



Dough Portraits

by Søren Dahlgaard

29.07.10 - 10.08.10

NATIONAL ART GALLERY MALDIVES

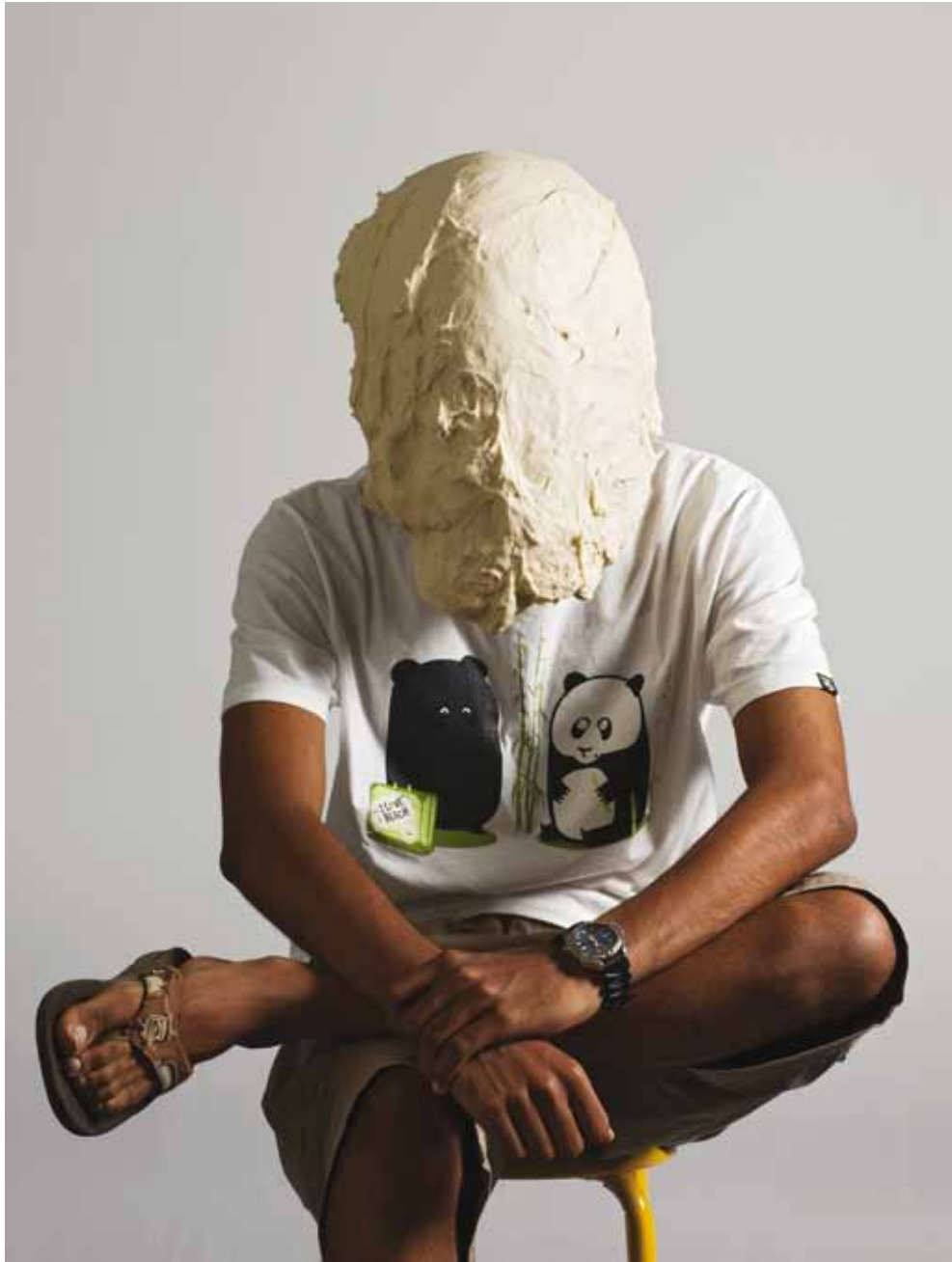




Azra, 27



Mufeed, 17



Dheydhe, 20



Azdha, 23



Inaan, 18



Yurri, 27



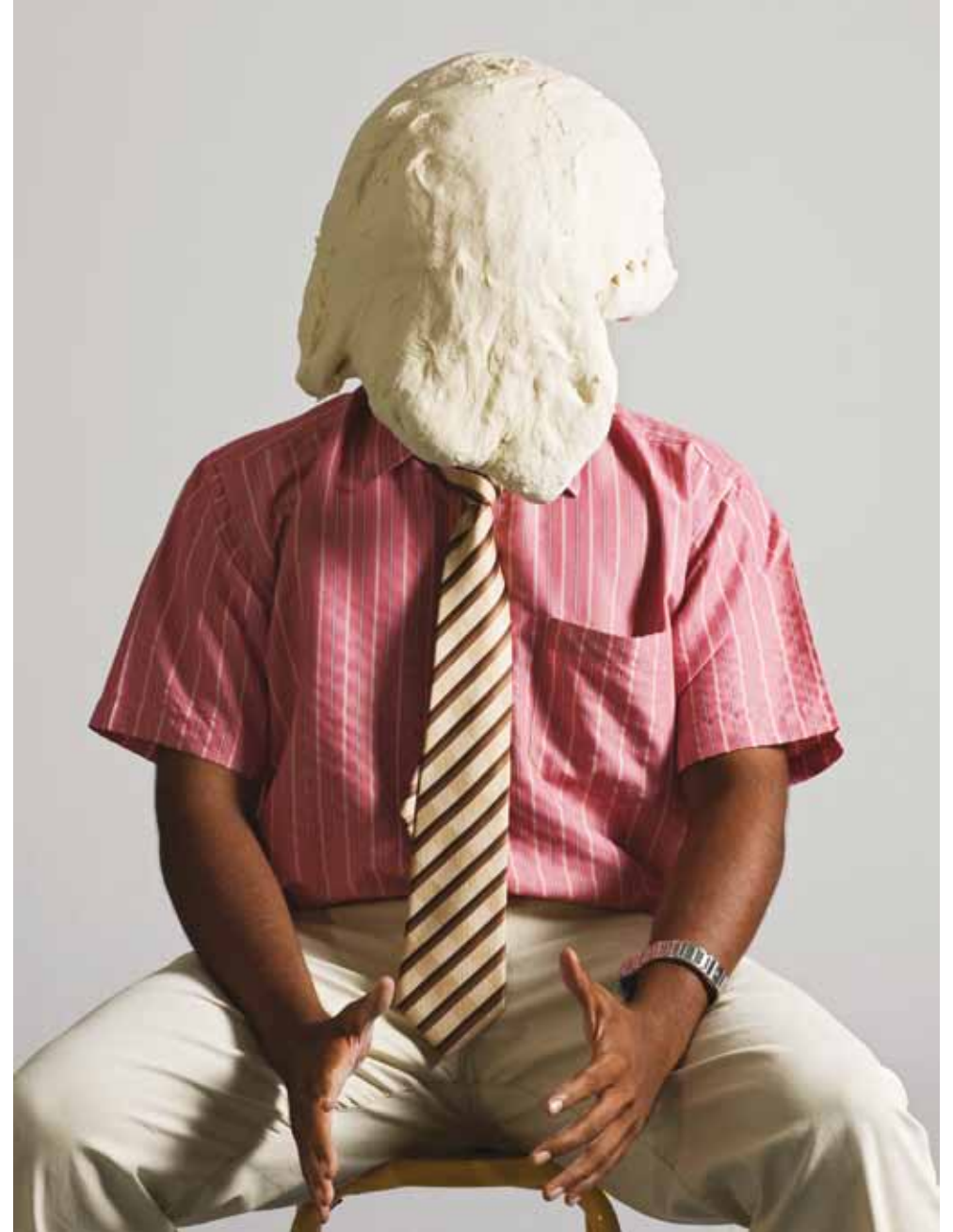
Manni, 43



Manih, 32



Nihama, 24



Luthisham, 19



Hussein, 10



Eskil, 9



Iko, 19



Amani, 35



Misfah, 20



Nuha, 18



Ajay, 24



Marina, 16





Hassan, 23



Filza, 22



Manal, 22



Hajja, 21



Samfa, 63



Sattar, 59



Mohamed, 13



Laesha, 18



Musliha, 15



Raudha, 13

By thy mask I shall know thee

by Barbara Læssøe Stephensen

“By thy mask I shall know thee”, says one of the characters from the world famous Danish author Karen Blixen in her story “The Deluge at Norderney”.

A statement with so much force, it has become a kind of saying in itself. A contradiction in terms. For the mask is indeed a tool for concealing the “true face” and yet we all know that it is precisely the mask - the thing we choose to cover ourselves with, dress up in, decorate ourselves with as well as the way we pose, that we use to orchestrate ourselves. And it is by these things - the masks - that we judge each other.

A portrait is the first work of art a poor family will invest in. And being portrayed is still the greatest honour given to great men and women. In contrary to the ordinary snapshot, the person portrayed renounces his control over his image, and in return gets an authenticity, which the artist contributes. By ceding sovereignty to the photographer or sculptor, the one being portrayed trades in pretense for a purer, more objective image, with greater truth and value. The statesman, desiring an image of status, can never obtain this by posing in front of a camera alone. It is awarded to him by the artist.

