

I Dare Say I'm More Of a Rat Than

Flatz

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN JUSTIN HOFFMANN AND FLATZ

J. : You've been giving performances since 1974; since 1977 you have been calling your work "Disassemblies". What do you actually disassemble in your "Disassemblies"? If somebody disassembles something, it does not necessarily mean that this act involves aggressiveness. But there is definitely a destructive element in your "Disassemblies". For example, in "Disassembly IX" in Tbilisi.

E: There are a few aspects I consider important. These refer a) to contents and b) to form. As regards contents, the important thing is never what can be seen or what is being disassembled visibly, but what it stands for, i.e. a metaphor which refers to the thing behind the surface. As regards formal structure, I work with polarity in all my disassemblies. The opera, classical song or classical dance are metaphors of an academic, conservative, restorative attitude, as I'd put it. Against this, I set an up-to-date attitude towards a contemporary work of art. In my opinion, in our day and age, which is substantially characterized by an incessant flood of stimuli, it is very important to learn how to select, i.e. how to make decisions, qualitative decisions, as to which stimuli should be absorbed and dealt with. I've found that a strong stimulus, the provocative element, when used as a means, will have an effect. I work with this element a lot. I'm not interested in provocation for provocation's sake. But if a provocation is capable of releasing something, if a shock can release something, shake an existing view of the world, set an awareness in motion, or cause irritation, then I've found a starting point or access to somebody. The first step is to change something, and from this point of view, destruction is a very constructive element.

J. : Do you regard yourself as being a kindred spirit to artists like Nam June Paik, who smashed a violin for the sake of producing a liberating shock, a shock that can set free trains of thought? I do think that your work inspires new thoughts.

F.: But the shock elements I'm dealing with are visual factors which radiate a visual, haptical brutality, which is effected directly and which the viewer can immediately follow up mentally and experience physically, and which function even on several sensual levels -visual, acoustical and smell, depending on the means I use.

Other things are also involved, like elements of composition, for example. I'd say, the opera singer, as an instrument, is a perfectly trained, disciplined body, which permits very little freedom of motion or none at all. When I watched the opera singer and her body training, I could see how restrictive it actually is; it cannot bring about any expansion at all – it is an embodiment of the 19th century. And yet the detachment of 20th century art from 19th century art was partly due to shocks; in painting it was dissolution and the breaking of classical picture compositions and pictorial taboos, then there were the dadaists and futurists around the turn of the century ...

J.: One also ought to mention the cubists, who disassemble the object of the picture and split it up into facets.

E: That's right, but cubism still took place within the classical disciplines, like painting, sculpture and drawing, while the dadaists took a step further and involved the body of space, creating a time/space/body relationship. Their works of art were the first fundamental move away from the wood panel paintings, from static sculpture and the classical media: wood, stone, paper or canvas.

The next move took place in the fifties and sixties, after Action Painting; in America, there was the "happening" and in Europe we had Fluxus, and the Viennese variant, the Actionists. These developments were important for me when I started to study and when I was a young artist, and was preoccupied with all this.

J.: Now although you are Austrian by birth, you do not really belong to the Vienna Actionists circles, as in the work of the Vienna Actionists, like Hermann Nitsch, for example, the psychological effect is in the foreground while you prefer a cooler and more sociological approach in your actions.

E: That's right. I'd call myself more of an "ethologist" – in 'inverted commas' in art, for whom the objects of his investigations are not only sociological phenomena but also other ones. My investigations are not ultimately supposed to point a warning finger. What I'm interested in is to point out the simultaneousness of things or to deal with them; I mean the fact that there is war and torture going on, on the one hand, while a wonderful birthday party might be taking place at the same time. Both have nothing directly to do with the other, but in a wider context they have, because the cycle of life and death is a closed circuit. I see the art system in a similar way. How much of an effect can art still have on society today, or to what extent has it become a blind alley that you can enter but not leave again because it has detached itself from society and does not have any feedback any more.

I am interested in the social phenomena that can be put into art and which ultimately have an effect on society again. The approaches of Warhol and Beuys are important for me in this respect. In case of Beuys, it is not so much his formal dealing with art but the way he deals with the public, and in case of Warhol, it's both.

J.: I'd like to return once more to the polar structure of your disassemblies. On the one hand, you have the opera singer or a pair of dancers, as in the Soviet Union, and on the other hand, you perform destructive or provocative acts. I mean, you deliberately confront conventional art, the bourgeois or restorative art, with a more radical or aggressive form of culture. Do you consider the synthesis of the two elements to be a new form of art, or is your aggressive form of art the new form, set against old art, as a thesis?

