



# Fluxus Perspectives

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- 1  
**Fluxus Perspectives**  
Martin Patrick and Dorothee Richter
- 6  
**FluxUsNow**  
Dorothee Richter
- 25  
**The Fluxus Virtual, Actually**  
Natilee Harren
- 41  
**Intermedial Perception  
or Fluxing Across the Sensory**  
Hannah B Higgins
- 51  
**Parsing Scores: Applications in Fluxus**  
Julia Robinson
- 64  
**Unpacking the Score:  
Notes on the Material Legacy of Intermediality**  
Hanna B. Hölling
- 82  
**My Life in Flux -- And Vice Versa (excerpts)**  
Emmett Williams
- 88  
**Journals (excerpts)**  
Ann Noël
- 95  
**The Eve of Fluxus: A fluxmemoir (excerpts)**  
Billie Maciunas
- 100  
**Fluxus is just beginning:  
An interview with Jeffrey Perkins  
and Jessie Stead**  
Weronika Trojanska
- 106  
**Fluxus Legacy**  
Ken Friedman
- 122  
**Ribbit, Riot: Benjamin Patterson's  
*When Elephants Fight, It Is the Frogs  
That Suffer—A Sonic Graffiti***  
Jordan Carter
- 133  
**Yoko Ono's Touch Piece:  
A Work in Multiple Media, 1960-2009**  
Kevin Concannon
- 150  
**Iconoclastic and Irreverent (Buddhist-inflected)  
Simplicity in Fluxus Performance and Artworks**  
Martin Patrick
- 165  
**Banking with Fluxus, Then and Now**  
Peter van der Meijden
- 176  
**Whatever Happened to the Judo Throw?  
Fluxus and the Digital Gimmick**  
Natasha Lushetich
- 189  
**Wolf Vostell's *dé-coll/age* Magazine:  
The Editorial Design of Action Art**  
Henar Rivière
- 207  
**Harboring Hidden Histories:  
Mail Art's Reception in United States  
Institutional Archives**  
John Held, Jr.
- 219  
**Mail Art and Fluxus:  
An Antic Exhibition from 1982**  
Simon Anderson
- 250  
**Speaking Personally:  
Some Topics of Correspondence  
Between Fluxus Artists on Fluxus**  
Owen F. Smith

# Fluxus Perspectives

## Martin Patrick and Dorothee Richter

Although the Fluxus art (non-)movement is often read as a historical phenomenon, the breadth of its innovations and complexities actively thwarts linear and circumscribed viewpoints. The notion of Fluxus incorporates contradiction in challenging and enduringly generative ways. More than five decades after its emergence, this special issue of *OnCurating* entitled *Fluxus Perspectives* seeks to re-examine the influence, roles, and effects of Fluxus via a wide range of scholarly perspectives. The editors asked notable writers from different locations, generations, and viewpoints, all of whom having written about Fluxus before, to offer their thoughts on its significance, particularly in relation to contemporary artmaking and strategies of curating today.

### **FLUXUS—Artists as Organizers**

The 1960s witnessed a growing number of artist groups, including Fluxus, Viennese Actionism, the Situationists, the Affichistes, the Destruction Art Group, the Art Workers' Coalition, the Guerrilla Art Action Group, Nouveau Réalisme, the Letterist International, Happenings, and the Gutai and Zaj groups. Each movement developed under specific social and historical conditions.

In the German-speaking world, Fluxus and the Viennese Actionists became especially well known, as did Happenings, which were, however, not strictly distinguished from the other movements. The reformulations introduced by these revolutionary art movements implied an altered positioning of art towards politics, and of the private sphere towards the public. They exploded genre boundaries, questioned the author's function, and radically changed the production, distribution, and reception of visual arts.

Artist groups organized their own opportunities for public appearances. Their scores were performed jointly and differently in each revival; they took charge of distribution, of publishing newsletters and newspapers, and of establishing publishing houses and galleries. Audiences were now directly involved and subjected to provocative modes of address. The inversion of terms instituted by Fluxus, via mapping their methods of composing music onto all aspects of the visual, made it possible to consider everything as material and as a basis for composition. They challenged hitherto prevailing cultural hegemony and anticipated on a symbolic level the 1968 student riots and protest movements.

The role of the “chairman” of Fluxus was, of course, contested, and different artists claimed to be the most important node in the network, especially during the lively New York scene of the 1960s.

Nevertheless, in retrospect, Maciunas's role as organizer, arranger, presenter, funds procurer, and public relations agent bears a remarkable resemblance to that of the independent curator, emerging as a new role within the cultural field during the 1970s and '80s. In his capacity as Fluxus organizer (and chief ideologist), Maciunas anticipated not only the attribution of creativity, the meaning-giving acts of establishing connections and recontextualization, but also the authoritative gesture of inscriptions and exclusions. Also, his attempts to subsume as a meta-artist the works of other artists under a single label (“Fluxus”) recall the role of a contemporary curator.

Just as in today's independent scene, producing exhibitions and events depends not only on large venues and funds, but also other kinds of interpersonal relations. Friendships, networks, group affiliations, and individual positionings within the field all account for the social capital that allows one to operate in the arts. These networks represent social and cultural capital, which may also be translated into economic capital. (Not that this worked for Maciunas). Thus, Maciunas's role transgressed the established roles in the field of art and anticipated new structures and modes of operation. While the Fluxus images indicate no hierarchical relations among the group of artists, including Asian and Black artists, and some women, the group is predominantly male.

In 1972 at *documenta 5*, Harald Szeemann's staging as the main curator, however, partly adopted and established a hierarchical relation between gestures and stances, suggesting an anarchic, liberated image of the artist, but a group of artists beheaded by a powerful curator. The curator was now not only the "warden," but above all the figure subsuming the exhibition under one single heading. He prescribed a certain reading of the works, the title becoming the most distinct (succinct) version of a program, and his name emerged as the discursive frame. Szeemann had thus wrested the naming strategy and labeling from the hands of artist groups and had successfully transferred the exhibition into the economic sphere. For visitors, the title "Individual Mythologies" blended with the individual works and thus predetermined meaning—with the works forming small parts of a greater mythological narrative.

In many aspects, Fluxus resonates as an important historical precursor for a radical curatorial practice, for new ways of publishing, for experimental filmmaking, and, last but not least, for a collective way of working. Collectivity in particular is now a new turn in contemporary curating, as one can see from the appointment of the Indonesian collective *ruangrupa* as the curators of *documenta 15*, and the nomination of five collectives for the Turner Prize: Array Collective, Black Obsidian Sound System, Cooking Sections, Gentle/Radical, and Project Art Works. Collectivity as the new spirit in curating?

To introduce the issue, we have included co-editor **Dorothee Richter's** essay discussing aspects of her film entitled *Flux Us Now: Fluxus Explored with a Camera* (2013) (made in collaboration with **Ronald Kolb**) which featured contemporary interviews and footage of Fluxus artists. Following this are a number of essays that explore Fluxus in terms of intermedia, scores, and materiality. **Natilee Harren's** "The Fluxus Virtual, Actually" examines the notion that, rather than viewed as simply analogous to the dispersed virtual networks of today, Fluxus's very material, analog presence is crucial to its power. **Hannah B Higgins**, in her "Intermedial Perception or Fluxing Across the Sensory," a seminal article from 2002, discusses Fluxus and its relation to the embodied and sensorial, also invoking the notion of "intermedia" in its original form via the influential writings of her father, Fluxus artist Dick Higgins. **Julia Robinson** writes on the multiple and diverse methods and approaches that Fluxus artists used with reference to the score in "Parsing Scores: Applications in Fluxus." **Hanna B. Hölling**, in her essay "Unpacking the Score: Notes on the Material Legacy of Intermediality," writes on the enduring potentialities of the event score when housed within museological and archival contexts.

We are pleased to include a selection of remembrances, documents, and interviews from Fluxus artists and participants. **Emmett Williams'** memoir entitled *My Life in Flux--And Vice Versa* (1992) remains a fascinating and entertaining read, as the artist and raconteur offers his insights on a Fluxus life well lived. Artist **Ann Noël** has kept journals that become artworks in themselves, including vivid drawings, photographs, and ephemera. She has kindly allowed us to include pages from this engaging material. Poet **Billie Maciunas** was a key witness and active participant in the final period of George Maciunas's life, as his confidant and partner. Her memoir, *The Eve of Fluxus*, lends a glimpse of George Maciunas not only as an artist but a specific, and often fragile, human being. Filmmaker **Jeffrey Perkins** has been active in Fluxus circles for decades. In this interview, artist **Weronika Trojanska** speaks with Perkins and collaborator **Jessie Stead** about the making of *George: The Story of George Maciunas and Fluxus* (2018), their engaging documentary. **Ken Friedman** has been a Fluxus artist since the mid-1960s when he met Maciunas, who encouraged Friedman to run "Fluxus West" in California. While Friedman has written extensively about Fluxus over the years and edited the anthology *The Fluxus Reader* (1998), here he paints a simultaneously informal and informative picture of the struggles he encountered circulating Fluxus artworks in an era when its receptive audience was very limited.

In the next group of essays, a number of writers discuss specific Fluxus artists and Fluxus notions with particular attention paid to Fluxus's contemporary impact. Curator **Jordan Carter** provides a detailed discussion of the installation of a large-scale work by artist Benjamin Patterson entitled *When Elephants Fight, It Is the Frogs That Suffer—A Sonic Graffiti* at the Art Institute of Chicago. Carter also contextualizes the intricate subtleties of Patterson's approach, with specific attention paid to the layering of identity. Scholar and curator **Kevin Concannon**, who has frequently written on the art of Yoko Ono, here turns his focus toward the various sonic, textual, and visual iterations of Ono's *Touch Piece* over the period 1960-2009. **Martin Patrick** writes on the relations between Buddhist philosophy and Fluxus artworks as enacted in works by artists including Geoff Hendricks, Nam June Paik, Robert Filliou, and Alison Knowles. **Peter van der Meijden** offers an in-depth consideration of Knud Pedersen, one of many Fluxus friends who hasn't been frequently discussed. Van der Meijden also engages with the entangled discourse around Fluxus and how Pedersen's work relates to more contemporary projects dealing with economic realities. **Natasha Lushetich**, in her wide-ranging essay "Whatever Happened to the Judo Throw? Fluxus and the Digital Gimmick," addresses the complexities and contradictions of avant-gardist actions emerging within the post-industrial capitalist period and considers ways of (re-)thinking: "the production of experience in a (global) culture that has appropriated many Fluxus features: performativity, interactivity, and ready-made-tization."

The final section of the issue focuses more directly on Fluxus-related publications, mail art, and correspondence. **Henar Rivière** critically analyzes and interprets from a historiographical perspective shifts and emphases in artist Wolf Vostell's *décoll/age* magazine, which during its existence included works by both Fluxus and Happenings practitioners (and their contemporaries). Historian of mail art **John Held, Jr.**'s "Harboring Hidden Histories: Mail Art's Reception in United States Institutional Archives" discusses the intricacies of historicizing and archiving precarious and ephemeral materials. **Simon Anderson**'s contribution involves a selection of works from a Mail Art exhibition that he curated in 1982. This grouping features many dedicated mail artists from that era, along with Simon's retrospective account contextualizing the project. **Owen Smith**, author of the ground-breaking book *Fluxus: The History of an Attitude* (1998), here collates and annotates a thematic selection of

correspondence between Fluxus artists and associates. Smith's text is an apt one to finish the issue, leaving conclusions open, and offering an archival treasure trove of Fluxus camaraderie and contentiousness.

This anthology of Fluxus scholarship has been in planning since 2018, and in the process has once again brought together a global (eternal) network of writers, artists, and curators. The editorial process was certainly extended due to the unanticipated global pandemic. The editors bridged a distance of 18,000 kilometers through their shared interest in Fluxus, digital correspondence, and burgeoning friendship. And we extend our sincerest thanks to all the contributors to and readers of the issue.

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**Martin Patrick**, an art critic, historian, and writer, is an Associate Professor of Art at Massey University in Wellington, New Zealand. A regular contributor to and reviewer for many international publications, his book *Across the Art/Life Divide: Performance, Subjectivity, and Social Practice in Contemporary Art* was published in 2018 by Intellect Books/University of Chicago Press. He contributed the chapter "Exploring Posthuman Masquerade and Becoming" to *Animism in Art and Performance* (C. Braddock, ed., Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2017). He has presented his research as a keynote speaker, chair, and panelist at public galleries and museums, conferences, and symposia. He is a member of the advisory boards for several arts organizations and publications. He is currently compiling an anthology of his selected art criticism.

**Dorothee Richter** is Professor in Contemporary Curating at the University of Reading, UK, and head of the Postgraduate Programme in Curating, CAS/MAS Curating at the Zurich University of the Arts, Switzerland; She is director of the PhD in Practice in Curating Programme, a cooperation of the Zurich University of the Arts and the University of Reading. Richter has worked extensively as a curator: she was initiator of Curating Degree Zero Archive, Curator of Kuenstlerhaus Bremen, at which she curated different symposia on feminist issues in contemporary arts and an archive on feminist practices, Materialien/Materials; recently she directed, together with Ronald Kolb, a film on Fluxus: *Flux Us Now, Fluxus Explored with a Camera*. She is executive editor of OnCurating.org.

# FluxUsNow

## Dorothee Richter

For this short article, I will enlarge summaries of the film's chapters, and provide a bit more historical background. The material came together from many different sources, shot by different camerawomen and from material the artists gave me. *Flux Us Now!*, the research-based film by Dorothee Richter and Ronald Kolb, was published in 2013. It is based on a large collection of formal and informal interviews and conversations with artists Ben Patterson, Alison Knowles, Hannah Higgins, Letty Eisenhauer, Carolee Schneemann, Jon Hendricks, Geoffrey Hendricks, Larry Miller, Eric Andersen, Jonas Mekas, Daniel Spoerri, and Ben Vautier, and historical material featuring Yoko Ono, Jackson Mac Low, Ken Friedman, Dick Higgins, Nam June Paik, Philip Corner, Henry Flynt, Emmett Williams, and La Monte Young.<sup>1</sup>

With this diverse material, I asked myself how to work with it, since a compilation of artistic portraits would be exactly contradictory to the important message that emanates from Fluxus material. So, working with Ronald Kolb for three years on the filmic material, we decided to edit the film according to different themes that emerged through our conversations with the artists, as well as categories that I developed as the backbone of my PhD on Fluxus, including authorship, distribution, reception, gender, community, and the relation of politics to both daily life practices and artistic events.



Interview situation at Alison Knowles' studio. New York, 2009. Photo by Christoph Schreiber.

We used historical material in the manner of Roland Barthes, not as illustrations, but as part of a complex meaning production for our research:

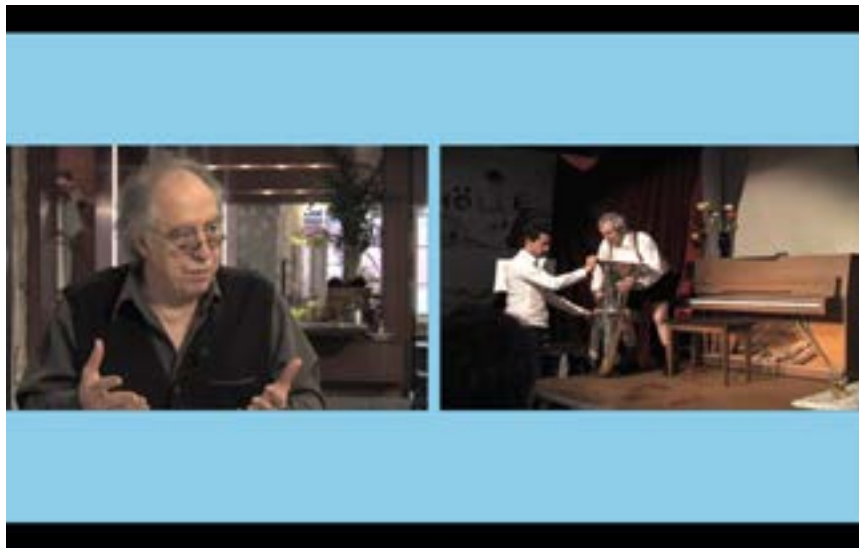
Mythical Speech is made of a material which has already been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication. It is because all the materials of myth (whether pictorial or written) presuppose a signifying consciousness, that one can reason about them while discounting their substance. This substance is not unimportant: pictures, to be sure, are more imperative than writing, they impose meaning a tone stroke, without analysing or diluting it. But this is no longer a constitutive difference. Pictures become a kind of writing as soon as they are meaningful: like writing, they call for a lexis. We shall therefore take language, discourse, speech, etc., to mean any significant unit or synthesis, whether verbal or visual: a photograph will be a kind of speech for us in the same way as a newspaper article; even objects will become speech, if they mean something.<sup>2</sup>

**What is Fluxus, who is Fluxus, when and where was Fluxus?** Hardly any other art movement is as difficult to define. Various writers have seen this as the reason why the movement has not become better known or met with greater success on the art market. Yet, this supposition itself prompts a number of questions: 1. Was Fluxus an “art movement” at all? 2. Did the Fluxus artists actually aim for commercial success? In light of this, it is not exactly surprising that Eric Andersen, one of the very first Fluxus artists, declared as recently as 2008 that no such thing as Fluxus ever existed, and that the widely diverging forms of expression that are now referred to as Fluxus would be more accurately characterized as “intermedia.” There is also a lack of agreement as to which artists could be described as belonging to or even just associated with Fluxus. Consequently, “Fluxus”—whatever is meant by it on any given occasion—is a term that provides a perfect basis for association with mythologems and elaborate narratives. This is all the more true in view of the fact that “actions” and ephemeral objects, editions and newspapers produce something more complicated than the object-based, art-historical trail that traditional artistic activity normally lays down for its interpreters. Certain key phrases often used in connection with Fluxus take the place of traditional art objects, serving to bracket together a variety of disparate practices, places, participants, and relics. These key phrases solidify as quasi-images. The slogan “art equals life,” for example, is a particularly effective verbal image that is frequently cited in the context of Fluxus. The combinations of art and politics, art and the everyday, or action and chance are also often mentioned.

### **Chapter 1: Before Fluxus (10min 17 sec)**

George Maciunas initially called this accumulation of performative forms of the newest kind of music “Neo-Dada,” but Tristan Tzara did not much like the term, as Ben Patterson told us. As a result, “Fluxus” (originally intended to be the title of an anthology) came to be adopted as the new name. Activities developed in New York around John Cage’s classes, and there were other experiments with happenings and New Music performed at a variety of locations. These new forms were brought to Europe by George Maciunas. (Maciunas, on the run from creditors, safely joined the US Army as a designer). In Germany in particular, following the cultural disruption brought about by National Socialism, there was still a certain barren emptiness that even the German “Informel” of the early 1960s had not filled. In post-war Germany, there was therefore an opening for Fluxus as an American import, mediated by the Lithuanian Maciunas, a brilliant organizer who had emigrated to the USA via Germany. As Maciunas was employed as a designer by the military, fellow Fluxus artist Emmett Williams likewise drew a salary from that institution. Indirectly, one could accurately state that the US Army funded certain radical artistic experiments.





