

IN MEMORIAM: Joki

He was the first to come to Minden, Germany, and he went first, drowned in a tragic sailing accident in the Atlantic at Whitsun 1997. Born Josef Klaffki in East Prussia during World War II, he hardly survived the traumatic flight from the invading Red Army on foot across the frozen Baltic Sea as a two-year-old together with his family. Ever since, he has had a dramatic relationship with oceans that influenced his creativity a great deal. He painted and drew a lot by the sea and about the sea. He loved sailing life, and the repair work on a friend's boat eventually brought him from Berlin to Minden in 1971 where he met his love, Onno, a year later and decided to stay. Had they been married, this year would have been their silver wedding anniversary.

A learned locksmith, he later went to art school, because he preferred the free life of a full-time artist to installing escalators and such. Through local jobs, he then made a living from his painting skills. The casual visitor of Minden's old city center still finds his typical caricatures on pub signs, bicycle advertisements, house walls and in our traditional jazz club of which he was president. When I accompanied Joki occasionally on his daily walk from his P.O. Box 2631 at the GPO near Minden cathedral, just two rows above my own, going to his studio in the upper city, we used to pass many colorful spots which he had created in the city.

At home, he skillfully integrated local motifs into his networking activities, e.g. depicting historic buildings from our city on his artistamps for international shows. And vice versa: when he got a dozen networking friends from abroad on a visit to create a large collective mural collage on the long wall between Königstrasse and his gallery in the Old Factory.

Joki's mail art activities started in 1979 when he used his travels to Southern France on his first travel picture letter. Soon his envelopes developed into coherent holistic artworks which combined his own "forged" postal stamps with many variations on the dull official stamps in such a clever way that even the local French postman took them for real and canceled them—philatelic rarities today, or was it just because of the cheese and wine they enjoyed together the evening before?

After a while, Joki realized that there was a growing network of similar activities outside Minden. His

approach, however, always remained a very individual and personal one, above all centered on painting and the creating of a rich variety of artistamps, to which he added the color computer graphics increasingly in the last years. Among his hallmarks were fried eggs, French stamp images, erotic motifs, and of course Mona Lisa. The computer was one of the few luxuries I ever found around this minimalist social dropout artists who lived under the motto: "Less is more" and who loved to tell visitors when they got puzzled about his modest lifestyle: "The more you own, the less time you have to think."

His creative processes were mostly public, and that was on purpose. He welcomed me as a new artist friend to Minden including me into his "Jo's Workshop & Galerie" in his Co(s)mic Year 1980, which was already his 50th exhibition program. Shortly after that he moved to his final artspace "Kulturszene Fabrik" where he combined a long series of international mail art shows and events with local music and art markets, willingly sponsoring young talent. His Factory became a focus and a switchboard for local/global exchange just like our Kulturzentrum BUZ in the lower city, both decorated with a long series of old mail art VIPS in person.

From 1984 on, he combined all his interests in the zine **Smile** where Factory events were documented, mail art documentation. From Neoist Monty Cantsin days in the 80s on, it was one in a network of nearly 50 diverse issues of **Smile** worldwide with international networking news. Under his pseudonym Mona Catbird (a parody on La Gioconda and her puzzling smile), also as Abel Numan and as Pere's **Trojka** (an homage to Gorbachev), Joki fought tirelessly for ways towards democratic cultural societies, especially for the independence of mail art from the commercialization through established institutions. "Art is useless, but man cannot live without the useless." Among his further targets, I'd like to mention Chernobyl, Strausfascism, unemployment and xenophobia. And he never hesitated to complain about trash in his P.O. Box, above all the copy of a copy of a leftover from some mail artist's bottom drawer which has nothing to do with the theme of your project.

Amazingly enough, he managed to finance 13 volumes of **Smile**, like his international comics fanzine **Stars & Types**, merely through the ads of local businessmen—and that in an international magazine! This shows his charismatic role here in Minden, a *propheta in patria* without the Cavellini effect which

saw him disregarded at home. Unconventional, individually, and uncompromisingly he created regularly new publications, preferably between midnight and 4 a.m., producing even to his latest *Zeitreiter* in April 1997.

In 1986, we both loved traveling, especially mail art tourism, and thus sometimes met in strange places like Robert Rehfeldt's East Berlin studio to produce a collective artiststamp sheet, after paying our entrance fees to the GDR like a zoo ticket. Apart from his regular "Tour Aquitaine" summer academies in France, he created mail art on the move in England, Greece, Poland, and the U.S. At home we had meanwhile developed a peaceful and cooperative co-existence in diversity within our creation, Mail Art Mekka Minden, participating in each other's mail art projects and openings. September saw us organizing together a total art week as a joint project of his association Kulturszene Fabrik and my Kulturverein Wolkenstein within the worldwide year of DNCs, i.e. Decentralized Networking Congresses which brought 26 networkers from 8 countries to Minden, among them H.R. Fricker from Switzerland, the father of the DNC idea, for performance, a mail art conference, artist videos, installations, graffiti, an open air gallery and so much more. Just imagine all those creative energy potentials multiplying each other!

Joki loved festivals, vernissages, parties of which he very soon became the droll, fabulous, eloquent, gnarled center and soul. After several Academy Festivals at Kunst-Bahn-Hausen with a video studio production

showing a more sedate Joki bearded and with his new black hat that he had traded for other numerous red caps of his revolutionary years as living artwork, the following Years Without Art from 1990-1993 meant to him an individual art strike in accordance with many networkers against the exploitation of artists. His credo was: "Art is dead. Long live the new creative praxis!" Since 1989 he was storing ideas from networkers in his INGE Investment Bank's box room: The thinking will be paid when mutual values improve situations."

During his last sailing trip around the Azores he was experimenting with a different form of mail art again, sending out messages in bottles. We got a prototype in our Netmail archive: a poem on a condom, a "French letter" in red wine, contributed to my city pun project. It was on this fatal trip, when a treacherous wave tore him unexpectedly from the midst of a creative life. In grieving for him, I imagine him just now over some of his beloved cheese and red wine, relaxed together with Ray Johnson and Cavellini and Heino Otte by a heavenly fireplace, sketching caricatures of some naughty little angels with thick conk noses, as he used to do by the fireplace here in his studio at Mail Art Mekka Minden. So goodbye, Joki! And to say it with the international mail artists' farewell: Keep in touch! Who knows?

Peter Kustermann Netmail
Minden, August 1997



Joki (2nd from left) stamping galore with Netmail, Stussi, Meade, and Olbrich at Kulturzentrum BUZ.