F.: First of all, it is an optical synergy, a contrapuntal simultaneousness, showing that things happen at the same time. On the other hand, however, yes. I would say it is a counterthesis, which has much more to do with my reality or my

world or my thoughts and sentiments than with the world of opera or dance, which is just as real today. And then we actually get to what is of vital interest for me, the reason why I use opera. Knowing that every seat in every opera house in Germany receives a daily subsidy of DM 290, whether this seat is sold or not, and considering the other relationship; what today's society and its political representatives do for contemporary art, if you compare these two aspects, you will see that contemporary art has to make do with barely a thousandth part of the money spent on established, conservative high-brow culture. You can also see that with museums. Pumping money into museums basically means furnishing mortuaries. I regard museums as being morgues. They are important for the artist, that's true, because he gets a social reputation through them, but, ultimately, once a work of art ends up in a museum, it has gone to the morgue, the morgue of history. These are the things I'm interested in, and which also appear in my work. Mind you, I am not out to destroy the other picture or smash it up, but I want the recipient to have the possibility to draw his own conclusions. If he prefers opera, he also identifies himself with this attitude. But there are also people, young people, in particular, I've found, who identify themselves more with my art, in which a very strong element of destruction is 'lived' and formulated. This expresses a feeling of life or attitude that is reflected in this generation.

J.: Aggressive art as you perform it, like disassembly, expresses a certain attitude, which is probably in accordance with the respective era. Do you regard your works as being metaphors for destructive processes which are taking place at the moment? Where do you find the destructiveness that appears in your work, transformed into art?

F.: Aggression and/or destruction exists in many different forms: some are very quiet and subtle, and others are oppressively direct. You also have an indication of this in the way our cities, architecture, environment and communication is changing, which can ultimately be traced back to the aggressive forms of an aggressive system – the Capitalist system – which in turn is based on Christianity. I believe that Capitalism was only able to grow on the basis of the Christian faith; it is not by chance that it did not develop out of some Asian philosophy, Christianity and its aberrations, however, also gave rise to the counter-philosophy, namely Marxism.

J.: What kind of aggressive situations are they, moments when systems clash, when people are pushed against the wall, the type of conflict material that may become the subject of your art? In comparison to other artists who are looking for harmony today.

F.: I'm not interested in harmony, or rather, in a wrong notion of harmony. I think that violence and aggression are vital drives and characteristics, which are inherent in any person – it's just a matter of channelling them – and that violence, aggression or destruction are counterparts to offset love, tenderness and harmony. You find that everywhere, in every living thing, even in a plant that finds a gap in concrete and pushes its way out through that. Or a plant that takes away the light from some other plant. Here you have forms of aggressiveness that are much more subtle, in the animal world in any case, but with people you find the most pronounced forms because Man has learned to think, and has partly become the master of his drive or has learned to calculate them. The society in which we live is partly characterized by aggression, which is used quite openly as a form of communication in the world of business. It also manifests itself in the world of art, especially on the market. Bands like "Einstürzende Neubauten" (collapsing new buildings) who have a music program similar to what I have in pictorial art, and who also cross borders as I do in my work, use violent means in their work and release pent-up aggressions with them.

J.: It is noticeable that you take up certain approaches and motifs of the subculture, such as motor saws, for example, which acquired a particular actuality in the 'chainsaw massacre movies'. Or that you act in a way similar to certain pop musicians and bands, like Henry Rollins, who uses violence as a means of expression. These forms of subculture appear in your work over and over again. Do you see any close references there?

F.: Very close references. Why, violence is an enormous energy, energy that can be transferred because there is a physical effect even if one is confronted with violence or if one is not directly involved or participating in it. But if the "Neubauten" stage a spectacular show or Henry Rollings exhausts his body on stage, you, the viewer, feel how much aggression even physical aggression – is being transmitted by the voice, in the implementation of music.

J.: Or Iggy Pop, who frequently smashes an empty bottle on his naked chest.

F.: Of course. This dates back much further, you can trace that back as far as Jim Morrison. In music, lots of artists have felt an urge to do such things. It is not by chance that lots of people who studied art went over to music in the seventies, because art no longer provided an opportunity to express the feeling of life, of what really mattered. For me, performance-art was a medium to transport this.

In my opinion, good music has always had a message, and I think that good art always has a message, too. I'm not interested in formalism. That is why I serve all media, or rather, I make use of all media, because I'm also interested in publicity, after all. I consider it a vital concern or criterion to establish publicity in art. I'm not interested in psychotherapeutical art; that is atelier art. My work feeds on life, and I translate that into a language of forms, which is reproduced in art, and that is why I may be closer to musicians or writers than to lots of artists who are sitting around in their ivory towers, jerking off, and who never leave them. That's an artificial world, a world of attitudes and appearances.