## Chapter 2: Beginnings of Fluxus (9min 33 sec)

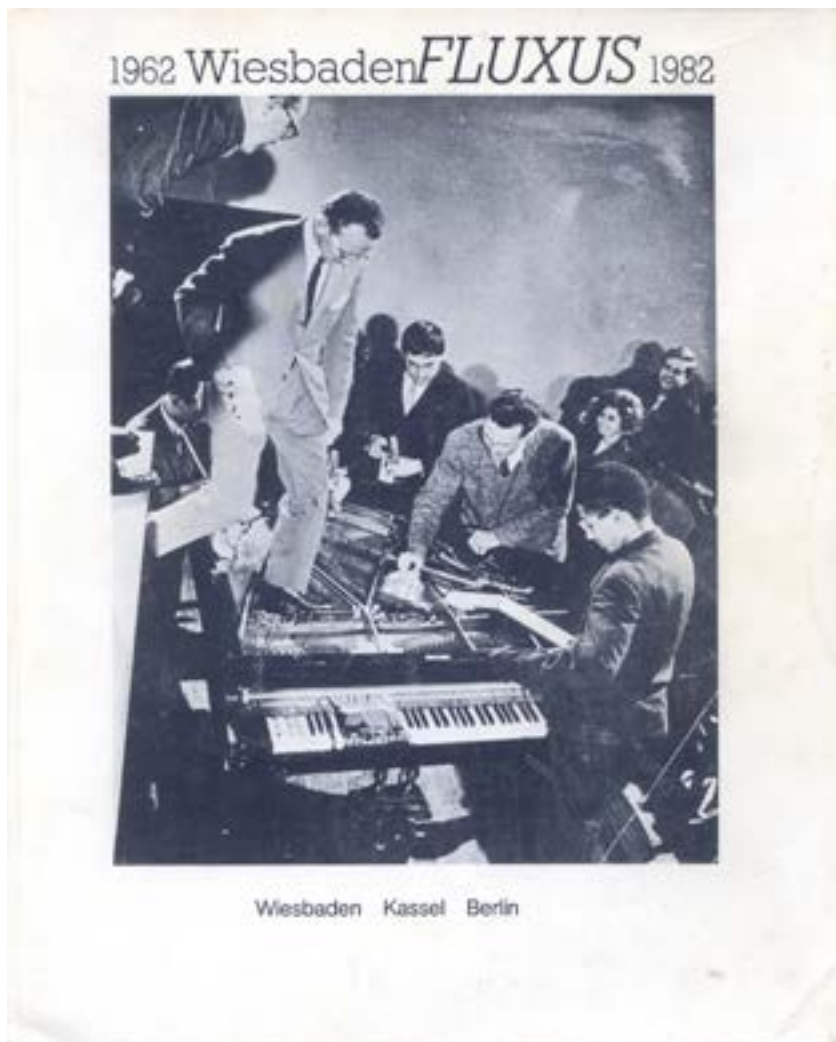
Fluxus made its first appearance in Wiesbaden in 1962, after which a number of festivals of varying magnitudes took place within different European cities. As an extremely dynamic phenomenon, it changed over time: to begin with, the focus was on scores and events. Scores can be defined as short sets of instructions, while events simply as structured performances—as opposed to the more complex and theatre-like Happenings. “Early Fluxus” consisted of performances inspired by New Music and Concrete Poetry. What part was played in this by Maciunas’s “manifestos,” and who coined the term “Fluxus”? As these examples clearly indicate once again, Fluxus was not only transmitted through objects and relics of the performances, but also existed from the start through the media of photography and language—although (paradoxically) Fluxus events were noted down in the form of scores. Diedrich Diederichsen calls the notation of visual art the unspoken constant of Fluxus. He regards this kind of notation as a framework that locates “actions” and visual art in a new concept of material. This corresponds to the relationship between a composition and the score, which is the recording of music as musical notation. In this way, unlike other art forms, it is essentially a mediated process which does not directly give expression to the thing itself but first sets down symbols (notation) that point towards a potential outcome. Composition is thus based on an abstraction of music/sound that follows its own laws and its own logic.

### Insert: Some Thoughts on the Historical Situation in Postwar Germany

The reformulations introduced by revolutionary art movements such as Fluxus, Happenings, and Gutai imply an altered positioning of art towards politics, and of the private sphere towards the public. They exploded genre boundaries, questioned the author’s function, and radically changed the production, distribution, and reception of fine arts. Artist groups organised their own opportunities for public appearances. Their scores were performed jointly and differently in each revival; they took charge of distribution, of publishing newsletters and newspapers, and of establishing publishing houses and galleries. Audiences were now directly involved and subject to provocative address. The inversion of terms instituted by Fluxus, by mapping their methods of composing music onto all aspects of the visual, made it possible to consider everything as material and as a basis for composition.<sup>3</sup> They challenged hitherto prevailing cultural hegemony and manifoldly anticipated on a symbolic level the 1968 student riots and protest movements.

In Philip Corner's *Piano Piece*, an alternating number of performers dismantled the piano on the subsequent weekends of the festival; the event score suggested various activities with the piano, such as "drop objects on strings on other parts of piano or draw chains or bells across, act in any way on underside of piano"<sup>4</sup> (two out of nine instructions). The individual parts of the instrument were auctioned at the end of the festival.

"Fluxus" spread via newspaper reports and photographs and thus became known to a large number of people. This black-and-white photograph shows eight people, of which six are intensely busy with a piano, while two are sitting at the right edge of the picture observing the proceedings. The first impression of the photograph is one of extreme artificiality. It looks so forcefully composed that at first one believes it is a photomontage. The hard, high-contrast lighting and the jutting of a ledge or wall into the picture on the left makes it seem decomposed by a series of cuts. Its upper right part looks curiously blurred and cloudy, the traces of irregular image development, and its coarse-grained character convey spontaneity and the "documentary" as a subtext, since its technical development is somewhat amateurish. The photograph has obviously slid from a horizontal position, thus adding to its dramatic effect together with the hard shadows of the figures.



Wiesbaden Festival of New Music, Pictures of Philip Corner's *Piano Piece*, September 1962.

The opened-up piano, into which we look from above, reveals its partially wrecked inner life. The arrangement of the figures around the piano recalls the imagery of medical operations or anatomy classes familiar from throughout art and film history. This concentration and the serious faces of the actors support these associations. The seriousness of those involved simultaneously resembles children dismembering an animal or disassembling an alarm clock; it seems quite obviously incommensurate with the dismantling/destroying of a piano. The two spectators on the right side of the photograph are the only figures<sup>5</sup> facing the photographer, or rather the present-day viewer. Both are smiling rapturously, almost ecstatically, and their expression reminds me of the concept of *jouissance*, that is, of (female sexual) pleasure.

The actors destroying/disassembling a piano can be easily read as an attack on one of the symbols of the bourgeois conception of education and morality. The photograph, which appeared on the front cover of a catalogue in 1982, must have been considered an enormous affront against the bourgeoisie and its values when it was originally taken in 1962. Justin Hoffmann has also suggested that in the 1960s art frequently involved the destruction of musical instruments, for instance Nam June Paik's *One for Violin*, Terry Riley's *Guitar Piece*, and so forth. Hoffmann sees this as a destruction of the status symbols of bourgeois culture.<sup>6</sup>

In retrospect, we can read the piano as a symbol that, just like classical literature, provided the bourgeoisie with a certain noble possibility to withdraw from the boredom [humdrum] of everyday politics, that is to say, with an innocent—that is, blameless—retreat from the memories of Nazi crimes against humanity and the latent question of guilt. Without doubt, the piano is a complex symbol in postwar Germany. Those advocating reactionary positions have repeatedly had recourse to timeless cultural values. One prominent example is Hans Sedlmayr, who claimed that he had never adopted another position other than harmony and timeless values.<sup>7</sup>

Fluxus artists took up educated middle-class concepts in both their choice of venues (museums, universities, galleries, concert halls) and the terms employed in their events, such as score, composition, symphony, or concert—only to subsequently subvert them. Silke Wenk has shown that in the postwar period the need of Federal Germans for a clearly structured order organized in terms of stable values, which found only partial expression in political discourse, was displaced onto high culture.<sup>8</sup> Hierarchized high culture therefore appears as a refuge from the collapse of a collective nationalist identity at the end of the Hitler regime and the aggressions and sense of guilt bound up with this breakdown. Adorno, a contemporary of the Fluxus movement, concluded “that secretly, unconsciously, smouldering, and hence particularly powerful, those identifications and the collective Nazism [here Nazi-ideology] were not destroyed at all but continue to exist. The defeat has been ratified within just as little as after 1918. [meaning here after the First World War]”<sup>9</sup> The destruction of the piano under the “misleading” headings “concert, New Music, score, etc.” shattered precisely this bastion of retreat to “timeless” hierarchical high culture. The Fluxus actions revealed a fissure in the imagined unassailability and sealing off of this cultural sphere. When gazing into this fissure, the contemporaries perceived an atmosphere of gloom: excessive sexuality, guilt, and violence.

Already in 1965, Fluxus artists began publishing sarcastic articles that had previously appeared in the *Bildzeitung* (Germany's major tabloid) and middle-class feuilletons, together with photographs of their performances and reports penned by the artists. Reprinting a *Bildzeitung* article, a paper known for its populist right-wing tendencies,

in a Fluxus publication, as it were, situated the artists' actions as left-wing and potentially revolutionary. The description of the audience in this article as "bearded young men, demonic looking teenagers, and elderly women" carries sexual connotations. Precisely those individuals most likely to be of an age in which they would be living in a well-ordered sexual relationship, namely a middle-class marriage, are conspicuously absent from such a description. Even the "elderly women" appear to have come without elderly men (sic!). Each of the groups mentioned implies a certain sexual openness, not to mention availability. The suspicion of sexual debauchery, at least by way of allusion, underlies the description as a subtext. Press comments varied from mere boredom to derisive comments. Reprinting the articles in documentation published by artists foregrounds the narrow-mindedness of the press and buttresses the mythologization of Fluxus actions as those of a protest movement. Moreover, conducting a negative discourse on a work of art also produces meaning (and ultimately enhances its value), as the artists realized.<sup>10</sup>

One further connotation of the piano is virginal innocence, since learning to play the piano was still considered one of the virtues of the unmarried daughters of middle-class families. Since the eighteenth century, rooms were increasingly classified along various parameters: public vs. private, work vs. recreation, and male vs. female. In this respect, we can bear in mind the determining of gender roles, which consigned bourgeois women to an extremely restricted sphere, comprising not only sexual unfreedom but also a general subordination to their fathers' and later husbands' needs and affairs, as well as economic dependency.

The aggressive assault of the Fluxus artists resembles a violent prying open: the piano seems naked, innocent, and raped. The actions of the all-male attackers are brutal; the only figure whose entire body is visible can be seen thrusting his full bodyweight onto the strings; another is gripping a hammer; and yet another is captured halfway through encroaching upon the piano with an unrecognizable instrument. The enchanted faces of the two spectators appear to support the sexual connotations. One level of meaning within this image would thus be the dismantling of bourgeois values and sexual morality, without, however, abolishing gender hierarchy. The spectators' enchanted faces bestow upon events the aura of excitement and fascination.

Dick Higgins commented on one of the pieces performed on that particular weekend as follows: "By working with butter and eggs for a while so as to make an inedible waste instead of an omelette, I felt that was what Wiesbaden needed."<sup>11</sup> Wasting food was another affront in postwar Germany. The latter remark certainly applied to the entire performance. The festival also provoked comments from the Wiesbaden population in response to the re-education to which they were exposed: (when we see the willingness of the authorities to present "American art" to the population as a will to re-educate people, for example, instead of reinstalling persecuted Jewish and non-Jewish artists). This poster was reprinted three years after the event as an instance of self-positioning in *Happenings, Fluxus, Pop Art, Nouveau Réalisme* (eds. Becker and Vostell):<sup>12</sup>

As mentioned, the artists organized their own performance opportunities. Below, I will quote from the letters of George Maciunas, which are largely concerned with organizational details, but also have an ideological streak. Astonishingly, Becker and Vostell's abovementioned publication already blended a variety of different texts as early as 1965, displaying these without further ado in the art context. Not only reports of the participating artists (predominantly male), but also details of the "making of an exhibition" were included. Disclosing organizational processes implies institutional



Poster, Wiesbaden Festival of New Music, Scribbles, 1962.

critique. The conventional notion of a closed, presentable, image-like performance is subverted. “Backstage” affairs are laid bare, thereby dismantling the aura of a work and of the idea of the authentic, spontaneous, and ingenious artist-as-subject.

In 1963, George Maciunas wrote to Joseph Beuys before the latter became a member of the Fluxus movement:

“To Joseph Beuys, 17 January 1963

Dear Professor Beuys:

I received your letter yesterday evening, and herewith respond to your questions.

1. Coming to Düsseldorf already at 10am on 1 February would be somewhat uncomfortable as I would have to stay away from work and would lose 80 Marks. I could come on Friday evening towards 11pm. I must consider the same problem that Emmett Williams has. I will come on 1 February at 10am if it absolutely necessary. Actually Saturday would be enough to prepare things.
2. Our manifesto could for instance be a quote from an encyclopedia (enclosed) on the significance of Fluxus. I enclose a further manifesto.
3. We would be delighted if you could perform at the Festival. Wolf Vostell, Dieter Hülsmanns, and Frank Trowbridge will be also be taking part as performers and composers. I have revised the programme once more and have included your compositions, although I don't know which of Trowbridge's compositions can be performed. I would need to see them before I could agree. [...]
5. We will not destroy the piano. But can we distemper it (that is, paint it white) and then wash off the paint afterwards?
6. My daytime telephone number in Wiesbaden is 54443.

Regards

G. Maciunas.”<sup>13</sup>

This letter, politely phrased and keen to assure Beuys that the piano will suffer no damage, undermines the image of the wild and revolutionary artist-as-subject. Prevailing social conditions, however, become apparent in the avant-garde artist's addressing Beuys as “professor.” The publication conveys the hiatus between revolutionary impetus and polite, bourgeois manners, and makes plain the changing roles of artists, organizers, and collaborators. And as mentioned before, Fluxus exists in this conglomeration of events, texts on events, letters, printed matter, relics, scores, photographs, editions, and films, as we see in the next chapter.

### Chapter 3: What is Fluxus? (13min 40 sec)

Fluxus artists explain precisely what, in their view, constitutes Fluxus: the nature of the collaboration, “chance music” (compositions involving chance), humor, etc. According to several contributors, this means that Fluxus consists of entirely contradictory elements. Is Fluxus primarily a network or a style? And how were these close associations reflected in the works? Performances, event scores (scores/instructions for actions), graphic works, boxes and editions, newspapers, objects, and reports accompanied by “documentary” photographs are all part of the meaning of Fluxus. What is more, any given event score was open to very different interpretations. Also, is a distinction made between art and life? What part is played by the ego in Fluxus? To what extent did George Maciunas define and market Fluxus? Hannah Higgins shows how Fluxus has always been subject to more or less arbitrary definitions. Artists in the film explain scores and present editions, including the famous Fluxboxes and other ephemera.



### Chapter 4: Who was Fluxus? (16min)

For the film project, a number of the Fluxus artists produced new diagrams—inspired by Maciunas’s historic Fluxus diagrams—to show the relationships between the artists in Fluxus. Not only is Fluxus difficult to categorize or define, it is even unclear which artists belonged to it. An illustration of this circumstance is the fact that the participants named on posters and invitations used for the early Fluxus concerts were often different from the artists who actually took part. How were individual artists included in Fluxus or excluded from it, and whose decision was it? Names? Some artists such as Yoko Ono, Henry Flynt, and Daniel Spoerri took part in early performances and

perhaps belonged to the inner circle of Fluxus for a time but would now, for various reasons, no longer describe themselves as Fluxus artists. Other artists who stayed close to Fluxus, like Eric Andersen and Ben Patterson, never subscribed to George Maciunas's Fluxus manifestos

### Chapter 5: Authorship in Fluxus (12min)

Authorship in Fluxus is usually more complicated than it appears at first sight. Thus, for instance, Daniel Spoerri describes how *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* came into being. For that book, Spoerri, Emmett Williams, and Dieter Roth wrote sections that interlock and comment on one another, and the book now exists in several different versions. Many Fluxus artists, among them Emmett Williams and Robert Filliou, produced works jointly, stimulating and inspiring each other and often, for example, named their works after other artists as a way of alluding to their qualities. Performers likewise enjoyed (and still enjoy) a great deal of latitude in their realization of event scores, thereby automatically becoming co-authors. The production of the editions (boxes) typical of Fluxus was usually the responsibility of George Maciunas and a small supporting group of artists. They created both boxes and films based on brief instructions formulated by other artists. Here again, the process was multi-authorial, but the boxes were marketed under the names of specific artists and sold with the typical Maciunas design styling. A quasi-fictitious Fluxus Mail Order Warehouse was also set up, and later re-created.



### Chapter 6: The Something Else Press (7min 7 sec)

The Something Else Press became another hub, a center of production in which many Fluxus artists were involved. Some of them lived for a time at the home of Dick Higgins and Alison Knowles, where the SEP was located. Hannah Higgins, the daughter of Higgins and Knowles, demonstrates how extensive the overlap was between the networks of Fluxus and the SEP. Nevertheless, the two were fundamentally different types of organizations; one a press, with a more conventional structure, with Dick Higgins as the publisher, and Fluxus, as an amorphous collective, chaired, at least in his own understanding, by George Maciunas.



### Chapter 7: Gender and Sex in Fluxus (12min 25 sec)

Fluxus also played a part in the social reconfiguration of the “dispositive of sexuality” which took place from the 1960s onwards. Gender identity and the attribution of fixed roles were called into question in both the private sphere and in art: subjects such as cross-dressing, heterosexual relationship models, and homosexuality were acted out in important events such as the Flux Divorce, the Flux Wedding, and finally the Flux Funeral. Male Fluxus artists were involved in their children’s upbringing to an extent that was surprising for the 1960s. Other elements of everyday life such as eating together also featured in a variety of “actions” and works.



### Chapter 8: Mr. Fluxus: George Maciunas (15min 33 sec)

Art historians tend to tie Fluxus to specific individuals, as this corresponds more closely to the idea of individual artistic creativity and genius that generally informs the writing of art history. Surprisingly, however, Maciunas’s role was in many ways what we would now describe as curatorial: he organized performance opportunities,



arranged accommodations, and decided sequences. This gave him a measure of power regarding definition, although this authority was repeatedly called into question by other artists. The artists interviewed here record a confusing variety of aspects of Maciunas's personality. The latter is also reflected in the works themselves: in the editions, for instance, one can see his incredibly meticulous handiwork. Another surviving object that reflects his life, a door with cutting blades on the outside—now accorded the status of a work of art in the Silverman Collection in the MoMA archive—demonstrates his fear of the SoHo police. He also devised grand, utopian, unrealizable projects, which were often thwarted by unfavorable circumstances.



