

THE ART OF CRIME

During the past twenty years Istvan Kantor aka Monty Cantsin AMEN! has executed several hundred blood actions, repetitiously and obsessively incorporating the act of blood taking in his performances. Many of Kantor's blood-x works were done without authorisation, in illegal circumstances, exploring the form of guerilla performance, surprise intervention, criminal action and openly relating to the act of vandalism. He has got arrested and imprisoned at several occasions for his unwanted blood splashes done in museums. His best known master piece among these is a blood-x made between two Picassos, in New York's Museum of Modern Art, in 1988. He also hit the walls of Toronto's AGO, the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa and the Musée d'art contemporain, Montreal, to mention only a few of them. This obsessive and radical art activity not only inspired the makers of Batman but it was an impulsive lesson for Jubal Brown as well for initiating his vomit series.

Besides his museum crimes Kantor also likes to explore different kind of intellectually and physically assaulting methods of creation, from breaking objects to generating unbearable noise via excessive and risky body actions or fire. As a result Kantor/Cantsin's name often gets associated with destruction and violence. In a special coming issue of INTER, devoted to the subject of Destruction in Art, Kantor/Cantsin will tell about his theoretical ideas and investigations in an exclusive and illustrated interview focused especially on his art-crimes.

Now, in connection to Canadian Performance Art in Germany, June/1988, a tour of nine performance artists from Vancouver, Toronto, Montreal and Québec, we publish a description of his most recent blood-x action he has done during the German tour. And the story is told by the artist himself.

GIFT TO RAUSCHENBERG

A blood-x action by MONTY CANTSIN

July 1st, 1998 Köln, Ludwig Museum

I have done everything according to my plans. The day before the crime I went to the Ludwig Museum for an on-the-spot examination in order to pick the "location". My target was the Rauschenberg retrospective that opened just a few days before. At the ticket office I learned that video taping and photographing was prohibited in the entire museum.

After wondering around for a couple of hours, looking for the best spot, watching the security, timing their movements and taking notes, I made my final decision: I chose a room with some of his early works(1950-53) that included a selection of Elemental Sculptures(1953) on a large pedestal. The pedestal was placed such a way that there was a big empty wall behind it, a perfect surface for GIFT. It seemed to be an easy jump to get up on it and have access to the wall, above the sculptures.

Another detail that has definitely inspired me in choosing the spot, was the Erased De Kooning(1953), often hailed by critics as a landmark of carefully applied vandalism, hanging on the right side of the pedestal. On the left side was another small framed work, intitled Cieling + Light Bulb(1950).

From the museum I went back to my temporary headquarters, to the offices of ASA- Art Service Association, a group of people promoting performance art in Germany. I sat down to make phone calls and send faxes. I called the photographer of EXPRESS, the biggest and most popular newspaper in Köln. I told him about my plans and he agreed to take pictures of my intervention. As a photo-journalist he had permanent access to the exhibitions at the Ludwig. He promised not to tell anything about my plans to museum officials or other authorities.

I also called some friends and invited them to witness the event. Among them was a video maker who promised to document my action with a smuggled in camera. I sent a fax to a close friend in Montreal making sure I wont disappear without traces in case I got imprisoned for a while: "Hi Babe, I'm going back to war again... I might need some help to get out of prison... avanti popolo... Daddy"

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I was ready for a new blood-crime since my arrival to Europe (end of may) and kept thinking about it and taking notes all the time. My visit was part of a performance tour of Canadian artists in Germany and it was going to end on July 12. At that time I'll have already made it to Budapest, Belfast, Mantova, Amsterdam, London, Munster, Sittard, including my next spot that was going to be Regensburg, on July 3rd. I felt the pressure of running out of possibilities to hit a museum. I realised that Köln was the right place for it, center of the art market in Europe and a touristic attraction of Germany.

One thing that had to be done beforehand was the blood taking. I usually have my blood taking kit with me wherever I go, including needles and vacutainer vials in a small plastic box. I often have to spend extra time at the borders, ending up having long conversations with border security, airport police, CIA, etc, if they find my equipment.

Having been a registered nurse and a former medical student, I learned to take blood, and I can do it to myself too, but I prefer to engage assistants, nurses or doctors, in order to extend the field of the performance and to replace the self-consuming blood-art-junky image with the clinical act of collaboration. It's not always an easy task to find collaborators. But this time I was very lucky to have a nurse-student living right in the neighbouring apartment, next to ASA. Though she was a bit unexperienced and it took her and her boyfriend quite an effort to draw blood from my arm but they have done it and I could put the five vials in the refrigerator of my hosts and go to sleep.

The next morning, as usual, I did my running and exercising in a near-by park. On the way back home I found a 50DM bill in the street. I immediately knew that it was given to me by the Spectre of Neoism?! and it was a clear sign that I was on the right track to immortality. It also meant good luck for the blood-action and perhaps for the rest of my bloody life. Most of my friends told me that I'll probably rot in jail for the next couple of weeks and my hosts invited me for a "last lunch". We took some family snapshots and then I put the blood tubes in my pocket and said good bye. Before leaving the ASA office for the museum I left a note on the table: "I'll be back tonight!"

It was 15 to 2 when I jumped into a cab and drove to the museum. My "appointment" was at 2pm. First I supposed to meet the photographer in the lobby, at the ticket booth. All the others interested to witness my action were asked to wait for me in the gallery and walk around as any museum visitors would do to avoid the suspicion of the guards. Because I only had a vague description of the photographer's look I asked several persons in the lobby if they were the one to meet with me, but no luck. He was late. Finally I couldn't wait anymore, I bought a ticket and went in to check if he was already there. But I only saw my friends waiting for the action, mostly standing still right in front of the pedestal, gathered in a surprisingly big number. As I walked in the room they all looked at me and that made me become nervous especially because the gallery seemed to be filled with guards.

