

# Markus Hansen

“Trying to figure out and empathise with someone else’s emotional dynamic is something I am very interested in”

MARKUS HANSEN, who once assisted Joseph Beuys, creates thoughtful multimedia works that explore issues of memory, history and identity – tellingly, perhaps, for an artist who was uprooted from Germany to England at a tender age, and now lives in Paris. The Lewes Series is newly completed, while the second work featured is drawn from his slide show, *Other People’s Feelings Are Also My Own* (2001–06), recently exhibited at London’s Bischoff/Weiss gallery. This comprised 23 dual portraits in which Hansen tried to mirror – as best he could, using the nearest match his wardrobe and physiognomy could provide – the clothes, poses and expressions of acquaintances photographed alongside him. These proved to be subtle but thoroughly unsettling acts of transformation. *INTERVIEW: Paul Carey-Kent*

**Are you related to Alan Hansen, captain of the Liverpool football team in the 90s?**

I’ve no connection, though I did see him play back in the late 70s. As the football team’s success was inverse to the economic decline of the city, the Kop’s chant felt like a defiant cry, doused with a huge dose of self-effacing humour. I often felt irreconcilable emotions in the face of such passion about something as simple as football. As a conduit for the assertion of identity, football still poses a big problem for me.

**You’ve lived in Germany, England, Columbia and now France. What has caused you to move around so much?**

I think at the root is my mother’s relationship to Germany. After the war my grandmother, like many Germans, went into a state of self-denial and depression. I think my mother’s decision to move to England with her new English husband had a lot to do with this, and that – consciously or unconsciously – she wanted more distance from Germany. I was nine years old, and my sister and I worked very hard to establish ourselves in our new surroundings. Perhaps we overcompensated to try and integrate ourselves: nothing is worse for a child than to be left out. I was confronted for the first time with German history; some of the children called us Nazis, the meaning of which my mother then struggled to explain to us. We had gone from a very protected upper middle class existence in Baden-Baden, which is a bucolic spa town populated with the rich and dying, to lower middle class Liverpool suburbia. This heightened my sensibilities, and made me try to understand differences: cultural, historical and therefore emotional.

**Has that influenced your work?**

The portrait pieces are linked to that process of compensation. As exercises in empathy they go beyond any moral formulation in that I am not judging, but trying to understand.

**You assisted Joseph Beuys. What sort of influence resulted from that?**

When I was an art student at Reading I became very immersed in the work of Beuys. His self-incarnation as a shaman fascinated me, and I became something of an amateur anthropologist. As a result I ended up living with the Waunana Indians in the Choco on the Pacific coast in Columbia. This was a defining experience for me as it challenged many of my conceptions of knowledge, language and the self. When I returned to London I had the opportunity, by chance, to work with Beuys on his installation *Plight* (now in the Pompidou Centre) at the Anthony D’Offay gallery. Beuys and I got on very well; he asked me to work on other projects but then he died. His work is too complex to try to reduce to a few words here, but I consider his artistic and political position to be more and more relevant after it was ignored during the market-driven late 80s and 90s.

**You have taken photographs of curtains. What were those about?**

The curtain was in my grandmother’s cellar in Germany, behind which I thought all the family’s secrets were kept. There were many unspoken subjects in our family, things that were too difficult to talk about dating back to my German grandfather and the Nazi period. It wasn’t until I was about 14 that I dared to look behind that curtain to discover that this was where grandmother kept her jam jars and old cooking utensils.

**What led you to the *Other People’s Feelings* project?**

It began when I was morphing images of myself with others. To make the process of morphing less technically demanding I took on more and more the expression of the other person. This intermediary stage began to feel much more important than the software twiddling of morphing and I began to explore it.

**What feelings has the project brought on?**

It has been moving and emotionally straining. It’s very cathartic. Trying to figure out and empathise with someone else’s emotional dynamic is something I am very interested in. Everything I see happening around me, from the micro to the macro, I am fascinated by.

**The photographs could be said to comment on the limitations of empathy?**

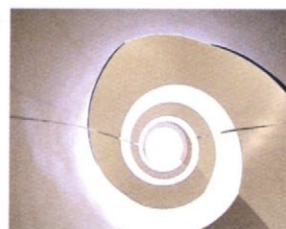
There is an attempt at what appears to be impossible, or at best very difficult and often feels like an absurdity, especially with our western fetishism of the individual. And yet I feel it is precisely this attempt that seems to compel people to watch with such interest. A group of collectors in New York were horrified, as they felt the “other” was being undermined by being infiltrated and interpreted; as if they conceived of the other as being completely impenetrable, some squeaky clean entity that others can only speculate about but never really understand. I often feel the portraits oscillate somewhere between pertinence and absurdity.

**What are you working on now?**

I am finishing a film about a Vietnam veteran, the violinist Billy Bang, who asked me to film his return to the battlegrounds of Vietnam in search of redemption. Bang is an African-American musician who uses Vietnam’s very diverse musical culture as a way of transcending his trauma. It is also a chance to invert some of the received ideas about Vietnam which have been dominated by the *mea culpa* films pouring out of Hollywood for the last 40 years.

