

Christian Jankowski

ArtPace, A Foundation for Contemporary Art, San Antonio

If Christian Jankowski's video *The Holy Artwork* (2001) is indeed both art and "holy," the artist is not entirely responsible. Commissioned by the ArtPace International Artist-in-Residence program, this collaborative work examines the nature of inspiration. As the video begins, Jankowski is seen being called forward to address the congregation of the Harvest Fellowship Community Church in San Antonio, Texas, glimpsed through the subjective view of Jankowski's handheld camera. Instead of preaching, however, the artist falls at the feet of Pastor Peter Spencer, relinquishing artistic control to the church and its own television cameras. Jankowski's prostrate artist alludes to a particular Renaissance painting by Juan Bautista Maino depicting an instance of angelic intervention, but Pastor Spencer's sermon on the positive role of contemporary art in Christian spirituality is wholly his own. Collaboration is both the strategy and the primary concern of Jankowski's video-based practice, one that consistently mixes scripted allegorical situations with the spontaneity of reality TV. With *The Holy Artwork*, the affable German artist can now add a real televangelist to his roster of collaborators, which in past projects has included a psychotherapist, a magician, customs officers, fortune-tellers, children, a dove, and other non-art world types. However brief, these partnerships generate an unpredictable dialogue between the general public and the more remote domain of contemporary art. As a result, Jankowski's



Christian Jankowski, *The Holy Artwork*, 2001, still from DVD, duration 16 min.

good-humored skits and video documentations are remarkably accessible as well as deeply personal. They also reveal the artist's penchant for acts of daring and public interaction. *Window of Daily Life* (1992) and *Shame Window* (1992), Jankowski's earliest projects, were staged in a Hamburg storefront window facing a busy street, where the artist invited passers-by to join him for daily meals, bathing, and public confessions. *Die Jagd* (The Hunt), 1992, and *The Safe Place* (1994) were even riskier works, each creating a symbolic confrontation between competing social philosophies. In the first, Jankowski surreptitiously entered Hamburg supermarkets with a bow and arrow to hunt down his food and provisions. Messy and dangerous, the performance turns wryly political when the artist stands in line to pay for his captured prey. For *The Secure Space*, staged in London in 1999, Jankowski positioned Twenty-four-hour security guards and surveillance cameras in a vacant bank building, creating a safe and neutral gathering place for tourists, drug dealers, art cognoscenti, and the homeless. Jankowski has also turned his lens upon the art world: its history, coded rituals, and professional ambiance. *Museum of Contemporary Art, 2097* (1997) imagines a fantastic scenario in which a strange retro-aging virus endows both staff and artists at the Hamburger Kunsthalle with eternal youth. Child stand-ins for museum director Uwe M. Schneede, artist Rosemarie Trockel, and others discuss the institution's 1997 opening exhibition, reconvened one hundred years in the future. In *The Matrix Effect* (2000), Jankowski drops the science-fiction premise in favor of straightforward comedy. Children are again used as surrogates, this time for curator Andrea Miller-Keller, Sol LeWitt, Glenn Ligon, Janine Antoni, and other artists who—like Jankowski—participated in the Wadsworth Atheneum's Matrix program. Fed lines from off camera, the untrained actors re-create interviews between the curator and artists, disrupting these closed-circuit exchanges with malapropisms, Freudian slips, and the untutored bonhomie of children. Jankowski displays an uncanny knack for folding these accidents and interventions into his video projects. This strategy is well served by our conditioned response to video as a medium of authenticity that nonetheless circumvents linear reality. Regarding Jankowski's potential for artistic success, the televised prophecies of Italian fortune-tellers indeed come true in *Telemistica* (1999), subsequently shown at the 1999 Venice Biennale. Even *The Holy Artwork* is saved from overbearing artistic hubris by Pastor Spencer's commentary, given an aura of authority by the frame of the television camera. Despite his pious platitudes ("We are creative, but only God is the Creator"), he passionately advocates a spirit of collaboration across the secular divide, noting the one fundamental truism shared by Jankowski: "Without an audience, there is no art."

John Ewing