

Mathias Rust: King of the Hooligans

By Gianfranco Sanguinetti

Translated by Bill Brown*

“I am still convinced that my idea was the right one. It showed anything is possible.” Mathias Rust, interview in *The Observer*, 26 October 2002.¹

“*Detournément*: situationist procedure that consists in bringing into a given context a violent action that disrupts and destroys all previously established order in that historical context: *detournément* is an action

¹ English in original. The entire text of this interview is available on-line. Over the course of it, Rust says the following things: “I was 19 and very political. I was interested in relations between East and West, particularly the Reykjavik meeting between Gorbachev and Reagan. I realised that the aircraft was the key to peace. I could use it to build an imaginary bridge between East and West. (...) My plan was to land in Red Square, but there were too many people and I thought I’d cause casualties. I had thought about landing in the Kremlin, but there wasn’t enough space. I wanted to choose somewhere public, because I was scared of the KGB. I approached Red Square three times, trying to find somewhere to land, before discovering a wide bridge nearby. I landed there and taxied into Red Square. As it turned out, the day I chose – 28 May – was the holiday of the border patrol. I suspect that’s how I got away with it. (...) I was sentenced to four years in a labour camp, but spent my time in the interrogation prison because the KGB couldn’t guarantee my safety. I was locked up for 22 hours a day in a 10sq-metre cell, but at least nobody could harm me. (...) Imprisonment hit me so hard – much harder than I had thought. After my trial, my flying club got permission to bring the plane back to Germany. It was originally worth about 75,000DM, and I think they sold it for 160,000DM. It’s owned by a Japanese businessman who’s stored it waiting for the value to go up. He compared it to Charles Lindbergh’s aircraft! Arriving home in Germany was difficult, as I faced a lot of negative media attention. (...) I couldn’t go out for weeks because there was always someone shouting at me in the street, and I received many death threats. (...) You have to be young to be able to do things like that. Now I’m more cautious. I’m proud that I was able to do what I did – psychologically it was a great wall to climb.... (...) I don’t have my pilot’s licence anymore, but I’m still very political. (...) I’m still convinced that my idea was the right one. It showed anything is possible.”

that results in a *historical correction*.” Gianfranco Sanguinetti, *Unpublished Dictionary of Untranslatable Words*.²

The miserable but wonderful end of the spectacle of the Cold War was the committing of an action, as individualistic as it could be – both perfect and unpardonable –, full of audacity and reckless and successful mockery, and it completely recalled situationist style.

On 28 May 1987, at 7 pm, a small Cessna 172 unexpectedly landed in Red Square in Moscow after having flown, with impunity, over the USSR for 5 hours. From it descended a 19-year-old man, Mathias Rust, a West German, who had secretly developed an audacious plan to ridicule the spectacle of the Cold War.

By diverting [*en détournant*] the plane that he had rented and flown in from Helsinki, Mathias Rust mocked all the formidable Soviet aerial and land-based defenses that Reagan, the American president, had ceaselessly decried as a menace to world peace – and had already threatened [in response] to put into place the famous “Star Wars” missile shield.

After he had landed on the Bolshoy Kamenny Bridge, Rust calmly drove his plane to Red Square and parked it next to the Cathedral of St. Basil. The Russians who happened to be there greeted him with curiosity and, in accordance with tradition, offered him bread and salt as a sign of welcome.

The spectacle of the Cold War, on which, following the Second World War, the “balance of terror” had been built, was struck dead by this mockery, which was inconceivable, unforeseeable and unexpected, but *definitive* because it was successful: the spectacle collapsed miserably. The disarray of all the ministerial advisors, both Soviet and Western, who were ridiculed by this action that was indescribable if one did not use the term “situationist,” was as impotent as it was complete. They never got over it, and they had to conceive of new balances founded upon *other terrors*.

On 28 May 1987, an epoch without glory ended in a glorious way thanks to the luck and virtue of Mathias Rust.

As compensation, he was punished by both sides. The Soviets, who admired Rust’s success more than they were dismayed by their failure, skillfully seized this pretext to purge two government ministers³ and two thousand superior officers who weren’t acceptable to the new regime of Perestroika. They only condemned

² It is important to note that this definition of “détournement” is not the canonical one in situationist literature, which first defined “détournement” in 1958 and 1959 as an exclusively “aesthetic” or “artistic” practice.

³ Sergei Sokolov, the Defense Minister Marshal of the Soviet Union, and Alexander Koldunov, the head of the Soviet Air Defense.

Rust to 4 years of hard labor for “hooliganism,” etc., but released him, in the midst of a certain sympathy, after fourteen months in the KGB’s infamous Lefortovo prison. One cannot say the same thing about the Germans, who are the enemies of all individual manifestations of free and radical revolt. Upon his return to Germany in 1988, Rust was the target of a shameful media-based and judicial lynching, and he was formally accused of high treason and threatening world peace. He was slandered, provoked and imprisoned. His plane-symbol was purchased for a lot of money by a Japanese magnate, and then, in 2008, it was repurchased for even more money by the Germans for their *Deutsches Technikmuseum* in Berlin. One always fears the fetish less than the man.

The anonymous photograph presented here, taken by the police, is unpublished; it documents and immortalizes the first moments in Red Square when Mathias Rust was approached by the agents of the KGB. On the reverse side, one can read the following, anonymous inscription, written in Russian in blue ink: “28 May 1987. Citizen of the GFR⁴ M. Rust with his private airplane. M. Rust ‘rests’ after his landing in Red Square surrounded by the superior officers of the police and the KGB.”⁵

This photograph skillfully captures all of the actors and elements that compose the scene: at the center, the Cessna and Rust, who is perfectly visible⁶ thanks to the contrast of his head against the white background of the wing of the plane, on which – due to a care for detail – one clearly sees the name (Reims-Cessna) and the initials D-ECJB in the foreground;⁷ on the left, one sees the ramparts of the Kremlin and, from behind, the security officers, whose black *Tschaika*⁸ one can discern. The magnitude of the silent drama that is taking place, as well as the exceptional character of the event, excludes any useless words, any agitation or hysteria on the part of the actors, and so one might believe that one was in the silence of a dream of respectful harmony and solemn calm: *this is the meeting of the generals of two armies; the victorious one is composed of a single man.*

⁴ Federal Republic of Germany.

⁵ Note well the respectful tone of these comments. It is almost as if those “superior officers” were there to *congratulate* Rust.

⁶ Note that Rust is holding in his left hand, which is resting on the top of his plane, a large piece of paper, which might be his flight plans or a map.

⁷ One can also make out the word SKYHAWK.

⁸ Russian for luxury limousine.



Dimensions: 117 mm x 180 mm. The photo is black and white, extends to all four corners, at which there are miniscule pinholes; at the top margin, there is also a small patch on which the image is missing, without affecting the paper.
Provenance: Gianfranco Sanguinetti-Archives of the *Unpublished Dictionary of Untranslatable Words*.

28 мая 1987г. приглашение СПП М. Руст
на собор в Красноярске

М. Руст после соборного процесса на
Красноярск на "отдых" в сформированном лагере
при министерстве и КСБ в том же лагере.

*Note: all footnotes are by the translator.