Robert Filliou – The Secret of Permanent Creation

13 Oct 2016 - 22 Jan 2017

Robert Filliou was born into a protestant family in the south of France in 1926. At the age of seventeen he was active in the French resistance. Later he would apply the principles of non-violence very strictly to all aspects of his life and work and thinking. In 1945 he went to the US to find his father, an itinerant tailor. They eventually met in Los Angeles, where Filliou worked in a Coca-Cola plant and took a degree in political economy. He joined the team of United Nations economists and co-authored A Five-Year Plan for the Reconstruction and Development of South Korea in 1953. The year after he abandoned this career and began his own itinerant, often precarious existence as a man of what he called ‘joint works’: ideas created and visualised in close collaboration.

‘Art is what makes life more interesting than art.’

In the autumn of 2016 Muhka, the Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp, will dedicate its main exhibition floor (around 1,300 m2) to an artist, poet and playwright who was one of the most conceptually radical – but also one of the most radically intuitive – presences on the European and Transatlantic scene of the 1960s, 70s and 80s. Today he might have called himself an activist, working to turn the political economy into a poetic economy, but he was also an entrepreneur of sorts (who made almost no money), an educator (in both practice and theory) and a mystic (whose last ‘project’ was to retreat into a Buddhist monastery for three years, three months and three days).
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with words (both French and English ones), physical materials (including all kinds of found objects) and – most importantly – other people.

Filliou was in many ways the quintessential artists’ artist, collaborative and convivial but also a strong influence on his peers. Indeed he is still an active reference for artists of younger generations, some of them not even born when he passed away almost thirty years ago. Among Filliou’s many close companions and collaborators were the artists Daniel Spoerri, Dieter Roth and Marcel Broodthaers, the artist and composer George Brecht, the artist and poet Emmett Williams and the architect and artist Joachim Pfeuer. But the most important person in his life and work was his wife Marianne Filliou, whom he first met in Copenhagen when she was just seventeen.

‘I use objects for their own sake, or as springboards for the concept.’

Filliou’s visual oeuvre began in 1960 with L’Immortelle Mort du Monde (‘The Immortal Death of the World’), a graphic representation of an aleatory theatre play, and ended in 1987 with Time in a Nutshell, short pieces of writing on small pieces of paper sealed inside cracked walnuts. Writing is almost always on display in Filliou’s work, as part of the image or image-object.

The work from the 1960s, when he maintained an on-off relationship with the Fluxus movement, could be described as poetic, not least because he often used his preferred materials (paper, cardboard, wood, canvas) as support for words. The ‘suspende poems’, sold by mail order, are good examples of this. The various ‘boxes’ also incorporate written messages, nodding to Fluxus but also, inevitably, to Duchamp. It can be argued that Filliou went further than Duchamp, whom he criticized mostly for not taking the non-white-males of the world into account. In the performance Gong Show (1977) Filliou says:

You know, Duchamp used to say in his later years, ‘What do you mean I’m famous – my greengrocer doesn’t know who I am.’ I used to say that I’m quite the opposite of Duchamp – only my greengrocer knows who I am. Duchamp added, ‘We must abolish the idea of judgment.’ I have worked it out further. I think we must abolish the idea of admiration.

Filliou was ready to live experimentally, with or without the support of the art world. In 1961 he had his first solo exhibition, at the artist Addi Köpcke’s gallery in Copenhagen, and in 1962 he operated a very small art gallery on the streets of Paris, Galerie Légitime, out of the cap on his head. Later in the decade he ran the non-gallery La Cédille qui sourit with George Brecht at Villefranche-sur-Mer near Nice. It was during those years that he developed his constitutive practice – collaboration and conviviality across space and time – into the concept of La Fête Permanente, which he consistently ‘ mistranslated’ as The Eternal Network.

It was Marianne Filliou who once remarked: ‘You’re artists when you create. But when you stop, you’re not artists anymore.’ This alerted Filliou to the necessity of Permanent Creation, which would become his overriding concern: ‘First and foremost I’m interested in permanent creation, of which the universe is only a consequence.’ In Irmeline Lebeet’s Le Petit Robert Filliou (1971) he offered these explanations:

The Secret of Permanent Creation: Whatever you’re thinking; think something else. Whatever you’re doing; do something else.

The Absolute Secret of Permanent Creation: Desire nothing, decide nothing, choose nothing, be aware of yourself, stay awake, calmly seated, do nothing.

Filliou first became acquainted with Zen Buddhist practice while working as an economist in Korea. He sometimes signed off as ‘taoïste de gauche’, which is ironical not least because the distinction between location and direction, so crucial to the Western mind, is often suspended in Chinese and Far Eastern culture.

Such fluidity and constant movement is also at the core of Filliou’s work and thinking. He identified three kinds of art practice: art as creativity; anti-art, consisting of disseminating the works resulting from such creativity; and non-art, meaning ‘to create without worrying about the dissemination or non-dissemination of works’.

