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HOW THE SHOW GOT STOLEN

The following text was written after my stay in New York from August to October 2001. My goal was to finish the "Joker Performances Project".

When I left for New York on the 14th of August, none of the possible scenarios that had been running through my head matched the reality I now know. When you plan a project like the Joker Performance, you try to think of every possible situation you might be confronted with: A highly conservative judge, who has, in fact, actually never seen a modern art museum from the inside; a police officer who happens to be near the site, who gets easily confused and pulls his gun. You even think of a Mafia boss who unwittingly gets trapped in the middle of the performance.

You try to weigh all the risks as carefully as possible and then make your decisions. Sometimes you even modify the performance:

You ask your attorney to prepare a speech that could even teach a gorilla the basics of modern art; the policeman is calmed by a smiling girl handing over a pamphlet that reads: "Art at work". And you start praying that the Mafia boss coincidentally has stomach problems from drinking one or two martini cocktails too many the night before, forcing him to stay at home that day.

On the 16th of January 2001, on my way to Japan for the Joker Performance exhibition, I was reading Stefan Aust's book about the Red Army Faction (RAF), "Der Baader Meinhof Komplex". This was a terrorist group that reacted radically to the post-war German political hierarchy and situation at that time, including the Vietnam War. Since I had been arrested and convicted following the Tokyo performance, it was still unclear whether I would have problems entering Japan or not. During the flight, while reading my way through the RAF story, paranoia struck. Would I be able to enter the country? Would they check my luggage? And if I were able to enter successfully, would the exhibition cause us any problems?

I try to put a lot of the paranoid thoughts into perspective that inevitably confront you after your first more or less serious contact with the authorities. Sometimes you succeed in calming your mind, sometimes you don't. It makes you aware of a world one step too far.

Aust's book, together with my own experiences throughout the Joker Performances, made me aware that, although the concept of my artwork is in many ways different from the basic terrorist ideas, some unmistakable parallels exist:

- Like terrorists, I have to prepare my performances in secrecy. Terrorists are perfectionists in their way of working. I consciously try not to make the organization too perfect. If the police are confronted with a perfectly organized group of people, they get very nervous. They only see the possibility of the organization turning into a professional terrorist organization. So, because it's my aim neither to create a terrorist group nor to upset the police too much, I keep a certain amateurish flair to the whole organization.
- Like terrorists, I work with the elements of shock and disorientation. The big difference is the scale. There are very positive aspects of shock and disorientation. People have to rethink. They don't know exactly what's going on, because the situation is different from the ordinary. The big difference is: unlike terrorists, I'm not aiming for fear.
- Like terrorists, I aim for as much press coverage as possible.

This was the knowledge that I had before my New York project, the knowledge I arrived at New York with on the 14th of August 2001 at 10:37 A. M.

JOKER PERFORMANCES

This time, the Joker project had grown again. Sponsors had committed themselves to the performance. The work was to be presented in Rotterdam the next day via uploading of the video through the internet. Possibilities of using the press as well as a knowledge of how to use it effectively had grown considerably. A good Dutch friend would come to New York to work on all European press. My press agent in Berlin would specifically take care of Germany. My Japanese assistant was already working on the Japanese press. I was trying to use the sum of my experiences with the previous performances to make this last one even better. This one had to be the crowning of the work.

During the first two weeks, I mostly just walked around. I started meeting some people, but purposely didn't start working on the performance fully. I just wanted to be in New York, to get to know the city. Despite this relatively easy start, I knew that I had to get to work on the basic elements right away. My first concerns were to:

- Contact lawyers to acquire an overview of the judicial aspects of the performance.
- Assemble a camera crew, if possible coordinated by a production company.
- Find photographers and, of course, complete my research on King Giuliani.

I found out that New York is tough. Everybody comes to New York with a lot of plans. Everyone's busy. A lot of them pretend they're busy. You can't waste people's time. You need an introduction to get through to people. The city gives you the feeling that you're welcome, but the next thing you know, you get shot in the leg, after which she says: "Come on, keep going." As I got used to this toughness, things started to work out for me. After a month, the camera crew was about to take form. Five photographers and about fifteen performers were found. I got in touch with a defense lawyer who had good contacts, and I found out that the Joker Performance suited its location and, in particular, its king, Rudolph ("Rudy") Giuliani, very well.