Yet art history shows again and again that portraits have been used to show off, impress and manipulate.

In this perspective, the dough-portraits are the purest portraits I’ve ever seen: because pretense is almost impossible. In this case it is not just the object of the portrait, who has ceded sovereignty, but also the portraitist who has had to give up controlling power to the lively and uncontrollable dough.

And that is when we begin to see. First and foremost, we register how we usually see. And

then we realize what science has long claimed, that facial gestures mean more to us than we recognize and that the facial expressions generated by such feelings as fear, anger, disgust, sorrow and joy are amazingly similar all over the globe and the easiest way to communicate.

Standing before of the dough portraits bizarre faceless figures we are confronted with the difficulties of lacking the facial gestures when trying to read another person.

Immediately we notice ourselves searching for other features that will tell us who we are facing. We look at the clothes. And discovers that it says nearly nothing. Then we turn to the body-language, and find it much more loaded with information. Once our attention is drawn to it, we instinctively know how to read body-language and readily use it to base our judgments on. Does she resemble me? Is she brave or cautious? Is he funny? Is she tidy or more relaxed? Would I go to bed with him? Is she lazy? When mimics are no longer possible the body takes over the posing, and the positions of the body become the important bearers of information: The sit-up- straight back, the open palms of the hand, the easy laid-back attitude, men with their legs wide open and girls with their legs crossed. We can see them, and read them, but are still on unsecure grounds - without the faces.

The shapeless dough-lumps are both repulsive and horrifying as deformed heads. They remind us of The Elephantman or E.T. But like both of these icons they call for tenderness, in their sorry shapelessness. Because even though it is not visible, we inevitably look for the face. See the face. Suddenly the dripping blurred, swollen dough appear as expressions of - or impressions of - the person within. Although we know that the real image of the person is to be found on the inside of the dough-lump and we are only

looking at the outside of the mould, one cant help discovering facial features in the dough and be moved by them:

Isn’t the one with the heavy hanging dough-cheeks looking mournful? And does the guy in the suit not seem coarse with that bulldog-head? Don’t you feel an urge to gently wave away the dough that has loosened itself, covering her left cheek, which has fallen down on the right side of the young girls face, as a bold unruly lock of hair? And isn’t that little girl laughing at us?

A few years ago, an image went around the world picturing an American soldier who had returned from Iraq and a collision with a bomb, with a face patched together to something, which was barely a face. It was a wedding picture of him and his wife, who had known from before the war and the accident, and continued to love him despite his lack of face. And the whole world looked on in wonder. Because we are so dependent on faces, we cannot imagine how one can love a person with no face. What then is the person, and what is the mask?

