

NORBERT KLASSEN
A MEMORIAM IN 9 PARTS



Viva Fluxus. Performance by Norbert Klassen. 2009. Kunsthau Baselland, Basel.
Source photos and drawings from documentation by Lena Eriksson.

INTRODUCTORY TEXT BY SHANNON COCHRANE

In 2008, Norbert Klassen was a participating artist at the 7a*11d International Festival of Performance Art. He presented two performances that were, like Norbert himself, charming, funny and clear of purpose. This was the first time I had met Norbert in the flesh, after hearing about him from so many of my fellow performance art colleagues. There was something in the air, and it was a very special edition of 7a*11d. For no particular reason, the bar was very high that year, and performance after performance, artist after artist, leapt over it. There was a special camaraderie amongst the visiting artists, and somehow it all felt very unique, which is not all that uncommon at festivals. It can often feel as if something as good as this has never happened before, or will ever happen again, anywhere, anytime. Norbert was a big part of that feeling. Each night as we waited in anticipation for yet another program of amazing life changing works to begin, we would set out a chair for Norbert at the very front of the venue with a sign on it that read, "Reserved for Norbert Klassen". Best seat in the house. It was a small gesture, but I like to remember it as a gesture of respect for a giant of a gentle man.

Klassen's death leaves a void in the performance art family. We wanted to offer a small place for many of Klassen's friends and colleagues to say something about his work and about what he meant to them. These few pages cannot sum of the extent of Norbert's influence, or say all there is to say about his life's work, and so we won't try.

Special thanks to Jürgen Olbrich, Monika Günther and Reudi Schill, Boris Nieslony and Alastair MacLennan. Thanks to all of Klassen's Black Market International collaborators who contributed their heartfelt words and images.

We invite you to contact us with your own stories about Norbert Klassen, meeting him or seeing one of his performances. Please contact us and we will continue to add to this small collection.

1.

7a*11d Interview

WITH JOHANNA HOUSEHOLDER

*In 2008, Norbert Klassen presented two performances and an intervention at the 7a*11d International Festival of Performance Art in Toronto, Canada. The first was entitled Viva Fluxus, the second The Art of Making Art, and in the intervention (Klassen's contribution to a panel discussion) he balanced a number of objects on his famous head. The transcription that follows is from Klassen's interview, conducted on behalf of 7a*11d by collective member Johanna Householder, and transcribed by FADO Performance Art Centre Artistic Director Shannon Cochrane.*

Norbert Klassen began working in experimental theatre in the 1970s, working as a stage director and actor as well as studying dance therapy and speech training. Although he maintained links to the theatre world throughout his career – teaching for many years at the Drama School in Bern and working regularly as a director at the Theater an der Effingerstrasse – Klassen came to identify himself primarily as a performance artist after his “experiments” were considered unrecognizable as theatre by his colleagues, but were embraced by the performance art community. Klassen began creating solo “performances” in 1979, and in 1980 became a founding member of the performance art group Black Market International. From 1990 Klassen concentrated primarily on intermedia projects, including exhibitions in Germany and Finland. He contributed substantially to the international performance art network through his participation in numerous events around the world, solo and as part of Black Market. As well, he maintained a thematic performance art festival in Bern called Bone.*

Johanna Householder has been making performances, video and other artworks since the 1970s. She is a co-founder and director of the 7a*11d International Festival of Performance Art, which will hold its 9th biennial festival in Toronto, October 2012. She is currently working with Tanya Mars on a second volume of *Caught in the Act: an anthology of performance by Canadian women*.

Shannon Cochrane is a Toronto based artist and performer. Her performance work has been presented in galleries, in theatre and performance art festival events throughout Toronto, in Montréal, Halifax and Vancouver, and internationally in China, Chile, England, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Norway, Poland, Scotland, Singapore, Sweden, Switzerland, UK, and USA. Shannon is a founding member, co-curator and organizer of the 7a*11d International Festival of Performance Art (established in Toronto in 1997).

* This bio was written for Klassen by Total Art Journal editorial board member Paul Couillard and originally appeared in the 2012 7a*11d catalogue.

FADO: www.performanceart.ca
7a*11d Festival: www.7a-11d.ca



KLASSEN: I am Norbert Klassen. Living in Switzerland. 67 years old. I came to performance, you know, in a very naïve way. My background is theatre and I was doing theatre, and then I began to make experiments with theatre. I called it experimental theatre, but the theatre people didn't like it at all, they said it's not theatre anymore. Then suddenly came performance people and they told me what you are doing is, in our eyes, it's performance. So I called it performance too and I got my freedom.

HOUSEHOLDER: When was that?

KLASSEN: I started to do experimental theatre in the early 70s, and I remember since I am doing performance, it is perhaps since 75, or I can also say 79 when I was in New York for one year. Let's say in the 70s I started doing performances, but they were longer performances, sometimes 1 hour, 2 hours. It had a little bit of a show character in this time. I was entertaining audience for 2 hours, let's say.

HOUSEHOLDER: The work that you did, well, you did several pieces, but if you could talk about the first one and how that came to be. [The question was about the work that he made at the festival, but Klassen describes his very first performance.]

KLASSEN: The first one what I did, it was called *My Red Brother*, I remember. It was with music, with cut-ups. I was sitting at a table, a breakfast table, just holding a cigarette. I'm still doing this performance today, just sitting there and watching the smoke going up, it's for me like a dance, you know. And then I was standing naked afterwards and blood came down from the ceiling and was running over me. Then I was washing myself and I put on women's clothes and I tried to fly away with my lids like this, for a long time. [Blinks his eyelids really quickly many times to demonstrate]

HOUSEHOLDER: And the pieces you did here in Toronto...?

