

INTERVIEW WITH HENNING CHRISTIANSEN
Francesco Conz
Translated from the German by Michael Swellander

This interview, conducted in 1992 in Møn, Denmark, in German by the Italian publisher and art collector Francesco Conz, was never published and has been transcribed and translated for publication in this journal. Conz and Christiansen discuss the latter's career from the 1960s to the then-present, with a focus on Christiansen's collaborations with a range of artists throughout Europe. The transcription was lightly edited for clarity and accuracy, and condensed to remove some of the small talk on the original recording. We have indicated in the transcription where there were breaks in the tape, which was transferred to digital by Magnus Kaslov.

FRANCESCO CONZ

What is today?

HENNING CHRISTIANSEN

Today is August 12, 1992. That is the date, and I am 60. I was born in 1932. Is the machine running?

FC The machine is running.

HC The machine is running. Good. I was born in Copenhagen in 1932. Then school, etc. Sometimes sick, sometimes healthy. Then at 18–1950—I went to the conservatory in Copenhagen with a major in clarinet and minor in composition, and of course music theory, music history, and everything else. Solfège...

FC I wanted to ask a question... it is harder to interview in English...

HC Yes, it is harder in English. I was thinking about that, too. I speak German better than English. The words for me... I don't know it as well as everyone else does. They also only have three languages. We always have to make compromises. Many compromises. But anyway, I went to the conservatory very early, actually. I was 18. Today that is not normal at all; most people are older. I was there for five years, until 1955. Then I was out and I was supposed to become a soldier, but I got a position with the Royal Life Guards, those people with bear hats and blue or red outfits in parades.

FC You were with them?

HC Yes, I was there instead of military service. I lived at home at the time, however; I had a great salary, and I could stay there. After four years, though, I had a wonderful fight. This fight happened because I was very dissatisfied with the job, even though it was very easy, just two hours a day... Then I also played as an assistant with the radio orchestra at the Royal Danish Orchestra. I also played in Tivoli in order to make more money, and moreover, I became a state-licensed music pedagogue and had many students. Then I became a kind of performer-professor at a conservatory in Odense. The only condition was that I had to enroll in classes again and study music theory, music history, and solfège. I did that in 1960. I

taught at the same time. I became less and less interested. In 1962 I threw it all away. I had played enough. I knew that I did not want to be in an orchestra because it was quite boring for me. It was always the same. Others find it very nice, but I was finished with it. At the conservatory I had begun to organize a society for New Music with another named Mogens Winkel Holm. We worked on various forms of concerts, for example four-hour concerts, and then in 1963 we hosted Fluxus at the conservatory. Eric Andersen, Per Kirkeby, Poul Gernes, Peter Louis-Jensen, and John Davidsen were there.

FC Was Knud Pedersen there as well?

HC Knud was not there. He started organizing Fluxus at Kunsthallen Nikolaj in 1962. That was basically his entry. Besides that, he knew Arthur Køpcke very well. Before this, however, we called [our group] “13.” That was already 1961. We also started the Ex-School at this time. “Experimenting.” That was people like Kirkeby, Bjørn Nørgaard, Poul Gernes. About ten people. Troels Andersen was there. The director of the Asger Jorn Museum, Richard Winther, who was a bit older. The main idea was: “out of the art academy.” I was ripe for the idea: “out of the conservatory.” Then after the Fluxus concert at the Nikolaj Church there was the spring event at the conservatory. That was very funny. I want to say that I was kicked out of the conservatory, but I could also say that I left voluntarily. It went like this: the event ended with Poul Gernes taking a hammer to Nam June Paik’s piano—Paik was at the Louisiana Museum before this—and smashing the keys and the piano to pieces, one could say. Then the lights went out, and all over the walls: images from porn. Every situation was portrayed there. It was great. Then the director of the conservatory came and he was furious. He said: “I saw all of this in Paris in 1925. It’s over. No one does this anymore.” He wanted the piano taken downstairs. A broken piano like that had no place in a conservatory. We carried the piano down to the street, which was quite difficult. We put it out on the boulevard, and it was taken away the next day as trash. The next day I went to the director to say goodbye. That was the end. Before this there had been the Fluxus Festival in Copenhagen. Køpcke, Andersen, and I were there. Albert Mertz’s name was on the poster, but I believe he was actually in Paris. Robert Filliou was supposed to come, but he didn’t have the money. He didn’t come, despite being married to a Dane, Marianne [Staffels].

FC Marianne is Danish?

HC Yes. Anyway, I was with Dick Higgins, Alison Knowles, Knud Pedersen, and many others. I have written much about what I remember of those times. I realized a graphic score of Sylvano Busstto’s where I set and hung beer bottles all around a piano. We jingled the beer bottles, which was very pretty with the piano. Then later—or it might have been before—I played Mozart’s A-major sonata, but the goal was to play the whole thing in one minute. I started and stopped everywhere in the sonata. My idea was that one only needed a hint of this sonata [*bums*]. It’s already there because we know it so well. I also played Beethoven’s F-minor sonata. This, also in only one minute—through, boom, done. Then I did Fisherman’s Piano, which is where we opened an upright piano and set a big ladder next to it. We had a fishing pole and a beer opener and went fishing. That’s what I remember doing.

At the same time I also wrote music, similar to Stockhausen, Boulez, and all those people. I was at the school in Darmstadt. Summer. I think it was in 1961, ’62, ’63, ’64...

I did music, like the earlier quintet, similar to Boulez. But then I had these *Perceptive Constructions*, the one work that is played quite often. At some point it caused a furor. These are rising forms, constructions. From then on I continued with Fluxus-compositions, Fluxus-models, and I also had piano-models. Then I collaborated with Eric Andersen. We were good friends, but [he was] much younger. Then I had a friendship with Køpcke. We were all over Denmark doing performances. Funny places, including high schools, of course. Those were the best. We performed with other groups as well, with poets like Vagn Steen and Hans-Jørgen Nielsen for example. We did a performance with all these people in the Nikolaj Church. It must have been early. I am convinced it was before Fluxus. Anyway, we built a big structure and climbed all over it like apes. Then I read a poem by Vagn Steen, which I recited very comically—very ironic, funny, and everyone laughed themselves silly. That was nice. Then we did bed-compositions in various other spaces, where one goes to bed. Very simple: clothes off, the clock, about half an hour. Funny things.

