

NY Debut ORIGINAL 1964 -
TIME Sept 18 1964 MUSIC part 4 "PAINTER"

AVANT-GARDE

Stuffed Bird at 48 Sharp

The idea, the director explained, is "a collage of music with action."

The music was electronic, but the action was clearly electrifying as Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Originale* was presented as the top event of Manhattan's second annual Avant-Garde Festival.

It all started when Cologne's small Theater am Dom commissioned Stockhausen, 36, Germany's leading exponent of nonmusical music, to do a play. Stockhausen had eight friends with artistic talents of sorts—a painter, a poet, an amateur moviemaker, a Korean

friends were instructed to perform all or part of their specialties on a rigid time schedule coordinated to the composition. Scandalized city fathers, who had made all these goings-on possible through a subsidy to the arts, tried to ban the production.

The New York production featured two white hens, a chimpanzee, six fish floating in two bowls suspended from the ceiling, a shapely model stripping to her black lace panties and bra, and a young man who squirted himself all over with shaving lather and then jumped into a tub of water.

Fish in Bowls. As the *Kontakte* musical score—a mixture of taped airport



STOCKHAUSEN'S "ORIGINALE" AT JUDSON HALL

composer, a newspaper vendor, a street singer and two musicians. He also had a 94-minute composition called *Kontakte*, which blended canned electronic sounds and instrumental music. He wrote a "score" in which his various

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drone, traffic noise, radio static, mixed in with homemade sounds from drum, piano, saxophone and cello—unwinds, the performers follow carefully drawn stage directions. At 48 minutes sharp, for instance, the percussionist is instructed to "feed all animals, fish in

1964



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THE COLLABORATIONS OF ROBERT DELFORD BROWN

by Mark Bloch

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The Collaborations of Robert Delford Brown

By Mark Bloch

Twenty years ago, the brilliant publisher, writer, composer, performer and Intermedia-ist Dick Higgins (1938-1998), casually said to me at an art opening, "I wish that someone younger than those of us associated with Fluxus would write about why Fluxus is important to them." While I have created many an homage to Fluxus, I regrettably never did write the essay he described, per se, but many others, including his own daughter, have. And I should add that they have done so quite eloquently and effectively and that partially as a result of those efforts (and partially just because time has a way of changing things), Fluxus's star continues to rise on the art history and art market horizon.

There is a contemporary of the Fluxus artists that also deserves both analysis and accolades from a younger writer. Notwithstanding the fact that I am no longer "young" myself, I do remain at least one generation younger than those born in the late 1920's and early 1930's, so I would like to take this opportunity to muse on the value and importance, to me, of the work and life of Robert Delford Brown (b. 1930).

What is it about Bob's work that has worth to me? Is it his unique sense of humor and the outrageous, irreverent attitude that, at age 74, he still hurls in the face of the seriousness of both art and life? Or conversely, is it the serious and committed outlook he has toward our imperiled planet and the earnest efforts he turns into action as his part in reversing destructive global trends? No, it is the complex synthesis of these seemingly opposite worldviews that interests and inspires me.

Similarly, Robert Delford Brown also appears contradictory when it comes to his place in the world and his subsequent choices of a course of action. Is Brown a loner who intentionally shuns definitions, conventional categorization and the pigeon-holing endeavors by those that would try to group him with others of his ilk or, indeed, as I have done, his generation? Or is he a unifying whirlwind of creative collaboration, operating in clear sight of bemused onlookers, bonding endlessly in celebrations of pure social interaction with all who will listen, inviting anyone who might attend to join him on his gallant path of teamwork, partnership, group effort and alliance in the service of munificence? The answer, again, is that he is both.



(Text: *The Collaborations of Robert Delford Brown* © 2005-6, Mark Bloch)

From the very start, the Browns used their Church to create social events called *Grand Opening Services* that combined artistic collaboration, glamor and pseudo-spiritual excess (see photo front cover, top). These often included art-making such as the oft-cited *Maps to Nevada*, which require group painting and gluing to create visual guides as a suitable replacement for Nirvana. Brown proposes that Nevada is easier than Nirvana to get to because you can take a bus.