In front of the dough-portraits we are no longer able to tell, which is the truest image – the inside with its pretence, or the faceless outside with no pretense. And thus we are reminded of the difficulty of seeing anyone for what they are - love them for who they are “inside”. Without form, no content. We can get rid of layers of self-staging and posing, renounce control over how we look ourselves, but not escape the power of form. Form will always govern and dominate, manipulate and assists our perceptions of each other. But by thy dough-portrait I shall know thee.



Hexagonal Cyclops, 2000
C-print

Barbara Læssøe Stephensen, Master of arts, rhetoric and art history. Head of communications, GI Strand - Gallery of Modern & Contemporary Art, Copenhagen, Denmark.

Playing with dough

by Amani Naseem, M.Sc IT

Dough is a material that everyone is familiar with, it is an 'everyday material.' We have all used it in some way. As Dahlggaard says, dough is a material that does not have a history of use in artistic tradition. As such, as a material it does not call up references or associations to any particular sculptural or other artistic tradition. Dough is therefore an 'everyday material' in this sense as well.

Putting dough on our heads is a playful act. It's a funny thing to do and it makes us laugh, maybe a little nervously. The absurdity of our purpose distances our actions from the mundane, and sets them into what the anthropologist Huizinga in his book *Homo Ludens* calls the 'Magic Circle of Play.' For Huizinga, play is at once part of and removed from everyday life. We are playing in Søren Dahlggaard's world, by his strange rules where you have to cover your head in dough to pose for a portrait.

When we frame our actions within the Magic Circle of play, our actions mean something different. The actions take on meanings determined by our play; we are distanced from everyday consequences and motivations. The consequences depend on the rules of the play, and rules can develop within the course of our play. At the same time playing can be a serious activity, and all acts can become playful. Play is a subtle sense we have as humans, an integral part of our social selves.

When we play with the dough and shape it to put it on our heads, we are drawn into Dahlggaard's game with its own rules of play. Yet the rules are simple enough and the acts familiar enough that the game is an easy one to join in. It is a social game and we watch and comment as other people shape the dough and sit for their portrait. We anticipate the strangeness of sitting there and feeling the dough on our heads and faces. We listen to others' reactions and descriptions as we wait our turn. We laugh. When our turn comes we have our own way of kneading and shaping, it is a familiar act and we naturally draw on our own experiences and make our own associations;

the action is absurdly yet effortlessly framed in relation to our lives, and as part of this very social event. Play can be serious, and a game may not be 'just a game'.

Dahlggaard sees the dough portrait as a collaboration between the artist and the visitor. His work critiques not only the boundaries of the artwork, but also critiques the traditional idea of the lone artist creator. We join in the artwork by bringing our own rules into the acts, our own sense of play, shaping our image, and shaping the event.

The playful and the uncanny

The event is part of a series that have taken place in different parts of the world and it has had a different character in each location. The dough portrait event was first held at the National Art Gallery in Denmark. Henrik Holm is an art historian at The National Art Gallery in Denmark, and for him the dough portraits open up a field of tension about identity. "There is a liberating banality about it," he says, "--come on, it's just dough. We play: Let us get something going and see what happens." Yet Henrik Holm sees the situation as "an infringement on the person's self-image. The person sits there suddenly with a different relation to his or her surroundings and new implications are brought up, which would not have been without such an infringement. It becomes serious, because there is an infringement at deeper levels."

He sees something uncanny in the situation. Holm draws on the field of psychology and explains it as the sort of event that creates trauma: "And then you cross over to the scary part of it. The persons are placed in a situation they are not in control of; they do not know how others will react, and I can't help thinking that they have voluntarily made themselves available for an experiment which deprives them of their identity."

