On worldbuilding

Creative director Martin Falck (Fever Ray) discusses separating and connecting business and art, learning through creativity, and how other people can be key to your best ideas.

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As told to Max Freedman, 2330 words.

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What you do with Fever Ray, and previously The Knife, can feel like world-building. Can you talk about how creating your own worlds benefits your creative practice?

It happened very subconsciously. I don't think I was aware of that in the beginning. I was always very into Sim City, building my own worlds, but I never realized that's what I was doing until recently.

In a way, growing up gay or queer, or just not part of society, you're forced to build your own world. You have to set up your own rules because there aren't that many for how to live your life. A lot of the time, you also have to come up with a positive world, a good world that works for yourself.

What are some of these rules for you?

When I start to build a new world or approach a new project, I always try to really see, to really use my eyes. What do we see, actually? Not so much what we think we see, or our preconceived ideas of what we see, or what history [or society] tells us we should, but what do we actually, really see here? That's always one of the starting points.

What are we looking at? What do we want to look at? What do we want to exclude? What parts of homophobia, misogyny, racism do we really want to look at from, not a structural, normative society level, but, what do we actually want to say? What do we want to see these characters be doing or wearing? How can we play with it and make it something that everybody can relate to and not something that is just for a small, separatistic group? How can we, by just switching something very basic, create a new thought in the person who sees it? Something like, "Oh, I always thought it was this my whole life, but actually, it could be like this."

You're talking about shifting somebody's perception, which makes sense coming from you, because I've seen a lot of people describe your work as dark or weird, but I often see it as playful or campy—you're just presenting things through a different lens. This makes me wonder: What does your curiosity look like? How do you explore and experiment?

I always have people saying, "Oh, dark, weird, strange," when that has never been a goal of mine. It's exactly what you say. It's a lot of humor and it's campy.

Obviously, there are a lot of norms living in my head. There are a lot of preconceived ideas. I grew up in this world, so obviously, they live inside of me. My curiosity has offered me another way of approaching people. I'm very curious about people [and] what drives people. I love hearing about people's desires, any form of desire. I

think that’s very fascinating, and that’s usually a place where we all can meet. In their core, in their essence, [people] are usually very similar, but as they develop, they go [in] different directions.

I don’t only mean sexually. I also mean how we see ourselves in 10 years. It’s interesting to think about how a person desires to be seen, and how it’s good for them to be seen. There’s usually a clash there. I find that very interesting too. If no one would think you’re weird, what would you do? Or if you followed your gut feeling, like your therapist always tells you, what would you actually do? I get very excited about that kind of raw emotion [and] impulse. It’s somewhere everyone is kind of equal.

In what ways have you seen your distinct aesthetic and the work you do guide people toward questioning their prior assumptions or preconceived notions?

In the intellectual leftist community, people really love what I do, which is strange because I don’t consider myself an intellectual. I come from a working-class background where you love expensive brands and McDonald’s, but maybe there’s a lot of stuff I didn’t really understand. So things that people maybe take for granted, I didn’t take for granted, and I try to really understand why all these rules and regulations exist. But I never necessarily questioned them like a lot of my intellectual friends. I just exposed them a little bit, played with them, and tried to find some freedom in them. I think that’s something a lot of people pick up on.

There’s a curious and, I hope, fun energy in my work that people can feel a little bit more free in or think for themselves, “How do I actually feel about this?” But also, a lot of people feel like it’s dark or twisted and strange, and that, I really don’t understand. I don’t know why they feel like that.

Can you talk about the power of staying true to your art, your approach, no matter what other people are saying?

I’ve compromised a lot, but I was always aware of where I get my money and where I don’t. I had this kind of Robin Hood approach to things. I do things that I know, this is just a job, it brings food to the table, and there, I can stay very professional. Usually, when I do that kind of work, they don’t want my art in that sense. Maybe they would request me because they think it’s funny that I use the color pink a lot. For the work I would do with Karin [Dreijer, a.k.a. Fever Ray] or other musicians or films, or writing or other art exhibitions, I wouldn’t compromise at all.

When I say “not compromise,” it’s also a super collaborative work where everybody in the project guides it. I usually work with a set of core people who I really trust, and we have this very safe working environment where everybody can guide each other. I never have to protect anything, or I don’t have to defend anything, because it’s such a safe environment where everybody totally gets what we’re doing. Surprisingly, it’s very rare that I have to think that thought, to never compromise.

Maybe it’s not something I’m concerned with. Maybe it’s just so natural for me. Maybe it’s also something that’s so uncompromising that it’s not even a discussion I would go into. I would just avoid it.

How do you balance creativity with the need to make money? Or, put another way, to what extent do you treat your creative practice like a business?