FC Did you compose much?

HC Yes, I was always writing compositions in addition to everything else. I mean actually writing them down. I also attempted to develop the modern tonal language. I realized, however, that this was a false path. I believe that to this day. This leads to nothing, because it does not have enough form and socially has too little to say. The other line was pop concerts with the Beatles, and that went very well. In 1967 I did strict melodic compositions for full orchestra. Film music. I lived off of that. This was interesting, because my next idea came from it. This was music as a fundamental idea. When one makes film music, they say: “12 seconds here,” “32 seconds here,” and “two and a half minutes there.” That was quite boring for me, because I wanted to work with the whole sound of a film. Perhaps not the actors, but the whole original tone, the normal sounds—leaves, a car driving. I wanted to work on all of that electronically, so that it could be defamiliarized in some way. I found that very interesting. Then music left me. I discovered that the tape recorder was the single truly new instrument of the twentieth century. The other instruments are connected to dreams of organ music, all that one dreamt about the organ’s being able to do. This electronic idea continued. I have called one’s working with real sound “music as foundation.” This “foundation” is reality for me.

I must also talk about when I was in Darmstadt in 1964. I used to sit in a beer tent with Terry Riley, Eric Andersen, and Jed Curtis, an American—big guy. We always sat there and talked disparagingly about the concert arrangements. We listened sometimes, but we all agreed that this path was stupid.

FC Did you produce artworks at this time?

HC Do you mean images? Some. I don’t want to say that that was my main occupation. They were early works.

FC When did you start to produce work in this direction?

HC I can’t say. I was still occupied with sound. I also made sound behind Beuys as he stood. That was very important. In principle, I created space and time. He could stand there for an hour without moving as long as my music carried him. I have a picture of him, but the music—and that is what is advantageous about music—has vanished. It takes up no space. Only when one listens to it. I find that good.

Anyway, Riley and Curtis drove back with me in 1964, quite early. We did an action in North Zealand, where I lived at the time. There was a bunny farm. Riley threw sand in my piano. Not a piano, a flute. Then he planted roses. I played him my *Perceptive Constructions*, these repetition-models. Jed Curtis stood on the roof with a Viking helmet and naked torso. That must have been 1963, because it was August. [Curtis] called and screamed like Valhalla. It was glorious. I brought the audience into the bunny cage and overburdened myself with schnapps, cake, and coffee, and I went around serving people. Then I got into a bit of a fight because a young man had had too much schnapps. His parents found this outrageous. They called the police the next day. Anyway, it was funny. I had an electric train with which I transported the schnapps.

FC Is there documentation?

HC No documentation at all. Eric Andersen—it was in August—went skiing. He hiked off. How long he hiked, I do not know. He simply wandered off into the landscape. Astonishingly, many people came to this performance. Some came from Copenhagen. Most were farmers, normal people. Friendly. They found it very funny. It was all public. The whole house was open. It was great...

After this Fluxus-concert in the Nikolaj Church, there were other events, which one can look up. Anyway, we were together: Kōpcke, Thomas Schmit, and I. We did concerts in the Nikolaj Church. I performed a question-and-answer. The composition is that I ask the audience if they have questions, and if they have questions, they are served beer, coffee, schnapps. Kōpcke was the waiter and brought these things to the audience. In the meanwhile, I did a composition for lawn mower. Every twenty-five minutes I went around with a lawnmower, and in five minutes that caused a good row. I am telling you this because at the end, the audience threw bottles, glasses, and apples into the lawn mower and made a huge mess. Because of this mess, a boss at the church was able to get Pedersen kicked out of the museum. He was able to tell of how terrible this composition was. It was not so terrible at all, because we cleaned everything up afterwards. It was an orgy for him, however.

Thomas Schmit, *Sanitas*, 1979. For this, a bus came for about sixty people. Then we explained, “We have a bus here. We will drive to an open field about sixty kilometers from Copenhagen, and you all will have to get yourselves home.” That was also in August.

The bus was properly full. Køpcke, Eric Andersen, and I drove off without Thomas Schmit. He disappeared. He had returned to Cologne.

FC Did you all drink a lot around this time?

HC Yes, we drank a lot, and talked a lot. Køpcke was the dean of this. I can say, Tut [a nickname for Arthur Køpcke's wife] never made a work, but he was himself a work. He was a Fluxus-king.

Anyway, we were at this field and the people got off the bus. Eric, Køpcke, the chauffeur, and I drove back to Copenhagen in the empty bus. Someone said later that the group wandered across fields until they came to a small village. They were able to find another bus there, which they paid to bring them back to Copenhagen. That was a great experience. That was Thomas Schmit's idea. Sanitas, 1979.

Then, 1964. I was at the Technische Hochschule in Aachen. I went there with Robert Filliou and Køpcke. That was eight funny days of preparation...

[*Tape side ends, and the next side begins in the middle of Conz's and Christiansen's conversation*]

...assassination of Hitler. That was celebrated in Germany as the birth of democracy. That started well, but it got rough very quickly, what can I say? This civilization... Beuys got punched in the nose and then the audience got deathly quiet. Earlier I had been playing piano, and Tut and Filliou were singing and dancing in the auditorium. [Wolf] Vostell did his *Grain Field* (*Kornfeld*). He poured yellow powder all over and other colored powder, and he gave grain to the audience so that everyone sat there with grain. We found all that to be a bit much, which is to say that it took a lot of effort.

FC Right.

