

With you in Rockland

Karl was standing on the corner at the intersection between Thomas and Church Street. He had stopped in order to light a cigarette upon his walk through Tribeca, just after having paid his first visit to the Dream House, further down Church. The drone sounds of La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela were still ringing in his brain and ears. MMmmmmmmmmMMMMmmmmmmmmMMMMmmmm ... Karl inhales the smoke from the cigarette and glances at the AT&T Long Lines building on Church Street and wonders how it's possible to construct such a brutal and inhuman yet incredibly attractive building. This is somehow the most hostile creation in lower Manhattan, a huge concrete slab clad in pink Swedish granite. The Long Lines building – with almost no windows, only a few ventilation shafts high up on the wall – host all the wires and computers that process most of the phone calls that New Yorkers make, a giant block of highly secured communication very few persons will ever enter, a center of communication with almost no humans inside its shell of concrete and stone. Karl exhales the cigarette smoke and the drone sounds disappear and reappear as an inner voice: Hello? This is your Mother. Are you there? Are you coming home? Hello? Is anybody home? Well, you don't know me, but I know you. And I've got a message to give to you. Here come the planes. So you better get ready. Ready to go. You can come as you are, but pay as you go. Pay as you go... He stubs out the cigarette and walks east towards Chinatown.

Karl lived in New York City from 1989 until 1994. Exactly why he left Sweden I don't know, but I have my fantasies about it, my presumptions... Maybe it was a sexual drive, a subliminal venture. Perhaps it was the idea of being a young migrant like so many Swedes from generations before that tempted him. Or maybe he simply wanted to listen to and practice his English in order to re-direct his work? Or was it just that Stockholm was so utterly boring, consensus-orientated and uninspiring to him as a young poet, artist, wannabe-music video artist or whatever he aspired to be? An inner voyage, a trip to find the mantra that would fit his soul; maybe the city of New York could hand this to him as a present.

One day in 1989 Karl walks 6th Street from 2nd Avenue towards Tompkins Square Park and passes the former Con Edison substation that looks like none of the other buildings in the street, austere and desolate, with just the number 421 in white relief letters on the large portal on the front of the property, a mass of stone, yellow brick and large glass sections. Garbage bags, cigarette butts and pigeons looking for food in the gutter. The building is home and studio to Walter de Maria, one of the more secretive personas on the seventies art scene. Karl knows that. He walks past it quite often but never sees any sign of life in the building. Maybe de Maria has disappeared into the desert, or he is just hiding from everyone, this strange artist who is known for his absence and at the same time so very present, if you consider his impressive permanent loft installations of 500 polished brass rods and 250 cubic yards of dirt. Karl reaches the corner of the park. Crossing the intersection heading towards the park entrance he ponders the fate of Monika Beerle, who was killed last year; dismembered by her roommate, cooked, and offered as soup to the homeless in the park. Many flesh eaters in Gotham, he thinks. Will this city turn Karl himself into a victim or victimizer? One never knows how this city will corrupt the human soul.

Karl wanders towards the elm tree in the center of the park, the Hara Krishna elm tree ... hare kṛṣṇa hare kṛṣṇa kṛṣṇa kṛṣṇa hare hare hare rāma hare rāma rāma rāma hare hare, hare kṛṣṇa hare kṛṣṇa kṛṣṇa kṛṣṇa hare hare hare rāma hare rāma hare rāma rāma hare hare, hare kṛṣṇa hare kṛṣṇa kṛṣṇa kṛṣṇa hare hare hare rāma hare rāma rāma rāma hare hare, hare kṛṣṇa hare kṛṣṇa kṛṣṇa kṛṣṇa hare hare hare rāma hare rāma rāma rāma hare hare, hare kṛṣṇa hare kṛṣṇa kṛṣṇa kṛṣṇa hare hare hare rāma hare rāma rāma rāma hare hare, hare kṛṣṇa hare kṛṣṇa kṛṣṇa kṛṣṇa hare hare hare rāma hare rāma rāma rāma hare hare, hare kṛṣṇa hare kṛṣṇa kṛṣṇa kṛṣṇa hare hare hare rāma hare rāma rāma rāma hare hare, hare kṛṣṇa hare kṛṣṇa kṛṣṇa kṛṣṇa hare hare hare rāma hare rāma rāma rāma hare hare ... the tree echoes, a long lasting reverb all the way back to Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, and to Allen Ginsberg and his reading of the mantra. Karl met him the other day at the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church where Ginsberg was reading his latest writings to a small crowd. After Ginsberg had replied to a couple of questions from an eager group of NYU students Karl had his chance.