J.: Another thing that seems to play a part in your work, is death. I'm thinking of the work where you smash a mirror with your body, or of "Disassembly IX", in which you move as a pendulum between two steel plates. You approach certain limits there, so that one even fears for your life. Does death, or rather, the subject of death, play a specific role in your work?

F.: I'd say, it is not a specific theme in the foreground of my work, but death is more a part of life. I'm not afraid of death, just because I've gone to such limits where I simply knew that it would be the end of me if anything went wrong. But I'm rather interested in developing awareness and languages of forms which are tangible and which actually work. That's what art's about, after all. I design something, work with a great risk, deliberately work with a great risk, which, however, only leaves a very small remainder risk that cannot be calculated. In fact, it is planning

that matters. Art is planning, planning a view of the world, planning form. Basically, it also involves realizing, implementing the things you think up or have in mind. And that is why high risk is important to me: It shows me whether the planning has been accurate or not, and if anything goes wrong it was the last thing I've done. But if the thing that you've thought up involves such an extremely high risk and it goes well, then you have a moment of fulfillment ... You could almost call it salvation, that takes you to a level of consciousness where you set your goals even higher and simply want to know what extent you can make use of the vocabulary of forms. You're like a Formula 1 racing driver who has mechanized certain formal sequences and who's only trying to increase his power of concentration. I think a similar high form of concentration and precision is required to make good art.

J.: Is the subjective element important for you in your work, this feeling of release, which bungee jumping is also said to involve, or are you more interested in the reception, in the feeling given to the viewer?

F.: I'd like to introduce another aspect. We are living in a performance-orientated society, and this performance-orientated society demands more and more from you. Sports are quite a good example of the way the performance-orientated society formulates itself. Another example is the market, where money and high risk plays a role. Today, money is the only God. Art is also subject to these mechanisms of society and so is the body I employ in performance-art. This is also a matter of performance, performance in society, and I do in art what athletes do, too: render a top performance. In technology, it's similar: one chip is followed by the next better, next faster, next smaller chip, and so on ... These are elements which interest me in what I'm doing, although I'm not interested in the sensational values but in the accuracy required in grinding and adjusting everything so that the next thing will go well, too.

Basically, things are similar in art. A wood panel painting is also something useless and actually only serves to expand the mind. To develop something new or to advance the forms of language in painting, today, means assuming a great risk, a formal risk, because one also lets oneself in for the historical context. Well, I see my work in a similar way.

J.: That means, you are also interested in certain innovations, in trying out new forms of expression by approaching the limits of public language.

F.: That's right, yes.

J.: Therefore, you would never do some work like the Survival Research Laboratories who set up computers or robots to carry out specific acts?

F.: That's not so interesting for my work. Personally, I am interested in the work of Mark Pauline, in the basis of his work. The fact that robots, machines, take the place of Man nowadays, and that Man takes pleasure in machines, is another feature of our society – I can see the quality of his work very clearly. A drama of substitutes is taking place, as the Romans staged it originally, by letting people fight against lions or by letting lions fight against each other or letting lions fight against bulls. The Star War program works along the same lines. But my area of work or field of research is Man and his capability to exist in this society, or the tricks he has to invent in order to succeed or survive, as well as society's reaction to him. I'd put forward my thesis as a counterweight to Pauline's thesis. I place the individual, Man, in the foreground. I think that Man or the individual should establish counterpositions or counterweights in a society or age in which machines require or take up more and more space. I think it is necessary to give more consideration to the individual person, and that the individual will regain more attention to the same extent that technology and microchips are spreading.

J.: Therefore, your last disassembly in the Munich "Kunstverein" was an exception, as you did not actually perform as a person. The audience was walled in with books, by a group of people you had selected. You directed the action and it was your idea. But, I think, this was the first time, an exception, that you did not appear in person.

F.: No, this is basically an aspect of my thinking. I was present all the time, because I thought up the whole thing, There were 700 people and it is an extremely subtle form of aggression to consciously wall in 700 people. The opera singer also played a vital "role" in it, she set up the trap, diverting attention. It is a classic example: while the audience got carried away by the lovely singer, licking the honey, the trap closes and the audience was closed in, lulled into being walled up. This also works perfectly in our society. I was extremely present, because my mind was present. The subtle aggression then turned into open aggression as the audience had to become actively aggressive in order to free itself from this situation. They had to push down the wall of books. So I simply gave something back.

