

# Willem de Ridder the First ■ An Appreciation ■ by Larry Miller

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magnetism encouraged many to be a part of his infectious and ever surprising episodic story.

His life was a multitude of creative acts. For another event we both participated in, *Margrethe Fjorden '96* in Roskilde, Denmark organized and directed by Eric Andersen for *Copenhagen: European Cultural Capital*, Willem designed the First custom couture dress made from Danish currency. The gown proved so exorbitantly expensive that armed guards had to accompany the model wearing the dress at all times. Less publically sensational, he was also the First artist to audiotape the loud creaks in the old flooring of our loft in NYC, considering that walking across it was not a noise "nuisance", but declaring it a musical concert instead.

Thankfully, there are now hours of videotape of Willem currently preserved in my archive, of various interviews with him including time I spent with Willem and Annie together, taping the two jointly in my studio.

Willem laughingly told me that George Maciunas looked at some of his existing works in the early 1960s and excitedly announced to him, "You are Fluxus!". Undaunted and caring little about labels, Willem replied, "I am? Well then... OK, I'm Fluxus!"

**ALREADY** knowing of each other through Fluxus associated friends, I finally met the Willem de Ridder I had heard about. One day in 1981 when I had first arrived for an extended residency at De Appel, the internationally influential contemporary arts centre in Amsterdam founded by Wies Smals in 1975, Willem strolled in, dressed in striking clothing, looking at me through his classic, brightly-colored glasses from NYC's Canal Street. I was both gratified and humbled, immediately impressed by his charisma. Soon he was telling me of his Walkman pieces that led people on personalized journeys and interactive engagements, of his extensive stories and listener-participant events I wanted to hear about. Masses of people would do as he suggested via radio broadcasts, actively driving their cars, convening in directed areas, to do group actions. No stranger to hypnotic suggestive influence in my work, I was captivated that first day by the contagious persona of Willem the "story teller" he said he was, and provided ample proof as I got to know him.

In the following years, I often worked with him, in places from California, New York, Europe, and Korea. Together in South Korea during the *Seoul NYMAX Fluxus Festival* in 1993, with a large cast of Flux-colleagues, we presented several concerts, outdoor events and a live broadcast on Korean television. Knowing Willem to be a pioneer – pushing establishment boundaries – I offered to make him the First person to sell his DNA genome to me, meant for licensed resale of "Willem" traits. At the *Fluxus Virus* event in Cologne in 1992 he had already been among the First to certify personal genomic ownership via my "Genetic Code Copyright Certificate" project, initially registered by notarizing my own genome in 1989, later launching a public action in eight languages. Fully grasping and endorsing the conceptual commodification of DNA as an art material, and its projected broad social implications, Willem was delighted. I purchased his unique DNA for 10,000 South Korean Won, equal then to about \$8 dollars (US). (René Block, curator of the Seoul series, served as our signatory witness.)

Next, we together identified his "marketable" traits as commodities, to be shown in photographic, documentary material and audios and testimonials as "illuminations" of his selected desirable traits, packaging his DNA samples (they were bodily then). Official, detailed agreements defined the work. That initial formulation became a template for my *Genomic License Series* presented in several exhibitions to come.

Willem had so many desirable characteristics that we settled on two distinct licenses.

Here is a sample of some of the language contained in the documents:

## License Sale Agreement: Genomic License No. 1 (Willem de Ridder Properties)

The Seller grants to the buyer certain license, further specified herein, to reproduce the following (among others) genetic traits of the Primus Corpus (Willem de Ridder), within another human being (Corpus Similus).

### Adventurous Disposition

that genetically reproducible property which disposes a human being to optimism, cheerfulness, continuous energy, and in the paraphrased words of the Primus Corpus, "causes one to be relaxed, take time to enjoy everything, be lazy and never busy, but always in an intense way."

The first license also included his self-identified ability as a good storyteller and the second, the often exaggerated or falsely claimed trait by males to be "a good lover" – alone being enough to qualify as a highly marketable trait. That license read this way:

## License Sale Agreement: Genomic License No. 2 (Willem de Ridder Properties)

The Seller grants to the buyer certain license, further specified herein, to reproduce the following genetic traits of the Primus Corpus (Willem de Ridder), within another human being (Corpus Similus).

### Good Lover

that genetically reproducible property which is known to Original Humans as being a "Good Lover", which includes, but is not limited to: well-formed genitalia, a sensuous nature which is attuned to erotic desires, sensitivity and individualized affection, and generosity in sharing physical pleasures.

Asked how I could "illuminate" the trait of Willem as a good lover, he referred me to his friend Annie Sprinkle for her personal opinion. Annie gladly provided me with a beautifully expressed enthusiastic testimonial and also donated signed promotional photographs for my installation. I understand Willem to have been the First to suggest to Annie that she was indeed, all along, a "performance artist", thus helping launch a definitive descriptive turn in her career. I went on to acquire the DNA Copyright ownership of a few other artists with very vendible features, including Flux friends Eric Andersen and Alison Knowles, but Willem was the most expressively enthusiastic in participating, and



Top: Installation at NEMO, *The Dream of New Man*, of Larry Miller's *Genomic License* series (Nos. 1 and 2) which detail Willem de Ridder's DNA traits, Nikolaj, Copenhagen Contemporary Art Center, 1996. Photo © Larry Miller, 1996. Above: Miller's *Sale of Genetic Code Copyright (Willem de Ridder)* 1993, offset printed on readymade certificate form, embossed gold-foil, ribbon, hand written and signed by de Ridder, and witnessed by René Block. © Larry Miller 1993.

hoping for a willing "collector", even promoting the fact that he was the First to sell his DNA.

You will be reminded in the pages of this tribute newspaper, Willem was prone to many active "Firsts", of which one was being the Publisher of the "Willem de Ridder" newspaper, a cheeky celebration in cheerful recognition of his individuality. Willem de Ridder indeed has a legendary status. He used to say he was "world famous in Amsterdam", baring his wry smile. The Willem I knew was always upbeat, gregarious and creatively adventurous in whatever he did, being

In 1965, Maciunas shipped him a massive amount of Fluxus editions materials – putting him in charge of distribution of The Willem de Ridder European Mail-Order Warehouse. Willem designed the small mountain of editions, printed matter, etc., in a display space with a curtained shelf and posed a female model within. But that venture went almost entirely unsold.

Unlike Maciunas, who is not known to have written a score for laughing, Willem made a "scored" work for laughing using "laughing face masks" as props. Many times I presented his "Laughing" in Flux Concerts. But I have seen it poorly performed; that's because you needed Willem himself to first demonstrate HOW to make it work – because there is no sound of laughing heard. One had to see Willem do it kinetically first. (Some of Fluxus is learned directly from the composer.)

Those lucky enough to have encountered Willem through one of his differing media, either in person, or hearing the sound of his voice on a Walkman, radio or TV, were more enabled to see and experience all around them as if through Willem's vision. He reveled in the joyousness of sharing the Story that was evident in the man, Willem de Ridder the First.

His mesmerizing voice and vision stays, lingering with us as true Legends always do, echoing ever larger.



Masks from performances of de Ridder's "Laughing". From the Larry Miller/Sara Seagull Archive of Flux-Props. Photo © Sara Seagull 2017.

the First to happily declare aloud that so much around him was "Wonderful!" and invited anyone near to freely join him in feeling the richness of life he himself was experiencing. His personal