I don’t treat my creative practice as a business at all. I used to, and it really stressed me out, and it’s not my way of thinking. I had to have a very old wise person tell me that I chose the creative field…because I wanted to avoid working in business.

I take on every project and try to look at it as if there is one thing in it that I can teach myself, and I try to stay very true to that. I try to really explore something and learn something in every project. That’s the most honest way to treat my clients, because it keeps me very connected to the project, and it gives me something of my own, which I can explore, which is mine.

There are very rarely problems now in my projects. But when I was younger, there were a lot of problems. Now, I

feel like, when I can create my own space, and I know what I'm interested in and what I'm looking for, it's a little bit of self-exploration and learning in every project. It doesn't matter so much if it's super commercial or a very strange, weird, arty-farty project. I approach them very similarly.

What do your collaborators do for you? What value do they bring to the table? I'm curious how they help you achieve your creative goals, especially on the visual side of things.

One of my interests is identity. I really need a diverse group [of collaborators] in every aspect. That is really important to me [so] that we can really discuss the project, see it through different eyes and say, "Here are the problems. This is what we need to avoid." To stay true to what I do, I have to admit to myself that I am who I am, and I can't see everything. I need people I can trust who can tell me, "Oh, now you're doing something really weird, and I don't think that's what you want to do, and we need to have a conversation about that."

This became clear to me when I was working with a lot of queer feminist projects a couple of years ago. It was a very white group of friends, and what we were doing was not…I mean, we thought we were working really inclusive[ly], but it turns out we totally didn't. The main reason for that was because it wasn't a very diverse group. I learned that if you want to discuss identity, you really need to have people close to you that have that experience, because I can never claim that I can do that myself.

What parts of your creative process do you typically do alone, or feel like you need to do alone?

I need to be alone when things are overwhelming. On set, when we shoot something, sometimes I just need my own room for 15 minutes. Other than that, I really love being around people, and I love being in the process with someone. I don't like it much to be alone or work alone. I need someone to talk to all the time. That's also something that me and Karin do very well. We have a very similar process and we share everything all the time, every image, every idea, every joke, everything.

I'm really not a lone creator. I'm always with people or have people around me. My best ideas come when I'm with two or three people and we're working together. It's in those moments where I always feel like the magic happens, and I always try to have an extra one or two or three hours to try to make that happen. But obviously, that's not something that, when you work more commercially, they would appreciate, because they want to plan for everything. But there are ways to schedule that in.

How do you give each of your creative avenues the amount of time and energy you want to give it? Do you ever burn out on, or at least need a break from, any of your creative output?

No, I never burn out. Obviously, it's nice to take a day off and play video games, but then, always in the back of my head, I'm still working. Maybe this is going to sound like too much, but I enjoy my work so much, and [I've] created this space for myself where I feel like I know what I'm doing, and that really helps, and it keeps me curious and interested. Your gut feeling tells you if [something] is a project you should enter or not. Sometimes, your ego can be like, "You should do this," but your gut is saying, "You probably shouldn't." A lot of the time, your ego gets to decide what you should do because it's good for your career, or it's an opportunity.

I almost always listen to my gut, and if I don't feel like it's a good project, or if I feel like it's not something that I have to do, I don't do it. This has really helped with my creative relationship to myself, because the moment I felt burnt out, lacking energy, or not feeling joy in my work was when the project was very chaotic or not good for me.

I try to be very careful in the beginning. I try to have a very honest conversation about the expectations and how the person's work process is. The bigger names you work with, the more you realize there's less space and time, so it's even more important to be very clear about, "What do I have to play with here? How much am I going to be able to do?" Just be realistic about it.

Martin Falck Recommends:

5 Things I try to remind myself of every day.

Remember Fun. There is an idea that art is suffering, it can be, sometimes, but it's also fun. It's usually very hard work and can be difficult. A great strategy to counter that is to remember to have fun and play. I work in the creative field not in an institution or on Wall Street—I try to remember that and make others remember that.

Read. I recommend Susan Sontag's "Notes on 'Camp.'" Read it and read it again and really understand it. It's freeing and liberating. You can also watch John Waters' *Female Trouble* and Bruce LaBruce's *The Raspberry Reich* and Fassbinder's *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* and *Party Monster* (2003).

Enjoy the process. When a project is finished it's finished and done. That's it. So I try to make sure that I enjoy the process and stay "in-the-doing" and present. I try to enjoy it and not worry too much about the end result.

Spending time with people not my age. I try to spend time with older and younger people. It gives you a lot of perspective and can prepare you for future stuff and make you remember what went through your head as a 21 year old. It helps you remember how to listen.

Rest. Take a day off. Play video games, eat ice cream, candy. Do face masks, watch your favorite scenes in *Armageddon*. Binge *Real Housewives of Atlanta*, don't leave the house.

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