HC A lot of material, and it was very bad this time. We were all mad at him, because we all had to clean up this colored powder. We left it to him. We watched, drank, and talked about who was going to clean it all up. Such a thing—that kind of mess—went against our thinking. I made messes as well at Nikolaj, but that was another story, with the beer and bottles. That was also much simpler, since

[Vostell's piece] was in an auditorium and it is very difficult to clean that up. The carpets as well. Then the police came into the auditorium and the audience was kicked out—and it was a big audience. I was playing with a toy rifle, which I posed with on the floor in classic nineteenth-century war positions. That managed to soothe everyone a little. The people were all outside and it was not at all a bad thing that the performance ended with a row. Those days it was possible, today barely. No reaction, because... oh well. They know that it's a bit abnormal to do an action. It was very nice.

Then I went to Aachen in August. Then came Beuys with Eva [Beuys] and the children.

FC When did you get to know Beuys?

HC 1964, in Aachen. I wrote an article about it where I arrive and it is very hot. I met Beuys immediately. He wanted to show us something in the back of his car. He opened the trunk and there was a box of fat. It was very hot and liquified and yellow and blue and smelled terrible. I slowly found this strange thing wonderful. I saw it again later, when it was cold. We became friends instantly. I wrote with him. I was in Düsseldorf and saw his *Ulysses* drawing, and was with him for several days there. Then I wrote a lot and did an action, a demonstration-concert, in 1966. Beuys and Vostell came to Copenhagen for the first time in 1964, where we did something we called the *May Exhibition*. We did the performance in August at Charlottenborg. I played *Körper und Klopfen* (*Bodies and Knocking*), which is a piece in which I quietly play cello. I also did my coffee piece. It begins with a nice coffee table, which over time becomes wrecked. All the cakes get smeared across it. Vostell did his *Bus Stop*. Beuys did *Eurasia*, where he lies on the ground in a felt roll with a microphone and there is a dead rabbit behind and in front of him. In 1966, however, he showed his images of dead rabbits in Gallery 101 in Copenhagen, which were and continue to be quite well-known. That came out of the Ex-School, and we did a lot there. There were many installations and actions. Nam June Paik was there as well. Charlotte Moorman—

FC Did you see her often? Were you friends?

HC Yes, but we didn't see each other often. She always wanted for me to go to New York, but I didn't go.

FC Have you ever gone?

HC I went to New York for the first time in 1992. That is generally my Fluxus problem, that I never sought out George Maciunas in New York. But one should not make too much out of that, that one doesn't go to kiss the Pope's feet [*laughs*]. It looks that way. Anyway, I went to Germany. I went there in 1966. Soon afterward I went together with Bjørn Nørgaard to Düsseldorf in order to perform *Manresa* at the Schmela Gallery.

FC You met Maciunas in Europe, right?

HC He had to have been in Copenhagen, right? Never. He was there, but I never met him. I never had an intimate friendship with him. I was very interested in Dick Higgins, however. I wrote with Higgins and he was also in Copenhagen at the academy at Charlottenborg. We did a performance there. He came with his big fur. It must have been winter. It was before I went to Germany, anyway, which was December 15, 1966. Beuys was in Copenhagen in November. I went back home. On the first of February I drove back to Germany and stayed quite a long time, until 1969. Then Ursula [Reuter Christiansen] and I got married. A child—

FC When was that? 1966?

HC 1969. I did a lot with Beuys at this time, however. Performances. Important performances were: *Eurasienstab*, *Hauptstrom*. *Eurasienstab* was in Vienna and Antwerp. *Hauptstrom* was in Darmstadt. And then there was *Rastplatz bitt sauber halten* in Düsseldorf. *Celtic* was of course in Edinburgh and Basel. *Celtic* is three and a half hours and quite well-known. I did all of the sound for this action. That was what was totally peculiar about our collaboration, that Beuys did what he wanted, and I did what I wanted.

FC How did the friendship start? Through your music?

HC No, but because of the point I had reached [in my practice]. I was in total accord with what he was doing. I did music as well that was not made with instruments. I worked with all sounds. I so markedly left the source [*Ur*] [of my musical background], but that was only because I'm so interested in music that I will work with...

I come from a family that is not so cultivated. I had the whole experience with classical music, and indeed that experience was very strong because there were only operettas and popular singers played in my house. That is okay. My father could also sing very well and always played comic songs. Anyway, I come markedly from the musical side of things, and we know that most Fluxus compositions have much to do with music and the stage. Beuys was also very musical. We had a piece for piano and violin. We were meant to do something with Paik at the end, 1980, but Beuys could not come. He was too sick, but I did play with Paik at the *Freundsbiennale* in Hamburg. A record was made from that. Beuys could also play cello. It was his favorite instrument when he was young, but I suppose things turned out differently for him, right?

Anyway, I met everyone in Düsseldorf that year: Jörg Immendorff, Reiner Ruthenbeck, Imi Knöbel, Sigmar Polke, Dieter Roth. Roth and I never worked together, but we were often together in Düsseldorf, with Dorothy Iannone. Roth was more often in Stuttgart or in Iceland, which is to say he was not in Düsseldorf much. He often said that he was too tired to come. I had a great relationship with Filliou. I found those three—Filliou, Beuys, and Dieter Roth—exceptionally interesting. Then there were the others. I met Hermann Nitsch without knowing who he was.

FC When was that?

HC 1967, when we did a performance at Gallery nächst St. Stephen in Vienna. Nitsch was there. I also met Otto Muehl there.

FC Muehl is in prison now.

HC Yes. I am sorry to hear that. We all went together, with Muehl, to Neusiedlersee. His mother lived there. She had a small stage and a grand piano, which she had painted beautifully. Then she played for us. Schumann. She played in a state of total absorption. We were all very happy. Then we swam in Neusiedlersee.

FC Was Muehl alone or was he with other communards?

HC He was alone. I got the impression that he was quite alone. He said that he did not tolerate others. He had a relationship with Nitsch, and who was the other...

FC Günter Brus, and Rudolf Schwarzkogler. He was not dead yet in 1967. He killed himself.

