

ARTNEWS

'YOU'VE GOT TO GET RID OF YOUR CRUTCH': SAM FALLS ON 'SEPTEMBER SPRING' AT THE KITCHEN

BY [Hannah Ghorashi](#) POSTED 09/29/15 11:33 AM



Photo from the opening night performance of *September Spring*.
COURTESY THE KITCHEN

At 31, Sam Falls is something of a luddite. This idea, not quite an ideology, makes its appropriately subtle presence in his work. “I’ve gone through a lot of art by painting and using technology, and still, somehow, come back to more traditional practices,” Falls told me over the phone a few days after his first performance piece, *September Spring*, premiered at The Kitchen in Chelsea. He had just driven a few hours upstate; on several occasions during our conversation, I thought I could hear the sound of birds chirping in the background.

Like the Romantics before him, Falls is fascinated by the omnipotent forces that give shape to our experience of life—time, weather—minus any 19th-century grandiosity. His body of work, which includes and also combines painting, photography, and sculpture, showcases an active, deliberately unlearned engagement with nature, harnessing the manmade power of basic linguistic systems of order, such as color, to document the presence of time.

September Spring, a collaboration with Hart of Gold (dancers Jessie Gold and Elizabeth Hart), is a tribute to Falls's close friendship with poet and musician Jamie Kanzler, who died in 2013 at the age of 24. Kanzler, whom Falls considered his god brother, performed music under the name Old News and wrote poetry as September Spring.

An official description of the show begins with this text, written by Falls:

"I lock in with Jamie everyday and spin, for a minute or an hour, sometimes most of the night, I hold him and he holds me. The main distinction I see between life and death is the way time moves and its respective wake. Life is a heterogenous mixture of day and night where time is barreling forward and the imposing oppositions within experience and emotion compound rapidly with only brief moments of pure reflection. Death seems a homogeneous state of cool smooth darkness that dissolves the conflicts of life and carries time as its twin."

During the performance, which takes place daily through October 3, Gold and Hart dance atop twin canvases meticulously daubed with orderly splotches of colorful paint. They dance to Kanzler's songs. Once finished, the canvases are hung in the same theater space as part of a proper accompanying exhibition.



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I saw *September Spring* as it premiered on September 10. Our subsequent conversation, which has been lightly edited, follows below.

ARTnews: Tell me about the genesis of the project.

Falls: Five or six years ago, I made this record label with my friend. He still runs it now; I just kind of help out here and there.

What's the name of the label?

Wharf Cat Records. They produced Jamie's album. Part of the reason we set up the record label is because all the records they release come out on vinyl LPs with a[n accompanying] digital download too. There aren't that many places that produce vinyl LPs anymore, and I'm really interested in not only vinyl as sound, but also as an analog object in recording, the same way that there is in film and photography. A lot of my work tries to expand beyond the professional tools of photography while still staying true to representation.

With vinyl, I got really interested in the record itself and the marks on it. Originally I was working on a project to change the shape of the cuts on the record, so that instead of being perfect concentric circles you would have ellipses. The needle would move around these ellipses rather than in a circle and the idea was to have dancers that would trace these patterns that were on the record being played, therefore translating movement of the sounds. That turned out to be way more difficult than we thought, however, because you can't change the way a record is cut. No [traditional vinyl company] one was going to help us with it—elliptical records were breaking

their needles—so we turned to a few Makerbot-like places, but eventually we couldn't really handle it because the sound isn't good. So I was kind of rethinking it and at that time, Jamie had recently passed away and he had sent me the album we were planning to release about a month before he passed away. We had been giving it some time but those two elements kind of collided and then I decided to choreograph an abstract dance.

It became more about choreographing it as a representation of the music. During the performance, music was playing off a record in the front room so there is this idea that [the dancers] are moving in concentric circles.