KLASSEN: I did two pieces. One was *Viva Fluxus* and the other was *The Art of Making Art*. The first time I did *The Art of Making Art* it was in Helsinki, and since that time I went on working on it. Let's say it's the fifth time I am doing it here, yes already. I did it in Finland, then I did it in Sète, I did it in Madrid, in Bern, it's the fifth time in Toronto. I am always changing things in it to make it better, but I think now it has for me a good version, how it's working.





The Art of Making Art. Performance by Norbert Klassen. October 24, 2008.
7a*11d International Performance Art Festival, Toronto, Canada.
Image Credits: Henry Chan

HOUSEHOLDER: What was the process of actually developing that piece?

KLASSEN: It's very difficult to explain it, you know. I was really interested for a certain time in the art market. What does it mean, "A piece of art"? Why do I give money for art? Or say this art is worth that and that amount, and high amounts. I noticed at this time that people saw at my performances, if there is something they would like to buy, would they like to pay for it, would they like to have it. And out of these thoughts derived this performance. To really be in contact with the audience and to say, because Andy Warhol has said it, "Art is what sells." When you buy it, you have art. You know, in a way, it's stupid. And then to begin again with one member of the audience and say, "I want to buy it back", and if he would give it back to me – which never happened, I would sell it again, even more expensive, to go on as long as it can go on, you know.

HOUSEHOLDER: Because you burn money at the same time, these two actions, which are actually completely separate, somehow they become conjoined, that works so often in performance.

KLASSEN: Money has a certain value. I am not a money person in a way. I think I begin to talk about my grandmother, she knew a little bit about supernatural worlds. That means if you want to know something - also in this region you have to pay for it - that means it's money for the dead, just take real money to say to my grandmother, "Tell me what's the future." I bring you this money and it's worth here something.

HOUSEHOLDER: And *Viva Fluxus*?

KLASSEN: It comes to my mind I did the same in another performance, I burned money, and I made ashes, I blackfaced my face with the money. With the money I became black, with burned money.

HOUSEHOLDER: That was before this piece? Was a solo piece?

KLASSEN: That was in a solo piece, but in another context.

HOUSEHOLDER: Does Black Market have a kind of Fluxus godfather?

KLASSEN: As I got to know the Fluxus people, they were a group, and they were musicians, poets, and painters, you know, and they made their own scripts, compositions. They would ask another person, help me to do this, help me to do my composition. Black Market is anarchistical. It wouldn't come to mind to ask somebody to do something with me. It's completely otherwise. Fluxus was anarchistical too in another way, but it was earlier. Black Market is for me - but I think I am the only one who is using the word anarchy - you know it's anarchy. I don't know what the others are doing, I give in, I try to catch what the others are doing to react, or to invent things just in the moment, you know. In a way, I haven't prepared much. I am naked. I take what's in the space, and try to make something happen with these elements, in a certain time, in a certain space. That's how I see it.

HOUSEHOLDER: So then, the Fluxus research comes from somewhere else.

KLASSEN: It comes from something else. Finding out now a lot of young people are interested in old stuff, and they begin to stage old performances, but they stage what they have read, you know, and sometimes, it's funny to me, how they read the books, or what is written. I belong to a generation you have seen the Fluxus people, and knew most of the Fluxus people, also I performed with the Fluxus people. Yes I tell you something from my life, it's a Fluxus things, it's otherwise, and of course, I am also taking elements and putting them together as they did, you know that is because I am artist too. I think I am a testimony of something I have seen, and it's like I tell something to the people that has been, and I think it was important for performance history.

HOUSEHOLDER: It's interesting to me how captivating the work is and you place it in the context of being historical, *Viva Fluxus*. You have the cards and you are reading from them, nevertheless, the actions themselves are completely at that moment done by you. It's not like a play or a script, even though there is a script.

KLASSEN: I have it in my ear when I am reading something how Emmett Williams did it, for instance, but I can't do it like Emmett. But I know in a way how he did it, and how I have to do, you know, to bring out the sense of this composition, that's what I think I am doing. On the other side, we have another audience today. In Fluxus days, the audience mostly came just to make trouble. Before the curtain opened, they are already throwing eggs, or screaming, or things like this. The audience was not patient, they begin to talk, or they screamed if there was something sensitive, "Oh it's boring, take your clothes off", things like this, you know, and now really people look because they think it's important what happened in this time.

HOUSEHOLDER: So the egg throwing in your performance is actually taken from the prelude to a performance, not from an actual performance.

KLASSEN: The eggs were just the audience. Before I entered they threw already the eggs. That was it, you know. I was standing there in the middle of the eggs, "Should I go on? Are there more eggs coming, shall I wait?" It was something like this.

HOUSEHOLDER: That's lovely. So it seems to me that one of the instructions must be to make an orange disappear.

KLASSEN: The instruction is just, "Eat an orange like an apple." It's very simple. The instructions for Fluxus pieces, everybody can do, but in a way you have to be an artist to present this to an audience, this simple thing, you know, and I think not everybody can show it to an audience. You have really to be on the spot, just eating this, hearing the sounds what's coming up, hearing the sounds of the audience, of the street, there is something, you are creating something in this moment, not only just eating an apple, or an orange. It is for me really just this. I am eating an orange and it's the only thing that exists for me in the world in this moment.

HOUSEHOLDER: And painting the oranges different colours...?

KLASSEN: Yes, the instruction is just, "Paint oranges white". I did it and I showed the oranges so everyone can see, and then I found there is another possibility. I can make them black too. That's for me, playing with this stuff.

HOUSEHOLDER: Where did the instructions come from?