J.: So you didn't have to become aggressive, but the audience did ...

F.: ... I made the audience become aggressive, forced them to become so, they had no other way out, they had to become aggressive. That's also part of my work; it has been used earlier on several occasions. Another part is played by the fact that my work always refers to the context: the space, locality, or city where a piece is taking place plays a vital part. Therefore this was work with a totally clear reference to Munich, but it can be transferred to other places.

J.: So your work was not only meant for architecture but also for the art scene in Munich.

F.: For the socio-cultural context. For the superficiality, detachment, aloofness, voyeurism and expectancy. I think, the reason why so many viewers came was the reputation linked to my name – the fact that there would be another sensation or Flatz stunt. I was interested in breaking this attitude, in questioning the prejudices there and then, in getting the audience into such a situation. We enjoyed that.

J.: One subtle aspect of the destruction consisted in the fact that the audience had to walk over the books after the wall of book had collapsed. It is definitely extraordinary to crush books underfoot. But the viewer simply had no other choice if he wanted to get out.

F.: Well, this "Disassembly X" resulted in another, quite different thing, as well: there was actual looting. Nobody said they were allowed to take the books away with them. If you visit a museum, you surely don't take home parts of the

exhibition that are or were elements of the work. And with this work, I was also interested in sculpture; the sculpture changed its form three times in the course of the piece: first, you saw the blocks of books, then the change of form by blocking the door opening, then the wall tumbled down, which in turn resulted in a sculpture of a different form, namely an amorphous form. Chaos is a form, too. A form that ultimately made it possible to step on the books, take them away, actually looting. 4 tons of books were weighed before the performance. When they were weighed again after the end of the exhibition, 1950 kg were missing. Almost 2 tons of books were looted on the opening night. I liked that. Looting does not stop in this established framework of a presentation in a museum. Whether windows are smashed at "Bolle's" in a Berlin riot night, and everybody takes what isn't nailed down, or here because chaos has been produced by the complete destruction of a conventional form and books were lying around – everyone helped himself; mass promotes such behaviour. I observed that no more books were carried off after that, during the normal course of the exhibition. There were even people who did not go into the main room of the exhibition because it would have broken their hearts to step on books. They went home again.

J. : Did you sometimes get aggressive acts from the audience during your disassemblies or performances?

F. Again and again. I must admit that sometimes I did provide provocation. "Disassembly III", for instance, in the ProT (Prozessionstheater Munich, editors note) was a very subversive thing, with similar or parallel lines to the one in the "Kunstverein". Both proceeded like an attempted assassination, so-to-speak. The singer contributed the element of diversion or deception, always present with assassination attempts in order to bring about a certain situation that nobody had expected. In the Pr6T, she was singing the "Lorelei" at an exposed point of the stage while the FLATZ syndicate prepared the attempt at another point and carried it out in a minimum of time. We set fire to the setting for the piece "Maianacht" (May Prayers) that was being repeated day after day, and left behind a letter of confession by spraying it on the wall: May 16th, 1987, FLATZ syndicate. This is work taken right out of life, which has the same effect if it is implemented in art, with art's language of forms. In the case of "Disassembly V" the situation was similar: the singer was standing at an elevated point in the room, and when her aria had ended and the wall was closed and the lights turned off, she was able to leave the scene of action unhindered, and all the other accomplices were able to disappear, except for the pianist, who had to be sacrificed. The attack went according to plan, the audience was caught in the trap. I was interested in these structures which I had taken from our everyday world.

J. : Do you consider yourself a terrorist of the art scenes?

F. : No ...

J.: But you attack normal cultural operations?

F.: I'd say, I do things which question and challenge structures. Without doubt, my work has a subversive aspect, especially in the area of performance but also in more classical areas with the other work.

J.: How do you actually see the relationship between your actionist work, the disassemblies, and the pictorial work? Are the aspects of aggressiveness and destruction in your pictorial work, too, or are things different with this work?

F.: There are different conditions for every medium and the artist must consider the conditions. A wood panel painting, moving on a purely optical level, i.e. being two-dimensional, can be just as aggressive but it must employ different means. Fontana's canvas slashing was just as aggressive as my smashing up of some pieces of furniture with an axe, or drilling a hole in the wall to the next room with the percussion drill in order to conquer the next room. These things are parallel to me, they are circuits which become clear and easy to follow once they are opened up.

