down to his speed. Almost like a full stop.

Christiansen: It also has a lot of humor in it.

Rail: Absolutely. The second part about George Soros was so existential and quick [*laughs*].

Christiansen: Yes, the whole idea of hypnotizing the entire English population was fascinating for all of us, to say the least. The idea of making, and again, if you make people just stop and think about the financial crisis and so on, this hysteria, we call it a psychosis, that's the way we try to treat it or give the potential for treatment or step on the other side. That's why using hypnosis can bring you down onto another level, your sub-consciousness and so on. So it gives you the chance to view the thing you are in at the moment, or the thing you are being bombarded with, which is the financial crisis and the chaos. And yet, for example, in Denmark, there are not that many who are directly affected. For many nothing happened at all, they had the same job, the same payment, everything was the same, but all the fear that was created around it amounted to complete hysteria. That could be one perspective, which we wanted also to introduce.

Rail: Well it seems quite ironic, the attempt to hypnotize that many British people through television, especially George Soros, who had studied at the London School of Economics and made his money from betting against the British currency. Otherwise, what were people's reactions when the film was showing at Frieze (which couldn't have been the most opportune time, during the financial setback, where out of 151 galleries that normally take part, almost 30 of them didn't participate)?

Christiansen: My perception was people are in the crisis, so they can relate to the film. Of course you have to slow down to be treated, and there's no time for that when you're in the crisis. I think most of the galleries in the art world, like in the financial world, do not have that time to slow down.

Fenger: In general, what any financial crisis does, in effect, is to give us a possibility of reflecting a little bit on how we live and how the system is working. So in that sense it is a little bit the same with the film. When it was presented at the air fair, in the middle of this super-hectic economic art world where people just quickly glance at all the presented objects from the outside, you go into a smaller space where this hypnotist is talking very slowly about different levels of the economic disasters. Overall, I think these kinds of situations give us a chance to look upon ourselves and look upon how we have decided to live in this world.