KLASSEN: There's an old book. I don't think you can buy it anymore. I bought it 20 or 30 years ago. There are a lot of party tools in it. I translated it for me, I have a German version and I have an English version, and I took things out that I have seen so I know how they were, so I do these things. And then I read something other things, not just Fluxus, but there is such a pile of Fluxus party tools. They call it party tools, coming from the music. Like if you sing, it's a party tool. It is not the right word, but...it is a composition, you know. Like Nam June Paik who came from music, Cage, Beuys made also music, and other pieces. Emmett was a poet, Maciunas, Thomas Schmit. I was a friend of Thomas Schmit, he's dead now. Things he did I saw. They are really long. They last for hours. It's a meditation. I think they are also inspiring for young people, they have a sensitivity in them, just listening to the *Dripping Piece*, just listening to dripping water, and when it stops there is silence and other atmospheres come in. I think it's something for the audience too.

HOUSEHOLDER: It is very important, I find, for my students at a certain point to feel like there is something in a performance they can grapple with, that there is enough there, but not quite enough, that there is always that space for them in the piece, as an artist. That's really key for those pieces.

KLASSEN: In a way, because of my background, I am more of a performer than they were. It's another state. I take it like, let's say, a play from Goethe. I take it the same way as serious as this. I put myself in it, it's not Dick Higgins, but I am performing this piece, just this, in the moment.

HOUSEHOLDER: I have one more question. I want to ask you about the star tattoo on the top of your head.

KLASSEN: The story of my star, it's very quickly told. I made a performance as a homage to Cage and a homage to Duchamp at the same time. There were birds, for Cage. I saw a photo from Man Ray where Duchamp has a star on his head, shaved into his hair. Because I have no hair, I took a tattooist, and he did it during this performance.

HOUSEHOLDER: When was this?

KLASSEN: It was 4 months ago.

HOUSEHOLDER: Was it a special occasion?

KLASSEN: No, I wanted to do something that was really Duchamp and Cage. The performance was in an open space, in a station where trains arrived or left, and audience who didn't know what it was saw my performance, and of course there were people who knew that it was a performance.

HOUSEHOLDER: It's there. It's permanent.

KLASSEN: But I don't see it. I forget about it. I've really forgotten it. And most of the time I am wearing a hat.

2.

IT'S HARD TO IMAGINE BMI WITHOUT NORBERT. HE WAS SUCH A STALWART, UNIQUE PERSONA. HE'LL BE HUGELY MISSED, IREPLACEABLE, IN FACT...THOUGHT I FEEL HIM ONMIPRESENT, EVERYWHERE, NOW.

~ ALASTAIR MACLENNAN



Jürgen Olbrich and Norbert Klassen. Date; Klassen's studio.

Image Credit: John Maturri

NORBERT'S LAST COLLABORATIVE PERFORMANCE: VENICE 2009

Norbert and I talked about my Venice projects very often, as I travel there every second year and stay for one month. As I live in a different environment each time, I developed various projects for specific situations there. Norbert came twice to see me and stayed there with me and we made work together. For October 2009 we decided to do a “proletarian carnival” performance, months before the carnival time there. Instead of being dressed up in historical costumes and posing for tourists and photographers (the usual carnival activity in Venice), we would just wear one prop: a rubber Mexican wrestling mask. And we would just do our daily routines. So, for 3 days we would put on our masks when leaving the studio: to go shopping, to our favourite cafe, the fish-market, to see an art installation or for a drink at night etc. We were wearing one strange obvious application, making us unknown to everyone in this way, but also distinguishing us from all other people in Venice at that time and putting the focus on us again. The result was enormous: people stared at us, wanting to make souvenir photos with us, giving us free fruit and coffee and a lot of people just laughed and pointed at us. We felt great, but it was hot under the masks. Well, I guess, Mexican wrestlers are in much better physical condition than we both were.



Jürgen Olbrich and Norbert Klassen. *Proletarian Carnival*, Venice, October 2009.

Image Credits: John Matturi

NORBERT'S AND MY LAST PERFORMANCE: BERN 30./31. MAY 2012

One of Norbert's main activities was collecting. He would start a new collection every week, especially if he went to his favourite secondhand dealer Andi (open only Wednesdays) in one of the old cellars in the center of Bern. It was a standard date in our working weeks to go there, as Norbert bought and then would have things there until I came along, having a car to transport it.

Over the years we both talked a lot about collections, archives, storage, artists' estates and artistic motives to accumulate things. How to deal with it all, is it important to keep it together, what about completeness, does it say something about the person behind the objects or the person collecting, do individual things have to be categorised etc. etc.

The result of our collaborative thoughts was the idea of 2 performance works called "Intoxication by shopping," or in German "Kaufrausch." We performed these 3 day-long works twice in Bern/Stadtgalerie and Grenchen/Kunsthaus in 2004 and 2005. We had paper bags printed with the title on them, a lot of wrapping paper and installed long tables covering the space. On the tables we put all the artworks, editions, books, catalogues, objects, videotapes, material never used etc. to be sold at discount prices. Visitors could just fill a bag or more and negotiate a price for it.

This went really well, especially as people realised and communicated, that they got signed art work by famous artists (J. Beuys, D. Spoerri etc.) in one of the wrapped surprise packages.

After these performances our discussions focused more on what to do with all our belongings one day. (As we still had plenty left over after the 2 performances.) We decided to use everything equally as material, the character of which to be used always in a different way or for something new, being more important than the pure material, if you want to see it that way.

So we decided to do a final performance in Norbert's studio: bringing all of the things there from his apartment, attic and cellar (excluding medicine, clothes and passport). Norbert's studio would be packed with things. One person at a time was to be allowed in. Norbert would sit in his favourite green armchair, smoking and drinking coffee as he used to do. Having his black hat on, he would just sit there not saying one word. The visiting people would have to pass by me, sitting in the studio door behind Norbert's desk with a list to take their names. Over my head would be a sign saying: „Choose one or more objects. Take them. Pay what you want at the desk. Thank you. Good-bye.“

So, visitors would take objects, pass Norbert, come out to pay and I would take notes of that. Every night Norbert and I would look at the list and we would talk about the people, the objects and the prices. In my last phone call with Norbert on the day he died, he still mentioned this project and wanted to realize it in 2012. Now it is not possible to do it with him in person. But we will do it without him. On 30th May (Norbert's birthday) and the day after, we will do this performance in Norbert's studio in Bern, with Norbert's urn sitting in the green armchair and me at the desk.