**Finally, if you could live with any work of art ever made, what would it be?**

I belong to the Museum generation – I have no artworks in my home except for the drawings the children put up which are constantly changing. When the children move on to their next cycle I keep them. ☺



1 **Floor drawing of the big now** (2000) mixed media and sound, site-specific installation, Évry Cathedral

2 **Curtain in my own dirt** (1997/2007), dirt and varnish on glass, 110 x 140cm

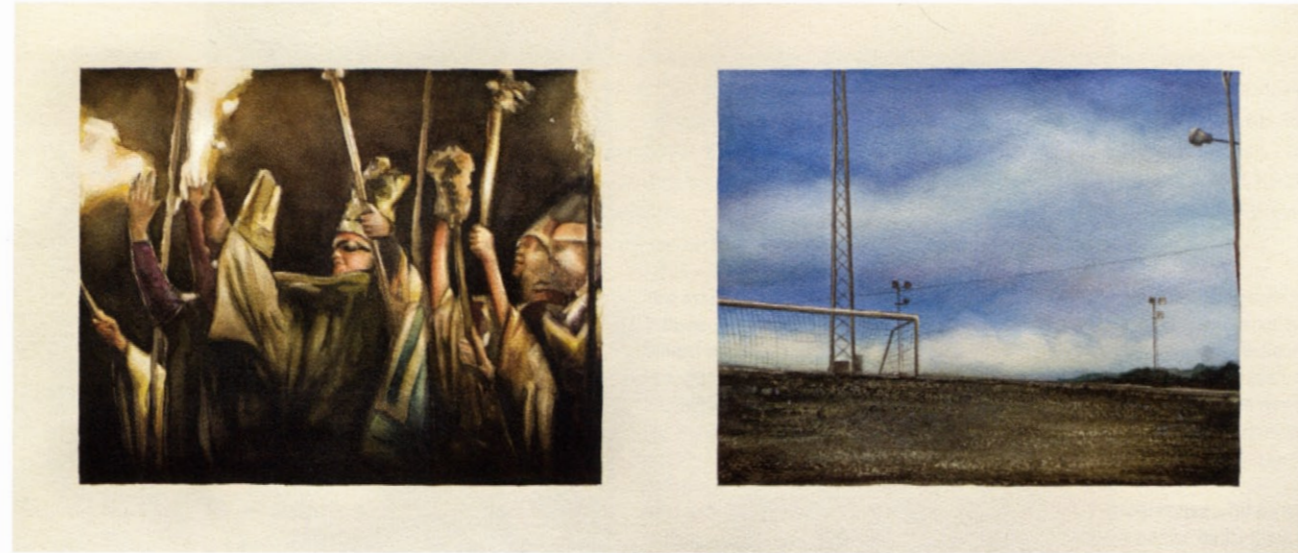
3 **Romantic sky in my own dirt** (2004), dirt and varnish on glass, 110 x 140cm

4 **Billy Bang’s redemption song** (release date 2008), HD/35mm film, 90 minutes

**CV** Born: 1963, Heidelberg, Germany Studied: University of Reading, UK  
Lives and works: Paris, France Represented: Virgil de Voldere, New York; Bischoff/Weiss, London



Above: Untitled works from the *Lewes* series (2000/2007), with Christoph Nissou, watercolour on paper, each 35 x 80cm



**The Lewes series**

Above: Untitled works from the **Lewes** series (2000/2007), with Christoph Nissou, watercolour on paper, each 35 x 80cm

The framework for this series is the annual Lewes fire procession, an anti-papal event held on Guy Fawkes Night, in which the East Sussex town commemorates the burning of 17 protestant martyrs. It is based on a video work Hansen made in collaboration with Chris Dorley Brown, which combined footage of the procession night with another film of same route, taken by day six months later. Hansen then, in collaboration with painter Christoph Nissou, made these watercolour images based on pairs of night and day stills. "I played with the

idea of the traditional English bucolic watercolour, my favourites being by Samuel Palmer, who comes from the same part of England as I do," he says. "The benign normality of the day and its apparent emptiness is invaded by the extraordinary violence of the night, and both are suspended with a poetic ambivalence that provokes the viewer to question which is more disturbing. I felt that beyond the historical context, the lightness and translucency of the watercolour would play off against the violence of the images."





Naomi



Marion



Sophia



Ana Maria



Richard



Axel



Natasha



Klaus



Eva



Iris



Hilke



Chris

Other People's Feelings Are Also My Own (2001–06)

Above: From *Other People's Feelings Are Also My Own* (2005–06), photographs, each 77 x 98.5cm

For this series of 23 slides, Hansen invited friends and acquaintances to have their photograph taken. He then donned similar clothes and attempted to empathise with their physical and emotional states, by mirroring their expressions and stances – and feelings.