### **Chapter 9: Stars in Fluxus (14min 30 sec)**

Taking Wolf Vostell and Yoko Ono as examples, we investigate the extent to which Fluxus and an individual artistic position are compatible. Both artists were temporarily part of the Fluxus movement, but over the course of time, both—in different ways—claimed a special status or once more identified themselves with the role of a singular artistic “genius.” Vostell adopted the traditional stance of the great painter, while in the case of Yoko Ono the mere fact of her marriage to John Lennon catapulted her into the position of a star, which inevitably altered her relationship to the other artists. Yoko Ono is (like Nam June Paik) one of those whom critics treat as individual artists in their own right.

### **Chapter 10: Politics and Fluxus (10min 29 sec)**

Political motivation was a fundamental element behind the changes in artistic content, the integration of everyday culture, and the (mass) production of editions as promoted by Fluxus. In a 1965 publication, for example, Wolf Vostell drew parallels between occurrences in art and in politics. An art movement like Fluxus is inconceivable without such political motivation, even if (or perhaps precisely because) political attitudes were anything but consensual in the group; on the contrary, they were always highly controversial. The artists negotiated their positions in newsletters and semi-public letters. Precisely this gesture of a (semi-)public discussion endowed the controversies with a truly political dimension if one considers politics above all a venue for the articulation of interests and standpoints.



### Chapter 11: Gentrification (8min 30sec)

Shel Shapiro and Roslyn Bernstein carried out in-depth research on the legendary 80 Wooster Street and the changes that came about in SoHo. Shel himself lived for a time in the building that housed Maciunas's studio as well as Jonas Mekas's cinematheque; expensive boutiques have since taken their place. The artists and their contemporaries come to widely different assessments of these changes. Whereas Jonas Mekas emphasizes the social character of Maciunas's cooperatives, Letty Eisenhauer also addresses the problematic aspect of gentrification. Mekas explains that Maciunas founded eighteen housing cooperatives and sold them, loft by loft, to artists without making any money on them. By far exceeding the boundaries of art, Maciunas changed the development of SoHo and Tribeca, both key districts of Manhattan. And even today, the former housing cooperatives have to house at least one artist in the building.

### In Retrospect

In retrospect, I am still amazed by the ways Fluxus laid the foundation for topics including the future of acting collectively, intervention into political questions, and the questioning of ascribed binary gender roles. This was revolutionary, even if the group struggled, fought with each other, and could not in many ways overcome the "objectification" that is forced upon us in capitalism. As Johan Hartle recently explained in a talk in our PhD in Practice in Curating programme<sup>14</sup> in detail, it is implied in Marx's concept of fetishism that the very act of commodity exchange functions as such, because it's implied in the principle of the exchange of equivalence. The concept of objectification (*Verdinglichung* in German) is broadened by the most renowned Marxist cultural critic Georg Lukács, when he writes *History and Class Consciousness* in 1923. In this book, he develops the idea of objectification further and stops speaking about fetishism, instead speaking of reification, meaning to turn social relations or processes into things. This concept implies that something is turned into a thing that shouldn't normally be treated as a thing, and in fact one could say that Marx's understanding of commodity fetishism already implies such a dynamic of turning society into things because of the very act of commodity exchange and ascribing a necessary value to an object, and that this commodity is equivalent to a monetary value. What Lukács states means that, under capitalist circumstances, more often than not we tend to take processes and relations as what they are *not*, namely as

things. They are being reified, and we do so by acting as individual commodity processors; and it means that we act as individual market agents rather than seeing ourselves as the collective producers of our own lives. Despite the desire of individual protagonists to be seen as brilliant artists, despite all antagonisms, and despite the art historical tendency to reduce attributions to individuals, despite all this, Fluxus gives us something that reminds us that we are more than individual commodity processors, that we can be the collective producers of our own lives—let's keep this in mind and reactive it!



Daniel Spoerri in his studio. Filmstill,  
*Flux Us Now*, 2013.



In the studio of Shel Shapiro. New York, 2009. Photo by Christoph Schreiber.

Studio of Letty Eisenhauer. New York, 2009.  
Photo by Christoph Schreiber.



Early location of Something Else Press.  
New York, 2009. Photo by Christoph Schreiber.



Carolee Schneemann. New York, 2009. Photo by Christoph Schreiber.



In the studio of Geoffrey Hendricks. New York, 2009.  
Photo by Christoph Schreiber.

Fluxus Edition



In the studio of Geoffrey Hendricks. New York, 2009. Photo by Christoph Schreiber.



Location of Joe Jones' JJ Music Store.  
New York, 2009. Photo by Christoph Schreiber.

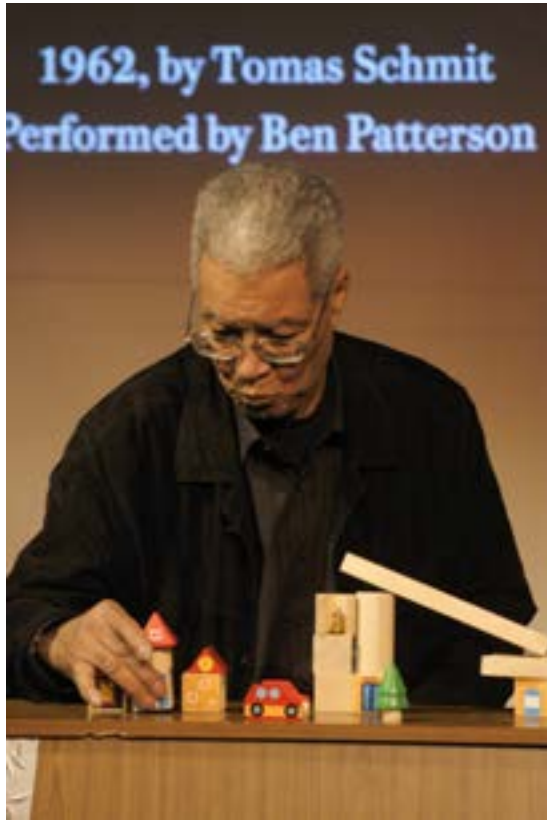


In the studio of Jonas Mekas. New York, 2009. Photo by Christoph Schreiber.



Jon Hendricks. New York, 2009. Photo by Christoph Schreiber.

Fluxus Festival at Cabaret Voltaire, Zurich, 2008.  
With Alison Knowles, Hannah Higgins, Ann Nöel, Eric Andersen,  
Ben Patterson, Larry Miller. Curated by Dorothee Richter and Adrian Notz.  
Photos by Adrian Notz.



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## Notes

- 1** See <http://www.fluxusnow.net/>. Here, you will find chapters and the list of venues where the film has been shown and discussed up until now.
- 2** Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), p. 110.
- 3** See Diederich Diederichsen, “Echos von Spielsounds in Headphones. Wie Kunst und Musik einander als Mangelwesen lieben,” *Texte zur Kunst* 60 (December 2005).
- 4** See *1962 Wiesbaden Fluxus 1982*, ed. Harlekin Art(Berlin and Kassel: Museum Wiesbaden and Daad Program, 1982), p. 194.
- 5** Different artists have identified the two as Bazon Brock and Vera Mercer, a photographer at that time married to Daniel Spoerri.
- 6** Justin Hoffmann, *Destruktionskunst, der Mythos der Zerstörung in der Kunst der frühen sechziger Jahre* (Munich: Verlag Silkw Schreiber, 1995), p. 126.
- 7** Sedlmayr was an especially early follower of the Nazi regime; in his postwar lectures, his attitude is typical for beneficiaries of the Nazi regime and their line of right-wing argument: “Above and below are not only spatial relations, but symbols of intellectual ones. [...] It cannot be that one refers to the upper as the lower. You will never call the upper instinctual life and the intellect the lower? This are entirely objective observations. Just don’t feel attacked all the time and constantly take offense! I believe that I take modern art more seriously than all the whitewashers and embellishers who run to its defense. [Applause – stamping and acclamations: Heil Hitler! Acclamation: Pfui!] All I can reply is that I have presented the same matters before and during Hitler, in precisely the same way, with the same avowal of the power of the mind and without the slightest concessions. [Applause].” Hans Sedlmayr: “Über die Gefahren der modernen Kunst,” Lectures delivered in 1950, in *Darmstädter Gespräch: Über das Menschenbild in unserer Zeit*, ed. Hans Gerhard EVERS (Darmstadt: Neue Darmstädter Verlagsanstalt, 1959), pp. 48-62, quoted in *Kunst/Theorie im 20. Jahrhundert* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2003).
- 8** See Silke Wenk, “Pygmalions moderne Wahlverwandtschaften. Die Rekonstruktion des Schöpfer-Mythos im nachfaschistischen Deutschland,” in *Blick-Wechsel, Konstruktion von Männlichkeit und Weiblichkeit in Kunst und Kunstgeschichte*, eds. Ines Lindner et al. (Berlin: Reimer Verlag, 1989); and Barbara Schrödl, *Das Bild des Künstlers und seiner Frauen* (Marburg: Jonas Verlag, 2004).
- 9** Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften, Volume 7: Ästhetische Theorie* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1970), p.135.
- 10** See also Pierre Bourdieu, *Die Regeln der Kunst*, trans. Bernd Schwibs and Achim Russer (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2001), p. 276.
- 11** Dick Higgins cited after Owen F. Smith, *Fluxus: The History of an Attitude* (San Diego: San Diego State University, 1998), p.74.
- 12** Jürgen Becker and Wolf Vostell, *Happenings, Fluxus, Pop Art, Nouveau Réalisme, eine Dokumentation* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1965).
- 13** George Maciunas in Becker and Vostell, *Happenings, Fluxus*, p. 197.
- 14** Johan Hartle, *Corona/Spectacle*, October 2, 2020, see <https://www.curating.org/johan-hartle/>.



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## Screenings

**27 April 2019**, Museum Ulm, as part of the exhibition *FLUXUS*

**17.–19. Juni 2018**, *Defragmentation – Four-Day Convention on Curating Contemporary Music*, Darmstadt

**20 April 2018**, Kino Toni, Zurich University of the Arts, ZHdK, as an event in the exhibition *Revisiting Black Mountain*

**28th of April 2017**, LENTOS Kunstmuseum Linz, accompanying the exhibition *ICH KENNE KEIN WEEKEND. Aus René Blocks Archiv und Sammlung*

**5 November 2015**, Museum Tinguely in cooperation with the exhibition *Ben Vautier. Ist alles Kunst?*

**24 June 2015**, Hochschule fuer Gestaltung Karlsruhe, in cooperation with Seminar Kunstwissenschaft: *GLOBALE Renaissance 4.0* (Prof. Dr. Beat Wyss/Sebastian Baden)

**2 June 2015**, Kibbutz College Tel Aviv, a cooperation of the Petach Tikva Museum and Curatorial Studies Certificate Program, Faculty of Arts, Kibbutzim College of Education, Technology and Arts Tel-Aviv

**22 May 2015**, Kunstakademie Stuttgart

**21 May 2015**, Ostwall Museum Dortmund and Leonie-Reygers-Terrasse, Dortmund

**19 May 2015**, Leuphana Universität Lüneburg

**10 July 2014**, Moonlight Lounge, Kunsthaus KuLe, Berlin

**March 2014**, Akademie der Bildenden Künste Wien

**6 February 2014**, Gesellschaft für aktuelle Kunst Bremen

**19 January 2014**, Kunstverein Wiesbaden

**23 November 2013**, Kunsthalle São Paulo

**15 October 2013**, Künstlerhaus Stuttgart

**4 October 2013**, Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Zurich

**13 April 2013**, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart

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# The Fluxus Virtual, Actually

## Natilee Harren

This essay begins with a little story. Several years ago, on a springtime visit to the New York studio of Alison Knowles, in Soho near the flower district, I brought with me a bouquet of yellow tulips, some of the first of the season. The artist immediately arranged them in a vase, which she set in the middle of the low-slung living room table around which we sat and talked. Deep into our conversation, Alison stopped abruptly and exclaimed, “Look! Those tulips are opening.” Indeed the yellow buds, having taken to the water, had relaxed and opened up their blossoms just slightly. It struck me in that moment, more powerfully than ever before, that Alison, like many Fluxus artists, is a first-class noticer of things—everyday things that most people would find trivial or mundane.

To this, I want to juxtapose a contrasting event, for me illuminating as to how Fluxus is understood art-historically today. In 2008, I witnessed the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art’s exhibition *The Art of Participation: 1950 to Now*, a historical survey of interactive art accompanied by a catalogue including essays by the museum’s curator of media arts, Rudolf Frieling, and media theorists Boris Groys and Lev Manovich.<sup>1</sup> Installed roughly chronologically, the exhibition began with some of the most canonical examples of postwar experimental art, such as John Cage’s silent piece *4’33”* (1952), and continued with Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece* (1964), Nam June Paik’s *Participation TV* (1963), Lygia Clark’s *Dialogue: Goggles* (1968), and examples of Fluxus event scores and multiples. Then came Tom Marioni’s installation, *The Act of Drinking Beer with Friends Is the Highest Form of Art* (1979), a stack of takeaway Felix Gonzalez-Torres posters (1992–1993), and a squat stage outfitted with props where visitors could enact Erwin Wurm’s *One Minute Sculptures* (2007–2008). These works, which in sum provided a range of experientially diverse possibilities for interaction, narrated a history of participatory art that led, finally, to a series of galleries sparsely equipped with computer monitors, where viewers could mostly sit and interact via keyboard and mouse with screen-based new media works by Lynn Hershman Leeson, Warren Sack, Johannes Gees, and others.

The new media art conclusion to Cage and Fluxus was written into the exhibition from its very start. A press release explained the curated historical trajectory this way:

From early performance-based and conceptual art to online works rooted in the multiuser dynamics of Web 2.0 platforms, *The Art of Participation* reflects on the confluence of audience interaction, utopian politics, and mass media, and reclaims the museum as a space for two-way exchange between artists and viewers.<sup>2</sup>

Originally titled *MyMuseum* in a nod to the language of social media, the exhibition came off as a project of historical legitimation for recent new media practices that also retrospectively framed earlier practices as prophetic of what Frieling referred to as a contemporary “Internet mindset” of browsing, sharing, collecting, and production in the age of Web 2.0. The implications of this presentist reframing of Fluxus are what I wish to confront here. Do the practices of Cage and Fluxus necessarily lead us to such museum computer rooms? And conversely, what happens to our understanding of Fluxus when we map our present-day “Internet mindset” back onto those 1960s practices?

The emergence of this kind of reading of Fluxus at the beginning of the twenty-first century is not surprising. Today there exists a vibrant and ever-expanding community of internet artists who self-identify with Fluxus, and debates recur as to whether Fluxus is still active as a movement, much as they occurred in the 1950s and 1960s around Dada. (In fact, George Maciunas initially referred to his coterie as “Neo-Dada” before seizing on the name “Fluxus.”) Given Maciunas’s mandate for the democratization of art and Fluxus artists’ critical exploitation of the postal system and available means of travel to build a far-flung, international collective, the internet and other networked digital technologies seem natural sites for artists seeking to evolve Fluxus ideas. I single out *The Art of Participation* because it is symptomatic of the contemporary reception of Fluxus, often invoked as a kind of art-historical shorthand for legitimating quite incongruous forms of contemporary art—from performance, mail art, experimental publishing, video art, and social practice, to the new media, digital, and internet-based practices included in Frieling’s exhibition.

New media historians and critics including Craig Saper, Christiane Paul, and Charlie Gere have highlighted the dispersed, network-like qualities of Fluxus, claiming that its international reach demonstrates an incipient “network mentality” in postwar art, or that its conceptually driven gestures and objects are fundamentally algorithmic or computational.<sup>3</sup> In a book-length survey of digital art, Paul writes that Fluxus works “based on the execution of precise instructions whose fusion of audience participation and event as the smallest unit of a situation in many ways anticipated the interactive, event-based nature of some computer artworks.”<sup>4</sup> A version of this argument formed the basis of a 2018 exhibition Paul curated at the Whitney Museum on “programmed” art based on rules, code, and choreography, which reinforced and furthered certain dimensions of the narrative Frieling had earlier presented at SFMOMA.<sup>5</sup> When Paul elsewhere defines digital art as “process-oriented, time-based, dynamic, and real-time; participatory, collaborative, and performative; modular, variable, generative, and customizable,” it seems she could easily be describing Fluxus.<sup>6</sup> Saper devotes an entire chapter to Fluxus in his scholarly history, *Networked Art*, declaring that the collective’s most important contribution to postwar art history is “making networking situations into artworks.”<sup>7</sup> In a scholarly anthology focused on precursors to internet art, Owen Smith concisely encapsulates this line of argument and its willful collapse of the language and ideas of Fluxus with those of the internet when he writes, “Even though much of Fluxus existed prior to the age of the computer, the Internet, the World Wide Web, hypermedia, and hypertext, Fluxus’s activities and attitudes present many of the most important realizations of network culture, many of which we are now only rediscovering.”<sup>8</sup> In such accounts, Fluxus is understood foremost as a group of artists who, despite separation by great distances, constituted a functioning, close-knit community, and historians describe this community in the technological language of the network as a way of indicating these artists’ recognition of “the potential of the systems themselves as art.”<sup>9</sup> Smith furthermore writes, “[I]t becomes clear that Fluxus is more of a virtual space than it is a particular art historical group with a finite set of geographic and chronological parameters.”<sup>10</sup> “This is not to say that there are no boundaries, materials, or objects in Fluxus,” he admits, “but that they are less important and ultimately inconsequential in the processes of change and creation of possibilities.”<sup>11</sup> More recently, Roger Rothman has related Fluxus’s interventionist gestures and dysfunctional commodities to the subversive hacker culture that developed contemporaneously in MIT’s computer labs.<sup>12</sup> Through these accounts, we witness the recasting of the Fluxus viewer as a “user” and the anachronistic application to artists’ practices of terms like “open-source” and “hypermedia” until the entire project of Fluxus is circumscribed by its virtual existence as an incipient worldwide

web of creative activity. Following this logic, one could argue that the ostensible breakdown or failure of Fluxus activities by the late 1970s has been finally redeemed by new media practices that are only now able, because of improved technological capabilities, to fully realize the group's goals.

And yet, against such accounts, and despite my own claims in my book *Fluxus Forms* for the art-historical significance of Fluxus's "Eternal Network," I find it urgent to recuperate the ways in which Fluxus works warned against and were insistently opposed to technological mediation. Fluxus works were for the most part deliberately anti-spectacular, anti-technological, and anti-digital—radically analog. Fluxus strategies, including those directly engaged with technology and emergent network aesthetics and social formations, were developed precisely to critically *resist* the dematerialization and virtualization of the artwork, the image, and the sign at the earliest moment of the cultural shift we now recognize as postmodernism, often pitting technology and computational processes against the human body and its intransigent fleshiness, excessiveness, vulnerability, ridiculousness, and sexuality. Fluxus was certainly innovative in developing alternative means of organizing creative activities and in distributing work outside the art world's mainstreams, but this was not the collective's singular defining characteristic. It may not even be the most enduringly important one, despite our contemporary global politics in which the interconnectedness of economies, societies, and individual people is seen simultaneously as both a profound ontological threat and source of well-being, if not survival.