Holm describes the moment the portrait is taken: "They sit with a hood over their heads waiting for their sentence, waiting to be shot. They get dough on their heads while there are other people



3 hour sculpture, 2006
100 kilo dough & aquarium

present. They get shot at with reactions, which they are not in control of. They have to sit there hearing everything people say, and they can do nothing. Their nice faces become a mere blob that collapses. It is as if the whole identity, which is built up so much around the face collapses. And they are helpless."

The Dough Portraits in Maldives

Dahlggaard says that he is not trying to make a point about identity with this work, for him it is the event and the image that is important. The idea is a simple one, and the event breaks from more traditional forms of art. Yet the resulting images can be placed squarely within classic portraiture, the dough, the posing, the framing, creates iconic images with striking beauty.

The portraits of the 99 visitors to the 2009 event in capital Malé are being exhibited for the first time one year later. "It was heavy, my neck felt shorter!" says a 16 year old schoolgirl who took the picture in her uniform with her school bag on her back. She laughs, "my nose was squashed!" For her it was something she did with her brother, who gave her a lift on his scooter.

They helped each other knead the dough and they laughed together as they sat for their portraits. The portraits mean more to them because they got to play and have fun. It was not traumatic for her, but she can clearly remember the visceral experience one year on. It is possible that the memorability of the event is partly due to its uncanny nature on the boundary between playfulness and transgression.

The Process

by Søren Dahlgaard

High art / low art

The Dough Portrait photo series is very simple to produce. Anyone - without a weak neck - can join in and making a Dough Portrait takes less than one minute - or a little longer when chatting.

The Dough portraits is an event I initiate and direct in collaboration with each participant.

This collaboration really work. I can say this after having photographed more than 300 Dough portraits in Denmark, Kosovo and Maldives. Together, each participant and I create a portrait photo. I explain and direct the setup and the framing but each portrayed individual chooses the lump of dough, kneads and shapes it and places it on top of their own head. Every dough has a new shape and expression. This is the nature of the dough as a sculptural material it is very versatile and alive.

The Dough Portrait event succeeds in breaking down the barrier between the artwork and the spectator, which normally is present in the museum setting. The groundbreaking Japanese Avantgarde art group *Gutai* - most active in the 1950s - had a similar aim when they developed events and exhibitions and staged them in parks or on a rooftop. Always driven to create something new and original. Also Swiss artist Roman Signer has been a significant influence. His works are actions, were the process (of often-absurd situations using everyday objects) is the essential part. Documented on photo and film they are sculpture processes happening over time.

I seek to continue to challenge the conventions of painting, photography and sculpture, and place the process as the essential expression, building on the thinking of these artists.

The Dough Portraits might seem scary to some, with the faceless people. Another type of faceless people is becoming increasingly common in the capital of Maldives. The Arabic all covering burka for women are now walking the streets in increasing numbers. This, to me, is much more scary.

The first Dough Portrait photo series was produced and exhibited in the National Art Gallery, Denmark in 2008 followed by The National Museum, Kosovo in May 2010 and now The National Art Gallery, Maldives July 2010.

The project is planned to travel to 8 different locations around the world before completing it with a book publication.

99 people participated in making the Dough Portrait photo series in Maldives in July 2009. The resulting images are exhibited in the National Art Gallery of Maldives July - August 2010.

It is exciting to bring this project to Maldives, where contemporary art from abroad is rarely shown. There was a lot of interest and curiosity during the event. All ages and types of people were represented. School children wearing uniform, casually dressed giggling teenagers, office staff wearing shirt and tie or dress and some also wore colourful veils (mainly covered by the dough). There was a fisherman in his sarong, a traditional drummer, the surfer and posh lady wearing a silk dress and lots of gold jewellery not to forget the 5 year old wearing a bad man T-shirt followed by the Bangladeshi driver.

There was a lot of teenagers and people in their 20's. It is also noticeable that more girls were present. They seem to dare more to participate were the boys are a little reluctant to engage in an event, which might be slightly out of their control. Everybody had fun and most people stayed for a while and discussed or commented on what happened.