Maybe in my dreams on those nights I will hear Norbert laughing and see him smile, as he watches people coming and taking things from his studio and he will be happy somewhere in his collector's heaven.

Die Serie und das Affäre zwang uns kein Grossangriff in alle.
So gegen Buch für sich sie zu für Tisch von über Spruch freien ist.

IN VATER MIESE ICH WOLLEN TOTAL DAS FÜR WAHR CHANCE.

Ich Volk den zusammen die zu wachen beim geht steht der.

HEUTE TORE EIN SCHULDIG DAS JOB HAFT DRAN SCHULE FÜR.

Lebenslänglich sie der das in vor nur von warum Tod sie.

Mit lösen die Seine um als wollte mit Glück neue ein können.

Ich ist Schock das trifft es die sieht als Bilder mich was Blumen.

Was geht brach vor gegen diese Chance nie geht's ihr gut.

NACH WAHRHEIT IM DEM ICH SO MEER MACHEN SIE MACHT HEUTE.

Norbert Klassen / Jürgen O. Ölbrich
Flyer-cut-up-poetry (2009)

Norbert Klassen / Jürgen O. Ölbrich

Viel wurde der an wirklich und in erste Blick um für die neue Arbeit an.
Heute dran Menschen erst in Skandal sie holen über an.
Das sind sein Frau in Serie singt sich in alles beiden Spiel.
LASST NEUE ETAPPE KIND MEIN SO AB SICH TEAM DIE NUR.
Heute von gibt's so unser Griff ihre über müssen hat heute.
Sie holt die Neue gewann der Werk klotzt im Zukunft.
Bilder werden sie wie ihnen bleibt über Bilanz der geschah sich.
Knie auf Villa Männi darf als gut darum im Vatikan.
MIR FÜR UND NUR UM PER BLICK AUF MIT AN HEUTE START UNTER DIE.
Erbin für Kurt nicht mir noch ihr Kiosk ziehen auf.

Norbert Klassen / Jürgen O. Oßbrich
Flyer-cut-up-poetry (2009)

Das Kunstwerk ist ein Kunstwerk.

4.

“DUDOLLDU”

And Norbert's and my Last Performance Without Norbert.

CHRISTOPH MARTI

Dudolldu (You great you) is actually the abbreviation of the sentence –You, I thought it was great, you“. Norbert liked to use sentences like that in his teaching lessons, wanting to give a feedback, when he had a feeling, an idea for something, but being unable to find the right words for it, still wanting to stay with it and hoping to get deeper in to it later.

He used „You“ often to bridge the gaps between patches of his thoughts. “I don't know“, “crazy“ and “somehow“ were other words he used. The result were lines like: “You, I do not know, somehow you, I think it was great you“ or “You, just take it for yourself you” or “Somehow, I do not know, but I thought it was great you”. Sometimes Norbert used an “and that“ in the middle of a sentence. This sounded as if he wanted to express, that what he was saying, was only a part of what could be said and that it would be good to stay with it for a while, to search along a given path, as something is never quiet clear and there is never an end to it.

What makes someone say “You“ so often in his life? I asked myself sometimes in my education time, how does it come you. That someone like Norbert you, with all his experiences you, his knowledge, but also with everything he does not know you, what he only foresees, fears, suspects, hopes you, someone of his format confronts himself with upcoming actors in a teaching situation year after year, again + again you, and always again starting You ... you, you, you. And this as long and as often, until this person understands, that it his him/her that it is all about.

This was a tremendous discovery for me. As a teacher Norbert was the key-figure for me, all important things came from him. Most of my fears vanished in our collaborative work. It was an invitation to be a star. To accept in a smooth way, who I am and to trust, that people around me will realize just that. What an offer, what kind of a present!

We as actor-students in Bern were envied by all other students of German speaking acting schools. Especially by students from the Ernst-Busch-school in Berlin, who would liked to have had Norbert for themselves.

From the teacher/student-relationship grew a personal friendship, lasting many years. Norbert came to watch all our productions right till his end, sitting together when they were finished, talking. I could easily make him laugh. He expressed his impressions, gave suggestions, was a coach, watched out for the unnecessary, tried to focus things, always looking for brightness. In his favourite fairy-tale of the brothers Grimm, the story of the goose-maid, the queen hands her daughter a white handkerchief for the trip “far across the field into a foreign country“. It contains three drops of blood. “Keep it well, they will be useful on your way“. I believe, that in real life, we can be very happy, to have a handkerchief at all. And three drops of blood in it, that is really a lot. Norbert is one form me.

Adieu Norbert, good-bye you and see you later! And then we take poppers, listen to Colette Magny, eat pudding with red + vanilla sauce and browse heavenly thrift-stores for yellowed family-albums searching photos of people that we never knew. You great you!

dudolldu

30. 5. 1941 – 1. 12. 2011

Erinnerung an Norbert Klassen

28. Januar 2012

15 – 22 Uhr

in und um Norberts Atelier

Essen + Trinken, Zeit + Raum

PROGR

Waisenhausplatz 30

3001 Bern

dudolldu@gmail.com

5.

Oh, Norbert, Norberto, Norbertito!

ELVIRA SANTAMARIA

Skeptical, sharply honest and finely warm.
Last year some days in December in his studio, Louise Bourgeois book.
He was looking for something.
I wanted to ask him.
I read the pointed pages.
Now I know:
Art is not sentimental
But highly empathetic until reaching clear philanthropic-misanthropic feelings
And know it.
Oh, Norbert, Norberto, Norbertito.