HC Those were extreme people. I don't find it necessary to take oneself so far, but I was born in peace. I experienced the war as well, but from a distance, in Copenhagen. I experienced when the Germans came here. April 9, 1940, with planes over all of Copenhagen. And the older I get, the happier I am that our foreign minister made a deal with Hitler. That is, there was an alliance between Denmark and Germany, but the royal family and the politicians were not touched and in Denmark there was not much...

FC Fighting.

HC Not as much as in other countries. There was an active resistance in other countries as well, whereas in Denmark there was a passive resistance. And that, I want to say, was not so bad, especially when one realizes how idiotic wars are...

I have another small but important thing to tell about the concerts at the Charlottenborg for the May Exhibition. I eventually had a falling out with Eric Andersen. Køpcke was also connected with Andersen a while, until he also discovered that Eric Andersen is a psychopath. Is that too much? It's meant to be funny. Anyway, I couldn't be there. Suddenly, I drove there, and Vostell and Beuys immediately came over to me and asked what was going on with Eric. They hugged me. Then they drove back with me to the island [Jerslev, North Zealand], and they stayed with me for a couple of days. It was very nice. But this fight with Eric... we had worked a lot together since 1961. Køpcke chose Eric as a collaborator, but I never had a falling out with Køpcke. He found me bourgeois, however, and I found him boring. I mean, his compositions were boring to me. We [Eric Andersen and Christiansen] had a few problems, which persisted. Our camaraderie ended.

FC When was that?

HC 1964. The thing was, though, that I live in Denmark and Eric was born here and we eventually collaborated. Then there was a falling out. It is so normal that it's almost not worth talking about. That has happened with me a lot, that I work with someone, and then it is no longer interesting. Totally normal. There was no upheaval. It never reestablished itself, though.

FC It never reestablished itself?

HC No, I have no desire to, and neither does he. Simply a conclusion. But I find this falling-out story very nice.

Shall I really talk about everything? There was also the founding of the German Student Party, the whole political stage with Beuys's Student Party. The funny thing was that there were only seven people. We all signed a paper. Despite that, Beuys said that we were the biggest party in the world, that we had the most members. It was totally abstract. This was also the time of Rudi Dutschke and Wolfgang Lefevre. They hit hard. Willy Brandt's son was also involved. Then we had this abstract concept of the party. Bazon Brock was there as well. He pursued from there his idea of a more open democracy and a non-voting party. This was worked out in a colloquium where we all spoke about what thinking actually is. That was a good time. Kirkeby, Bjørn Nørgaard, and Lene Adler Petersen—people from Copenhagen—were also there. They stayed with us and also organized something at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf. That was a real academic situation. I was not a student, I was just there. We were in Denmark the next year and I made a lot of film music there. We had three children very quickly. Our firstborn is now 35. The others are 17, 22, and 20. The 1960s went by with lots of moving around and film music.

FC Were you also active in the '70s, or less so?

HC In terms of actions I was less active, but I did a lot of actions in the '80s and [in 1985] I got a position at the University of Fine Arts in Hamburg.

FC With Gerhard Rühm.

HC Yes, with Rühm.

FC I know him very well.

HC I knew him as a musician and composer, but he made images, too.

FC His father was in the Vienna Philharmonic.

HC I believe it. He was damaged. I noticed right away that Rühm was damaged by his relationship with his father, with Vienna, and with music. They have a concept of music as though it were the finest wine. I don't think that way. Effect. But the Viennese are so pleasant, like the Italians [*laughs*]. They have a lot of fantasies, anyway. I got along with him very well. He is nervous. We also have high blood pressure in common. I look pretty relaxed, but we both have this damn problem, and we always talk about it together. It's interesting. We always talk about what we eat, pills, and how it's going.

FC Are you teaching this year?

HC I am teaching, but I have a different plan. I used to be there all the time, but now I only teach four hours a week. I'm an hourly professor, one could say. I drive to Hamburg a couple of times a month. It depends on what we do. I like to take the students out of the classroom to do actions. I did that in East Berlin as well. I am not that into the academy. One needs to get out. One needs to see what life is. I'm not for this academic concept of incubation. They need to get out as soon as possible in order to learn who really wants to do actions. I have the idea that one comes to painting, film, and all that better through this work–video, etc., through action. One realizes ideas. I was always happy to teach. I was over 50, and it was very nice to work again with young people. That one has the privilege to talk with young people about their problems and ideas... But I bailed. I didn't want to be a music professor at all. Music history was all too concrete for me. I'm not the type. I have to say, though, that I do love music history.

Then I did many actions. Then I received the DAAD fellowship and spent three years in Berlin.

FC Three years? When?

HC It was 1988, 1989, and 1990.

FC Short.

HC Yes, I took the award money and have spent a lot of time in Berlin besides. I also met René Block there in the 1960s.

FC When did you first get to know him? 1969?

HC Yes, perhaps a bit earlier. Anyway, we have known each other a very long time. He did *ich versuche dich freizulassen... (machen)* in the Academy of Arts. The audience wrecked it. The story went like this. It was January. All the students were confined to the university all day because President Nixon was in Berlin. That evening at 11 they came to the Fluxus concert of Beuys's and mine, *ich versuche dich freizulassen... (machen)*. The concert began, and after twenty minutes the people had fire hoses and covered the whole stage with water. I played violin. There is a great picture of this.

[*Tape side ends*]

HC We are running?

FC We are running.

HC We are running, running, running. I invented the expression "Music as green" in 1969. I worked extensively at that time with tape recorders and found that it was the only new musical instrument. In this century. The possibility was to record real-sound, to manipulate it, and to narrate with it. I saw this lacking in the development of music: the narrative element. I also found anecdotes important. Anyway, it was the case that I was tired of the "parameter" music in Darmstadt. I was not the only one. I sought another way at the time. I invented the term, "music as green," because it was "world as sound." The world is quite green to me. My love for the color green came out of this. I can say simply that I began to write in green instead of in black. It didn't matter to me which green. All greens are beautiful. Then I learned that Hildegard von Bingen maintained, "Green is the sun of the world." With that comes spring. I made more images then. All have text. All have this "behind behind." One sees the image, but behind it are many crypto-philosophical ideas that one gradually discovers. For me, the point is not to paint beautifully. I can't. That is not my way. I would rather be contrary and do something a bit ugly. I have also written "ugly" pieces of music. Beauty is not so important for me, but rather [what's important is] reality, truth, and thinking about life. It was good to work with green because spring, awakening, uprising, upheaval, new life, etc., come with it. I am very positive about life.