I was reading the press release, and the intro paragraph includes the sentence “Life is a heterogenous mixture of day and night where time is barreling forward and the imposing oppositions within experience and emotion compound rapidly with only brief moments of pure reflection.” Beyond this piece, that sounds like a way of describing your photographic practice in general.

Yeah, totally. That's a very astute observation. Those painted pictures—which I've started doing more and more again—were sometimes a photograph of the everyday, and other times it was in a studio setup. I use a 4x5 camera for those pictures so it's obviously always kind of formal. But at the same time, the subject matter is less formal. There's more in a photograph than in a painting because you can't get everything out of there so sometimes it lets the viewer ultimately focus on a subject or highlight a subject while also extracting the essence of the picture—I was literally extrapolating color from the film through the computer and back to the paint again. It kind of adds a depth to a single moment rather than the usual clutter spilling into it. I think every single moment does have that clutter—for example, like when availability of internet distracts you from a goal, or from the purity of time. I think that's part of my photography and in this case, that was part of me reflecting on everything from this new perspective I have, losing Jamie and all.

Do you think that using technology is cheating time?

Yeah. I think it's affecting everyone in the present moment. I think it's ultimately a disservice to an individual even though it might be benefitting the greater good, especially in Western civilizations. I think it's good for developing countries to have a globalized reach that they didn't before, but for individuals, and artists especially, to be pulled away from focus, I don't think that's the right thing to do. In the arts generally, [technology] is the one thing that really distracts people. For example, to go from all the openings in Chelsea that I was just at to the Picasso show at MoMA really puts things in perspective. [Gallery openings] aren't even like postmodernist pluralism in art anymore, they're just a cluttered mess of work. It seems like artists themselves are over-producing the work to try and compete the same way we're always competing for people's attention now with digital technology. To see the Picasso show, where you just see him, and the handmade intimacy of it all....I think that's important.



Photo from the opening night performance of *September Spring*.
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I read an interview where you said that art movements used to serve as a replacement of an old one, kind of like a rebellion, but that now, because everything

is so accessible, artists are adapting from art movements throughout history. Related to what you just said about cluttered shows, I was wondering, do you see art as dead? Are we just recycling traditions?

I believe in the progress of art, and I think it will always remain a part of society and culture and keep moving forward. I think the issue is more about the lack of sincerity among artists today. The scary thing is that [that lack] is becoming more of a commodity...Okay, I don't want to get into that, actually. But I don't think movements were ever based on the medium anyway; I think it was based on the artists and the people. I'm not afraid of art dying—I'm more afraid of artists dying. I'm afraid of what it will mean to be an artist [in the future], that it will become more of a job position.

Back in the Renaissance, art was defined as a luxury to be viewed, whereas now, art is almost like a tangible form of therapy to be experienced, and there are so many people making art beyond even the contemporary context of display. Should we even further broaden our idea of what art is? It feels like even the art world hasn't caught up.

I don't know about that. I see what you're saying, but I literally don't know. I think that's a good point. But I think also the danger in that is, again, the danger in having anything reliant on technology. The show at The Kitchen, for example, is traditional as it's a mix of performance, painting, and sound, but I don't think there would have been a better way to get the idea across. And then, I think, there's the Greg Crewdson danger for our generation. I mean, it's exciting and enticing to see new work made with technology but then it might end up just looking like it was made using a tool like Photoshop, or 3-D printers now, which eventually gets adopted by everyone as they become less professional and more like—what is it called—user-friendly?

The other danger is passive production, which I definitely think happened with the snapshot aesthetic. I used to be really into snapshots when I first started exploring photography, and I thought it was really great to make work about the everyday but then I realized it's like shooting film—there's a certain, constant aesthetic, like the Ryan McGinley-Tim Barber kind of thing. That was really important when it happened but then as everyone else kind of got into that it became commercialized and now there are so many pictures. On one hand, I'm very happy that people did that. It's like drawing—all kids draw, and everyone should make their own photo books. But then, it's like, do still I need to see a show that's based on that [aesthetic] now? That was just a great development, I think, but then that style gets adopted and then everyone's photos are as good as yours and you move forward. I don't know if I'm answering your question.