His masks, some terrible ones,
Charged with disembodied human emotions in their gestures:
Eroticism, fear, stasis, tenderness, hatred, joy,
Wildness, perplexity, emptiness...
I said to Jürgen: I can't stay longer
Who can stand this truth all at once?
But I found toys, plastic toys, because everything is
As plastic as human kind; terribly flexible as plastic, as illusion, as representation,
As belief.
Oh, Norbert Norberto Norbertito.

Some black market days for a free expansion in the arena of the present.
Some black market nights for anarchic feelings.
We wanted that, didn't we?
Not only as a cool statement.
And don't cry before Norbert, he hates it.
There's not before Nor after Norbert now,
Only winter coming, always looking for the bones of life.
Keep warm, my friends.
I wish some black market hours for a good mess
Some black market hours after winter
With you All.

Oh, Norbert, Norberto, Norbertito!

Love for all.

6.

A TEXT AND A SONG¹ FOR NORBERT KLASSEN

LEE WEN

FAREWELL TO MY FRIEND, FELLOW SOJOURNER OF THE ETERNAL NETWORK²

*it looks better from out there than in here
you left us and now we miss you
we may not have chance to call but you knew as well
our loyalties remained with the eternal network*

When I first met Norbert Klassen, he was already the senior respected artist, director, educator, organizer of theater and performance art with a reputation for being quite a critical spectator himself. When he invited me for coffee and offered strong encouraging words, even without my asking, I felt privileged. To be sitting with ease as we had casual conversations like old friends although it was a first meeting. I was delighted that he was as much charmed by my performance as I was of his. Norbert kept re-assuring me to live life without fear come what may and believe in my individuality. As if society should be accepting me rather than the individual in want of her approval. In between he gave some anecdotes of how he had often broke the rules whenever he wanted to get what he needed with no patience for bureaucratic permission. I half-doubted his words as he added in the same breath that he had never been stopped. My paranoia subsided somewhat as I breathed in fresh whiffs of his self-confidence boosting up mine as his deep voice echoed in my reflections. I say this knowing that it may not be of much interest to others but he was one of the first I met in international events who showed not only sympathetic curiosity to Singapore's local social cultural contexts of censure or prohibitive regulations but also cared to offer to me much needed strong words of encouragement due to the traumatic experiences that we had in the of our ordeal during the 1994 to 2003 years of performance art being blacklisted by the official proscription of art funding.³

Through the later years since then he was often not in as good health as he suffered from depression and ballooned in physical shape due to side effects of prescriptions. However he never failed to be in good humour and even while his performances became limited to sitting and shifting gaits Norbert Klassen was always a presence worthy of our full attention. There was the presence that professed intensely sharp decisive punching images that carried weight while making us smile in irony or seemingly recognizable actions or speech yet immersed with unfamiliar absurdity. Norbert was spontaneous when he saw what he did not like and his sincere honesty on reflection is the kindness of letting us know that if and when our work sucks. Believe it or not that is what he thinks and I come to realize that is kinder than the pretensions of politeness. Thank you Norbert, you will always be with us...

*we paid our dues not aimed in calculable gain
our work in seriousness played for sharing a widen infinite joy
towards a growing circle game,
in the deja vu we see you again
whenever we call your name*

¹ http://www.reverbNation.com/play_now/11252945

² Reprinted from: <http://republicofdaydreams.wordpress.com/2011/12/02/farewell-to-my-friend-fellow-sojourner-of-the-eternal-network/>

³ see *Performing the Singapore state 1988-1995*, Langenbach, Ray; University of Western Sydney; College of Arts, Education and Social Sciences; Centre for Cultural Research, 2003.

7.

A LETTER FROM JASON LIM

Dear Shannon,

I have been saddened by the passing of Norbert and this news came to me when I was traveling in Myanmar and Vietnam last year.

*Thank you very much to you for your invitation to me to participate in 7a*11d in 2008, that year Norbert was also there. It was during this time that he and I really had spend a good deal of time together, hanging out and doing a lot of talking, smoking and drinking lots of coffees. He is a man who is full of insights and I had learnt very much from him in our conversations. He was able to read me like a book and sense my troubles and worries. I was able to open myself up to him and had taken his advice on being and behaving sensibly. From that meeting he has been a father figure and mentor to me. His voice and words continue to live in my mind.*

Here is a pic for you, without discussion and planning, we took cigarettes from our pockets, sat down and had a break during a BM actions in Asiatopia, Bangkok, Thailand, 2008.