Not because I don't see the negative side, but because, in my opinion, one cannot renew anything from a negative starting point. One has to overcome and then find out how life should really be. That is why I like it so much on the island Møn whenever I return. I travel a lot. I have a professorship in Hamburg. I got that in 1985 when I was ripe. By "ripe" I mean ripe for conversations with young people. They could learn a lot from me.

At the end of the 1960s I did this performance with Beuys. *Celtic*. That was very important for me. I performed *Celtic* twelve or thirteen times in Edinburgh and then the following year in Basel. It was wonderful for me because I discovered the Celts through it. The Celts, who were against all authority, suited me very well. They wanted nothing to do with any emperor. They preferred to have small groups all over Europe. In Britain and Ireland there are big festivals. They also have a language that they defend. I have worked a lot with language, but mix-language. I mix the languages of Europe. Back then it was the languages of western Europe, but now I go further into the languages of eastern Europe. I take words from each side. I did an exhibition of an exhibition at Gelbe Musik, with [Ursula and Rene] Block, in Berlin, called *Freedom is Around the Corner*. My idea was that this concept of freedom—Beuys spoke a lot about freedom—did not really exist for me. Freedom means no responsibility. That is not what Beuys meant, but this empty concept of freedom disturbed me. Because of this I found another position: "never get out." The feeling, the consciousness, that freedom is directly around the corner is the point where I want to live. I have a lot of responsibility: children, grandchildren, family. And then I have responsibility to the whole. I can't assume that responsibility because it is too much for one person, but I try. I try to find solutions to this whole disgrace we have. Everything went wrong somewhere, here and there. Economy and the market. Everything is confused. And now nationalism and war in the east. This all interests me greatly. I am very politically engaged, but I learned not to occupy myself directly with political parties because they all want power. Power does not interest me at all.

So, I did *Celtic*. That was the first time that I repeated an action. We repeated *Eurasienstab* in Vienna and Antwerp, but only twice and in completely different spaces. Everything changed, in other words. *Celtic*, however, was three and a half hours and then three and half hours again. In between performances we went into the highlands of Edinburgh. Holyrood Park with many sheep.

I returned to the sheep because they had impressed me so much. Later, I worked with sheep. I recorded a composition for 200 sheep in Hamburg. Then I manipulated the composition. I used it in Linz, for example, where I built a castle out of straw and let thirty sheep walk around with bells. The music played in a container, and that had a powerful loudspeaker effect. I also did this at an agricultural show in Denmark. I made a kind of hay hollow from out of which the music played. I used sheep-music there as well. That all happened in the 1980s. I did that in Roskilde as well, and at the exhibition called *Brennpunkt Düsseldorf*, where those studying at the academy were exhibiting. I did it in many European cities. The sheep-music came from a concept of nature, and I used the sheep as a basic material, but I also used the sea and birds. I worked with birds often, and [in particular] I worked with canaries. I have ten canaries in my house, and they make the most beautiful music I know. It is so variable, and there are new sounds every time. I have tried to describe how they perform because they really are great musicians [*laughs*].

In the 1970s, I mostly made film music. That was mostly about survival. We came to Møn in the 1970s. We came here in the 1970s and bunkered.

FC Who found this place?

HC We found it through Copenhagen. I received a fellowship from the Danish state, and I put all of the money I got into the house. It was hugely important that I had a fixed place. I was in Copenhagen and it was not possible at all for me to live with my family. Besides that, I preferred to live permanently in Denmark. I have a connection to the landscape and to the sea. I can't see the sea through my window, but I know it is there. I go swimming often. That was not the case in Düsseldorf. There, I only had the Rhine. It's true that water is very important for me. In 1980 I did the big campaign for "green" in Düsseldorf with Beuys. I did *Die große grüne Zeltsymphonie* there with birds. That was on the square in front of the opera house, at Dreischeibenhäuser. It's a square with lots of pavement. Beuys erected a big tent, and I had birds and my music there for ten days. That was from early in the morning, about ten o'clock, until evening, also ten o'clock. I had the wonderful feeling that the birds attracted people to the tent when people came from the street—it was October and there was nothing but cars in the streets—and

went into the tent. The tent was full of birdsong. That impressed many. It was wonderful. Then I spoke a great deal with Beuys. He gave lectures. He spread his ideas verbally. Orally. That was not so important for me. I was not able to work with that. Then we wanted to do a concert in 1985 at the Friedensbiennale in Hamburg. Paik, Beuys, and I were supposed to be there. We got two big grand pianos for it. Beuys was unable to come, however, because he was too sick. Then he had the great idea to set a telephone on one of the pianos and an oxygen tank underneath. He would call in the middle of the concert and say something. He did that from bed. It was great. Paik and I made music. I had a kind of bird-piano. I had a canary on the piano that would go, “Peep!” I made wing movements with my arms and I also played wing movement music. Paik played Chopin and Korean violin. He also played horse-music, rider-music. Then we played a farewell concert, as that was the last concert where Beuys was there. I have this telephone conversation... Then he died at the end of January–Beuys–1986. That is, two months after this concert. Then we had the idea to do *Lowland* in Wiesbaden, a concert about the depths of our consciousness and of the earth as well. I started doing it with Bjørn Nørgaard, and we did it in many cities. The first time was in Rome with Philip Corner; the Italian, Giuseppe Chiari; and Emmett Williams. We were up on the stage, Chiari with many foxes. It was very well performed and had very quiet music. Philip Corner was above [dressed as] a pasha, almost naked [*laughs*].