Today Brown is in the post-church era as well as the post-real estate era. He continues as an "artist-religious leader," but he sold the building and now resides in virtual space via the Internet at www.funkup.com (Email him at rdb@funkup.com). An early convert to cyberspace, Brown now believes that you can be available "everywhere, all the time." Recently, dismayed by political events, he got rid of his TV and radio and now relies entirely on the Internet for his communication with the outside world. He says that he is better informed than ever.

His physical collaboration of choice these days is the "Collaborative Action Gluing" where by e-mail and telephone, he arranges for a space and a participative audience of non-artists (see photos, lower front and lower back cover). This can be in another city or another country. He then shows up, armed with glue, scissors, rubber gloves, colored paper, magazines to cut up and several canvases for the participants to embellish collectively with their unschooled musings, each eventually transformed from a day-glo tabula rasa into a vibrant, swirling testimony to the power of joint action by non-artists, yet, at the same time, surprisingly reminiscent of the likes of Miro, Kandinsky and of course, Matisse's cutouts.

Robert Delford Brown combines vision with playfulness, tragedy with optimism and sophistication with heretofore-unseen flights of the untamed imagination. He does not revel in unfettered egomania because he knows that by humbly collaborating with others, he can avoid the seductive entrapments of isolation and self-involvement that almost destroyed him and that he has seen destroy so many of his friends.

In an observation he made in 2004, Brown wrote, "One's success today is defined by other people's failure. The raging against unwed mothers in America is a good example of this pathological attempt at resolving one's own sense of desolation by abusing someone who is less fortunate. It is rotten to the core. It cannot be fixed. It will be abandoned, and replaced by a view that is life affirming. The world is undergoing a Spiritual Awakening, which will lead to Global Transformation."

Compared to the alternative, this may be something that "young people" would be wise to check out.

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Next, Brown revitalized an idea that he had always dreamed of—a “meat show.” This was a collaboration not only with Rhett and attendees, but also the New York City media. Perhaps it was his notoriety in *Originale* that made them listen, but *something* did and the result was another success d’scandal. Brown again used humor and shock value when he typed up a press release for his display of 3,600 pounds of raw meat (see photo page 2) and the local journalists took the bait, publishing his descriptions verbatim. Even the society pages (right) proclaimed that missing Brown’s *Meat Show* would be not be up-to-the-minute and so, of course, the streets were lined with limousines dropping off well-dressed gentlemen and matrons that looked as much like a *Three Stooges* episode as it did an art opening.

This is where Brown chose a path that shows what he is made of. In creating signed “liver prints” on fine paper by flopping raw animal parts around the way Jackson Pollock hurled paint, Robert Delford Brown had stumbled upon a gold mine. He had found the gesture that could sustain him for the next fifty years. Everyone expected that he would become the world’s first “Meat Artist.” But repeating himself did not interest him. He did not do another liver print, and those that he had already done and the other souvenirs from his memorable event are now prized gems to art collectors.

I could continue this sort of hyperbolic (*and accurate and deserving*) praise all the way to the present but the big picture interests me more than the details. In a nutshell, Brown traveled to Europe, did more Happenings, caused more scandals (such as being arrested in London, see photo, lower right) and more laughs. He returned to New York and hosted more well-attended, unorthodox events in his Church, now housed in the “Great Building Crackup” on East Thirteenth Street where he hired the well-known architect Paul Rudolph to “doodle with architecture.” He had many famous friends and immortalized them with collaborations he did with them called “sanctifications” of his church. He even appeared in a cult film that was the first generated from the newly-created *Saturday Night Live* franchise, *Mondo Video*, in his briefs, eating a handful of canned spaghetti. The list goes on and on and it is well-documented elsewhere. But the operative words here are collaboration, partnership, alliance, and group effort.

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On the Town


By CHARLES MCHARRY

Cooling It

Just when you think things are quieting down in Greenwich Village, along comes a guy like Robert Delford Brown with a thing he calls “Meat Show.” “Meat Show” will be offered Friday evening and at matinees on Saturday and Sunday in Washington Meat Market, 447 W. 13th St. Brown describes it as an “environment,” an art form in which the spectator participates by “walking in-to and through the subject.” The subject in this case is a refrigerator containing 6,000 pounds of raw meat, 50 gallons of blood, 900 yards of lingerie fabric, 70 bales of sawdust, 900 yards of butcher’s paper, 25 pounds of human hair and four quarts of perfume. In Brown’s opinion, “Meat Show” will induce “startling spiritual, sexual and aesthetic revelations into even the most totally bereft wretch.” Admission is six-bits and patrons are advised to wear warm clothing.