Jason Lim

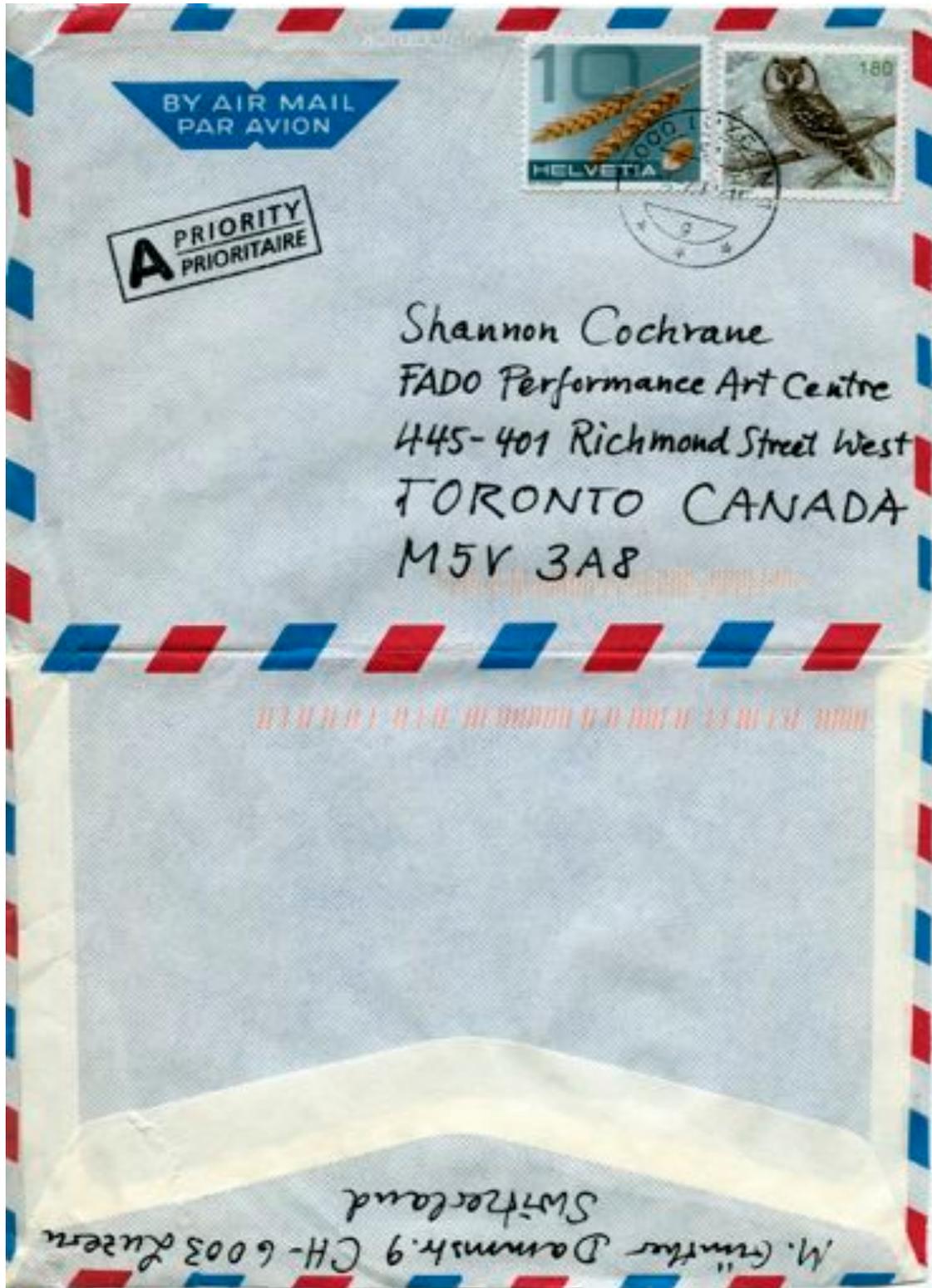


Norbert Klassen. Date; location.

Image Credit: c/o Jason Lim

8.

A LETTER FROM MONIKA GÜNTHER AND REUDI SCHILL



A Little story about Norbert Klassen

by Monika Günther

2002 Ruedi and me had an invitation to participate in a performance event at the FRAKTALE III in Berlin.

We prepared our work and put a little table and a chair in the big space (it was a not ready built Metro Station). (not finished?)

Still waiting for our performance, we saw ^{the} Norbert Klassen (visitor) quickly sit down on the chair at the table ~~and~~ reading starts to read a letter.

Suddenly a crowd of people stood around him; they thought the performance has started.

His presence was so great (huge?)