FC On the piano?

HC Yes, on the piano. On top of it. Then Emmett Williams did poetries in the context of the music.

FC That was in the Teatro Olimpico, right?

HC That was in the Teatro Olimpico in Rome.

FC I was there, too.

HC Oh? Did you not see me?

FC I was there the whole time. Paik was there...

HC No.

FC Williams, Chiari, Corner on the piano...

HC Yes, and I was below in the orchestra pit.

FC With chickens!

HC And Bjørn.

FC I didn't know. I photographed everything.

HC But you didn't photograph anything below?

FC No, because I didn't know what that was. I didn't understand then.

HC No, no.

FC But I remember many chickens...

HC Yes, we made a chicken coop. We made music there and painted pictures and the chickens walked around.

FC They were tamed chickens, very good.

HC Yes! It is very easy to work with chickens, and with animals in general, if you just don't threaten them. If you just treat them very softly... sheep, too. Later we worked with sheep.

FC I must have spoken with Bjørn, since he was in the chicken coop.

HC Yes.

FC He told me that you all brought the chickens from here.

HC No, we didn't. We only brought the idea from here [*laughs*]. They were beautiful, Italian chickens... quite large. I sat at a table and drew, wrote, and made music out of it.

FC Below, never above?

HC No, always below in the chicken coop in the orchestra pit.

FC Rene was also there.

HC He was there as well. He organized the concert along with Carlo Quartucci and Carla Tato. We also performed *Penthesilea* by [Heinrich von] Kleist. We performed these for four and a half hours, five times. I made the music for it. I did sound for the entire four and a half hours. There was always either a bang before or a bang afterward. It's strange, that you didn't discover us making music, because all of the sound came from us. There was only piano music above, but all of the sound came from below. The whole floor was full of sound. I had a lot of loudspeakers and lots of music, that is, lots of sound, sound-music down there.

FC I was friends with Emmett Williams at the time, and there were a few people there who I knew well. They brought me inside quickly and I took photos, but I wasn't there for a long time.

HC No, no, it's okay. It's nice of you to say that. We performed *Lowland* several times, in Oslo, Malmö, Aarhus, and in Copenhagen. At the end we did a *Lowland*-trilogy in Sydney, Australia... We decided to have two stages, so a stage on each side. Then we decided to work in the middle, with the audience on the stage. We did it that way because we needed a lot of room. We had that for three days. The main event was always from seven until nine when we had a performance directly in front of the people. They always came and we worked from early in the morning, about ten. We built a big landscape. I have video. We had four hours and it was not directed, we just did it. We didn't have a super-Beuys editing machine. We had to invent everything. It was damn long. One sees that with the video.

What should I talk about now?

FC Wait a moment, let's take a break...

[*break in the tape*]

Good.

HC So, I have already spoken about my conception of language, my mix-language: "Ie-u äh-mi Vo-gel," for example. I wrote a whole poetry collection in mix-language, *Mix-Sprache, mix-sprog, langue mixe*.

FC That was an example of it.

HC Yes, "Io am en Vogel" is an important example. There are many more. We were one people here in Europe, and suddenly this problem of various languages became evident, obvious. Really, our quality and then also difficulty at some point. I did an action in Berlin where everything changed. It was a revolution, an upset. Change. It was at the Ballhaus. First there was a concert with Joe Jones and bim-bam orchestra, and there were sheets of paper over the lights. [Joe] laid paper over the lights to dampen them, then removed them, and then repeated it. He gave a great concert. Everything was exhibited onstage and Joe Jones went around and played. Afterwards I performed a revolution with musicians with plastic tubes and various wind-possibilities, even trombones with saxophone mouthpieces, as well as with all possible bells. Bells and even toys. Sissel Tolaas and Milovan Markovic built big rails, and they suddenly threw in a bunch of apples. Then, children came and took the apples. At the end, I pounded with a hammer, and then a laser beam shot down on the stage. A strange performance, one could say, but very sincere, because it dealt with revolution. Thus, the hammer against war and the laser beam, which is like a new communication. That was at the Ballhaus in a beautiful space, properly full. Joe Jones's concert was very gentle, and mine was very vigorous. The whole thing was a little longer than two hours. It was very nice.

FC Joe Jones recently made a car in Cologne. He makes cars.

HC Music as well?

FC Music in the car, I think.

HC Very nice. He wants to do that in Cologne? Very nice. I do picnics now. Someone orders and gets a picnic immediately. What else do I have to tell? I have of course worked a great deal with Carlo Quartucci and with other people in Rome. I did a performance

there with Ursula. We were on a stage where I was pulled around in a net and I howled like an idiot with a loudspeaker. Ursula soothed me, then I got up and we wandered around speaking Danish with each other. All of this was translated into another sound-world via a delay technique. Then at the end we found two solar pianos, so to speak, on the beach, a beam shown down on us and we began to play with each other. Each played their own melody. Then we stood up and listened to these melodies a bit and sang along. That was the end of the performance.

FC What have you done recently, in the last two or three years?

HC I've really done so much. In Oslo, I...

[*tape side ends*]

I did an exhibition in Oslo called *Evergreen*. That was December 1990 or 1991. I'm not sure. I have a paper, [about] this big, with all my actions on it. Anyway, it was in December and I hung a Christmas tree upside down. It hung and there were big stars sprayed green and it looked like a slaughtered Christmas tree. And then cowbells... and if one rang them there was a cowbell-concert. I did that at the beginning, at the opening. Then I arranged a lot of shoes. There were shoes all over the place in various combinations. Many shoe-objects together with records. At the opening I said that people should bring their old shoes. Then they paid 200 Krone for the new shoes. I gave them a green pattern...

FC Did you sign them all?

HC Yes, I stamped and signed them. I also find it nice when one has something to do at an opening. It's not about eternal beauty and "what is that?" and explanations. Simply work. Ken Friedman was there and he helped me.

FC He helped you?