Karl: Hi, I am Karl.

Ginsberg: Hello, thanks for coming. How are you? Where are you from?

Karl: I am fine. Thanks for the reading. I'm from Sweden.

Ginsberg: Ah, Sweden. But where in Sweden are you from?

Karl [reluctantly, convinced Ginsberg has never heard of his provincial hometown]: Hmmm, Vesterås...

Ginsberg [very enthusiastically]: Ahh, Tranströmer town!

Karl: Hmm.

Ginsberg: I have been there several times to visit Tomas.

Karl: ...

Ginsberg: Well, nice to meet you Karl.

Karl thinks back on the day he saw Tomas Tranströmer on the Apotekerbroen that crosses the Svartån in Vesterås. It's far away now, the picturesque setting with the old town on the riverbank. Little did Karl know that a year later his hometown poet would almost be silenced after a stroke which paralyzes the right side of his body so that he had to ask his wife, Monica, to speak for him. Karl thinks of the poetry reading at the church and considers whether it's time to break his own silence and recite, in public, the writings he is about to create. "One day... Maybe Monday! Maybe not?"

I don't think that Karl met anyone at the Tompkins Square Park that day. He only glanced at some project kids playing basket, all in Knicks hoodies. I imagine he bought the latest Bear Magazine, the lifestyle magazine on furry nude men, at St. Mark's Bookshop. He probably looked through the File magazine, but didn't purchase it, and he also browsed the shelves for books on William Blake and read some in Peter Acroyd's biography on T.S. Eliot. Then, I think, he thought of treating his mind and body at the Russian & Turkish Baths on 10th Street, the place where they have the most gloomy and super-hot sauna, with a huge cold water tank next to the wooden benches and the heater so that one can pour cold water over one's sweaty and overheated body, and then throw one's body into the cold water basin right outside the sauna after the temperature experiment inside, being close to other men in the process of cooling down. But maybe a sauna in a proper men's club would be more fun, or, even more temptingly, sneaking into the darkroom over at The Eagle. I envisage that Karl ended up getting laid at The Eagle that night, and I imagine he also inhaled some poppers and that the night felt endless.

Karl had heard that ACT UP held quite a few meetings at the Cooper Union art school, and he was curious to see what went on there. So one day he attended a meeting, finding a large gathering discussing how one might influence the US government – whether actions and demonstrations were still the way to go, or if other means should be explored. The Reagan Administration had just stepped down, but in many ways the new Bush government applied the same approach to AIDS – silence and ignorance – displaying no interest in research or treatment to help the many victims of the disease. Steadily and quietly it was eliminating and undermining the more flamboyant and frivolous lifestyles of the major cities in the US.

The meeting was quite chaotic, and Karl didn't really think that any good suggestions were tabled, but nor did he himself have any ideas on what might be done. Nevertheless he thought he'd come back the next week and follow the discussion; that would be his attempt at doing something. The vast, derelict classroom used for the meeting held a large notice board. A multi-colored party flyer caught his eye: "The Grand Return of the Flaming Creature, screenings, music, and drinks 2 \$. Friday 10:00 PM – 6:00 AM". In a way he thought of himself as a kind of Flaming Creature, and that seemed ample reason to go to the party, even if he did not know the party's location on Lower East Side.