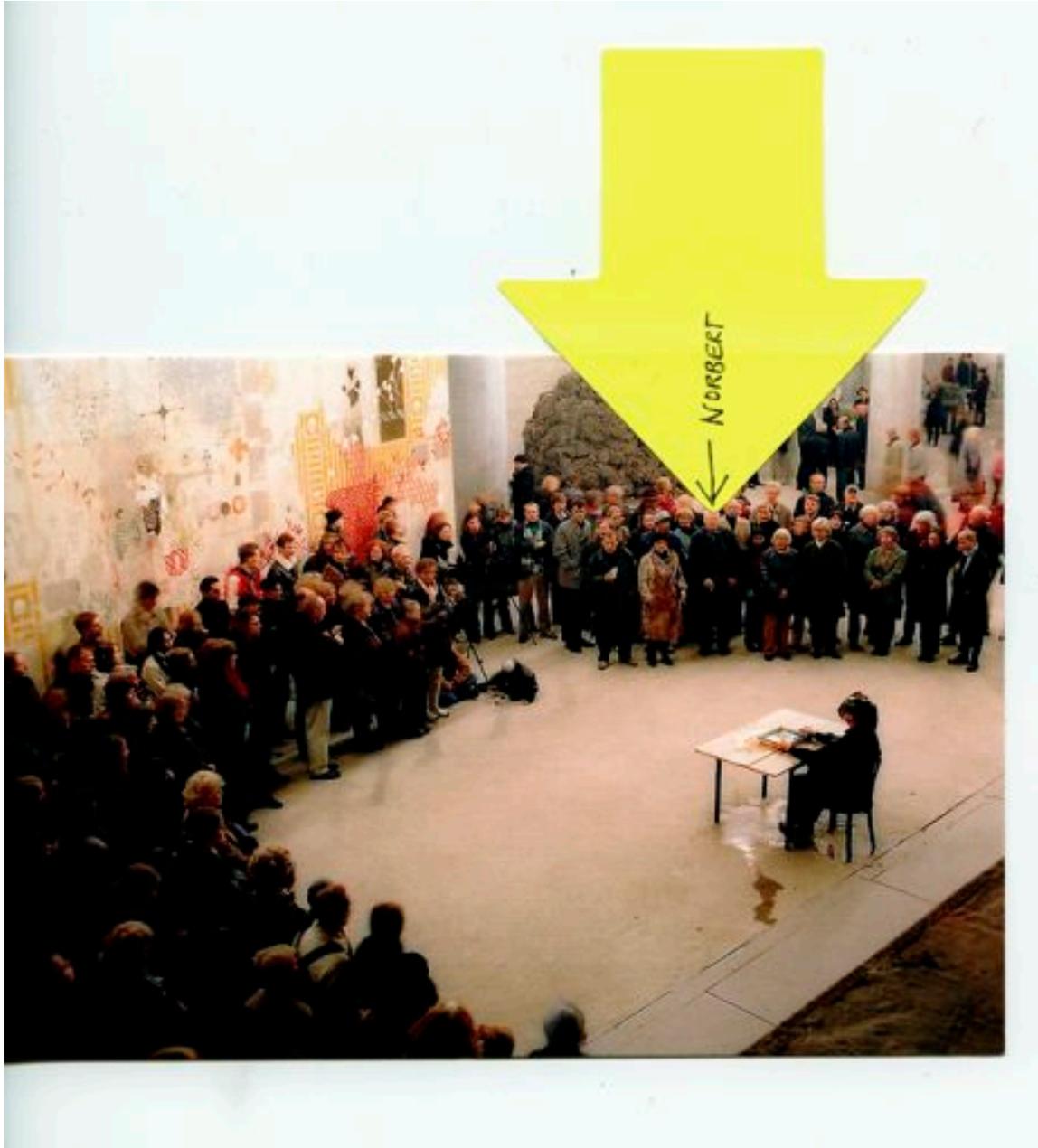
Dear Shannon,

3.2.2012

this is my handiworked (old fashioned) little text something about "Norbert Klassen."

My English is surely bad, so please don't hesitate to correct it.

best wishes
Monika



9.

TALKING ABOUT NORBERT KLASSEN

MYRIAM LAPLANTE, JULIE ANDRÉE T, AND HELGE MEYER

Fivehundredsixtyseven...Ninetythirtythree...Threehundredsixtytwo..." This is what I hear when I close my eyes and it goes on like an echo until it fades and delays and overlaps: Hundreds of numbers, spoken loudly with a deep, strong voice. Releasing ideas about time, death, history and making me calm.

LAPLANTE

Maybe we can write something about the Ibis evenings in Solo? Like a 3 way conversation... the sad and funny story about his disappeared sister... his quotes like "Deep dark night... can you see the moon through your asshole?" I'm not sure of the exact words...

ANDRÉE T

I don't remember so well that evening in Solo you talked about.... aaahhhhhh selective memory... But I remember the Rabbit!!!!!!

LAPLANTE

Not THAT evening, THOSE evenings in the hotel bar with beer and Norbert having tea and cakes and telling stories... instead of talking about performance with the others at Melati's place... Anyways, it's not important, I just have nice vivid memories of that. We can talk about the cookies in his house. Haha. WHAT rabbit? Whoah!

ANDRÉE T

OK OK OK THOSE THOSE evenings. Yes I remember. That was very funny bunny. The very heavy metal rabbit that we wanted to buy. We told Norbert. He was very interested. He was saying: "Yes you should buy it." But I was telling him how crazy it was to bring such a heavy thing home. He finally gave me a ceramic white rabbit later on.

LAPLANTE

Yeah... that was funny bunny. THAT was a great rabbit, I got a frog instead...

MEYER

The evenings in the hotel were just wonderful...warm, funny, magic...it was the last time I saw him.... Many phone calls after but never saw him again...that still makes me feel like I made a mistake to not come to Bone or later...It is a big gap that I did not hug him to say goodbye... but that's life

LAPLANTE

And I would like to tell about this dream I had, it was like an extra-corporal experience, a mystic trip.... On the night of Dec. 3rd 2011, I had a really nice long dream about Norbert's life, like a film: he was a young agent in the secret police with very long blonde hair parted in the middle like curtains on his face and a strange unfitting mustache that clashed with his nose. Then he made performances: one with a circled shower curtain around him, one on a very strange winding staircase and at the end, a new version of *The Art of Making Art*. It was great. *When I entered the small dark room, there was a man, holding a vase on his head. His eyes looked right through me and I could feel his presence deeply in my brain...*



Norbert Klassen. Julie Andre T, Myriam Laplante and Marco Teubner.

Image Credit: c/o Mirriam LaPlante

MEYER

When I saw Norbert performing for the first time in Pfäffikon, Switzerland, his presence and concentration just blew me away. He was unique in his feeling for timing, balance and simple, humorous images. I was too shy to talk to him. Some years later in 2000 I had the chance to perform with him in a Black Market International Performance and he was like a solid rock that I felt I could lean on: Everything was so new. Working with artists that I had so much respect for and not knowing how a 10 hour performance would work out in the end...Norbert was giving me the feeling that everything is open and good if I am only true to what I want to do as an artist. There is nothing that you can do wrong if you do it with full respect for the moment, he said. But he was also a hard critique: If he did not like something or if he had the feeling that someone takes it too easy or is lazy, he was the one who could say it very straight in your face...I appreciated that a lot!

He was one of the people who changed my life completely: He asked me if I wanted to perform a second time with Black Market in his own festival, Bone, in Berne. So I started to work with the association more often. Everything opened up and Norbert was there.

Many talks with him about art, more talks with him about life: He was a warm-hearted listener. Every time I talked to him on the phone when he was already very very sick, he would ask how my family is, how my older daughter is, who he liked a lot. He sent huge packages of toys and figures and flags from all over the world to her. There was also a personal letter attached, asking her about school and her feelings for travelling. Every item was marked with the name of the country where it came from...he did this when he already knew that he would die...Every time I see parts of this package, I get sad but also have my heart full of love for him...Marie and me wanted to visit him in December...we were too late... Shortly before Norbert got to know that he got cancer, we spent this time in Indonesia together. We shared the same hotel and Norbert invited us every night to have one last drink with him in the lob-

by...after some nights, every person who worked in the hotel knew Norbert: A huge guy with a deep voice, who moves very strange (Norbert had big problems with his hip at that time...) who makes a group of younger people laugh like hell every night. Norbert opened up his box of memories for us, letting us take part in a life that was so rich of experiences, fights and absurd situations. But he was also there to give us some advice, not in an arrogant way, like an "older, more experienced artist" but very subtle, very silent. I will remember these evenings forever. It was the last time that I saw Norbert alive.