J. : But one finds the theme of war in your pictorial work, and not just natural death ...

F.: Violence, aggression, or let's say: the dark sides of our social existence are of more interest to me than the sunny sides. If I'm interested in the sun it's because of the eruptions on its surface. Therefore, I dare say I am a rat from the shady side of our civilized dung-heap, rather than one who gorges on sunlight ... (*laughs*)

J.: Can you give us a short description of your work in Linz. Is it also a disassembly

F. : Yes, it's called "Disassembly M" and it will be the last work to be presented during this year's Ars Electronica. I will go into the context again quite explicitly. It is a disassembly, with the same structure as the others. The opera singer will play a part assigned to her again. The piece will take place in the concert hall of the Brucknerhaus, which is one of the halls with the best acoustics in the world and can accommodate several thousand people. The whole hall is dominated by a giant organ, so this will be integrated into the work, too, coupled with the opera singer. Do you want to know more details? The question is, should I describe it in detail or circumscribe it, so-to-speak.

J.: Circumscribe it.

F.: The context is the hall itself, on the one hand, and, of course, the festival, on the other hand, as it deals with electronics, having acquired a history of its own in the meantime. This will play a part in my work. Practically, I will deal with things that bring electronics or pictorial media, which are the video display units or television screens of computer screens. These are the things I will deal with, and the human body will also play a part again.

J. : As regards your disassemblies, present -day culture philosophical ideas have come to my mind, which deviate from the idea of the Integral and Identical and focus special attention on the decentralization of systems and signs. Terms like deconstructivism and deconstruction are being used in this context. Do you see a certain relationship of minds between this and your works, where you disassemble, dismantle and dissolve something and maybe behave in contrast to the search for harmony as proposed by Gerhard Merz, for example?

F.: No. It's true that deconstructivistic elements are being used, but what I use is a language of forms. I am not interested in the need for harmony proposed by the so-called Munich School. For me, this is extreme, tensed-up

mannerism. I disapprove of mannerism in any artistic work. It is not by chance that Munich is predestinated to it, but on the other hand, there is a very good underground scene in Munich, too. Funny, isn't it? This has to do with the music, and also with films, the workshop cinema scene, etc. I feel much closer to this. But to go back to your question. I am interested in the wholeness or interaction of the systems, in the theory of chaos, which says that everything is connected to and involved in a cause-effect relationship. In this respect, I see connections in my disassemblies; the destruction of an order always brings about a new order. The work with the books ("Disassembly X", editors note) is actually almost a showpiece of an example: three orders were presented; first, the minimalistic order consisting of the two book sculptures which had a floor area of one square meter and a height of two meters; then the conceptual, structural sculpture, i.e. filling the wall, and finally the amorphous sculpture, the heap of books, which obtained a new order by collapsing. That's what I'm interested in, the fact that everything is interconnected. The element, the book, never changed throughout the work. The change was only brought about by the way the book, as an element, was dealt with. The fact that it lay on the floor in an amorphous heap, or that it was put in layers to form a column, or that it served as a wall.

Three orders were pointed out, and every one had its own set of rules that worked. Whereby the last amorphous order had the best set of rules, because it took on more new forms. Ultimately, this is the basis for the theory of chaos, the principle of cause and effect. – We all know the butterfly theory, don't we? These are the interesting aspects of my work, and I put together polarities because this results in something new. And as I said at the beginning, I am interested in the simultaneousness of things, let's say, in the fact that there might be a tornado raging in Australia while you are basking in the sun, having a good time, at Lake Starnberg, or that there is famine somewhere while we are about to throw up as our bellies are so full, that both things exist side-by-side, that we have to deal with all of it, that we live in a complex world and have to deal with complex systems.

J.: Are you interested in the Contradictory, Contrasts, or simply in the Dualistic?

F. : They belong together and cannot be separated, I would say. Contradictions are revealed by themselves, by putting together polarities. Things speak for themselves, if you only lead them towards each other. The logistics is easy.

J.: If one performs actions; does this also have to do with the fact that one largely rejects a conventional way of artistic creation, that one is searching for an adequate way of dealing with materials, that one would rather start on an object with a percussion drill than paint it?

F: Of course, this is involved, as well. But, generally, I think it is the liberation from material e. g., the free dealing with material, that matters. The fact that a product does not exist any more is an acyclical relationship to the market. The thing I supply is the awareness or the participation or the possibility to reflect. In other words, a mental picture, not a material one that you take with you, the material is destroyed and left behind.

J. : Are there no relics?

F: I do not deal with relics, no, I do not build any reliquaries. There are photographs, and I use the photographs as photographic work. But if you think of Nitsch or Paik, I'm not interested in this level. The work will only be conveyed in the original, and that by means of participation.

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