An even more famous triad is his Principle of Equivalence. It directly attacks the concept and practice of judgment, a fundament of Western culture: ‘That an artwork is well made, badly made or not made at all I find, from the point of view of permanent creation, to be of no importance.’ From the late 60s onwards, Filliou explicitly visualised this principle as several key concepts. Classifiable as sculptures or installations or videos. In his work the interaction between ‘concept’ and ‘object’ (and between ‘art’ and its ‘audience’) goes far beyond the cerebral. This should already be clear from the quotes used as chapter headings here!

Already in 1963 Filliou and Pfeuer started constructing their joint work Poïpoïdrome, ‘a functional relation between reflection, action and communication’ planned as a building measuring 24 by 24 metres, centred on the ‘poïpoï egg’ and ready to accommodate all audiences.

You don’t have to ‘learn’ anything to participate in the actions and reflections of the Poïpoïdrome. What the users know is enough. Accepting that you know what you know, but also knowing knowing what, is that the spirit of permanent creation. Homage (and thanks) to the Dogons! When two Dogons meet, they ask each other, for instance: ‘And how is your field? And how is your family? And how are your cattle? And how are your chickens? And how is your house? etc.’ To which they answer a simple ‘Poïpoï’ before parting or, sometimes, starting all over.

Prototypes ‘in real space-time’ were shown in Brussels 1975 and outside (not inside!) the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 1978 – while the co-authors were in Mali to meet the actual Dogons… Poïpoïdrome embodies many of Filliou’s key concepts. Apart from Permanent Creation and the Principle of Equivalence, there is La République Géniale (which might be rendered as The Republic of Genius), which starts from the insight that everyone has genius of a particular kind. This is Filliou’s way of ‘de-hierarchising’ another core feature of Western culture. He called himself ‘a genius without talent’. Each Republic of Genius has its own territory, which can very well be mobile (just like the Poïpoïdrome).

To describe his activities from the early 70s onwards Filliou often used the term Research, stressing the organic nature of knowledge and thinking – knowing what knowing is – and that genius is ‘built in’ rather than ‘built out’ or ‘built upon’. (He used these English words also in French texts.) Among the key works in this genre are the very large work on canvas Recherche sur l’origine (Research on the Origins, 1974) and works of more manageable size such as the installation Nine Works of Research on Futurology (1971).

The ‘multi-book’ Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts/Lehren und Lernen als Aufführungskünste (1970, published in English and German by Walther König) was conceived as a joint work between Filliou and the reader, exploring problems of Teaching and Learning in fields such as action poetry, games and street theatre. In the late 70s Filliou also launched a ‘Video Universcitary’ planned to span a period of five billion years.

The idea to launch an international Biennial of the Art of Peace evokes works such as Seven Childlike uses of Warlike Material (1970, installation of found objects and series of prints) or COMMEMOR (1970, proposal to exchange war monuments between European countries who were once enemies).

Subversive gaming was part of Filliou's repertoire of topics from the very beginning. One of his last large-scale works, the installation Eins, Un, One... (1984), consists of a multitude of wooden dice in various sizes and colours, but always only showing 'one', as if abolishing chance one and for all.

'We are at the same time perfect and perfectible.'

This quote, from the last year of Filliou's life, may be the ultimate celebration of Permanent Creation. Approaching his oeuvre through this concept, we wish to bring his ideas to new audiences and make it clear why and how they are crucial for the world today – and in the future.

Our goal for 'Robert Filliou: The Secret of Permanent Creation' is to acknowledge Filliou as one of the most relevant and radical references for twentieth and twenty-first century art.

We see him as a precursor for some of the recent and ongoing 'turns' in contemporary art that involve both politics and poetry, both education and spirituality. Another important reason for showing Filliou's work next year is the growing impact of Filliou's work and thinking on younger artists today.

The exhibition is thought and planned within a sequence of Filliou surveys that began when he was awarded the first Kurt Schwitters Prize by the city of Hanover in 1982. It will focus on making Filliou’s thinking visible and accessible to audiences today. It will rely on the mental and visual power of individual works but also organise them in areas of interest that transcend chronology (such as 'Joint Works', 'Centres of Permanent Creation', 'Research', 'Teaching and Learning' or 'Contributions to the Art of Peace') and simultaneously as indications of the directions Filliou suggested for his own thinking – and for ours.

One point of anchorage for the display would be the Poïpoïdrome, which articulates the tension between art as Permanent Creation and the 'anti-art' of dissemination and mediation that art institutions can – and must – cultivate. We have started preliminary discussions with Joachim Pfeiffer. Some principles of construction for the display could also be borrowed from the Chinese garden. In its classical form it actively challenges the visitor’s visual and spatial orientation at every step on his path through a confined space ingeniously constructed to replicate the scale and complexity of both nature and society.