This city had a definite king, as opposed to the former venue cities of Berlin and Tokyo, where urban development and sociological issues loomed more in the foreground. None of these boasted an individual responsible for the processes.

Giuliani, who had been reigning the city for the past eight years, was clearly the king, assuming responsibility for almost everything in the city. He was a former Kennedy fan who had moved over to the Republican camp in the eighties and had worked as an attorney for the Reagan administration. He ended up as a control freak, overstretching his idea to clean up New York. With his idea of "zero tolerance", he was aiming and shooting at "squeegees, the 'fake homeless', pan handlers, sex shop purveyors, cabbies, jaywalkers, street vendors, cop-bashers, unreconstructed liberals, black radicals, black moderates, anti-Catholic art exhibitors, drunk drivers, methadone users, graffiti artists, public school bureaucrats and, of course, welfare freeloaders." The city, known for its creativity and freedom and still the art center of the world, saw its own mayor trying to close down the British "Sensation" exhibition in the Brooklyn Museum of Art. This was definitely an interesting city to stage the last Joker Performance in.

The 10th of September was a cloudy and grey day. A perfect day for making telephone calls at the office on West Broadway. That night, I had a short drink with a woman from Berlin, after which I left for Croton on Hudson. This little, rich, Twin Peaks kind of place (about an hour's ride with the Metro North train from Grand Central Station) was a kind of hideaway for me when the city became too hectic. The next day I was scheduled for a meeting with a lawyer.

On the 11th of September, I woke up at 8:30 AM. I saw that the sun was shining through the window of the bedroom. The sky was perfectly clear. Everything looked set for a beautiful day. I had breakfast near the pool and waited for the lawyer to arrive. Our appointment was for 9:30 AM; she came at 9:45. I went into the kitchen to make her tea when somebody came up to me and told me not to look at the television. So I turned on the TV.

From then on, the movie started.

I told the lawyer that it would be better to come into the kitchen and take a look at the television. She immediately thought of her husband, who passed the towers in his car on his way to the courthouse every morning. She found out that he'd left a message on the answering machine saying that he was fine and that he would call again to tell her where she could pick him up. We decided it would be wise to drive to her place to wait for this second call.

On our way, I noticed that most of the American flags were not yet at half-mast. Most of all though, I kept looking at the blue sky. This was bizarre. The weather hadn't changed a bit. People all over the region, all in very different situations, yet all in shock, were all under this beautiful blue sky. Nature was showing her indifferent face at its very best.

That day, we even discussed my performance and its possible consequences, but it felt totally weird to talk about it.

I decided to cancel the performance.

First of all, because I knew instantly that hardly anybody would be able to respond positively to a disruptive art piece. Secondly, because I knew that in times like these, jesters immediately lose their royal license to play the fool. I slowly realized that they'd stolen the show. In a bad way, so to speak.

I spent the rest of the day watching television, like most people all over the world. Over the next few days, I began to understand what I had experienced; I was better able to imagine what terrorism was all about. The knowledge I had was taken to a higher level.

It crossed my mind that the terrorists had also been preparing their act at the same time as I was preparing mine. As I tried to explain before, there are parallels, but also very significant differences between what they did and what I wanted to do, but this type of thing went through my head nonetheless. I was able to imagine the stress these people had been in during the previous months. There was a strong mental pressure on them for a very long time beforehand, up until the act itself. It made me think of the mental pressure I had experienced in Tokyo during the preparatory period. I had felt a heavy pressure on my shoulders throughout the rehearsal and on our way to the intersection. When I arrived, I became extremely confident. I thought: "this is gonna work".

On television, there was this one big question asked over and over again: how could people do this? Politicians and news reporters – and soon everybody else followed suit – declared the terrorists to be purely evil men. The overall outcome of the answers simplified the matter considerably. I find it extremely interesting to look at it the other way around: would I be able to fly an air plane into one of the Twin Towers? And: what would make me do such a thing?