I know what you mean. It becomes dated, and therefore trite, almost immediately.

Yeah. It becomes dated because of the technology, not the idea. There are new ways to do things that don't necessarily require new technology. I think—I don't know. I think people just don't challenge themselves enough.

I agree...

[laughs]

To move on—you studied physics and linguistics in college, right? I'm curious if that was hard for you, because personally I've always been better and more interested in creative pursuits, and math was always really difficult for me. Was your experience similar?

No, it was the opposite. I had wanted to be a physicist since 10th grade or something—I was really into math and calculus and took AP Physics and AP Calc.

I got into linguistics via logic, because that's also a number-based proofing system used to solve social riddles. I got into visual studies through linguistics, and then started making art after that. When I was writing my undergraduate thesis, I kind of hit a breaking point because I had intended to become a critic and I was writing about contemporary photography and video and performance, but I was getting really frustrated or upset with artists and what they were doing. I had all these ideas and I was like, "Someone should do this!" and I was like, "What the fuck, I'll just do it." So I went to graduate school to learn how to make art, but I think it's been to my benefit to be a relative outsider, because I don't have an allegiance to any medium.

Yeah, so you're able to remain objective.

Yeah. Even with this performance—it was the first time I'd done performance, or dance, and I think it was really exciting for [Hart of Gold] to work with me and it was exciting for me to work with them and learn their process. The first thing I think about [regarding] anything I do—painting, photography, whatever—is, “How do I do it?” The concept comes first and then you have to figure out how to do it.

How do you usually get an idea for a work?

I guess it usually happens when I'm working on something else. Most commonly, I'll be working on a big project that takes a lot of time and then it triggers something.



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So you get bored with the current project, which leads to another idea?

If the idea really becomes distracting, I start alternating work on both things. I don't really know what most of the work I do is going to look like or feel like until it's totally finished, so there is that [mystery] that carries me through. I want to see if my idea is going to work.

Did photography help you develop a sense of when to stop working on something?

[laughs] Maybe. That's a good question. I think that definitely has something to do with it. I was always really into the 4×5, and now I have an 8×10 camera, which requires you to deal with the issues before you finish the work. You always know what you're doing, and you have to ask yourself if it's worth it.

This is all very interesting, because usually people are either predominantly creative or logically/mathematically-inclined. But you seem to have an ambidextrous brain.

Actually, I'm left-handed, but I throw a ball with my right hand.

Well, that confirms that, then.

I guess so. But, you know, there are things in my work that people may consider aesthetic qualities, while I consider them mathematics or descriptive elements. For example, the colors in this performance go from light to dark, but I buy almost 20 or 30 different colors of paint. I buy all the colors of whatever material I'm using for a project and just use all of them. The only rule is

that colors will chronologically go from light to dark—as long as they’re following that rule, it doesn’t matter if light green comes before light blue. We actually intentionally switch it up every day so that it’s a descriptive tool, so you can see [the dancers’] steps. If the colors were all red, you wouldn’t be able to see the difference. The rain paintings I do also have so many colors in them, but the colors are important to me only insofar as they delineate action or movement of time.

I read somewhere that you can almost predict the way a rain painting is going to turn out because you’ve been making this type of weather-influenced work for so long that you’re familiar with all the different effects.

I know [the interview] you’re talking about, and it’s funny because I said that about having grown up on a farm. It was more of a reference to the fact that we had a clothesline instead of a dryer, and then we’d go on vacation and the clothes would get bleached. Or, I’d find an old thing in the woods and it would be sun-bleached or changed by the rain. You go to art or photography school and you work in a darkroom or with printers or computers or even painting for five years without realizing that, in a way, you have a whole lifetime of experience.

Is creating art ever stressful for you?