The Return of the Flaming Creature took place in a rather dirty, high-ceilinged workshop in Allen Street; the crowd included many of the same people he had seen at the ACT UP meeting earlier that week. The first film of the night, a rather worn experimental film, was already underway. Karl bought a

drink, lit up a cigarette and sat down on the floor, close to the projector. The grainy projection onto the whitewashed wall showed some men and women dressed as flower-clad bohemian nymphs and a kind of bog people bathing in and being dragged through mud in a marshy area, all swaying and touching each other in sensuous ways. The film's grand finale was set in a small field; the nymphs and bog people were dancing on a giant cake while a gauze-clad mummies pranced around with fake machine guns, shooting the dancers. They eventually ended up as a pile of "dead" bodies on top of the cake. The next film was even grainier, a very worn copy of the film that the name of the party invoked, *Flaming Creatures*, showing human bodies in a kind of sexual, yet also non-sexual orgy, with wafting clothes and make-up on a New York rooftop some time in the early sixties.

Karl had never seen anything like it. In many ways the impulses provided by these two films offered an opportunity, a potential. They insisted on letting aesthetics govern what you do, on an ebullient kind of existence, various cut ups, and a flowing awareness that offered an alternative in a materialist world, like a redemption or a kind of movable mandala forever changing its shape: from the crystalline to the amorphous, from pattern to chaos, from form to anti-form and back again.

The future of the nineties somehow began for Karl when he attended the opening at Paula Allen Gallery. He came in a bit late in the evening. The room was crowded. The artist showing was handing out food, Pad Thai, stir-fried noodles served with gentle movements from a temporary kitchen installed in the midst of the rather small gallery space. He had met the guy before, Rirkrit Tiravanija, a former student from the Whitney Independent Study Program. Karl understood the piece as centered around the gesture of generosity and that giving away something nice might generate a convivial social situation. While Rirkrit sprinkles yet another plate of noodles with peanuts and coriander, Karl thinks about the artist's project-cum-restaurant *Food* initiated by Gordon Matta Clark, Carol Goodden, and Tina Girouard. They might also have served Pad Thai, since they were kind of into exotic food at that time in the seventies, but they probably didn't serve it with the same tenderness.

No dinner after this opening, since the work in itself was a supper, but Karl joined the group around Rirkrit for drinks afterwards. Rirkrit and Karl talked at the bar, and Rirkrit told Karl about Chiang Mai in northern Thailand, saying that he wants to go back there sometime and that Karl should come along. Karl befriended Rirkrit and his girlfriend Elizabeth, and he would later have some of his best times of his New York years together with them at their place; in particular he would enjoy their New Year's Eve parties, the antidote to the loneliness that also comes with immigrant life in East Village.

More and more, Karl got into words, sentence construction and in particular the visual appearance of text. Gradually he was becoming convinced that poetry readings could do the same for people as Pad Thai offered in a gallery. Give-away thoughts, which would not only constitute a space for contemplation, but also promote social interaction after the reading. Perhaps these readings could even happen outside the literary world. Perhaps on the scene for contemporary art. It appealed much more to him as a scene in many ways. He decided to re-direct his work towards art, by the use of his voice, his language and his visuals. When he could afford it, he would produce a compact disc and a poster he had in mind, based on a series of 21 poems.

Karl is sitting in a café on 2nd Avenue, where he often comes to work. He is trying to write notes, bring words, sentences and fragments together to form new texts. At times he thinks about the literature and linguistics studies at the university in Stockholm. In a way he would have liked to have continued his studies, but in a sense he is now undertaking an even more interesting kind of autonomous schooling with the city as his curriculum. He thought about applying to the Whitney Independent Study Program, but he imagined that he wouldn't really appeal to the program's teachers, and perhaps he also felt that he hadn't made enough work to get in. And perhaps he wouldn't be able to stand sitting in a group with Ron Clark, discussing the texts of Hal Foster. However, the Whitney program had given rise to one very interesting offshoot: the collective Group Material and their project *Democracy*, which was inspiring both in its aesthetics and subject matter, but also seemed to Karl a little too proper and well-disciplined, perhaps reminding him of a kind of attitude familiar to him from his Stockholm days.