HC Yes. He painted...

FC He is well-informed.

HC Yes.

FC He can also be very generous and not egoistic. It's a shame that he gets criticized. Everyone has flaws, but he gave his life to Fluxus.

HC We are in agreement about a lot of things.

FC I value him very much.

HC He helped me a lot with an exhibition at the Emily Harvey Gallery in New York.

FC Did he?

HC Yes, he wrote about it. He does that a lot for Emily. He didn't come, but that is another story.

FC Can you tell me something about this exhibition?

HC Yes. What did I call it? *Canary*. It was about canaries. I built a canary cage in the middle of the gallery, a column, and then I put a kind of tree inside of it, which I completely painted yellow. Then I had two canaries, a male and female, of the same color yellow living in the column throughout the exhibition. Then I had about ten to fifteen photos about the life of canaries. I also had a drawing about the life of canaries behind a green grill. Then I had scores about the life of canaries, about their song, how they hop, about what they eat, etc. All their activities, nests, and eggs. I did all of this on music paper. I also made records about canaries. I painted the records green and had lunch plates. They have a nice size and hang very nicely. Then instead of "his master's voice" was "the canary's song."

FC Beautiful.

HC The whole time I had canary birdsong playing from a loudspeaker.

FC How was your time in America?

HC First of all, I met with many friends.

FC Who?

HC Dick Higgins, Alison Knowles, Geoffrey Hendricks, and Jon Hendricks. I had only met with him in Berlin before then. Of course, Nam June Paik. We were both 60. We gave each other drawings about being 60, and I also gave him something for these sixty years. And many more, whoever they are... We had a big party and there were many more there. I was also in a concert of John Cage's with some of his older works. That was very nice. I met Cage. I had never spoken with him before and we had a great conversation about hearing his music from the 1930s again. A fine person.

FC Fine.

HC And I know his music very well, so to talk about it at length... that was very good.

FC Did you like America?

HC Somewhat. I saw the brutality, how life is there. I mean, I saw how people wander around with plastic bags without a place to live. They have plastic cups to collect money in. The whole stage is not beautiful. I was interested of course in the fact that so much was going on there and how everything happens so confusedly. It's quite anarchic.

FC New York is another world, the way the people behave, drive. There's filth everywhere.

HC Yes, it is the opposite of Copenhagen, that is clear. And Berlin, Düsseldorf, Hamburg, and Paris, too. That was my first time in New York. I do not regret going to Germany instead of New York. Beuys is no small fry. It was very interesting, and I met a ton of people in Germany who were active in all areas. In the end, I was employed in Hamburg, right? That's why. Speaking purely in terms of academia... I said, "One must do away with these institutions." One cannot do that, but one can change them drastically. By that I mean that one should not take being a professor so seriously. One should do actions with students out in the city and in other cities. I

did that in my program. Immediately outside and working together with others. Of course, we worked in the academy, but it was important to venture out as early as possible in order to feel reality, rather than living under a bell. I scoffed as well at how they built so many new museums but no new academy. The students worked in old, miserable buildings from the previous century. Very difficult. One can't transport anything. One can't carry anything. There is only one entrance door for hundreds of people. In Hamburg there are 1,500. Not all are in the same building. I was in one with a capacity of 200, but there were 600. The structure is changing as well. I question this idea of the institution that got started in the last century and wonder if it is not ending now. The university does not function well at a certain level—

FC Few people go on from the academy to become artists.

HC Because of that we also went out in Copenhagen to do actions with the Ex-School. I also left the conservatory after I knew everything. It was not fun to be at the conservatory. It was boring overall, and it made me quite aggressive. I was not moved. Always these Mozart clarinet concerts. Requirements. It can be different, but most people do Mozart clarinet concerts in order to win in the competition over seats in an orchestra. To be the best. "Being the best" does not interest me at all.

FC Fluxus destroyed this world.

HC Yes.

FC It is more conservative now.

HC Yes, that is true. *Freedom is Around the Corner* wanted to say that, too. They never around at the place where they can take life in a relaxed way, at the place where it is fun. Most think that they must earn a lot of money in order to life in that place. More and more money. "I must," so to speak, "get into a position of power."

FC And they are ready to make any compromise, both in art and in their private lives. When one is young and ready to compromise, one is already old.

HC Yes. Thirty years old and done developing. But that cannot be. I say that peace must be as exciting as war. One must make life so exciting that the idea that war is interesting never occurs to one.

FC What do your children do? The eldest?

HC He [Bjørnstjerne Reuter Christiansen] is interested in photography, but in an artistic way. He does not want to be a reporter, I think. He is at the Fatamorgana photography school in Copenhagen. It is directed by Morten Bo, who is a very good photographer. The school is very international. People are always coming there. It is a small place. Not the best conditions, but a good work atmosphere. He is still going there. He has done four semesters of four months. In the next four months he will work independently.

FC I have a question. Ursula, your wife, is also an artist, right?

HC Yes.

FC It's a bit difficult for two artists to live together, right? It's said that one must resign him- or herself to the other. It seems to me, though, that you have found a good equilibrium.

HC It is hard to say why. Perhaps it is because I am so tolerant. I like to look at art and try to find out what is in it. I am not saying that I have a patent on truth, just for myself. I like that another artist is here. I have taken part in all of Ursula's images. I love it. She has also been there for my music and all of my images. That could have been different. Those are the elements of how we are together.

FC I saw the video yesterday. The music, the combinations... I find it very...

HC Yes, I am someone who can work very well with others. I change when someone comes with a new idea and I find myself in a new position where we can collaborate.

FC What are your roles? Ursula looks after the family in general.

HC She goes to her studio. I came to her yesterday with an image. We often do exhibitions together. We complement each other and say "That is Ursula, that is Henning." No problem at all. We suit each other well in an exhibition.

FC What are your roles? What do you do during the day? Do you work early? Do you wake up early?

HC I do not get up early. I stay in bed late. Ursula goes to bed early.

FC When do you go to bed?