At the same time that Fluxus's score-based practice emphasized the work's fundamental translatability, it also defended the importance of the uniqueness of each material instantiation. In other words, the network is not where the Fluxus artwork or the meaning of its critique ends, for every one of the innumerable tentacles of the Fluxus nexus culminated in an intimate encounter between beholder and artwork, an experience utterly singular and material. We should not consider the circulation of Fluxus works apart from their material specificity and resolutely corporeal address, for if Fluxus practice was buoyed by the utopian ideal of an international network, its works did not find their critical ground of operation in that extensible, virtual space. They were directed at the transformation of concrete experience in very specific, localized temporal domains that were often quite private and resistant to the mediation of still and moving images.

Recall that in Maciunas's proto-Fluxus manifesto of 1962, "Neo-Dada in Music, Theater, Poetry, Art," readymade and indeterminate methods and materials were advocated as the best means of resisting the artificiality of illusionism and abstraction. "Anti-art is life, is nature, is true reality," Maciunas declared:

Rainfall is anti-art, a babble of a crowd is anti-art, a sneeze is anti-art, a flight of a butterfly, or movements of microbes are anti-art. . . . If man could experience the world, the concrete world surrounding him . . . in the same way he experiences art, there would be no need for art, artists and similar "nonproductive" elements.<sup>13</sup>

Certainly there is a fetishism at play here, but it is not a fetishism of networks or of unfettered communication; it is a fetishism of the everyday valued as the essence of concrete experience, the essence of whatever was left in culture after modernism that might constitute "the real"—a fetishism admitted to by the artists themselves. "[T]here was almost a cult among the Fluxus people," wrote Dick Higgins in 1972:

or, more properly, a fetish, carried far beyond any rational or explainable level—which idealized the most direct relationship with “reality,” specifically objective reality. The lives of objects, their histories and events were considered somehow more realistic than any conceivable personal intrusion on them.<sup>14</sup>

Fluxus artists were not alone in their allegiance to the concrete, although their methods were singular. In the late 1950s and into the 1960s, the turn to everyday, common objects was a key tactic in neo-avant-garde efforts to challenge the alienating effects of modernist aesthetics and mass culture. This focus on the object was an assault on two linked phenomena of the time: the mass-production of waste incurred by the industrial strategy of planned obsolescence and the establishment by mass media of a virtual reality of spectacle and simulation. Jasper Johns incorporated into his work the detritus of the newly wasteful postwar consumer culture, Robert Rauschenberg appropriated remnants from historic architecture being razed for modern urban developments, and Claes Oldenburg fabricated pathetic sculptural replicas of household goods to sell from his chockablock marketplace *The Store*. But these gestures were not radical enough for Fluxus artists, who set off to press further the limits between the production and appearance of art and the materials and experiences of life.

Accounts of new media that celebrate the virtual space of intermedia artistic networks for initiating a break with modernist mediums and practices repress the fact that a certain notion of virtuality had already defined the high modernist artwork and its concomitant viewing experience. Specifically, the mode of experience privileged within modern art discourses—transcendent, disembodied, purely optical—anticipated qualities characteristic of contemporary experiences of virtual space in the digital realm. For Clement Greenberg, the successful modernist artwork presented the illusion “that matter is incorporeal, weightless, and exists only optically like a mirage.”<sup>15</sup> Likewise, the attendant subject of this modernist virtuality was described as being disembodied and wholly, eternally, immaterially present. As Rosalind Krauss has argued, modernist art’s transcendent zips, targets, chevrons, and sprays instated a mirroring “reciprocity of absence” between artwork and viewer. “What we have here,” she writes, “is . . . not exactly a situation of non-presence but one of abstract presence, the viewer floating in front of the work as pure optical ray.”<sup>16</sup> This mirage-effect has been carried forth from the high modernist field through the image worlds of Pop art to contemporary forms of screen-based new media in which the subject becomes a function of the image, dependent upon and either subsumed or alienated by it (possibly both). It was against this encroaching mirage-effect, whose presence was already felt in art and mass culture of the 1960s, that the neo-avant-garde’s counter-spectacular practices were positioned. In the wake of modernist transcendentalism, tendencies such as New Realism, Happenings, Fluxus, and minimalism amounted to so many efforts to thrust the viewer ever back into an awareness of the here and now.

The embrace of Fluxus by new media artists, curators, and historians stems from art-historical accounts that position Fluxus as a dematerialized proto-conceptual art of unfettered communication, whose ostensibly anti-art stance was equally anti-object. However, the Fluxus turn to language—an admittedly abstract, symbolic material—was primarily a means for the artwork to incorporate the material conditions of each situation in which it would appear. Along these lines, Maciunas’s 1962 “Neo-Dada” manifesto called for an art that would be like an “automatic machine,” enabling form to be created independently of the artist-composer.<sup>17</sup> The Fluxus event score—the collective’s most basic technology—was precisely this. It harnessed

language in order to disconnect aesthetic form from a definitive, enduring material existence, instead rendering it transitive and ambiguous—qualities owed as much to the operations of musical notation as to the poetics of the written word. This turn to the medium of language, both textual and graphic, was a necessary means for the artwork in flux, whether performance or object, to materialize more individually and concretely in varied contexts. As Higgins explained, “In its most extreme manifestations, Fluxian intermediality dispenses with media. For Fluxus, reality is the medium, experience the utensil, and language the means of distribution.”<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps more than any of Maciunas’s statements, Higgins’s concept of intermedia, introduced first in the manifesto-like tract “Intermedia” in 1966, has been embraced as a prescient defense of new media art due to its call for an untrammelled approach to combining and integrating diverse mediums.<sup>19</sup> Higgins took up the term in order to describe the myriad work he had witnessed since the late 1950s that fell “between media,” work that occupied the “uncharted land that lies between” existing categories of practice.<sup>20</sup> Among Higgins’s examples are Joe Jones’s kinetic, self-playing mechanical instruments, situated between music and sculpture, and Robert Filliou’s object-poems, situated between poetry and sculpture.

By the early 1980s, however, Higgins reflected that intermedia “shortly acquired a life of its own,” and “the term was mis-used and it became chic”—its meaning expanded and diluted in ways that ensured Higgins’s political ambitions for it would fall short.<sup>21</sup> On the one hand, intermedia in popular culture had come to signify an offshoot of expanded cinema characterized by all-encompassing, disorienting mass spectacles of multisensorial media collage incorporating architecture, sound, projected light and film, strobes, and sometimes tactile and olfactory stimuli as well. Quasi-commercial touring enterprises such as the media art collective USCO and Andy Warhol’s Exploding Plastic Inevitable sought to merge the experiences of the nightclub and art gallery through total synthesis on all levels: between artistic mediums, subject and world, subject and subject, and even intra-subjectively, as participants were thought to access untapped regions of consciousness through a kind of aesthetically induced intoxication akin to an experience otherwise provided only by LSD.<sup>22</sup> With this work, the connotations of intermedia’s expanded approach to the conceptualization and categorization of artistic mediums was overwritten by a preoccupation with “media”: a proliferation of new technological apparatuses and combinations thereof that the beholder was newly challenged to navigate.

On the other hand, intermedia entered academia as a new disciplinary track vaguely defined by an experimental, post-Happenings combination of performance and video, as in Hans Breder’s first intermedia MFA program founded at the University of Iowa in 1968. These two veins of intermedia rapidly, increasingly merged. Many of USCO’s performances took place on college campuses as part of the touring Intermedia ’68 festival, organized and managed by the young MBA and entrepreneur John Brockman, which also included projects by Les Levine, Nam June Paik, Charlotte Moorman, Carolee Schneemann, Trisha Brown, Terry Riley, Ken Dewey, Allan Kaprow, and even Dick Higgins (although the intermedia work that Higgins himself promoted was much more modest in form). By 1970, Gene Youngblood had reported in his genre-defining book *Expanded Cinema* that USCO had partnered with behavioral scientists at Harvard to form the Intermedia Systems Corporation with the goal of developing technologically sophisticated forms of “entertainment *as* education.”<sup>23</sup> In the contemporary digital realm, these fantasies have returned in the guise of new media works’ shared basis in numerical code, which is thought to allow for infinite possibilities of

“transcoding” and “programming.”<sup>24</sup> All forms of media are seen to converge through a unifying tissue of computer languages that effectively erases their underlying distinctions.

We should remember, however, that Higgins’s concept of intermedia described a dialectical approach of working *between* discrete existing mediums, achieved by mapping the language, structure, and/or ways of thinking of one medium onto another. To demonstrate this, Higgins’s score *Intermedial Object #1* (1966) proposed fantastical objects whose characteristics are determined along a continuum between two poles represented by two quite dissimilar objects (fig. 1). Elsewhere, Knowles and George Brecht referred to their objects as books, pages, and footnotes; Brecht referred to an encounter with any of his works, whether text, object, or performance, as an event; Filliou produced sculptural assemblages he called poems; and one Fluxbox after

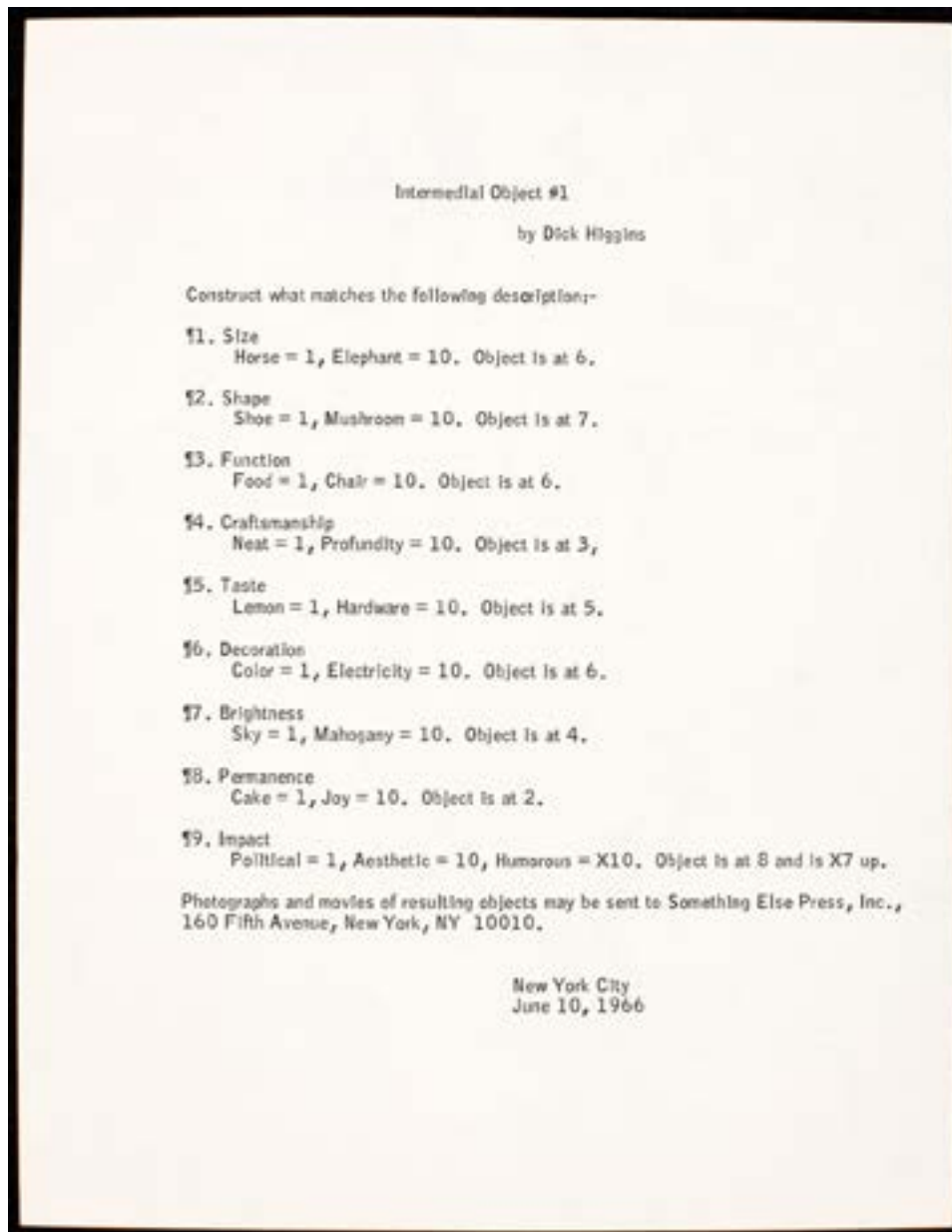


fig. 1: Dick Higgins, *Intermedial Object #1*, 1966. 11 x 8 ½ in. (27.9 x 21.6 cm). Collection Walker Art Center, Walker Special Purchase Fund, 1989, 1989.202. Courtesy of Hannah and Jessica Higgins.

another provoked the beholder to reconsider the stuff of everyday life under alternative rubrics such as time, food, and medicine. Numerous Fluxus works address boundary conditions where one thing meets another, transcends a limit to become something else, or is exchanged with a proximate yet unlike thing.

Above all, Higgins's notion of intermedia supported an aesthetic of "simplicity" and a return to "basic images" as a counter-experience to or escape from mass media. This he argued in a companion text, "Statement on Intermedia," published in Wolf Vostell's journal *Dé-coll/age* in 1966. In this text, the political stakes of intermedia were made overt, as Higgins characterized its in-between position as being motivated by a sense that existing categories of artistic production were inadequate for responding to a moment in which, due to new media technologies, "our sensitivities have changed." Modern art, Higgins felt, had simply not kept up. With manifesto-like zeal, he sets his sights beyond modernist aesthetic quarrels, calling to mind the backdrop of the Vietnam War (at that moment in its eleventh year) and emergent labor, civil rights, and feminist struggles as he poses questions about the collective ambition and future direction of contestational neo-avant-garde practices:

Due to the spread of mass literacy, to television and the transistor radio, our sensitivities have changed. The very complexity of this impact gives us *a taste for simplicity*, for an art which is based on the underlying images that an artist has always used to make his point. As with the cubists, we are asking for a new way of looking at things, but more totally, since we are more impatient and more anxious to go to the *basic images*. This explains the impact of Happenings, event pieces, mixed media films. We do not ask any more to speak magnificently of taking arms against a sea of troubles, *we want to see it done*. The art which *most directly* does this is the one which allows this *immediacy, with a minimum of distractions*.<sup>25</sup>

The viewing experience Higgins characterizes is not one of omniscience and transcendence but rather an active, highly physical, and immanently material spectatorship called into being by the artwork itself. Far from an optimistic fetishization of the technological, Higgins's vision of intermedia meant to engage political and social contexts in a more direct or concrete, that is to say *less* technologically mediated, fashion. It could be a Fluxus mantra: a taste for simplicity, immediacy, basic images, most directly, with a minimum of distractions. We want to see it done.

Of course, it is Nam June Paik's work with video, television, and broadcast technologies, the earliest examples of which were coincident with his participation in Fluxus, that has provided historians with the strongest link between Fluxus and contemporary new media. Yet Paik imagined his work with electronics from the beginning as a humanizing, critical "anti-technology technology" that depicted mass media technologies as dysfunctional and alienating.<sup>26</sup> Paik's first significant body of work incorporating televisions was presented in March 1963 in his *Exposition of Music—Electronic Television* at Galerie Parnass, the same venue where Maciunas had presented his proto-Fluxus "Neo-Dada" manifesto nearly a year before, and where prototypical Fluxus objects were now on view in a small display in the villa's basement kitchen. In one room of Paik's exhibition, eleven TVs were cast seemingly randomly about the space, including many on the floor, their broadcasts made illegible by manipulations to their circuitry (fig. 2). One set was laid screen-side down. Several were made interactive by means of pedal switches, microphones, and external sound sources as a way to transform viewers' typically sedentary encounter with television into a full-body





fig.2: Nam June Paik, *Exposition of Music. Electronic Television (exhibition view)*, 1963. Galerie Parnass, Wuppertal, Germany, March 1963. Photo: Peter Brötzmann. © Nam June Paik Estate.

experience. Following the example of Cage's prepared pianos, which treated the piano as a whole, concrete object to be played on any of its surfaces, Paik presented the television as a three-dimensional object rather than merely an image projection device metonymically identified with its screen. Paik furthermore took a microscopic, materialist view of television electronics, calling attention with his manipulations to the physicality of a TV broadcast's energy particles and waves.

David Joselit has argued that in Paik's work, the "dematerialized" mobility of the network was stabilized as an object of spectatorship.<sup>27</sup> But that was not all—Paik's objectified apparatuses were to be interfered with, fondled, worn. Paik referred to his TV works as "physical music" and "time art," another mode of accessing the concrete to which he readily compared very low-tech works like his event score *Fluxus Champion Contest* (1962), a performed peeing contest.<sup>28</sup> His pianos, TVs, and manipulated electronics explored the "possibilities of combining many senses; touching, blowing, caressing, seeing, treading, walking, running, hearing, striking, etc."<sup>29</sup> An altered record player, *Listening to Music through the Mouth* (1962–1963), was rigged so that beholders had to insert the turntable needle's arm, dildo-like, into their mouths (fig. 3). Calling for a bodily incorporation of technology, listening in Paik's works necessitated touching, and aural experience crossed into orality.

Paik pursued a technological art of the concrete that rendered mass media spectatorship highly material and phenomenologically rich. His work was poised against the reality of a scene he once recounted having witnessed at a New York dance club:

[I] was stunned . . . there were more than 1000 young people . . . mostly with their dates. 90% of them neither kissed, nor danced, nor . . . even touched . . . hands. They were just looking [at] a big TV projector, which . . . [showed] . . . banal pictures, such as old movies or Rock Roll music or Elvis, which they have seen most of their lives in their home TV set or movie house.<sup>30</sup>

In response, Paik exhibited wrapped TVs, burned-out TVs, organic materials fashioned into TVs, TVs eviscerated and overtaken by nature. By the late 1960s, he was known among his peers for working specifically with outmoded and obsolete devices in ways that emphasized media technology's tendency toward rapid obsolescence. Allan Kaprow wrote in 1968: "His pianos . . . were old and irreparable, and his television consoles are cast-off derelicts from Canal Street."<sup>31</sup> Cage described Paik's work as simply "Wires and more wires"; an "image of utter collapse."<sup>32</sup> These qualities accorded with the handmade aesthetic that characterized many Fluxus objects, even when they incorporated the readymades of advanced industry. As Higgins reflected, Fluxus "does not seem to participate in the age of technology, with the exception of the material substances on which works are printed or in which they are packaged, which are often chemically very sophisticated [e.g., plastic] but handled as if they were—wood."<sup>33</sup>

Paik himself conceived of his work as complementing that of his more Luddite Fluxus peers, writing in a 1966 manifesto, "Cyberated art is very important, but art for cyberated life is more important, and the latter [cyberated life] need not be cyberated. Maybe George Brecht's simplissimo is the most adequate."<sup>34</sup> Indeed, Brecht's event scores were a kind of Fluxus anti-technology, an automatic machine designed to produce unmediated experience, to re-create the artwork anew, over and over again, for each and every now. Likewise, Liz Kotz has described the logic of the event score as a two-part process, in which "a 'general' template or notational system . . . generates 'specific' realizations in different contexts." In this logic of specification, "the template, schema, or score is usually not considered the locus of the work, but merely a tool to produce it."<sup>35</sup> Purposefully evading a definitive, fixed form, the Fluxus work materializes again and again, with each appearance revealing yet another dimension of the work's potential, as if it were an infinitely faceted jewel.