**Carol
Bruce**



**Dede
Thomas**

Because of these apparent incongruencies, Bob Brown’s operations generate deceptively simple artworks for complex people. Sophisticated aesthetes and kids on skateboards both understand the manifestations of his enthusiastic artistic endeavors. They appeal to both because they capture life’s essence with a straightforward and mighty guffaw. His art can look absurd and ridiculous and that is where the humor in Brown’s heart comes in handy. His wild, electric, garish colors, whimsical, meandering shapes, and words that illicit titters and chuckles bring to mind that little tilt of the head that dogs do when they are perplexed.

Yet, because they are the result of a profound intelligence, prescience and a lifetime that has known not only fanciful fun but also palpable, piercing pain, his work and persona carry a subtle undercurrent of pathos and calamity, the weightiness and insight of one of life’s veterans who is able to transform private contemplation into extraverted achievement.

Furthermore, Brown does not usually conclude his creative process with a self-important flourish and a nail in the wall. His works hang more on a vital and requisite collaboration with the viewer. With its outrageousness, his work stipulates reaction, feedback, response and a continuation of the story. More often than not, he doesn’t work for a “viewer,” at all, but rather an imagined co-worker-as-equal with whom he can further his process. And he is rigorous but not picky about whom that might be or what form the joint effort might take. Occasionally he creates work like any other artist—his Ikonobiles, for instance—made to be exhibited and viewed in a gallery, a museum or a home, including his own. And they seem fashioned to provoke, engage, and connect. But such works seem only to be an offshoot of his main thrust—a commitment to cooperation in the largest sense of the word. He prefers to innovate along with others and he has spent a lifetime doing so.

The reason this is important to me, a generation younger than he, is because his attempts at fusion of this type are now, just as they were when he began in 1964, a necessary move away from art and towards life. Away from markets; toward generosity and sharing. Thus, Brown was, then, a man of his times and is, today, an anachronism. The activities of the Fluxus “collective” and the creators of Happenings with whom Brown engaged, the inter-connectedness of Ray Johnson’s New York Correspondance School in which Brown participated, and the social milieu of the New York art world of the 1950’s and 60’s to which Brown was exposed as a young-ish transplant to Manhattan—all were part of the status quo then and they foster in Bob, today, an ideal worked toward throughout his life. The naïve and quixotic efforts of those last gasps of the avant garde rubbed off on him, never to be jettisoned, even after styles changed when the men with the checkbooks moved downtown.

Brown’s first collaboration was with his wife Rhett. People called them the Bobsy Twins as they moved around town joined figuratively at the hip. Their romantic and strategic unification in the early 1960’s created a new force to be reckoned with in the downtown scene. By mid-decade they had established and purchased a building for their self-styled First National Church of the Exquisite Panic, Inc., the locus of many an extravaganza. Robert and Rhett collaborated with “the greatest minds of their generation” and got a great deal of press for it. By the middle of the following decade, the “Delford Browns” had not only created a track record of mystifying social occasions attended by au courant hordes but as

a by-product, Robert's potent mixture of merriment and iconoclasm had devolved into an addiction to alcohol that would transform his life.

Unbeknownst to him, Bob B.'s dedication to the principles of Alcoholics Anonymous over the next quarter century would enhance, not diminish, his tendency toward collaboration with others. Bob says it is a "we" program that, then as now, suits him just fine. A battle with his own demons came on strong at first, but eventually he won back his land legs and with that his dignity, his will to live and a new commitment to "getting along with people." Because no matter how much Bob and Rhett collaborated with others, there remained in Robert a rage and a sense of outrage, common to addicts and alcoholics, that had motivated him all along. It has made for many a wonderful spectacle, not only by Bob but, indeed, evident in the entire history of art. In Bob's case it was time to turn things around.