HC Three, four, five in the morning. It just happened. I didn't want it to, but it slowly turned out that way. I can't stop my head. If I go to bed at eleven, I get up about half an hour later because I can't sleep. My head spins with thousands of ideas. I write something down and work. So, I go to bed later and of course wake up later, around seven at night. I would rather get up early, around seven or eight in the morning, but I would have to go to bed earlier. This developed in more recent years.

FC And who cooks?

HC Ursula. I'm not allowed to cook. I am too bad at it. She is an expert. I clean up, though. We have a washing machine and it is my task to empty and fill it. I like doing that.

FC Who does the garden?

HC Garden? Ursula and I. We are both there. I mostly feed the animals, but she does it as well whenever I can't. We are not always here, you see. We either travel together or alone.

FC Tomorrow you have to organize the exhibition for Saturday, right? Kozlowski is not coming to the exhibition, right? He's coming tomorrow.

HC Yes, we're doing an action here at Møn. We'll do it on Wednesday.

FC Wednesday next week? When exactly is that?

HC The 19th, I think.

FC I'll pick him up and we'll come together to see the exhibition.

HC And the boys, Bjørn and Rasmus.

FC Bjørn is coming on Saturday?

HC Bjørn Nørgaard? No, he's in Berlin. He is coming on Wednesday, though. Then we are working together with someone named Stockheim. He made a big bell in Italy that weighs 377 kilos.

FC Really? In God's name...

HC It's because we like to hear clanging. I don't know if it will be possible, though, considering the transportation costs. It costs quite a bit to drive a truck from there with a 377-kilo bell. So, we don't know yet, because it was planned... This bell, maybe you'll get to see it. They are not here yet, but they'll be here tomorrow. The bell has a relief on it that he did. He had to sell it, however. It's going back to Italy to a *campanile*-museum. He still hasn't paid the foundry everything.

FC Where did he make the bell?

HC That I don't know. I have a book about it, so I could find out.

FC Køpcke is staying with you now, on the 15th.

HC Yes.

FC And Jaroslav Kozlowski as well?

HC No, he is staying with Block. The house is empty again, as far as I know. Marina Bistolfi is coming from Florence.

FC She's staying here for six days?

HC No, not here, but in the barn house, where she can sleep. She will be here, though. She's coming with her husband, Arnaldo Picchi. He is a theater professor. People are always coming. Family as well, although we do not have much direct family. Lots of people come from Berlin.

FC You have an interesting colony here.

HC Yes. Niko Tenten was here and the people from East-Berlin, where I did actions and exhibitions over the previous two months. I had an exhibition in Prenzlauer Berg in Oderberger Strasse. The gallery is called O2. Green images. *From the Green Man* was the title. I was there for two months and painted the whole window with chalk.

FC What kind of possibilities are there for you in Denmark at the local galleries? And possibilities for exhibitions?

HC None. I don't want any galleries. There is one in Jutland that interests me. But no, I don't want a main gallery.

FC Denmark has no interest in Fluxus, right?

HC Not particularly.

FC Are there no critics or galleries here that are interested in Fluxus?

HC No, no clear Fluxus gallery. There was a man, a thirty-year-old, with a gallery in Copenhagen [Jørgen Stadshil, Gallery Stadshil]. He also has a house here in Møn. He will probably also come on Saturday. He had to give up his gallery, though, because it was too expensive. His one flaw was that he always exhibited young people [*laughs*]. That is very beautiful and idealistic, but it doesn't work economically. I admire that he went through with it. He is very interested in art. But he has financial difficulties. That's how it is all over the gallery world. I have often sold things because he had low prices. I am more interested in people's having things, in people's being interested in things. That is a whole other thing. Shoes on a record, for example. People come and ask, "What is this crap? I could do this myself!" Of course, John Cage's answer is, "Then do

it.” I read that: “Why don’t you do it?” Because they don’t believe in it, because they don’t understand what it is. I work with digression, however. One goes in one direction into another cabin. That is my point. I am so informed that I am quite tired. Because of this, I work with a constant peripateticism and then I do something else. Sometimes something similar happens to other people, and that pleases me. That means it was right.

I did a performance with Robert Filliou. There was a sign hanging. He said, “And now Henning Christiansen and I are going to perform a dance for nice people, singing Sade.” I accompanied him with kraitsche-violin [*imitates scratching, “kraitsche” noise*], and Robert—

FC Recited—

HC Sang! He sang Marquis de Sade. Melodically. It was very nice. That was in Düsseldorf in 1969.

FC Can you tell me more about this performance? Was it improvised or did you organize it?

HC No, it wasn’t public... we made a recording. I went to Robert’s apartment in Düsseldorf with my recording equipment. Then he sat on a chair in his room with a piece of paper that had his text on it. Then he sang. He was quite close to the microphone.

FC Do you still have the recording?

HC Yes, the problem is that I don’t want to release it before Marianne gives permission.

FC I see. That’s how it has to be.

HC It will happen, but Marianne disappeared in a cloister, or who knows where, in the south of France. She did go to a cloister at some point.

FC I also wanted to hear from you about K pcke, maybe information that isn’t in any books.

HC There’s a lot. I have written about him myself. I wrote an article for the DAAD’s K pcke catalogue.

FC You did a lot with him, right?

HC Yes, we drove together a lot around Denmark in the early 1960s, along with Eric Andersen. We did performances. K pcke’s performances were full of energy. He berated people a bit.

FC Did he really always drink as much as they say, or only at the end?

HC He always drank that much. It was a problem, but in a way it made him more alive.

FC Did he drink strong schnapps?

HC Yes. I remember I was with him and Beuys once in a building at the Louisiana Museum that had just been repaired...

[*tape ends*]





Figs. 48–50 Henning Christiansen, *Cirkulation (Firilufsmusik 98) Blocks Sculpture* field, Askeby, Møn, Denmark, 1998. Photo by Thorbjørn Reuter Christiansen. Courtesy the Henning Christiansen Archive.