And so there is indeed a notion of the virtual operative in Fluxus, I would argue, although it is not the virtuality of networked space. It is rather the temporal virtuality of the artwork forever in-becoming through time. The plain language of most Fluxus scores, chosen for its affectlessness, keeps the work's form radically uncircumscribed such that the general-specific dualism Kotz describes might better be named in terms



fig. 3: Nam June Paik demonstrates *Listening to Music through the Mouth* (1962–63) at *Exposition of Music. Electronic Television*, Galerie Parnass, Wuppertal, Germany, March 1963. Collection of MuMOK, Vienna. Photo Manfred Montwé © montweART.

of philosopher Henri Bergson's dualism of the virtual-actual, which he proposed in place of the possible-real.<sup>36</sup> For Bergson, whose work at least Cage and Brecht knew, the relationship of possible-to-real assumes a situation in which the real is simply one scenario that wins out over a set of predetermined possibilities, whereas the idea of the virtual-actual entails the possibility for the actual to unexpectedly diverge from the known. The former is limited to relationships of identity; the latter contains the possibility of spontaneous difference. It is a subtle differentiation, but it has everything to do with the way we exist in, understand, and interact with the world. Gilles Deleuze, writing on Bergson, has well defended this point:

It would be wrong to see only a verbal dispute here: it is a question of existence itself. Every time we pose the question in terms of possible and real, we are forced to conceive of existence as a brute eruption, a pure act or leap which always occurs behind our backs and is subject to a law of all or nothing. What difference can there be between the existent and non-existent if the non-existent is already possible, already included in the concept and having all the characteristics that the concept confers upon it as a possibility?<sup>37</sup>

Instead of deriving the real from a finite set of predetermined possibilities, this notion of the virtual gives us conceptual access to that particular quality of Fluxus works which maintains the potential for ushering forth the utterly new. This projective, temporal virtuality of the Fluxus work—always in-becoming through its appearance as multifarious versions of the concrete—could not be further from the spatial and phenomenological virtuality of digital forms of communication and participation, in which, as Boris Groys admits in his text for *The Art of Participation* catalogue, “the body of the person using the computer is of no consequence. . . . One falls into a state of self-oblivion, of unawareness of one's own body.”<sup>38</sup>



fig. 4: Benjamin Patterson, *Methods & Processes* (detail). First published in Paris, 1962. Artist's book, offset printed. Jean Brown papers, 1916–1995 (bulk 1958–1985), Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (890164 and 2016.M.14). Courtesy of Benjamin Patterson Estate.



fig. 5: George Maciunas, *Excreta Fluxorum*, 1973/1978. Plastic box with offset label, containing objects in various media with offset labels. Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Gift, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2526.2008.a-ww. By permission of Billie J. Maciunas, PhD.

Hannah Higgins, who has considered Fluxus in relation to early computer art, reminds us that in the early 1960s, “most computers were real people,” that is, a person employed to make calculations. In this sense, Fluxus work “could be characterized as ‘computer’ art of the human kind.”<sup>39</sup> But it is also an art that immediately registered how the body always exceeds the technological. Both score and Fluxbox are a kind of container for corporeal experience, establishing a temporary commons of interpersonal, multisensory presence activating not just vision but also touch, taste, and smell. In scores by Maciunas, Higgins, and Benjamin Patterson, the body’s limitations and frailties, its awkwardness, its resistance to dematerialization or fungibility, are exaggerated, not mitigated, by rigorous tabular and diagrammatic structures of organization, drawing our attention to the dynamics of Fluxus being about both flows *and* stoppages (fig. 4). If anything, Fluxus algorithms or codes, materialized in the rules of an event score or the rationally compartmentalized container of a Fluxbox, worked as a foil to illuminate what *cannot* be contained: the shit of life (sometimes quite literally). (fig. 5)

To take another frequently cited example in new media–focused histories of Fluxus, in 1967, Knowles worked with James Tenney at Bell Labs to produce a computer-generated aleatoric poem, *The House of Dust*. The poem employed FORTRAN to combine in every possible permutation prewritten phrases that describe a house in terms of its materials, site, light source, and inhabitants. But the poem was not an end in itself. Nicole Woods has detailed how Knowles treated one quatrain—“A House of Plastic / In a Metropolis / Using Natural Light / Inhabited by People / from all Walks of Life”—as a score for constructing several small structures at CalArts in the early 1970s, which became a temporary hub for experimental performance.<sup>40</sup> The poem was also dropped from helicopter over the campus, making of the dot-matrix printout an array of paper ribbons that elegantly twisted their way through the sky (fig. 6). According to Hannah Higgins and Douglas Kahn, “The key to Alison Knowles’s going beyond the technological limits of digital computing was her placing of the dedicated output, i.e., the



fig.6: Alison Knowles with Norman Kaplan, *Poem Drop Event*, May 1971, *House of Dust*, 1969–75. California Institute of the Arts, Valencia, CA. Destroyed. Photographer unknown. © 2020 Alison Knowles.

printout of the text, amid the ever-changing contingencies of social and poetical practice.”<sup>41</sup> To my mind it is absolutely not a coincidence that Knowles’s poem—an homage to different ways of cultivating domestic space—emerged in a transitional moment for Fluxus, when collective energies became focused increasingly on ritualistic events, banquets, and housing projects—all various retreats into spaces and experiences of relatively private, yet still communal, interpersonal encounters.

Fluxus objects and gestures were recalcitrant to an art market that demanded (and continues to demand) unique, precious, individually authored things *and* to an image culture that demanded (and continues to demand) continuous circulation of consistent, recognizable images. Fluxus’s rejection of abstraction and illusionism was at first pitted against an art world dominated by modernist aesthetics epitomized by abstract painting, which seemed unwilling to engage the rapidly changing culture to which neo-avant-garde artists felt an urgency to respond if not reject outright. The counter-spectacular, immanent quality of Fluxus’s everyday objects and gestures opposed the disembodied, transcendent, purely “optical” viewing experience upheld by modernist institutions and discourses. Fluxus artists’ artworks in flux also resisted a popular culture of mediated images and commodity fetishes. In our desire to read Fluxus as a portent of contemporary new media art, we may misapprehend the collective’s most important lesson for the present, which I take to be its model of iconoclastic rejection of telepresence, in favor of experiences of intimate, face-to-face communion. Figuratively speaking, the art historical and curatorial narrative that I propose ultimately turns away from the museum computer room and toward that modest vase of yellow tulips set on the living room table.

Opened in 2008, *The Art of Participation* could not yet take stock of the post-internet aesthetic of an emerging generation of artists whose work celebrates fluid, self-made, augmented identities and realities, a new wave of new media art that has already

claimed its roots in Fluxus.<sup>42</sup> But the promiscuous position-taking of much post-internet art, while typically read as generous and open-minded, can be frustrating in its elusiveness, an embrace of multipositionality that avoids committing to any position at all. Digital natives (myself among them) ought to recognize as 1990s nostalgia the fantasy that digital communications and networked images allow for a post-identity society, especially at a time when identity categories—their rights, visibility, protection, and security—are in reality becoming more entrenched or under attack in frightening ways.

In light of these arguments, I will conclude by proposing two possible alternatives for locating Fluxus's legacy within contemporary art, which run counter to what has been offered in the discourse around digital, new media, internet, and post-internet art.<sup>43</sup> The first alternative trajectory would be an art that seeks to eliminate mediation entirely, as in the performance work of Tino Sehgal, which is foremost invested in direct encounters between human bodies in real space, even at the point of the artwork's transmission from artist to collector. Sehgal's works consist of moving bodies, speaking bodies, bodies that ignore us, avoid us, or proposition us. As a rule, he does not allow his works to be photographed or filmed, though admittedly there are illicit exceptions. Symbolically, at least, and in critical recognition of the machinations of the art market and life in general under globalized capitalism, Sehgal's work values human beings and unmediated intersubjective experience above all. The second alternative would include practices that utilize the internet as a means of launching relationships and experiences that ultimately exceed that platform. I am thinking, for instance, of Los Angeles artist Adam Overton's website UploadDownloadPerform.net (2008–2014), a once active open-access wiki repository of performance scores meant to be downloaded and performed in real space-time. Overton's instructions for how to use the site constituted a kind of performance instruction in and of itself: "*in any order, all, some, or [n]one of the following: upload [something] / download [something] / perform [something] / repeat if desired.*"<sup>44</sup> Or the work of David Horvitz, which lays bare the contradictions between the internet's promise of infinite space and instantaneous connectivity and the real-world limits of the human body in lived space-time.<sup>45</sup> The ways in which these contemporary practices—among many laudable others—continue the investigations begun by Fluxus artists more than fifty years ago is beyond the present discussion, but at the very least I want to propose that in today's world they urgently and effectively signal a taste for simplicity, immediacy, basic images, most directly, with a minimum of distractions. We should want to see it done.

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## Notes

- 1 Rudolf Frieing, ed., *The Art of Participation: 1950 to Now*, exh. cat. (San Francisco/New York: SFMOMA/Thames & Hudson, 2008).
- 2 "SFMOMA Presents Major Overview of Participation-Based Art," press release, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, June 15, 2008, <https://www.sfmoma.org/press/release/sfmoma-presents-major-overview-of-participation-b/>, accessed July 7, 2020.
- 3 The term "network mentality" comes from Owen Smith, "Fluxus Praxis: An Exploration of Connections, Creativity, and Community," in *At A Distance: Precursors to Art and Activism on the Internet*, ed. Annmarie Chandler and Norie Neumark (Cambridge, MA:

MIT Press, 2005), 126. See also Craig J. Saper, *Networked Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), xv, 43; Christiane Paul, *Digital Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003); Charlie Gere, “The Digital Avant-Garde,” *Digital Culture* (London: Reaktion, 2008); *MediaArtHistories*, ed. Oliver Grau (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007); and Tatiana Bazzichelli, *Networking: The Net as Artwork* (Aarhus: Digital Aesthetics Research Center, 2008). In tandem, there is an active community of internet artists who explicitly identify as latter-generation Fluxus artists.

**4** Paul, *Digital Art*, 13.

**5** Co-curated with Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, Paul’s exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art was titled *Programmed: Rules, Codes, and Choreographies in Art, 1965-2018* (September 28, 2018 – April 14, 2019).

**6** Christiane Paul, “Introduction,” *New Media in the White Cube and Beyond: Curatorial Models for Digital Art* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008), 4.

**7** Saper, *Networked Art*, xv.

**8** Smith, “Fluxus Praxis,” 136.

**9** Smith, “Fluxus Praxis,” 131.

**10** Smith, “Fluxus Praxis,” 132.

**11** Smith, “Fluxus Praxis,” 128.

**12** Roger Rothman, “Against Critique: Fluxus and the Hacker Aesthetic,” *Modernism/modernity* 22, no. 4 (2015): 787–810.

**13** George Maciunas, “Neo-Dada in Music, Theater, Poetry, Art” (1962), in *In the Spirit of Fluxus*, ed. Elizabeth Armstrong and Joan Rothfuss, exh. cat. (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1993), 156–57.

**14** Dick Higgins, “Something Else about Fluxus,” *Art and Artists* 7, no. 7 (October 1972): 17–18.

**15** Clement Greenberg, “The New Sculpture,” in *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), 145.

**16** Rosalind Krauss, “Using Language to Do Business as Usual,” in *Visual Theory: Painting and Interpretation*, ed. Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly, and Keith Moxey (New York: Polity Press, 1991), 89.

**17** Maciunas, “Neo-Dada in Music, Theater, Poetry, Art,” 157.

**18** Dick Higgins, *A Dialectic of Centuries: Notes Toward a Theory of the New Arts* (New York: Printed Editions, 1978), 4.

**19** Dick Higgins, “Intermedia” (1965/6), republished with commentary by Hannah Higgins in *Leonardo* 34, no. 1 (2001): 49–54. See also Higgins, “Statement on Intermedia” (1966), *Dé-coll/age* 6, ed. Wolf Vostell (1967), reprinted in *In the Spirit of Fluxus*, 172–73. I deal at greater length with Higgins’s notion of intermedia and its relationship to the spectacular and educational initiatives discussed in this chapter in my essay “The Crux of Fluxus: Intermedia, Rear-Guard,” in *Arts Expanded (1958–1978)*, ed. Eric Crosby and Liz Glass, vol. 1 of *Living Collections Catalogue* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2014), <http://walkerart.org/collections/publications/art-expanded/crux-of-fluxus>, accessed July 7, 2020.

**20** Higgins, “Intermedia,” 49, 50.

**21** Higgins, “Intermedia,” 52 (see 1981 postscript); Dick Higgins, letter to Tom Fallon, August 11, 1981, Dick Higgins papers, 1960–1994, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, accession no. 870613.

**22** Critical histories of this vein of intermedia include Branden Joseph, “‘My Mind Split Open’: Andy Warhol’s Exploding Plastic Inevitable,” *Grey Room* 8 (Summer 2002): 80–107; and Felicity D. Scott, “Acid Visions,” *Grey Room* 23 (Spring 2006): 22–39. See also Elenore Lester’s early reports, “So What Happens After Happenings?,” *New York Times*, September 4, 1966; and “Intermedia: Tune In, Turn On—and Walk Out?,” *New York Times Magazine*, May 12, 1968.

**23** Gene Youngblood, “The Artist as Ecologist,” in *Expanded Cinema* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1970), 348. There are further instances of artists and critics adopting the term “intermedia” early on that I can only list here: from 1967 to 1970, Gene Youngblood wrote a regular “Intermedia” column for the *Los Angeles Free Press*; in 1968, Elaine Summers founded the Experimental Intermedia Foundation to support and promote the work of artists deemed to be working in that mode; and Harvey Lond published an arts magazine titled *InterMedia* from 1974–1979 in Los Angeles. Intermedia also took root internationally with the 1969 Intermedia Art Festival in Tokyo, Intermedia ’69 in Heidelberg, Germany, and the founding of Galerie Art Intermedia in Cologne.

**24** Lev Manovich, “Principles of New Media,” *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 27–48.

**25** Higgins, “Statement on Intermedia,” 172, italics mine.

**26** See Nam June Paik, “TV Bra for Living Sculpture” (1969) and “Interview with Paik” (1975), reproduced in Wulf Herzogenrath, ed., *Nam June Paik Fluxus/Video* (Bremen: Kunsthalle Bremen, 1999), 132.

**27** David Joselit, *Feedback: Television Against Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 13.

**28** Nam June Paik, letter to Rolf Jährling, December 22, 1962, cited in Susanne Neuberger, “Terrific Exhibition: ‘Time Art’ alias Music in the Exhibition Genre,” *Nam June Paik: Exposition of Music Electronic Television Revisited* (Cologne: Verlag König, 2009), 31; and Nam June Paik, “Afterlude to the EXPOSITION of EXPERIMENTAL TELEVISION,” *fLuxus cc fiVe ThReE*, no. 4 (June 1964).

**29** Nam June Paik, “About the Exposition of the Music,” *Dé-coll/age 3* (December 1962).

**30** Nam June Paik, “Artificial Intelligence vs. Artificial Metabolism” (1982), reproduced in Herzogenrath, ed., *Nam June Paik Fluxus/Video*, 252–53.

**31** Allan Kaprow, “Nam June Paik” (1968), in Herzogenrath, ed., *Nam June Paik Fluxus/Video*, 124–25.

**32** John Cage, “Nam June Paik: A Diary” (1965), in *Nam June Paik Fluxus/Video*, 102–3.

**33** Dick Higgins, “Something Else About Fluxus,” 21.

**34** Nam June Paik, Untitled manifesto, in *Manifestos, A Great Bear Pamphlet* (New York: Something Else Press, 1966), 25.

**35** Liz Kotz, *Words to Be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 194.

**36** See Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1911), 179, 181, 196–97, 257–58.

**37** Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 211. Deleuze engaged Bergson throughout his career, but his two major works that deal with the concept of divergent actualization are *Difference and Repetition* and *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Brooklyn, NY: Zone, 1988). See also Gilles Deleuze, “Bergson’s Conception of Difference,” in *The New Bergson*, ed. John Mullarkey (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999). In Branden Joseph’s essay “Chance, Indeterminacy, Multiplicity,” which draws on Bergson’s virtual-actual dialectic in different ways than does my present argument, he notes that Cage and Deleuze were working through Bergson’s ideas at roughly the same moment. See Joseph in Julia Robinson, ed., *The Anarchy of Silence: John Cage and Experimental Art* (Barcelona: Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2009).

**38** Boris Groys, “A Genealogy of Participatory Art,” in *The Art of Participation: 1950 to Now*, 29.

**39** Hannah Higgins, “The Computational Word Works of Eric Andersen and Dick Higgins,” in *Mainframe Experimentalism: Early Computing and the Foundations of the Digital Arts*, ed. Hannah Higgins and Douglas Kahn (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012), 283, 279.



**40** Nicole L. Woods, “Object/Poems: Alison Knowles’s Feminist Archite(x)ture,” *X-TRA* 15, no. 1 (Fall 2012): 6–25.

**41** Higgins and Kahn, “Introduction,” in *Mainframe Experimentalism*, 12.

**42** According to new media curator Christiane Paul, “All the networked art forms from the 60s onwards—Fluxus and mail art, projects using fax machines and Minitel—can be seen as proto-post-internet in that they used networks or network technologies for creating work that would take physical, embodied form.” Paul, quoted in Paddy Johnson, “Finally, a Semi-Definitive Definition of Post-Internet Art,” *Art F City*, October 14, 2014, <http://artfcity.com/2014/10/14/finally-a-semi-definitive-definition-of-post-internet-art/>, accessed July 7, 2020.

**43** Other alternative accounts to new media framings of Fluxus include Anthony Huberman, “Talent Is Overrated,” *Artforum* 48, no. 3 (2009): 109–10; Martin Patrick, “Unfinished Filliou: On the Fluxus Ethos and the Origins of Relational Aesthetics,” *Art Journal* 69, no. 1–2 (2010): 44–61; and Bertrand Clavez, “Fluxus: Reference or Paradigm for Contemporary Art?,” *Visible Language* 39, no. 3 (2005).

**44** UploadDownloadPerform.net was founded by Adam Overton in 2008 and went offline in 2014. <http://uploaddownloadperform.net/>, accessed August 21, 2014. Now offline, partial captures of the site are available via <http://web.archive.org>.

**45** David Horvitz uses the internet and a personal e-mail list to advertise and sell works and projects related to highly localized gestures and performances. For example, for his work *#VadeMecum (5992. I will, with Pleasure, Take Letters for You)*, commissioned by Creative Time in 2011, Horvitz invited the public to submit Twitter messages which he wrote out by hand and personally couriered from San Francisco to Washington, DC, following the route of the first transcontinental telegram; see <http://creative-time.org/programs/archive/2011/tweets/?p=118> (also archived at <http://web.archive.org>) and <http://davidhorvitz.com/>, accessed August 21, 2014.