Decades later, he now has taken the discontent that once was directed toward himself and turned it into a vision of transformation, not only within, but also for the world at large. Robert Delford Brown now sees the potential of the planet and accepts responsibility for his part in renovating it. And, as always, he sees the way to do it in collaboration.

Brown has performed often since the 1980's in a clown suit with a large wig of rainbow hair and a red nose. He entertains audiences with his carefully-constructed creation myth about a civilization that has played a violent game of baseball with each other's heads ever since "man invented the stick." Twenty-five years of not self-destructing has provided Bob with an ability to teach and inspire by not taking himself too seriously while taking his unique place in the world *very* seriously. Not only does that speak to my generation but encouragingly, also the ones that follow. They, too, are interested more in life than art. Addictive behavior is now well-understood by our society and Bob recognizes that the heartfelt and humble message he espouses, will gently, slowly, and gradually be disseminated into the consciousness of young minds, not just by him but by many others that share his concerns and his mission. Since the 1960's, Brown has tweaked his methods and his message just enough to put him at the forefront of a slow but steady global conversion that he and others believe the world needs badly.

So Robert Delford Brown believes that "people helping people" will transform us. He says himself, "Everyone has to participate. Exclusion isn't going to work." He looks to Albert Einstein who said that he did not know what World War III would be fought with but, "World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones." He quotes Buckminster Fuller who said that, "Either war is obsolete or human beings are obsolete." Brown posits that the reason for our propensity toward violence is caused by "the extraordinary rate of change which leaves everyone feeling ill prepared." He believes this frustrates us. "In a mere 10,000 years in a universe that functions on a time scale of billions of years, human beings have gone from stone tools to space stations." And so Brown feels that the only way to get beyond this frustration is with group effort.

"Mutual support can increase people's capacity to a miraculous degree beyond anything that would be possible with individual effort alone. Humanity's potential is infinite. We have no

idea what human beings are capable of becoming. People living in a world full of fear and disinformation today are slowly creating a world free of fear and communicating freely. This is going to create a world beautiful beyond imagining."

These types of positive messages resonate with me. I am in favor of a life-affirming art that returns the creative person to the role of a healer in the society. Brown takes this a step further. He believes we are *all* artists and he invents imaginative, collaborative situations that empower people who were not trained as artists to create. "There is no *not* art," he decries. The battlecry that began the last century with Duchamp's readymades, that inclusive proclamation and gesture that turned the entire world into the artist's palette, has not been forgotten or dismissed by Robert Delford Brown. Yet, many of his colleagues from the 1960's are dead or have moved on to superstardom, "slamming out the same thing year after year."

Brown's work and message have impact and relevance today because they tell us that self-destruction and self-censorship are contrary to our survival. By self-censorship I refer to the tendency of artists to repeat themselves in order to achieve market success. During Brown's lifetime, successful artists have moved from their role as visionaries to their new roles as brand names. This requires eschewing the very complexity that is Brown's hallmark. But now, forty years after he began, despite a circuitous path, Brown has survived long enough to collect his "gold watch." Just like the corporate world, in the art world, if one hangs around long enough, one gets recognized. People are starting to re-discover the integrity in the collaborations of Robert Delford Brown.



After studying painting and sculpting, Brown restarted his career with *Originale* in 1964. This was collaboration in the truest sense of the word and it remains the keystone of Brown's career. Written by Karlheinz Stockhausen, it embodied the twentieth century tendency toward collage. Thus was Brown collaged together with his contemporaries Allen Ginsburg, Nam June Paik, Dick Higgins and others. Brown's friend Allan Kaprow, a central inventor of Happenings, organized the performance and asked Brown to take the role of The Painter (above) which Brown played as a space man. This was the beginning of Brown's interest in the creation myth. Swinging a three-foot penis, Robert Delford Brown caused a scandal that was covered by everyone from local papers to *Time* magazine (see back cover). Brown manifested a spectacle that was not limited to mere art world denizens. Comedy transcended art via the plodding phallic character that he and his wife Rhett created. The Browns were now a sensation in those very important days just after JFK was shot, as the Beatles emerged on the mainstream scene, when Pop art was in its infancy and the battle lines were being drawn for the cultural and political upheaval that was to follow.