I whispered a few words to a friend about to keep walking and then I went outside to look for the photographer. It was almost 2.30pm. Did he change his mind? Did he tell about my plan to the museum? I was about to go back again and just do it, when finally a man in black leather jacket with a camera bag on his shoulder showed up. We sat down for a minute and I told him again what I'm going to do exactly and what I expect from him. He promised me that in return for the story the paper will provide me legal help if it's necessary and they bail me out in case I have to go to jail. After this short conversation he went inside and shortly after I entered as well.

It took me probably less than a minute to execute the action. After entering the room I immediately jumped up on the platform of Elemental Sculptures and without any hesitation I proceeded to splash my blood on the wall. The vials were already out of my pocket when I jumped and they were in my left hand. One by one, doing the splashes with my right hand, I emptied their content on the wall in the form of an X. In some of the vials the blood was a bit clotted and it wasn't running down on the wall as fresh blood does, but basically I was satisfied with the result. Of course blood went on the platform and on the sculptures as well. It's a messy job.

I have done this many times, but even after so many years in the business it still fascinates me and as I was holding the empty vials in my hand I threw a last glance at the red X in the firm belief that I was looking at something truly beautiful. Everything else in the room was completely insignificant.

Then I turned towards the public to read my "letter of donation" addressed to Rauschenberg. The bewildered guards were still just gazing at me and watching what the hell was exactly happening. I almost finished reading when I heard the first urgent walkie-talkie voice and saw a guard moving towards me.

I threw 50 copies of the manifesto on the floor, for the audience that was composed of museum visitors and friends, and which was, at this moment, quite large. By this time a couple of guards were demanding me to come down from the pedestal. I told them to call the director of the museum and I stayed on. "I want to talk to the director" I repeated it a few times for bigger impact. Up on the pedestal, standing like a statue, surrounded by Rauschenberg's sculptures, I was safe. The guards were afraid to jump up and hurt the sculptures with a bad move or kick. But after a little waiting and strategical discussion they got more activated and a couple of guards decided to climb up to me and try to push me down while the others were pulling on my legs. I resisted in order to prolong the action and turn the aspect of arrest and resistance into the most significant part of the intervention that can only discredit the museum for using unnecessary violence. Of course, if I have to confess, I can phrase things in a more cynical manner and say that according to my preconcieved plans I also wanted to gain enough time for taking good photos. But soon I had to give up all the goals a simple physical act of struggling can represent as I was dramatically outnumbered and finally forced down to the floor.

Fortunately by that time the director of the museum has arrived and very friendly she approached me and introduced herself. Evelyn Weiss. She was surprisingly kind and very calm. Perhaps she was a good psychologist, and, expecting to meet a raging, lunatic criminal, she tried to be as unthreatening as much as possible. I gave her an envelope that included the Rauschenberg manifesto added with some selected printed documents of previous museum crimes. She looked at the "letter of donation" and talked to a man who seemed to be the chief of security. She then told me that the police will arrive shortly to proceed with the legal parts concerning the damage I caused, for which I'll have to pay.

Most surprisingly, and to the amazement of the surrounding security and museum visitors, she kept talking to me in Hungarian.

"Why didn't you come a few days earlier when Rauschenberg was here?" she asked me with a smile on her face. "I was out of town and I couldn't make it back for the opening" I replied, telling the truth as I was in Munster at that time. She assured me that after the necessary legal statements were done they will let me go. I can interpret her angelic kindness as a certain sympathy but I think she was just smart enough to get rid of me this way and thus preventing the museum from unwanted public attention, newspaper articles, court dates, debates, critical opinions, etc. But frankly, for whatever reason she decided to let me go this was the best solution for me as well: the gift was given, the message was download, the photos were taken, I stayed out of prison and could continue my tour. Amen!

With her permission I posed for an extra photo at the side of the Erased De Kooning, holding up a few empty vials. Later my blood tubes were taken away from me in the name of further investigation.

Soon a policeman in green uniform arrived and took my IDs. I could see the wonder and disbelief on his face as he looked at the bloody museum wall while listening to the story about what happened. Perhaps this was the least expected crime of his life. He spent the next couple of hours with making notes about the facts and putting down statements given by the museum officials. He was rather friendly to me and to all the people surrounding us waiting for a final decision. Meanwhile museum curators and restaurators took the sculptures off the pedestal and put them on a cart in order to take them for cleaning and to proceed with wiping off my blood from the pedestal and the wall.

The policeman decided that if the museum let me go he wont take me in either. Therefore at 6 o'clock I was sitting in a restaurant, having a drink with some of the friends who witnessed the action. I told them about the money that fell in front of me from the sky and paid the bill with the 50DM I found in the morning in the street.

Monty Cantsin

PS: Wolfgang Weimer, the photographer did a great job, immortalizing the action step-by-step, but I never got the promised prints, only a selection of photocopy quality, b/w, computer print-outs. The video maker friend, Roland Bergere of Radical Egal, gave me a copy of his tape the next day. Though he was unable to tape the whole thing because the guards stopped him all the time, it's a great document. The EXPRESS published a half page long article with a couple of photos in the next day issue, in the culture section. Other papers also picked up the news. A few days later when I was already safe in Budapest, the police was looking for me at the ASA office and was told I flew back to Canada. Since then I have no news of the legal affairs. I received some color snapshots of the action from Inge Broska. I'm in contact with ASA through e-mail. I owe a special thank to Hans-Jörg Taucher and Peter Farkas for their conspiratory assistance in getting things together. Also hellos to Endre Tot and Anja Ibsch.