I was very fascinated by the terrorist attacks for two reasons. First of all: the aesthetic value the images of the attacks possessed for me. If I forget my moral standards, I can see a certain abstract beauty in the image of the two air planes hitting the Twin Towers. Secondly: the influence it had on the world. In realistic terms, the outcome was not very positive in the end. The Americans closed ranks and stood nearly united behind their president. They managed to gather together an enormous alliance in the war against Afghanistan, and the world was divided into Good and Evil.

An American introspection of its own foreign policy, which a lot of people around the world were hoping for, never occurred. Once again, this makes me aware of the fact that you can never directly confront a democracy with its mistakes. Violence has a counter-effect.

One of the questions the Joker Project asks is: how much influence do I have as a critical artist, and how can I have as much as possible? The jester, as a critical institution, should never try to kill the king. The best possible position for him is next to the king. To try to make the whole court laugh and still transmit criticism through irony to whomever is willing to hear it.

Or is there a better way?

The ground under my feet had disappeared. Mixed feelings took over. Frustration that my plans had been thwarted, that my masterpiece had been taken away. Contrary feelings: that worse had happened, and that I had no right to complain. I realized the impossibility of fully comprehending the horror that had happened that day. Words could not match their content. Television had turned into a 24-hour movie.

Meanwhile, secret agencies and politicians were working hard behind closed doors.

After a week or two, I started thinking of making work around the catastrophe: a photo project of the cruel blue sky, a performance video about disorientation. Above all, I was drawn to the idea to react to the current political development. An Alternative Research Center. Installations had to be made in the form of commando centers, both of the Al Qaida and the Pentagon. Try to find out what they were talking about. What draws them to their conclusions? How are political decisions made? Is there any form of self-critique? How influential to political careers are issues such as arms sales and the oil pipeline from Tajikistan to Pakistan?

I don't know enough about the arms industry and its influence, nor do I know about the oil pipeline. I did see one thing from very close up, though. I saw a politician being reborn and almost getting a third term as mayor of New York. Posters all over the city read "Giuliani for Mayor", and people suddenly adored the person who had basically been a political dead dog only a day before. I was also taken by the idea of Giuliani as saviour. And yes, he did a good job. But should you judge a politician on a couple of weeks out of an eight-year term? Giuliani was smart enough to recognize the political possibilities, at least on the day after the attacks. His seeking a third term was finally blocked by the Democratic candidate Ferrer. One thing is sure: Giuliani's career is in all probability secure. We'll be seeing him again in the future.

The elections in New York were postponed. Giuliani endorsed Bloomberg. He was the only Republican candidate running for mayor that year. A businessman without any political experience who, before the eleventh, seemed to have no chance against his Democratic opponents. After the eleventh: Bloomberg won.

The thing that still bothers me is the fact that the only institution in a society that's prepared for this kind of worst-case scenario is the government. In this case, I don't mean the police and the firemen and all the other governmental institutions that try to get the society back into shape. We would be lost without them, and we should be thankful for their deeds. My concern is mainly directed at the governmental institutions that act without anyone knowing; secret agencies, the government. What are the real reasons for starting a war? To what extent do they control the press? In my opinion, this time the press lost its controlling function in this war theater. All information seemed to be heavily controlled by government officials. To me, it seems that democracy is in an unhealthy situation.

I slowly developed an idea on how to react to this political development as an artist. But then my family called me back to Holland because of my grandfather. I flew back overnight without having realized a single project, but with a shitload of experience concerning terrorism and its consequences.

The future of the Joker Performances is still very unclear. Plans exist to return to New York in the upcoming summer. Washington could be the spot. But because of current changes to US law, Mexico City or Rio de Janeiro might also be interesting alternatives.

Concerning the idea about how to react in an accurate way to political developments in war-time, the joker hopes to one day tell you by realizing his sneaky idea.

lepe B. T. Rubingh, Berlin, January 2002