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# Intermedial Perception or Fluxing Across the Sensory

## Hannah B Higgins

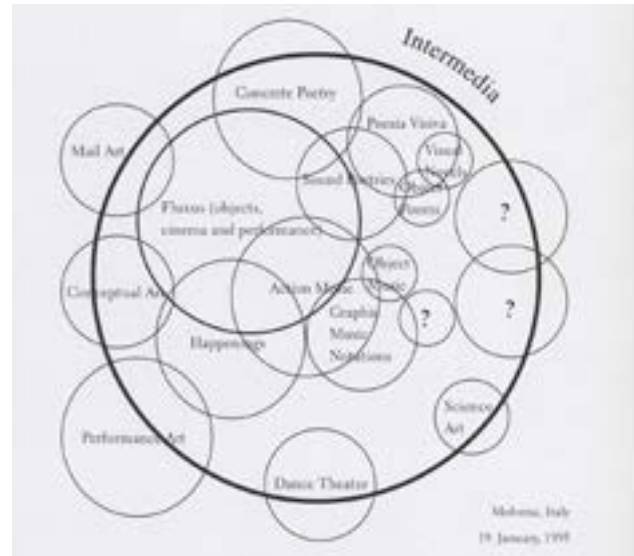
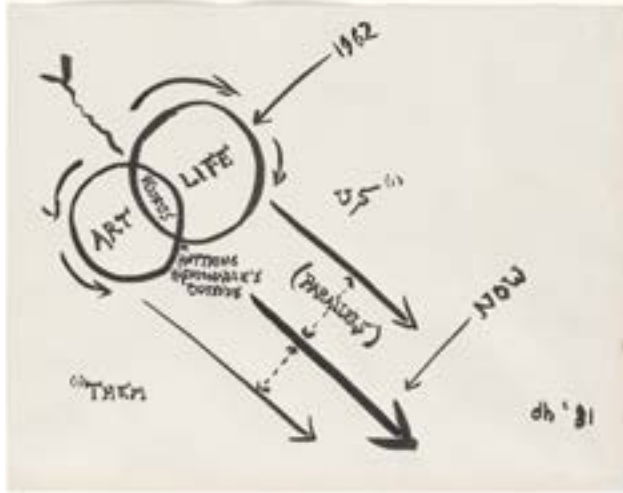


fig. 1: Dick Higgins, [Fluxus Chart], 1981. Dick Higgins, Intermedia Chart, 1995. Reproduced courtesy of the Estate of Dick Higgins

In a historic essay published in 1965 in the *Something Else Newsletter*, Fluxus artist, head of the Something Else Press (and my father), Dick Higgins, revived a term first used by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1812.<sup>1</sup> Higgins used the term, intermedia, to describe artwork that made use of structural continuities between the arts: poetry that was both read and seen as form (visual poetry), poetry that was both read and heard as sound (sound poetry), theatre with musical and painterly elements (happenings), and all other arts in between. Higgins wrote “I would like to suggest that the use of intermedia is more or less universal throughout the fine arts, since continuity rather than categorization is the hallmark of our new mentality.”<sup>2</sup> Thirty years later, these intermedia relationships assumed graphic form in the schematic “Intermedia Diagram” of 1995. [Figure 1]

The diagram shows, for example, the interaction of Sound Poetries, which emphasise the sound component of language and poetic association, and Concrete Poetry, which evolve around a homology of visual form and verbal content such that poetry is structured visually in a convergence of the communicative motive of graphic design and verbal content. It remains poetry because it uses letters, words and their mechanics to build this bridge. Concrete and Sound Poetries overlap in the

diagram, as they do in practice, with visual-sound poetry. For example, Jackson Mac Low’s *A Notated Vocabulary for Eve Rosenthal* (1978) consists of text and music fragments, a kind of song collage, seemingly tossed across a page. Mac Low’s poem demonstrates the extent to which the literal meaning of each word can be augmented (or even replaced) by the experiential nature of musical and spoken sound. Here, the associative or testimonial nature of much modern poetry is replaced by the physical presence of sound (often in repetition) and a graphic mode of presentation.

The performer’s attentiveness to the spontaneous relationships between adjacent parts becomes a totally absorptive process, as the borders of the page seem to disappear with the choice of manifold and everchanging directional and sound options. This opening-up of the space of the written page in all directions prompts words and word fragments to hang in the air (for the audience), just as they seem to do on paper (for the performer). One thinks of a verbal/musical rendition of leaves caught in the wind. The listener, who may be either the performer listening to him/herself or the audience member, moves between the musical component and the sonic and literal contents of the word fragments.

Sounds and text fragments exist as such, not as mere vehicles of literal meaning. Such poems, in other words, inhabit the intermedium between graphic art, poetry and music, or between viewing (the total pattern), literary experience (reading) and sound (hearkening). Put another way, this poem involves the places where visual, literary and musical structures overlap. Significantly, the term intermedia (as Higgins originally intended it) refers to structural homologies, and not additive mixtures, which would be multimedia in the sense of illustrated stories or opera, where the various media types function independently of each other. Rather, in this poetic intermedium, the traditional reading of text and music from left to right is subject to the alternative visual logic of the image. Like leaves, fragments of text are strewn across the performative space of the page that has been stripped of the rigorous sequencing of lines from left to right and from top to bottom. Working against restrictive formal categories in the arts, the intermedia approach offers an alternative to specialisation and professional standards of the so-called fine arts. For instance, grammar, meter and word choice no longer *necessarily* establish the qualitative features of poetry.

In its implied resistance to specialised skill sets, the intermedia concept more generally partakes of the anti-establishment orientation of much elite and popular culture during the 1960s. Significantly, the argument originally targeted art historical practices. In the same essay Higgins writes:

The concept of the separation of media arose in the Renaissance. The idea that a painting could be made of paint on canvas or that a sculpture should not be painted seems characteristic of the kind of social thought, categorizing and dividing society ... which we call the feudal conception of the Great Chain of Being. ... The scene is not just characteristic of the painting world as an institution, however. It is absolutely natural to (and inevitable in) the concept of the pure medium.<sup>3</sup>

For Higgins, intermedia work is a historic necessity, functioning in his own time as a foil for the specialisation of the arts and countering the overdetermination of painting as the dominant art of his era. During this time, the late 1950s, abstract modes of painting routinely assumed a near-hegemonic dominance among the arts.

Higgins maintains that the hierarchy of specialised arts is the product of specific historical circumstances that categorised and defined human experience in the modern era. The historiography of art, literature and music reflects this development as it mirrors the processes of disciplinary specialisation and industrial mechanisation. The move toward intermedial thinking signals a widespread historical process over the last 40 years. This phenomenon is evidenced by the interdisciplinary changes in the arts, mass media, academic disciplines, and in the shift toward a post-industrial economy. Examples of intermedia thinking that predate Higgins's recovery and expansion of the term include a 1958 essay called "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock" by Allan Kaprow, author of the first "Happening" and a friend of Higgins:

I am convinced that to grasp Pollock's impact properly, we must be acrobats, constantly shuttling between an identification with the hands and body that flung paint and stood in the canvas and submission to the objective markings, allowing them to entangle and assault us.<sup>4</sup>

As these words suggest, Happenings (like other painterly performance forms emerging simultaneously in France, Germany and Japan) extend and critique the heroic gesture of action painting through the intermedium of performance, where "we must be acrobats".

This presents us with a two-fold account of the resurgence of performance art (in this case the Happening) during the late 1950s and early 1960s. If performance art is viewed as a continuation of painterly action, then it takes its place at the periphery of canonical modernism—that is, in the intermedium between painting and theatre. Examined outside the arena of modern painting, performance art routinely assumes the position of anti-art, often also termed "neo-avant-garde". Such approaches remove Happenings from the intermedia category and associate them instead with a kind of chaos theatre.

That said, the staunch physicality, or acrobatic nature, of many Happenings and much European Action Music (and their legacies) remain quite different from the minimally formatted and modestly scaled Fluxus Event, with which Higgins is associated.<sup>5</sup>

Whereas Kaprow, an erstwhile painter and collagist, invented the Happening, George Brecht, a chemist, conceived of the distilled Event format. Brecht, Kaprow and Higgins all attended a course on musical composition offered by John Cage in 1958-9 at the New School for Social Research in New York. Common backgrounds notwithstanding, while the experiential intensity of the Happening no doubt has some ontological affinity with music, it is primarily structured between painting and theatre, as demonstrated in the above statement. In contrast, Brecht's extremely distilled, textual scores from 1959-62 recall poetry, musical notation, and the everyday situations they propose—all simultaneously.

The Fluxus Event, like intermedia art generally, “suggests a location between the general idea of art media and those of life media”,<sup>6</sup> as Higgins put it, referring to the fact that two domains overlap, but remain distinct areas. The centrality of everyday actions in many Events routinely leads to the common misperception that Fluxus Events seek to erase the art/life divide. However, the exploration of everyday activities as performance Events requires that they remain located within the domains of graphic art, music or poetry, for their position in between these media involves a presence within the camp of arts and culture. Even as the boundaries of art extend beyond previously perceived aesthetic or institutional boundaries, the relationship to materials and ideas associated with the arts remains. Or, once an activity has moved from life into art as an Event, it cannot return, unchanged, to life.

The hovering bubbles of the Intermedia Diagram (whose sizes seem indeterminate) imaginarily expand, contract, pass over and through each other in a visualisation of the fluidity characteristic to intermedia arts. This variability of boundaries between media in the intermedia chart necessitates an understanding of the senses, the physiological basis of all experience, as cross-modal in nature and productive of aesthetic experience. Put differently, intermedia studies draw attention to the overlapping aesthetics and their relations to the senses as implied by the Event format. Such an examination also calls for an expanded concept of aesthetics beyond its routine association with the visual arts.

Far from being limited to the traditional realms of painting and sculpture, the categorising behaviour of the modern era established the hierarchy of the senses in the modern period, at least in the cultural mainstream.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps for this reason, hierarchies both in the fine arts and relating to the sensory system run roughly

parallel to each other: from the visual as painting and as the sensory basis for the literary arts (as read), through sound as music to the baser art forms of movement (dance), taste (gourmet cooking) and scent (perfumery). Intermedia work, it could be said, occurs between media categories and perceptual categories. Understanding the power of intermedia work in general, and the Event in particular, calls for a cross-modal aesthetics of all senses as based in the interactions of hearing, touch, smell, taste and sight. The consideration of intermedial (and therefore intersensory) art therefore requires a simultaneously physiological and cultural framework for each sense as a cross-modal perceptual system.

Each sense relies on specific types of information. For instance, what is learned or can be learned by one sense, such as listening, differs both biologically and culturally from what is learned by seeing, smelling, touching or tasting.<sup>8</sup> Here, the basic orientation system involves mechanoreceptors that act to equilibrate the body by obtaining information about gravity. Similarly, the act of looking provides the visual system with data about distance, action etc., which, in turn, support the functioning of these receptors. Receptors operate exclusively according to their particular task of equilibration, just as tactile information produced by the haptic (touch) system, or vibratory events recorded by the auditory system remain specific to these respective senses. The combined effect of interacting sense organs and the culture of their hosts produces the complex process we call perception.

This point is worth repeating. Sensory systems, the physical channels for every piece of information we have about the world, do not naturally function independent of each other physiologically or culturally. For example, as a subject hears a sound, the head turns toward it so as to see its source and to position itself frontally toward the origin of the sound. Here, eyes and body contribute to the subject's ability to learn from what is, strictly speaking, a sound. Classical music, delivered in a live performance, requires a physically restrained audience in rows of chairs. The fact that people must be sitting and facing forward suggests a sense of physical control over the audience. To ‘get it right’ requires this posture as opposed to others. Western classical music, like the specialised art forms that have come to constitute high art in general, requires the isolation of one particular sense. In practice, this phenomenon has turned into a cultural mandate. Sitting backwards in a chair or dancing in a symphony hall is *simply not done*.

Sensory theorist J.J. Gibson suggests that, as one sense affects the function of another, it forms an “overlapping field”,<sup>9</sup> put into play by the observer in a kind of “feedback,”<sup>10</sup> or active inquiry. Applied to intermedia work, this phenomenon highlights the observation and coordination of several perceptual systems. In what follows, I consider a series of Fluxus Events with particular intermedial qualities. I will then move toward a clarification of the term that accounts for the difference between intermedia in Higgins’ sense and the way the term has come to be used by others. Due to the predominance of intermedial logic in Events, this short discussion can neither survey all examples, nor can it explore all cross-modalities in depth. Instead, brief descriptions of Fluxus intermedia that link hearing to touch, touch to vision, vision to smell and smell to taste, illustrate the interdependence of the senses and the intermedial art forms associated with them.

### Intermedia structures and Fluxus Events

A photograph depicting Philip Corner’s 1962 *Piano Activities* initially appears merely to record the physical destruction of a piano. As such, the work might be understood as an indictment of the restrictions of normative piano performance. Such an approach recalls the reactive notion of the avant-garde, in which the destruction of fine art translates into the emergence of anti-art. However, looked upon as an intermedial Event that actively engages the materials of the piano, Corner’s work activates a range of perceptual systems that only incidentally (and with clear and affirmative intent) results in the destruction of the piano.

Contrast this intermedial Event with a classical piano performance, in which the act of touching keys creates a series of sounds considered ‘correct’ from a musical standpoint. From a perceptual perspective, the pianist’s performance at the instrument suggests that the sense of touch remains in the service of the ear. Touch is subservient. Corner’s piece, on the other hand, empowers the performer by assigning specific roles such as rubbing, cutting, etc. In turn, feedback mechanisms (of the perceptual systems of touch to sound and back again) produce a simultaneously sonic and tactile experience *as art*, rather than a competent reproduction of a classical score. As a result, the work can be described as intermedial and cross-sensory—at least at the level of the performer’s experience.

By contrast, the audience perceives the work at the visual-auditory level; “What is that sound? Is it a brick rubbed over the strings—or a saw bowed across the back of the piano?” One need not close one’s eyes to

isolate sounds from the visual distractions of the traditional symphony hall. Even for the non-participating audience member, the result is a form of intermedial hearkening, or inquisitive listening—a perceptual form that Martin Heidegger describes as particularly linked to perceptual awakening. He writes “Hearkening too has the kind of Being of the hearing which understands. What we first hear is never noises or complexes of sounds, but the creaking wagon, the motorcycle. We hear the column on the march, the woodpecker topping, the fire crackling”.<sup>11</sup>

This attentive form of listening closely relates to curiosity, the inability of locating the exact source and nature of a sound. For our purposes, such an attentive, watching-listening mode of perception matters for each new sound or action implies its corollary sense at the other side of the intermedium. “I see a nail, which sound is that?” Or the reverse: “I hear a new, tinkling sound, what is its source?” Heidegger continues, “Curiosity ... does not seek the leisure of tarrying observantly, but rather seeks restlessness and the excitement of continual novelty and changing encounters”.<sup>12</sup> In concert, the piano is disembowelled by a range of interesting tools, provocative both for the sounds that they create and for the ways in which they alter the instrument.

Arguably, this curiosity functions differently for the performer than for the audience. Instead of “I see a saw, which sound is that?” Or the reverse: “I hear a new, rhythmic sound, what is its source?” The performer wonders, “What sound will this saw make here or there?” Or, “What is the other performer doing that is creating that sound in relation to mine?” These questions mark the unique ability of the haptic mode (touch) to “explore and alter” what it comes into contact with.<sup>13</sup> In other words, Corner’s *Piano Activities* demonstrates what happens when the normally neglected haptic (or tactile) mode of knowing is brought into an equal feedback loop with the auditory and the visual mode, as opposed to a position of subservience to them. The unique aspects of each sense (of listening to experience, of vision to scan and of touch to alter) converge in ways that remain impossible in traditional musical performance.

As an activity that occurs within the domain of high art, Corner’s piece suggests the constancy of touch as it always, actually, relates to musical performance. The inclusion of touch is significant because Western culture has largely ignored the haptic perceptual system, where

it is normally associated with its utilitarian dimension. "We are not accustomed to thinking of the hand as a sense organ since ... we grasp, push, pull, lift, carry, insert, or assemble *for practical purposes*."<sup>14</sup>

A deceptively simple piece like *Piano Activities*, then, involves listening, touching and seeing in various mutually reinforcing, non-hierarchical ways. The work's intermediality positions it somewhere between the established disciplines of music, sculpture and theatre (on the diagram this would be object music or action music), at the same time as it is cross-modal between different senses depending on the position of the individual in the audience or on stage.

At the sensory level, sound is uniquely proximate in our environment. This physiological aspect of sound may explain its association, in the West at least, with the affective power of music.

The correspondence of sound waves to their source means that information about an event is *physically present in the air* around the event ... the information about the temporal structure of the event that caused it and the vibratory frequency of this event are given with great precision.<sup>15</sup>

In other words, *Piano Activities* communicates sound information that, in turn, renders the visual experience of the work as physically present. Instead of being merely seen, the work is, literally, felt. Not surprisingly, there are implications for Mac Low's Concrete/Sound Poetry, which extrapolates traditional poetic devices such as assonance, dissonance and meter, and uses them as a means of physiological connection between audience members and the performer in a manner normally associated with music. In addition, abandoning the traditional left-to-right scansion of language and musical notation in favour of a multi-directional reading of an all-over spray of fragments supports the auditory effect since the conventional flow of words and notes is disrupted. My own experience at readings of such works confirms this observation. The sounds are as much felt as they are heard, while the audience imagines the reader's eye meandering through a forest of fragmented lines.

On the Intermedia Diagram, Mac Low's poem intermediates between Sound and Concrete Poetry and Fluxus Performance. Similarly, Corner's piano work intermediates between Action Music (the performer), Object

Music (the transformed piano), Graphic Music Notation (in the form of a scripted Event score) and Fluxus Performance. In a way characteristic to Fluxus Events, these works involve structural homologies between established disciplines as well as cross-modal sensory experiences necessitated by these overlapping forms.

Fluxus artist Ben Patterson's *Lick Piece* (1963) also involves virtually every sense organ for the performers and, at least at the imaginative level, for the audience as well. In this work, a woman's body is covered in whipped cream and then licked clean. When the performers are licking the whipped cream off of the woman, the taste-smell system is at work. The tongue explores both the constitution of the medium (flavours), and its composition (textures). In this case, the flavours and temperatures of the woman's body additionally alter the cream. The ultra-sensitivity of the tongue as the most receptive organ in the haptic (touch) system makes this a tactile work as well. Here, the tongue's caressing of the woman's body evokes a constant exchange between tastes of sweet, salt and sour, complemented by changing sensations of solidity and viscosity. The model, one imagines, would have a different experience.