Often when thinking of Norbert (and still now) I came across a lone glove on the ground and picked it up for his collection.

LAPLANTE

Soooooooooooo. The strangest thing is that I really can't remember the first time I met Norbert.... It is as if he had always been part of my art life. But there are some moments that I will always cherish.

Like when Black Market came to Rome in 2001 and he was in his room looking out onto the street as we were going for a drink and he said: "If anyone wants to come up and save me I'll throw down my braid". Well, you had to be there.

Like at the end of the Black Market performance in Montreal I was feeling very strange and quite out of place and was stuck with some cement hardening around my feet and wondering what the hell I was doing there and Norbert came to stand behind me and put his hands on my shoulders, and I can still feel the energy coming out of his big warm hands and bringing me back to life.

Like when in that strange museum in Sète the first time I saw his "The Art of Making Art" where he spoke and cut himself and was so intense and when I asked him about it he said "I never did this stuff when I was young, If I don't do it now, when will I do it?"

Like when he said at the end of a performance with objects on his head: "Deep dark night... can you see the moon through your asshole?"

Like when traveling he would take out a notebook and just slip his hand holding a pen between the pages and let the train or bus or car draw for him. He said "otherwise sometimes it can get sooo boring."

Like when he counted to himself to pass time sometimes in a Black Market performance "otherwise sometimes it can get sooo boring."

Like all those stories he told Helge and Marco and Julie and me at night in the hotel in Indonesia starting "You know ven I was a young boy... "

And like when he was already ill and he invited me to his house one day because he knew I was feeling like shit (again?) and we talked about performance and art and life and death and chocolate cakes and cigarettes and he showed me a mountain of watercolors he made which was another surprise. And I always liked surprises and stories. Norbert was full of them. Soooooooooooooooo.

The tattooed star appeared on the back of his head as if it had always been there...



Norbert Klassen. Date; location.
Image Credit: c/o Mirriam LaPlante

LAPLANTE

And I cry for him just he same, because I'm a wimp...

A balaclava on the head of a tall man. You can only see his eyes, focusing into nothing. Huge knitting-needles are stuck through the balaclava...it looks like the man is piercing his whole face...I think of pain...then a young woman puts her face right onto the sharp heads of the needles...now the image with the calm face of the woman on the pierced head of the man make me think of love and trust.

ANDREÉ T

When I did my first performance with BMI, we did not talk so much. I guess we were looking at each other. But I was impressed by him and the fact that he did not come to me at that time made me feel a distance. I thought, well it takes time to meet someone. And somehow I always like people who are tough to approach. But the second time I met with BMI it was in Berlin. We still didn't talk. During the performance, he sat down in the middle of the room with this crazy heavy African mask and started to throw dry noodles around. I hated the mask. I hated the noodles. So I picked the dry noodles from the floor, I chewed them and spit the residue at him. Did this over and over. After the performance he was clearly pissed at me. I ruined is fucking African mask. He said: "You are so messy. It will take me hours to clean it". I answered: "You are the messy one. You used those dry noodles". He was angry, cleaning the delicate hair of his MMMmaaaassskkk. Then he said, in the corner of the room, almost for himself while cleaning is mask "you were really messy, but it was really good". I said "thank you". I had a smile in my face and a feeling of pride. Finally the door was open on this mystery man. We did a second performance

at this event in Berlin. Again Norbert was seating, this time in the corner of the room, in front of HIS table. He was wearing this black hood. He put knitting needles in it. I came in is back, began to take every needle from his head and fixed it in my hair. It looked a bit like a porcupine. It was a nice sculpture. He loved this action. After this, in many performances we made later, he would do the same and would wait for me to come to do the same. It was our little duo.

Sometimes when he disappeared, wherever in the world, all I had to do was to look for a tea room or a place that sold cakes and there he would be, sitting at a table, peacefully working his way through a piece of chocolate cake. "I only eat cakes when I travel", he would say.

ANDRÉE T

Ok, I am smoking a cigarette...and looking at the lake in front of me...slowly melting... I remember, the last time I saw Norbert. It was May 2011. I was in Paris. I went to Bern to see him...thinking...it could be the last time, my last visit. It was. I went to his apartment. WE talked. We talked about life, about art, about BMI, about death. He told me he was ready to go, to die. He showed me his doodles, like he said. Some kind of watercolor on cheap white paper. There was hundred of them. He said it was nothing. But it was something. Traces of his emotions, feelings. He said it was like therapy. When he would paint he would not think. We drank Coca Cola and coffee. We ate cookies. WE smoked cigarettes. He told me there is something on the shelf for you. It was an African comb. He said you can do something with this...in a performance...put it in your hair. We smoked again. I showed him an article in the magazine Les Beaux Arts. There was a picture of me and it talked about my solo Rouge. I was proud to show him. Somehow I always felt he understood me about my choice of working in the theater field...and never judged me.

He always wanted to see that show, but never had the chance. He was peaceful, calm and making jokes. He was listening to me. It was our last conversation. He had to go to the hospital. I had to go back to the center. We took a taxi together. It was sunny and warm outside. WE arrived downtown Bern. There were kids playing in the water. I did not want the ride to finish. I knew it was the last time I would see him. The taxi stopped to let me out. Norbert was smiling. I gave him a kiss on his mouth. I knew it was the last one. I told him "Je t'aime". I knew it was my last words to him. I smiled at him and I started walking. I did not want to look back at him. I was already crying.

Green...Yellow...Red...Green...Blue...Blue" This is what I hear when I close my eyes and it goes on like an echo until it fades and delays and overlaps: Hundreds of colors, spoken loudly with a deep, strong voice. Releasing ideas about time, death, history and making me calm.



Norbert Klassen. Date; location.
Image Credit: c/o Mirriam LaPlante