Karl was particularly interested in one of the youngest members of the group: Félix Gonzáles-Torres. Like Rirkrit, and around the same time, Gonzáles-Torres had created works in more or less sculptural form, based on give-aways. A heap of free posters or a mountain of caramels in a corner. Simple, effective, and with a new political-aesthetic sensibility that Karl had not witnessed before. Now he saw this effectiveness all the time: at this point the city was studded with several identical billboards showing a sensuous photograph of an unmade bed with its white sheets bearing the impression of the two people who had lain there: the artist and his lover Ross, who had just died of AIDS. The disease would also claim Félix's life five years later. In the café the young bartender puts on *Smells Like Teen Spirit*, and the coffee suddenly tastes like bile and Karl has to leave.

I first see Karl at a party a few years later. He is sitting on top of a radiator by a large window in a Soho loft, wearing toned glasses, talking to a guy called Antek and a girl called Bernadette. They are working on a project they refer to as the Bernadette Corporation, a fake organisation where text, art and fashion form a slurry infused with a situationist attitude. Everyone's drinking tiny 25 cl. Heinekens. When I approach them I hear that they are talking about Purple Prose from Paris, a crossover journal that mixes art and fashion. I step up to them, introduce myself, say that I live in Paris, and that I don't really know the people behind Purple Prose, but that I do know some of the people behind other art journals in Paris. Antek and Bernadette don't seem very impressed, the conversation lags, and I withdraw.

Later, however, Karl approaches me and asks me about myself. We agree to meet up at an art opening a few days later, featuring the much-hyped artist group Art Club 2000 at the gallery American Fine Arts, also in Soho. Karl tells me that the gallery owner himself, Colin de Land, initiated the artist collective, which consists of seven students to whom he was introduced by some of the teachers from Cooper Union, and that their works mainly consist of young people posing in various college lifestyle situations that comment wryly on being a student, simultaneously a consumer of life and one's parents' money.

By chance Karl and I happen to meet again even before the Art Club 2000 event arrives. We bump into each other during my first visit to the Anthology Film Archives on 2nd Avenue. Jonas Mekas' film *Zefiro Torna or Scenes from the Life of George Maciunas* is being screened this evening. After the screening I offer him one of my cigarettes and we talk for a bit outside the door of the ticket office.

"Tack for senast," I say.

"Yes, nice to meet you," Karl replies. "Did you enjoy the film?"

"Yes, it was quite nice, a great portrait of his compatriot." I was hoping Karl would speak in Swedish.

"Well, it's Mekas, I also quite enjoyed it, though I prefer his old movie *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania*. Did you know that the guy was actually one of the founders of this institution?"

"No."

"Hmm, he was also arrested by the police in 1964 because he was screening Jean Genet and Jack Smith."

"Jack Smith! I just saw one of his films in Paris. It was screened in a cinema on the south bank. *Normal Love*, it was called, and it was shown as a part of ACT UP Paris's program. They had just restored the film, or the copy they screened, with the assistance of some of the people from the French film institute."

"Hmm."

"I have never seen anything like it, absolutely astonishing. I totally fell in love with Mario Montez, who played the mermaid in the bathtub full of milk."

"Hmm, he also played the part of Dolores Flores in *Flaming Creatures*."

"Ah, OK, but this film I have never seen, I have only heard of it. I would very much like to see it, though."

"Right, this would be the place to see it, then, at the Anthology Film Archives," he responded.

"But Karl, I don't know what you do, have you been here in New York for a long time?"

“Yes, a few years now.”

“What do you do?”

“Hmm, at the moment I give poetry a try.”

I didn't really understand what he meant, but I asked if he knew a place called Pyramid Club since I had heard about it from friends in Copenhagen.

“Yes,” he says, “it's just around the corner, a couple of blocks away, let me show you the P-Y-R-A-M-I-D...”

Text by Henrik Plenge Jakobsen about Karl Holmqvist for the exhibition Rameau's Nephews at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Oslo. 07.11.2014- 08.03.2015