12 second sculpture, 2006
Stills from video
30 kilo dough & chair



Upcomming Dough Portrait productions:
Vancouver Biennale, September 2010 & ECCO Contemporary Arts Center, Brasilia, Brazil from November 2010.

Søren Dahlgaard (B. 1973)

Lives in Copenhagen, Denmark

www.sorendahlgaard.com:

Education:

1997-02 Slade School of Fine Arts,
University College London, UK.

1996-97 The Royal Academy of Architecture,
Copenhagen, Denmark.

Selected solo exhibitions:

2011

Aarhus Center for Contemporary Art, Denmark.
Galleri Image, Aarhus, Denmark.

2010

ECCO – Espaço Cultural Contemporâneo,
Brasilia, Brazil.

Dough portraits in Maldives,

NAG – National Art Gallery, Malé, Maldives.

Søren Dahlgaard – The Dough Show.

The National Art Gallery, Kosovo.

The Breathing Room,

Rohde Contemporary, Cph, Denmark.

2009

The Breathing Corridor,

The Corridor gallery, Reykjavik, Iceland.

Dough portraits, Galerie Wolfsen, Aalborg, Denmark.

THE KABOOM! PROCESS Stalke Up North Gallery,

Copenhagen, Denmark

2008

Søren Dahlgaard – 100 drawings challenging reality.

The National Art Gallery, Copenhagen, Denmark.

The Dough Warrior paints landscape performance,

50th anniversary, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art,
Humlebæk, Denmark.

Dough Portraits, The National Art Gallery Copenhagen,
Denmark.

Challenging Dough, Stalke galleri, Kirke Sonnerup,
Denmark.

Søren Dahlgaard – The Dough Warrior painting show!

Gallery Poulsen Contemporary Art,
Copenhagen, Denmark.

Selected group exhibitions & performances:

2010

Internationales Performance Festival,

Württembergischer Kunstverein, Stuttgart.

Live Action New York.

Scandinavian House, New York.

Foto Arte Brasilia, Brazil.

Video Zone 5,

International Video Art Biennial CCA, Tel Aviv.

Infr'Action International Performance Festival,

Seté, France.

Vancouver biennale, Canada.

Copenhagen Photo festival.

Drawing biennale, The National Gallery, Kosovo.

BEST OF WONDERLAND,

WAS – Wonderland Art Space, Copenhagen.

The Danish Art Council Collection,

The Nordic Council gallery, Copenhagen.

On Paper, Stalke galleri, Kr. Sonnerup, Denmark.

2009

Blurr 7 – The Seventh International Performance Art

Biennial, CCA - Center for Contemporary Art,

Tel-Aviv, Israel.

Emergency Room, National Art Academy Hanoi, Vietnam.

Landscape – Foto Triennale, Brandts Photo Museum,

Odense, Denmark.

10th OPEN International Performance Art Festival,

Beijing, China.

Emergency Room, PAN, Palazzo delle Arti Napoli, Italy.

Sequences 2009 Art festival, Reykjavik, Iceland.

THE KABOOM! PROCESS Overgaden Institute for

Contemporary Art, Copenhagen.

Opening show, Galerie Ulf Saupe, Berlin.

ONE Copenhagen, Stalke Copenhagen.

(incl. Carl André, Robert Barry, William Anastasi).

2008

THE KABOOM! PROCESS performance,

Nikolaj Contemporary Copenhagen.

Wonder, Singapore Biennale 2008, Singapore.

Dreams, The National Art Gallery, Denmark.

2007

International Prize for Performance, Galleria Civica

Museum of contemporary art, Trento, Italy.

Emergency Room, Ileana Tounta contemporary arts

center, Athens, Greece.

Emergency Room, P.S.1 Contemporary Arts Center

MoMA, New York.



Digesting the news, 2007
Performance still & Installation view
P.S.1 MoMA, New York.

Different newspaper articles were
mixed and stuffed into the sausages.
Pigs intestine, fat, newspaper articles,
paper shredder, ingredient text,
sausage maker, table & drawing
of the news cycle.



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