The first performance [of *September Spring*] was stressful. I’m so used to finishing everything alone—getting it perfect in my mind and then sending it off. But the installation was the secondary part of the show at The Kitchen. The objects were finished, but we rehearsed the performance every day for almost two months. It really wasn’t finished until the opening. For me, that was insanely nerve-wracking. I didn’t want to say anything to the dancers, because they’re professional dancers and I didn’t want to say anything to make them more nervous, like, “Don’t mess up!” At the end of the first performance at the opening, I went and gave them a hug and said, “Oh my god, now we don’t have to be so nervous! It’s all good, right?” And they were like, “What do you mean? That was the most fun part.”

That’s funny. What if someone did fall? Would they just keep going, or would the performance come to a halt?

No, I think that goes back to my ideas of heterogeneous versus homogeneous. Each one of those carpets represents a year of Jamie’s life, and another reason for mixing the color up too is because of this idea that everyone goes through these rhythms of living. That part is represented by the choreographed dance, but the color distinguishes each stage from each other, even though the prints are the same. Idiosyncrasies happen in every year of your life in some way or another, and once in awhile there’s a traumatic incident. So I totally wasn’t worried about anyone falling.

You said in an interview that you used to go to the Met a lot when you first moved to New York because you couldn’t really afford to do anything else. Since then, you’ve “made it”—I’m saying that in quotes.

[laughs]

Do you view yourself differently now because then, no one knew who you were, and now you’re this recognized artist showing work in iconic art spaces? Has the transition been a self-fulfilling experience where you’ve become more confident in your work as you become more successful?

Yeah. That’s funny, I had a similar question the other day and an interviewer said something like, “It’s just so wild to see your work in these big places and also see images of your dog or whatever online.” I guess people don’t realize.... I’ve seen so many cases where artists, whose work I like, get popular and then the feeling is gone and their work becomes repetitive. These days it can happen at a really young age, too. I’m more of the mind that, by challenging myself, I’m always going to be true to myself. If I’m working for me, which ultimately is what I was doing in the beginning, then that consideration of people in the audience or people who might like your work is renewed rather than just conditioned to acceptance or something. And I think that for me, that’s always been something that I enjoy. It would seem like a job or something if you just kept making the same work and not challenging your ideas.

I also think that there’s this huge moveable ground. I mean, I’ve worked through a lot of stuff that I don’t show, and I think that all of that is really important but it seems like a lot of other people...well, I’m not going to comment on that. But one of my professors, Nayland Blake—he’s an

amazing artist—in critiques he would always say you have to kick out your crutch. And that always stuck with me. If you develop a crutch, you've got to get rid of it, and then you'll find something else and that kind of becomes it.



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When did you move to Los Angeles?

It was four and a half years ago.

Do you think Southern California is becoming a competitive art center? It seems like a lot of galleries are opening there, and more and more artists are relocating there.

Yeah. For me, it was appealing because I was working with the sun so much and it was also cheap, so I could move from living inside my 500-square-foot studio, like living and working in a studio in Bushwick, to living in a house and having a separate studio. So I think it's a great place for artists, but I still think New York is the best place to see art. But it's too expensive, and that will also limit—and especially by limiting what you can do in terms of space and finance—it limits what you think about.

Do you think L.A. makes people happier?

I do, yeah.

Do you miss anything about living in New York, though? I really prefer rain, so I would definitely miss the weather.

Yeah, I feel like the sun [in L.A.] is oppressive. I went to college in Portland, Oregon, where it rained 300 days out of the year, and I loved it. It also makes you feel good about being inside and not doing things. Whereas when it's sunny out, it's like reverse psychology—I get depressed when it's so sunny out, like I should be doing something.

Exactly!

It's strange that in New York, weather is a weird way to feel more in tune with the environment because you just can't avoid it. But I think I'm just not a city person, and in L.A. I can have a yard and dogs really easily. I go surfing a lot, and I hike; that's more my style. There's space to make artwork outside.

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