The varying sensitivities to touch and temperature spread slowly but assuredly over her body in what could be an erotic or at least a highly sensitive tactile encounter for her entire haptic system. However, the work also references cultural content such as the motif of the academic nude or the stripper, or by recurring to art historical parlance in phrases such as "the licked surface of academic painting" used to describe the transparent surface necessary to illusion. *Lick Piece*, it could be said, belongs to an intermedium between academic painting, pornographic theatre and dining.

At the other extreme from Patterson's public taste-smell-touch work, we find Takako Saito's intimate chess games. These self-contained and pristine versions of sense material (sound or scent) stake their claims to cross-modal sensory exchange on the stylised battlefield of chess. *Smell Chess* (1965), for example, deals with chess as a strategic game of skill that tests the opponent's ability to use the formulaic or predesignated moves of pieces against each other. Despite this reputation, artists have long enjoyed the aesthetic combinations and temporal dimensions of the game. Duchamp famously remarked that "All chess players are artists". Relying on the physiology of smell, Saito's practice of assigning a scent to each piece confounds the common perception of the game as a strictly

strategic endeavour. Smell is unique as a sense because its effect is, literally, direct and within the brain.

The olfactory bulb, which contains the neurological organs needed for smell, resides within the limbic region of the brain. This area is also associated with personal memory. In Saito's work the improvised networks of associative memory and olfaction are placed in juxtaposition to the comparatively concrete skills of strategy and analysis in traditional chess. One imagines this: I grasp a bottle. "Hmmm ... This smell is familiar. Garlic! That Italian place on Thompson Street with my old friend Hermann. What a scent for a knight! Now where's the queen?"

From a cultural perspective, the memory we value is memorizing memory. This has been beset by the more personally pungent memories of life lived—remembering. This is possible because the visible/spatial grid of pure chess has been married to other, internal coordinates of personal and cultural memory. The fixed grid of social strata (in the form of assigned movements across regular squares) has been altered by a membrane of permeability. Similarly, the legendary design for a room-scaled version of *Smell Chess* by Fluxus artists Larry Miller and George Maciunas employed the traditionally neglected overlap between kinaesthetics and smell. Smells have class and cultural overtones that resonate with location: the artists proposed hashish, fish, and fart smells that might suggest a party, a fish stall or a bathroom—to name a few possibilities. As a perceptual system, smell is also uniquely capable of creating a sense of ritual and transition—therefore its nearuniversal use in rites of passage. The ritualised movements of chess pieces reinforce this association with smell in its intermedium with ritual and game, sculpture and performance.

In these works, then, the artist's "eye for colour" has been given over to *A Nose for Art*, to use the title of Eric Andersen's 1998 piece. Here, a series of plaques with bronze noses on them appears at nose level along a gallery wall. As the press release for the show described it:

The nose is a body part that plays a mythical role in all cultures ... Science has recently discovered that the nose is the host of our sixth sense. This is our sensory apparatus for scent molecules, the feromones, which olfactory sense cannot smell ...<sup>16</sup>

Significantly, as described here, the nose contains the sixth sense (of someone's presence reserved for psychics and lovers). Smell, then is doubly functional. It serves both as a carrier of olfactory information (the smell of things) and, more subtly, as an index of the presence of others at a much more subtle level. Both functions appropriately correspond with the protrusion of the nose from the face since the nose is the first port of the body to enter space. As one approaches someone or something, one needs to know who and what one is moving toward. This placement is also appropriate to the associational power of smell: What does my memory tell me about this thing? A plaque on the wall, titled "Nose for Art", represents its physical position on the human face and its forward placement as the body traverses space—the body's kinaesthetic sensibility, effectively guiding the body (possibly) before one sees where one is headed. This work hence exploits the intermedium between dance, theatre, sculpture and perfumery.

How walking is accomplished has been the focus of several other intermedial Events, in particular Dick Higgins' *Walking Song* (1963) and Alison Knowles' *Shuffle* (1961).<sup>17</sup> *Walking Song* instructs the performer to "place your left foot forward, shift the weight of your body to the left foot. Place your right foot forward, shift the weight of your body to your right foot". In repetition, the text amounts to a virtual anthem for equilibrium and movement. It goes without saying that, as a culture, we rarely consider kinetics (movement through space) as a perceptual category even though kinetic awareness is clearly the perceptual system responsible for skill in dance and athletics, the latter of which is highly prized by this (Occidental) society. With each movement of the body in space, every spatial coordinate in a room is transformed. At a more subtle level, kinetic perception is almost always at work. However, like haptic awareness, it usually assumes a subservient position to other senses as one walks across a room to encounter people and things through vision, sound, and touch.

Higgins' work demonstrates that even at the most basic activity of stepping or shuffling across a room, kinetics is at work. As Gibson reminds us:

In a quadruped, the opposing muscles of each leg must work reciprocally by alternately contracting and relaxing, extending and flexing, and the bilaterally opposite muscles of the legs must work reciprocally in order to walk with alternate steps ... the whole system of

coordination is circular and depends on continuous registration of the positions of the parts of the body.<sup>18</sup>

However, the work is not merely kinaesthetic, it is perceptually cross-modal as well. At the characteristically slow pace of guidance in such instructional settings, the progress of transformation of every spatial coordinate in the room suggests an awareness of space normally reserved for sculpture. This piece therefore engages intermediality between sculpture and theatre, and possibly incantation, if one considers the moment of repetitive instruction.

The same can be said about the other walking piece, Knowles's *Shuffle*, in which performers shuffle across a floor, quietly sounding what is under their feet. As a result, this work inhabits a kinaesthetic-musical intermedium as the shoes of performers brush gently across the surface of the floor, eliciting sounds from surfaces as diverse as wooden floorboards, squeaky tiles or muffled carpets.

The placement of human events in physical space evoked a unique Fluxgeography for several artists. Their works demonstrate that the space of intermedial Events need not be limited to a room, but could in fact occur across the global map. Most significantly, Mieko Shiomi's *Spatial Poem No. 1* (1965) documents the enunciation of words by various performers at specific times and places. It takes the form of small flags pinned into a map of the world. These markers turn into meaningful locales in an experiential world geography of Fluxus artists. Since Fluxus artists travel extensively and come from virtually every European country, the USA as well as Japan and Korea, Shiomi's work speaks to the global production and experience of Fluxus intermedia work. The physical and sensory aspects of the Events remain constant, even as their reception and intent may differ for audience and artist alike according to any given geographic locale. When Phillip Corner described Fluxus as "throwing pieces of reality at the audience",<sup>19</sup> it is this constancy of the physical aspect despite geographic variation that he may have had in mind.

Someone who happens upon the card placed by Brecht's performer in his *Five Cards* piece (from a collection of scores published by George Maciunas in 1962 as *Fluxus One*), might immediately have his or her environment transformed, literally, into an exhibit.<sup>20</sup> The word "exhibit" appears on five cards (about half the size of a business card) intended to be placed by the receiver.

The cards and the idea of their placement remain constant even as what is chosen for exhibition and responses to that selection would differ according to different artists and audience members. Like Shiomi's *Spatial Poem*, Brecht's *Five Cards* involves an action that may move across notional and cultural boundaries, while simultaneously establishing its constancy and its cultural context. For instance, a person encountering the word "exhibit" in a museum, or bathroom, in Kyoto or New York would generate very different meanings.

Walter Ong provides a terminology for this multinational, cross-modal experience, wherein social contexts shift while the idea of the sensorium (or sensing ability of human beings) remains constant. In "The Shifting Sensorium" he describes culturally unique relationships between the perceptual systems in each society.

These relationships must not be taken merely abstractly but in connection with variations in cultures. In this connection, it is useful to think of cultures in terms of the organisation of the sensorium. By the sensorium we mean the entire sensory apparatus as an operational complex. The differences in cultures which we have just suggested can be thought of as differences in the sensorium, the organisation of which is in part determined by culture at the same time as it makes culture.<sup>21</sup>

Significantly, while the Event format first appears in Cage's class in musical composition in New York, many Fluxus artists outside the USA had already been gravitating toward the Event for some time. Besides the Cage class, there were: the Darmstadt circle of concrete poets and Karlheinz Stockhausen's composition courses in Darmstadt, Germany; works in the Cologne atelier of his wife, painter Mary Bauermeister; and the greater context of visual poetry in France and Germany; No theatre, Group Ongaku and the Gutai Group in Japan.<sup>22</sup> As Fluxus slowly evolved into a group, artists, poets and composers from across the globe took up the highly elastic Event format and adapted it to their poetry, dance, everyday life and musical traditions. The result was a truly global vanguard group, including artists from every European country (East and West), the USA, Japan and Korea. However, even as the global context of the Event suggests a variety of acculturated readings of the primary information, all locations share the physiological dimension of the Event.



Shiomi's map of Events performed at different times and locations suggests that it remains the same work, known differently. Several other Events similarly isolate specific movements or sounds in such a manner that they imply the presence of a basic, emotional force that remains outside of linguistic (and therefore cultural) differences altogether. Most obviously, some works utilise a seemingly primal level of vocalisation. Dick Higgins's *Danger Music # 17* (1962), which instructs the performer to "Scream! Scream! Scream! Scream! Scream!" is notorious in this regard. Similarly, Eric Andersen's *Crying Room* (1998), which is permanently installed in the Nikolai Kirke in Copenhagen, contains cassettes playing ritualised crying tapes that run virtually all the time alongside special crying stones designed to hold the listener's tears. As sound works, these skirt the specificity of words that would find them in a particular linguistic context. Instead, the work employs a timeless and *transcultural* emotional language that nevertheless recurs to a shared point of cultural origin. Both works stand at the forefront of language. As Gibson reminds us, "Vocalization of this kind existed long before speech, and it was from this repertory of spontaneous, unlearned utterance and our hominid ancestors that conventional speech sounds developed".<sup>23</sup>

Unlike the isolated phonetic elements of Mac Low's poems, these guttural sounds of crying and screaming form an elemental language of the human organism: meaning occurs more at the perceptual (than even the most fragmented, symbolic) level. "The cry 'wolf' has an entirely different function from either the cry of alarm at seeing a wolf or the howling of a wolf itself".<sup>24</sup> Put another way, even as crying or screaming may become aspects of a ritual or artistic performance, they do so as signifiers of a direct response to things. That is, they at least seem to step outside of the language of codes and indirect communication about things (happiness, terror, sorrow) and instead articulate the primary response to them. No human needs to learn what a scream or cry means at the emotional level, even as one needs to learn the word for wolf to discuss it or to know the cause of the feeling. That Eric Andersen's "Crying Room", or its more portable recording, elicits crying from the audience attests to the profound empathic power of these direct utterances, even as they have been removed from their culture of origin.

In summary, whether through the overlapping of touch, taste, smell, sound or speech, all of these works have, at some level, the principle of directness, non-mediation,

and unprocessed experience at their core. This does not, however, mean that the Events are detached from the cultures of the artists that produced them. Far from it. As Shiomi's *Spatial Poem No. 1* and Brecht's *Exhibit* cards illustrate, the Event adapts itself to many contexts even as its structure privileges perceptual systems over semiotic ones: the global sensorium. This goes some way toward explaining the difficulty people have in describing (or translating into words) Fluxus Event work. However, the sheer possibility that human animals sense in common, and that communities are established where certain sensory experiences are shared, suggests meaningful applications of intermedia aesthetics beyond Fluxus specifically, and beyond the specialised context of the art world generally. But first, the art world needs to be held accountable for a certain amnesia, since Fluxus is routinely ignored as the source behind much contemporary, sensual art.<sup>25</sup>

### Concluding remarks: intermedia, mixed media and interactive mixed media

Today, most work associated with the concept of intermedia addresses interactivity in ways that are very different from their original understanding. In contrast to interactions of sensory modes overall, many technological intermedia works involve only sight and sound: with the latter normally added to the former after the fact as an experiential accessory. Compared to the original meaning of the term intermedia, wherein modalities and the senses they employ were "fused conceptually" and could not be separated, very little computergenerated work is actually intermedial in structure in the historic sense. Rather, "the term shortly acquired a life of its own", Higgins wrote in 1981, "It was picked up, used and misused, often by confusion with the term 'mixed media'".<sup>26</sup> Hence one wonders as to where to position the prefix "inter" when addressing or discussing computer-based work? The answer, it seems to me as a non-expert in this work, lies in the much-vaunted interactivity of the computer.

It should come as no surprise that "interactive mixed media", a clumsy if precise term, may have lost or collapsed its middle terms "active" and "mixed" into the framing prefix and noun, "inter" and "media". Thus we are left with a homonym of the original term that potentially confuses the field of practice as it applies to new, technology-based work. On one side, there is intermedia work in the historic sense, which continues to be made by Fluxus and other artists, and on the other side, there is intermedia work of the other kind: technological, interactive mixed media. Both

camp feature wonderful work: “the term is not prescriptive”, Higgins wrote, “it does not praise itself or present a model for doing either new or great works”.<sup>27</sup>

The relevance of the former sense of the term to contemporary art by emerging artists is exemplified by Jeremy Boyle, who explores the fusion of sub-audible sound and tactility. His *Untitled (Bench)* (2001), which I saw at the Donald Young Gallery in Chicago, invited the visitor to sit on a concrete bench quivering with the sound waves of a sub-woofer installed within the empty, concrete block. After the viewer sits, the visitor’s viewed environment shivers in response to vibrations of his or her body. The resulting experience is indivisible between sound, sight and proprioception of the minutest order. Another Boyle piece, *Untitled (Installation)* (2001), consisted of sub-woofers submerged in opaque died liquid, whose sub-audible sounds were played quite loud loudly (remaining silent), producing visible wave patterns reflected by a spotlight onto the wall. In Boyle’s words:

I am interested in shifting the dominant component of the experience of sound from the aural to its being seen or felt. Sound by nature is very physical, it travels through space from its source as waves and locates its reception entirely as an internal, intimate sensation within the body.<sup>28</sup>

Similarly, Catya Plate’s *Sanguine Bedtime Stories* was shown at the Lance Fung Gallery in New York in 2001. It occupies an intermedium between literature (in this case diary writing), sculpture and smell. Visitors smell small vials of blood; the interior receptors of memory fire off while visitors inhabit a red, living-room set whose fleshy tone and tactile walls suggest the interior of the human body. Here, perfuming and sculptural space are brought, literally, into the space of memory of the body and mind structurally. It is elastic in space and time, suggesting intermedial points that span this continuum, even as the vials are separable from the room. Perfume and blood share longstanding association in occult philosophy: the combination recalls magic as well as the fundamental basis for the evocative power of perfume in the body’s pheromones and scent organs.<sup>29</sup>

The basis of intermedial sensibilities in primary experience and perceptual systems has a distinct, visceral aspect that serves to connect us to our world bio-behaviourally, while mediated imagery of any form is, well, mediated and therefore indirect. It differs by

degree at least, and often by kind. In a world threatened ecologically, I fear we lose a lot when we give over the physical dimension entirely. I therefore hold out for the original use of the term, even as it is sometimes applicable to computer-based work. If the term collapses entirely into its technological connotation, we merely establish new media categories configured (and reified) for the World Wide Web; but perhaps those fears are best set aside for another day. They seem to belong to another project. The words of educational theorist Edward S. Reed come to mind and will stand at the place of a conclusion as they reiterate the importance of Fluxus intersensory intermedia.

It is difficult to be puzzled by the ironies of our so-called information age. The technology for processing and transmitting information has progressed rapidly in recent decades, but in spite of this technological progress there has been considerable regress in meaningful communication among people: a marked rise in nationalism, sectarianism, and violence against persons; increases in ignorance and illiteracy within our ‘advanced’ society ... the information being left out of these developments is, unfortunately, the most important kind; the information—termed *ecological*—that all humans beings acquire from their environment by looking, listening, feeling, sniffing, and tasting the information, in other words, that allows us to *experience things for ourselves*.<sup>30</sup>

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## Notes

**1** Dick Higgins, “Intermedia”, *Something Else Newsletter* (1965), reprinted in *Horizons: The Poetics and Theory of the Intermedia* (Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983). The term “intermedium” is adapted from Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Lecture No. 3, On Edmund Spencer”, reprinted in *Coleridge’s Miscellaneous Criticism*, ed. Thomas Middleton Raysor (London: Constable & Co, 1936), Lecture III, pp. 21 and 31 ff.

**2** *Ibid*, p. 22.

**3** *Ibid*, p. 18.

**4** Allan Kaprow, “The Legacy of Jackson Pollock” (1958), *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. Jeff Kelley,

(Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), p. 5. The term “Happening” is first used in Kaprow’s “18 Happenings in Six Parts” in 1958. For this reason, it is correct to describe him as the name-giver to this movement. Other artists in Europe and Japan who developed similar theatrical concepts, include the proto-Fluxus group in Cologne and Japan’s Gutai, among others who appear in the rubric of Action Music on the Intermedia Diagram.

**5** For a detailed discussion see my book *Fluxus Experience* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002).

**6** Higgins, 1984, p. 20.

**7** Martin Jay has argued convincingly that this “scopic regime of modernity” (his term) is largely a fiction and that actually vision is more complex culturally and perceptually than most postmodern philosophers would have it. It remains as a cultural commonplace, however, regardless of its being challenged. For a summary of Jay’s extensive work on this problem, see “Scopic Regimes of Modernity” in *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1995), pp. 3-28. For the perspective that vision has been the predominant model for truth and cognition since the Renaissance, see Paul Virilio, *The Vision Machine* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988).

**8** James Jerome Gibson, *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966), p. 41.

**9** *Ibid.*

**10** *Ibid.*, p. 31. Emphasis Gibson.

**11** Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper-Collins, 1962), p. 207.

**12** *Ibid.*, p. 216.

**13** *Ibid.*, p. 99.

**14** *Ibid.*, p. 123.

**15** *Ibid.*, p. 17. Emphasis mine.

**16** Press release, “Nose for Art”, Stephen Gang Gallery, New York, 1997. Collection of the artist. Feromones is misspelled “feronomes” on the press release.

**17** Alison Knowles is my mother.

**18** Gibson, p. 34.

**19** Artist’s statement, December 1992. Artist’s archive.

**20** Robert Filliou, *Teaching and Learning as Performance Arts* (Cologne: König, 1970).

**21** Walter Ong, “The Shifting Sensorium”, *The Varieties of Sensory Experience*, ed. David Howes (Toronto, CA: University of Toronto Press, 1991), p. 28.

**22** See Hannah Higgins, “Fluxus Fortuna”, in *The Fluxus Reader*, ed. Ken Friedman (West Sussex, UK: Academy Editions, 1998), pp. 31-62.

**23** Gibson, p. 90.

**24** *Ibid.*, pp. 90-91.

**25** When *Art News*, as happened last summer, runs an entire article on sensory art and attributes it to the genius of a few youth, they have forgotten their history and mistaken a remote copy for the original. What’s worse, even where young artists have the courage to openly acknowledge their debt to Fluxus Intermedia, Events and Objects, as in Lance Fung Gallery’s “The Smell of Fear”, Spring 2001—*Art News* ignored it. Clearly, the cult of originality, which requires that we do not learn from anyone, and therefore learn nothing, reigns supreme. But there are exceptions in work, if not in fame and glory.

