

EMIL MANSER

“Those who know me love me.”

Emil Manser was born on 20 November 1951 in Meistersrüte, Appenzell, the fourth of six children. His parents, Marie and Emil, ran a farm. After attending primary school in his home town and secondary school in Appenzell, he began an apprenticeship as a printer, which he completed in 1971. He was exempted from military service. He initially worked as a letterpress printer in St. Gallen and Flawil, but gave up the profession and worked as a bricklayer and later as a painter. In 1975, he moved to Lucerne, where he worked as a self-employed painter. His partner at the time worked in the business, and they lived together temporarily in Emmenbrücke. However, Emil Manser was not cut out to be an entrepreneur. He experienced increasing financial difficulties.

In 1982, he was apprehended in Asia and transferred to a psychiatric clinic in Switzerland. The municipality of Lucerne placed him under guardianship in accordance with Art. 369 of the Swiss Civil Code.

He initially lived in the liberal men's hostel at Voltastrasse 14, later moving into his own flat in the Neustadt district. Time and again, he has to spend several months in the clinic in St. Urban, where he is given neuroleptics. But Emil Manser continues to be drawn to distant places. His officially appointed guardian once has to organise his return from Tokyo.

In addition to the support provided by his guardianship and occasional financial assistance from his family, Emil Manser tries to earn a living through various activities. He set up a collection point for dry bread for animals and obtained the right to use a railway embankment for his chicken farm. Occasionally, he worked on an hourly basis in a painting business.

His alcohol consumption made it impossible for him to earn a regular income. From the mid-1980s onwards, he attracted public attention with his peculiar job and rela-

tionship advertisements in the Luzerner Anzeiger newspaper. From the end of the decade until his voluntary death on 3 August 2004, he could be found in various favourite spots with large-format posters he had made himself.

For around 15 years, his presence shaped the cityscape of Lucerne. While his direct manner annoyed some of his fellow citizens, he was very popular with others. From 1996 onwards, he was supported by his partner Anita Bucher. Emil Manser increasingly used his persona to his advantage; he was aware of the public impact of his appearances. He appeared in various outfits: wearing make-up like Charles Chaplin, in a military coat and crowned with an Advent wreath, wearing a fly agaric hat that he had painted himself, in a painter's smock, with dolls in his arms and promoting his children's party. He developed a passion for the artistic realisation of his text posters, which he also sold as postcards.

Writing does not come easily to him. This makes him all the more careful with the posters he has created. After his death, around 200 posters, almost all of them double-sided, have been preserved. The last words he left his fellow citizens were: 'Cancer! (chose abbreviation in heaven)'. With his leap into the Reuss as his final act, he is reminiscent of a famous predecessor from the ranks of the city's originals, Dällebach Kari from Bern.

His despair and, above all, his fear of having to go to hospital or be treated by doctors again were probably greater than his fear of the disease itself. Emil Manser did not suffer from cancer at all, but from health complications that could have been remedied with a simple procedure.

His posters are highly original. They are witty and striking in the truest sense of the word.

Certain themes recur time and again. In addition to cur-



rent affairs, socially critical commentary and aphorisms, his texts aim to communicate directly with his fellow human beings. Manser reflects on his role in public life in a thoroughly ambiguous and multi-layered way, as a man, a potential lover, a fool or someone who has remained a child.

Children and fools speak the truth. Some of the posters begin with the words: 'A frank word: ...'. In his texts, Emil Manser addresses his fellow citizens in an oral style, as someone who wants to express his opinion, demands tolerance, resists power imbalances and criticises social differences. A series of posters addresses the fact that he needs money. Like an advertiser, he brings arguments into play, for example his guinea pigs, even though he never had such animals. You have to give people a reason to take a 'chunk' of their money. He makes fun of institutions and their representatives (church, school, police, politics). Power and freedom are his core themes, he is a specialist in this field and has relevant experience: children should not be indoctrinated, people should not be disenfranchised.

Sitting among the people, Emil Manser stirred up their relationships with each other, held up a mirror to them, and his presence was perceived as either an enrichment or a stumbling block in everyday life. His profound wisdom and sayings still fascinate people today, even those who never knew Emil Manser.

Text: Christoph Lichtin