The most notable Filliou surveys to date were the touring exhibitions 'The Eternal Network Presents Robert Filliou' (July 1984 – February 1985: Sprengel-Museum Hanover; Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris; Kunsthalle Berne), ‘Robert Filliou’ (October 1990 – September 1991: Carré d’Art, Nîmes; Kunsthalle Basel; Hamburger Kunsthalle; Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris) and ‘Robert Filliou: Genius Without Talent’ (April 2003 – March 2004: MACBA, Barcelona; museum kunst palast, Düsseldorf; Musée d’Art Moderne de Lille Métropole).

Muhka is looking for partners – ideally two museums or public galleries in Europe and one in America – willing and able to develop and realise this exhibition in collaboration with us.

The previous tours all included venues in France, where much of Filliou’s work is kept, but since Antwerp is just two hours by train from Paris (and three hours from Düsseldorf, another city where Filliou spent several years) we are contacting colleagues further afield, in Berlin, Copenhagen and New York. Just like Antwerp (where Filliou exhibited at the Wide White Space gallery in 1971 and 1972), these are cities to which he had an active and meaningful relation, but which have not yet hosted any survey exhibition of his work. Filliou was quite often in Belgium, and he lived in Germany, Denmark and the US.

The process of securing important loans begins this summer, but of course we hope to be able to make the final selection of works for the exhibition in dialogue with the prospective partner institutions. A certain number of Filliou’s best known works will have to be included in any case, but we also hope to showcase some perhaps lesser-known works that help us illustrate (in the positive sense of illuminating or ‘casting light upon’) his thinking.

The Muhka collection already comprises some important Filliou prints and multiples such as Handshow (1967) or Seven Childlike Uses of Warlike Materials (1970) and we are now acquiring the recently recovered 'telegram works' from Exposition Intuitive (1966), Filliou’s first solo exhibition in Paris. Muhka also has a realisation of Filliou’s Project for Toilets at the Mönchengladbach Museum (1969), based on a sketch in the part of the Muhka collection that derives from the Gordon Matta Clark Foundation set up in Antwerp after that artist’s untimely death in 1978.

Another aspect of this project, apart from the tour, that prompts us to look for partners now is the catalogue. Ideally we would want to produce one version in English (with a supplement containing translations of the texts into Dutch, and perhaps also in Danish) and one in German.

Muhka is conducting the preliminary research for this project in collaboration with the art historian Cécile Barrault in Paris. Until recently, she was managing the Filliou estate for Galerie Nelson (previously Galerie Bama) and is therefore very well acquainted with the oeuvre. Through her we are in touch with Marianne Filliou in Eyzies, who has, in turn, put us in contact with the artist Valentine Verhaege in Besançon. The latter is entrusted with digitising the hitherto unpublished archive that Marianne Filliou is keeping.

Another research moment will be organised, in collaboration with Muhka, the Flanders Art Institute and Pro Helvetia, during the last weekend of this year’s Salon Suisse at the Swiss consulate in Venice in late November. We are inviting people who knew Filliou and worked closely with him for one day of internal discussions rounded off with a public event in the evening. Among those approached are Daniel Spoerri (who once wrote, 'Filliou was my brother, but I was his mother'), Jean-Hubert Martin (who was the curator for the Poïpoïdrome at Centre Pompidou in 1978 and for the Filliou retrospective in Paris and Berne in 1984), Joachim Pfeuffer (the co-architect of the Poïpoïdrome) and Irmeline Lebeer (the publisher of Le Petit Robert Filliou in 1971). We would also like our prospective partner museums to be part of this gathering!
Participating artists

- Daniel Spoerri [info]
- Robert Filliou [info]

Artworks in this expo

- Porta Filliou
  Robert Filliou
  1977

- 14 chansons et 1 charade / 14 songs and 1 riddle / 14 chansons und 1 rätsel
  Robert Filliou
1967

Mind
Robert Filliou

1969

Information Box
Robert Filliou

1973
• Optimistic Box n°3
  Robert Filliou
  1969

Optimistic Box n°3

• Spaghetti Sandwich
  Robert Filliou, Daniel Spoerri
  1971

Spaghetti Sandwich

• Optimistic Box n°4 and 5
  Robert Filliou
1968

- **The Pink-Spaghetti Handshake**
  Robert Filliou
  1965

1976

- **Do as you Like**
  Robert Filliou
  1969

- **Joker**
  Robert Filliou
  1969
• Solitude
  Robert Filliou
  1964

• Telepathic Music N°7 - The Principle of Equivalence Carried to a Series
  Robert Filliou
  1977

• Optimistic Box N°1
  Robert Filliou
  1968
- **A Most Curious Invention of the Gaga Yogi**  
  Robert Filliou  
  1976

- **7 Childlike Uses of Warlike Material**  
  Robert Filliou  
  1971

- **Hand Show**  
  Robert Filliou  
  1967
Show more

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