

Peter Noever

Brus Will Be Brus

Some might be tempted to suppose that Günter Brus, the "flibbertigibbet" turning seventy this year, meanwhile a recipient of the Grand Austrian State Award and in the Brockhaus encyclopedia, has become mild with age, spoilt by conciliating success, a shrewd tamed. No way! At heart, though under different auspices, Brus has remained faithful to himself to this very day.¹ Honors could not lull his unruly artistic ambition.

The radical avant-garde calls the status quo in art and society "SHIT".² A long-standing legend: still an extreme action artist back then, Günter Brus defecated in public on the podium of a Vienna University lecture hall while singing the Austrian national anthem.³ In the face of such provocation, the establishment stroke back hard, and that was by no means a "Viennese walk": a media hunt, a sentence to six months of imprisonment, the flight to Berlin with his family. Which makes it clear once more: the more raging with hatred the reaction, the more likely it is to be great art, or in the case of Brus, even world-class avant-garde art.

Sensationalism virtually enshrined Brus, meanwhile canonized by art history, in this excrement, although his oeuvre in fact abounds in variety and depth. Thus the obvious obscures the inherent truth, and presumably, this is what it is supposed to do, for other-wise one would have to face up to what this symbolical aggression is directed against. However, rebellious avant-garde is not an artificial flame, no empty ritual, but rather the dialectical reflection of what it finds itself confronted with: the Catholic

provincialism and repressive conservatism of Austria in the 1960s made Brus sick, and this induced his bowel movement. It was neither merely an act of "épater le bourgeois", nor an art happening just for the fun of it, but an autonomous work of art, and as such, relieving oneself was self-defense, a reflected refusal to pull oneself together, defiance against the destructive pressures of socio-cultural conditions, an antithesis against the drill of convention and outdated traditions, a laugh that laughed away social conformism, an emancipatory attempt to break life free from anything that locks it in – art as undomesticated creativity, as an orgiastic intensification of life. You are fruitful only for the price of becoming an epitome of chaos; and yet, Brus was never interested in scandalizing taboo-breaking as such, in merely shocking the public; however necessary, anarchic provocation never was an end in itself for him: "Destruction in Art" was meant to create space for the new, to expand the vocabulary of art, to expand the awareness; how effectively Brus succeeded to do so is borne out by the reception history of his art actions.

Acting as knife edge and wound in one person, as it were, Brus carried his body-analytical and depth-psychological "Self-mutilations" – supposed to bring, and act, out socially induced, repressed pathogenic aggressions, fears, etc. – to the limits of physical endurance; his "ZerreiBprobe" ("Tension test", 1970) marked the end of that, Brus had thought this to an end, and the fact that he turned to something different bespeaks his intellectual consistency.