**26** Higgins, “Intermedia: 1981”, in *Horizons*, p. 24.

**27** *Ibid.*, p. 25.

**28** Jeremy Boyle, email to the author, 14 December 2001.

**29** This association is developed in depth in Annick Le Guérer, *Scent: The Mysterious and Essential Powers of Smell* (Toronto: Turtle Bay Books, 1992).

**30** Edward S. Reed, *The Necessity of Experience* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 1.

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# Parsing Scores: Applications in Fluxus<sup>1</sup>

## Julia Robinson

The battle for Fluxus' critical and curatorial recognition still seems, to some of us, like the relatively recent past. Ironically, its familiarity today might be the very thing against which it most needs to be defended. From the outset, Fluxus articulated a critical relation to institutions, the brick-and-mortar kind and language. Using the latter to challenge the former, the linguistic score accomplished many things, and generated a rare synergy between performativity, performance, and participation.<sup>2</sup> These three terms are overused now to the point of exhaustion, and more often conflated than distinguished. All were deployed in Fluxus, but not necessarily all at once. To be precise about particular strategies, their efficacy, stakes, and the types of intervention—developed from (or aimed at) various disciplines (music, poetry, art)—would seem basic to clarifying the urgency and agency of the Fluxus project at large. After all, Fluxus' collectivist matrix, whether we think of it as a mode of composition, as simultaneous performance, as networked distribution, or all of these and more, supported a kaleidoscopic convergence of personalities, cultural outlooks, and artistic approaches. This returns us to the “problem” of Fluxus' broad recognition, and the challenges it poses to rigorous historical interpretation. It is no longer a question of chiseling manifest heterogeneity down to a coherent unity, as some of the first documenters tried to do. Scholars and curators have often relied on the score as a common denominator for the collective. Yet, at this stage of the game, *that matrix* may be more valuable as a basis of differentiation. Recalling the old line about English and American speakers—*divided by the same language*—the diversity of Fluxus artists obviously had implications for the approaches to the medium of communication that putatively united them. A constant risk in analyzing the flexible, generative structure of the linguistic score—those John Cage called “non-notational” —is that its hard-won generality will be reduced to mere generalization.<sup>3</sup>

To underline the fact that the post-disciplinary application of the musical score was a given by Fluxus's launch in 1962 discloses essential ground that still begs clarification. It is as necessary as ever to historicize the score models that emerged, to give a sense of their development, chronologically, rather than taking their simultaneity on Fluxus programs for contemporaneousness. And at a more basic level, it seems crucial to provide nuanced definitions, to articulate the core characteristics of the given structure/function—from “indeterminacy” on out—and to identify the range of Fluxus variations.<sup>4</sup> As artists brought their imagination and virtuosity to the indeterminate score, they demonstrated its scope, its concreteness as much as its fluidity. Across multiple presentation formats—from the stage, to the page, to the book, the box, and the “kit”—a stricter indeterminacy was reconstellated contextually as “situation participation.”<sup>5</sup> In the larger field of skilled deskilling in 1960s artistic practice, it thus seems apt to think about Fluxus in terms of what George Maciunas called “applied art.”<sup>6</sup> If we take this idea even more broadly than he did, it bears allusive testimony to the resources mobilized at the hands of different artists. Moreover, it may also focus us, in a new way, on the “space” of *interpretation/realization*. When and by whom were Fluxus pieces *applied*? What was/is the nature of the score's address? Did the composer envisage a single participant, a larger audience, or both? Were their instructions performable? The answers differ depending on the score, and its author: a fact that is still under-acknowledged. Let's try to be more specific, for a moment:

(1) How might we distinguish the notion of “action” (or “action music”)—as crucial, early on, in Mieko Shiomi’s work as in Nam June Paik’s—applied by artists whose aesthetics were otherwise worlds apart? (2) What can readily and succinctly be stated about the contrast between Alison Knowles’ “Propositions” and Yoko Ono’s “Instructions”? And (3) although we are speaking of a post-disciplinary framework: Is it useful to consider that the orientations of *poetry* and/or *music* (however broadly and diversely defined) are essential to the way we understand the models of some artists but not others?

Clearly, there are many precise questions worth asking, or asking again. To the extent that the information we still need is inherent, as if permanently encoded, in each score model, it seems worthwhile to keep looking at them closely and making use of the evidence they store. Given the abundant evidence today that projects staked on improvised collaboration, communication, and cooperation show no sign of diminishing, the effort of finding alternative ways of articulating the legacy of Fluxus can only sharpen our focus on the larger historical picture. Below, I take a brief look at a few score types to adumbrate the kind of reading I have in mind.

### (1) George Brecht: The Event

Brecht’s “The Artificial Crowd” (1958) was a response to an assignment Cage gave on the chance organization of variables, such as sound sources, temporal divisions, etc. As the title suggests, the piece addressed the conception of audience. In fact, it had to do with Brecht’s sense that Cage hadn’t done so; but that’s a longer story. The piece distributed the causation of sound through a group of perceivers (the “crowd”), canceling the separate role of performers. At a technical level, the idea of having the auditory incident emanate from the listeners themselves reduced the distance between the sound’s cause and its effect to practically zero. At a conceptual level, it extended the function of chance operations by dispersing the causality/ initiation (authorship?) though the field of audition.<sup>7</sup> In July 1959, Brecht wrote the first short textual score of his generation. *Time-Table Music* was structured with recourse to the eponymous object. This gave onto another novum: bypassing the typical performance context (classroom, stage, or auditorium). Realized in a railway station, it was one of several pieces Brecht composed for sites of passage, creating a real-life figure/ground relationship among the different perceivers, performers and commuters, on the basis of *aim*. The found timetables not only offered a new way to arrange durations, but to initiate an active, conceptual and then perceptual operation. The participant’s task was to recode the familiar set of numbers (the train times) using a different scale; hours and minutes were *taken* as minutes and seconds. Selected by chance, the given digits constituted the participants’ *frame* for noticing events in their midst.<sup>8</sup>

*Motor Vehicle Sundown (Event)*, 1960, elucidated the figure/ground structure of all perception with reference to two temporal registers (mechanical and natural). Inside their vehicles, participants had their own cue cards—featuring digits based on chance selections from ranges given in the score—concentrating on stopwatches, against a backdrop of the setting sun. As he sharpened the textual model of the event score via *relative* (contextual) perception, Brecht made use of language’s readymade indeterminacy: referential ambiguity, subject position, the shifter, etc. For him, realization amounted to the “constitutive act *and* perception”—the everyday action of our constant reckoning with the world—and the *nature of experience*.<sup>9</sup> He also loosened the grip of grammar. The bullet point became the focal point. The prompts would be activated through basic channels of subjective intuition—along with desire, the desire to fill in the gaps—and language’s mysterious capacity to *do* something.

All 1961: *Three Aqueous Events* – ice, water, steam

*Three Gap Events* – missing letter sign, between two sounds, meeting again

*Word Event* – exit

*Six Exhibits* – ceiling first wall, second wall, third wall, fourth wall, floor

*Five Places* – place one card [marked “exhibit”] in each of five places

*Three Aqueous Events* used the same number of words to prompt the reader/perceiver: ice, water, steam. Allan Kaprow suggested realizing the piece by making iced tea. Each to their own. At the level of language, vis-à-vis realization, the way Brecht fused subjective aim and the motivation of the sign is most explicit in *Three Gap Events*. And yet, as soon as we use the word *explicit*, we instantly see how Brecht had always already shifted the *making explicit* from author to perceiver; how he put the process of specification in our hands. The event concretized the *object* (in both senses: aim and physical thing). Remarkably, the first of the gaps defined in the score evokes a *sign*, a word brought down to the unit of the letter, albeit lacking one or more. And this sign(ified) registers as verbal and physical, and simultaneously, as past, present, and future. Brecht pulled it from his own experience, imagining that those of us reading the prompt might know what he meant; we all have probably seen those broken-down relics of former times (MOTEL, AIR CONDITIONED, COLOR TV) if not in reality, in movies. Or we might also see one in the future and think of the score; but with the *Three Gap Events* card in hand, we also think *about* that lost unit of the word, now. The other two prompts bring to mind how we can inhabit the eponymous spaces physically. *Word Event* (1961) is perhaps the shortest score ever conceived in this genre. Again, making use of a *sign*—in linguistics and an object in everyday experience—its one-word notation (“exit”) reads as a noun, a verb in the imperative, and, of course, the actual emergency markers placed over doors still ubiquitous today. When it was drawn into Fluxus, *Word Event* was programmed at the end of a concert for obvious reasons. Finally, *Six Exhibits*, and its sibling *Five Places*, constitute an early focus on the architectural or spatial envelope of the given, illuminating how closely the handling of experiential situations through the score anticipated the spatiotemporal address of more physical manifestations in the art of the 1960s (e.g. minimalism). All of this to suggest the effect of what the scientist in Brecht called *generality*. As we know, these scores, and the event model, immediately became foundational in Fluxus.<sup>10</sup>

## 2) Alison Knowles: Proposition

Originally dubbed “propositions,” Alison Knowles’ mode of composition took shape with Fluxus. For the first concerts, she improvised a handful of pieces virtually on the spot. Ever since, her work has maintained its spontaneity and disarming simplicity of address. Knowles’ indeterminacy is *speculative*. Sure, from the outset, of the authorial scope she envisaged, she defined crisp mediations. Never an artistic statement imposed, they were possibilities proposed. And rather than the modality of *preparing* instruments—spectacularly popular in early Fluxus—Knowles prepared interactions, setting up a kind of *rendezvous* (extending the concept in Duchamp).<sup>11</sup> Her model eschewed the eccentricity redolent of ego, the penchant for obscure poetics, or attention-grabbing drama. A sign of this is that her work is never impossible to perform.<sup>12</sup> All these traits lay further ground for using the *common* Fluxus matrix as a basis for differentiation.

Clearly, to render *composition* as a “proposition” qualifies everything that follows (color, clothing, or lunch). Recasting situations plucked from reality, Knowles channeled the *colloquial* not as mere slang, but as communication. Her scores draw on language we hear and use daily: the stuff of problems, moisturizing cream, and family.

*Proposition #3* (1962): Nivea Cream Piece

*Proposition #4* (1962): Child Art Piece

*Proposition #17* (1963): Color Music No. 1 (for Dick Higgins)

Notwithstanding the organic content we associate with Knowles' oeuvre, the Nivea Cream piece is an outlier. This is mainly because in specifying the sound source (while in Europe) the artist named a particular brand.<sup>13</sup> The contingency plan was if the bottle sporting the well-known blue and white label was not at hand, you had to improvise the prop; with a handwritten "Nivea" label taped onto a container, for example. This effort was never necessary in the countries where the piece was first performed.<sup>14</sup> Apart from ablutions and meals—we do not need to recite the pieces of the latter kind—Knowles was the only artist in Fluxus who thought of creating a score for a child, and without (yet) having had one. Like other variables she chose, this is a little bewildering to ponder as a performance. Yet, from quite a number of perspectives, it was a stroke of brilliance. Think of the unmannered affect, and the unpredictability that comes "readymade." No matter what happens, the "frame" is radically indeterminate; the *end* comes, presumably, when the infant decides to stop or leave the stage.

Amid the exigencies of the here and now, Knowles cultivated an element of reversibility. The outside world spilled into the performance space, and a performance focus was projected onto daily events. Once one is acquainted with the work, these aspects become inextricable. In this regard, *Proposition #17 Color Music* (for Dick Higgins) is of special interest. Whereas others had riffed on the chromatic scale (in music), Knowles scaled color to "emotion" (though not her own).<sup>15</sup> She subjected the latter, human phenomenon to the mode of indeterminate scoring—structured through lists and numeric order—addressing the piece to her husband. The instructions, which concerned finding solutions to problems, were to be numbered 1-5. Thus, the performer had to prioritize; issues exceeding this limitation would not make the cut. Further nuancing the aforementioned reversibility, the "premiere" took place at 423 Broadway, where the author and dedicatee (Knowles and Higgins) were living when the piece was composed.

Knowles' approach has been to engage people in activities she sees the value of playing out. Some struck her as having a potential for musicality; others appeared as ideal conduits for recasting musical formalism. Making good on the de-authoring a *proposition* implies, Knowles' scores can usually be realized in many ways, and, given a little imagination, with unexpectedly variable content. But one always knows what to do with them. Her open, straightforward cues, in their way, dispelled a more intricate, mannered *instruction* mode before it took hold.

### 3) Emmett Williams: Songs

An American poet living at Darmstadt, Emmett Williams had written and presented many radical performances at the cusp of poetry, music, and theater in the decade before Fluxus. In 1962, he was one of the core group of performers Maciunas called upon in Germany to contribute pieces and perform in the marathon of concerts he deemed essential to establish the collective. Given where he was based, at the epicenter of New Music, Williams' poetic work listed toward the musical. In the spirit of the *contra-disciplinary titling* that flourished in the 1960s—in the US as much as elsewhere—he defined a series of early scores as "songs." In this, he retained a fealty to poetry, insofar as the term "song" had been a staple in poem titles for centuries. Williams also reoriented the Dadaistic-Lettrist strain of contemporary sound poetry, with its concrete use of language, toward the "post-New Music" modality that became

a hallmark of Fluxus. His *song* pieces assumed various inventive formats; in *Four-Directional Song of Doubt* performed at the Fluxus premiere in September 1962, Williams faced the stage, and five performers (Maciunas, Dick Higgins, Knowles, Nam June Paik, and Ben Patterson), as conductor. He had given each a gridded page featuring different constellations of colored dots, readable in all four orientations. Each of these “scores” was marked with one of five words: “YOU,” “JUST,” “NEVER,” “QUITE,” “KNOW” (the eponymous song of doubt). Knowles’ word on the first night was “never,” Paik’s was “just.” The different distributions of dots and voids cued an utterance or silence (respectively). In the unfolding performance, the hackneyed phrase never cohered as such.

*Song of Uncertain Length* (1960): Performer balances bottle on own head and walks about singing or speaking until bottle falls.

*Counting Song* (for La Monte Young) (1962): Audience is counted by various means.<sup>16</sup>

*Alphabet Symphony* (1962)

Williams’ exceptional linguistic capacities thrived in collective performance, as both complex matrices of gesture and sound, and simple, task-like directions. In the latter category, the *Counting Song* joined a cluster of witty—and in this case practical— *audience pieces* created in the formative period of Fluxus.

#### 4) Mieko Shiomi: Spatial Music

Trained in music and musicology—versed in the radical 20th-century composers (having written on Anton Webern)—Mieko Shiomi was a member of the Tokyo-based experimental music Group Ongaku before she came into contact with Fluxus.<sup>17</sup> Keen to free herself from the boundaries of artistic genres (music, poetry, art), Shiomi allowed them to interpenetrate in her work, and explored the concept of *action*. Her feeling for music’s physical presence—or what Midori Yoshimoto evokes as “the three-dimensional quality of music”—drove her to treat sound as sculptural.<sup>18</sup> Her work was also made of nature, conveying manifestations of the aqueous and the palpable within the spatiotemporal field comprehended in the score. Shiomi’s sense of nature’s poetic import may encourage alignment of her work with that of Yoko Ono. But that may be too simple, given the two artists’ decidedly different aesthetics. Certainly, there are other ways of parsing the elements and the scope of her scores.

*Music for Two Players*, 1963

*Water Music*, 1964

*Direction Event*, 1964

*Spatial Poem No. 1*, 1965

At this juncture, I would change tack to see what can be brought out of Shiomi’s work by thinking it in relation to a model that interested her (Brecht’s event). Juxtaposing specific scores—for example, Shiomi’s *Music for Two Players*, *Water Music*, *Direction Event* and her *Spatial Poem* series with Brecht’s *Three Gap Events*, *Three Aqueous Events*, *Six Exhibits* or *Five Places*—may newly illuminate both artists’ work. *Music for Two Players* is a dance of presence, and a kind of still, ocular joust. More oriented toward performance, it shares with Brecht’s *Three Gaps* the definition of space as well as unspecified interpersonal relations (locking eyes in the Shiomi, “meeting again” in the Brecht). It may strike us that her staring duet is more intense, and has a more concrete *here* and *now*. Where Brecht evoked spaces and timing relatively abstractly—as in: “between two sounds”—Shiomi made this precise, five sets of four minutes with changing spacing given in meters. Both created openings for emotion and sociality but



left it empty, to be supplied, or not, by those who participate. Unlike many of her Fluxus peers, Shiomi's formalism exhibits restraint. She refrained from making the locking eyes provocative, and from the banality of escalating excitement, had she simply directed the couple to come closer and closer *and closer*. For obvious reasons, it is tempting to pair Shiomi's *Water Music* with Brecht's *Three Aqueous Events*. And indeed, both are concerned with perceptions of a change of state. Her prompt was "give the water still form," "let the water lose its still form"; his, as we saw, was "ice/water/steam." Although Brecht always saw his selections of perceptual events as "music," and vice versa—expanding the sense of that term considerably, and not *taking credit* for *composing it*—this particular work by Shiomi seems more musical, and not merely because of its title.<sup>19</sup>

Performed first in a gallery, *Direction Event* shares something with Brecht's *Six Exhibits* and *Five Places*, but, in this case, we get a crisper comparison when we juxtapose Shiomi's 1964 piece with her celebrated *Spatial Poem* of 1965. Executed with her circle of peers and friends—attending her Perpetual Fluxfest event at the Washington Square Gallery—*Direction...* was based on the cardinal points but positioned Shiomi as the point of origin. Threads originating from the hands of the artist (specifically, her fingers) were "extended" to those around her, making a physical connection to prospective participants. Furnishing maps and compasses, Shiomi allowed people to orient themselves and—with only one word, "toward," as a prompt—to chart their own *direction*. A year later, back in Japan, she conceived the *Spatial Poem* project, emptying her initiation of *one word* by inviting her peers to come up with it. Once they had executed the "word event" and placed it somewhere, they were to send her notes about it, which she eventually turned into a world map, with flags exhibiting those words, and marking their points of origin.<sup>20</sup> Conducting a play of attention, involvement, and communication at a distance, *Spatial Poem No. 1* maintained the tactility of *Direction Event*, connecting participants through writing, positioning, and mailing. It was one of the works of the group Brecht most admired. As he was working with Robert Filliou in France on "permanent creation" through an "eternal network," Shiomi charted her "global" model of perpetual collaboration.

### 5) Nam June Paik: Action Music

Also trained in music, having written his thesis at the same Tokyo university as Shiomi—on Webern's peer Arnold Schoenberg—Nam June Paik absorbed Cage in his own unique way. Living in Germany and finding his way to the center of New Music at Darmstadt, Paik based himself in Cologne at the turn of the 1960s and took the chance to experiment with the wealth of equipment at that city's Radio studio (WDR). He was also struck by Dada, having caught the landmark 1958 exhibition at Düsseldorf's Kunsthalle, and seen the Zero artists divert their painting practice into performance in its wake.<sup>21</sup> In 1960, Paik began expanding *direct action*, the Dada model Theodor Adorno dismissed at that moment as no longer available to artists in *administered* society. Undeterred, Paik pushed on, defining a personal style of wildly energetic, sometimes violent and hybrid displays he dubbed "Action Music."<sup>22</sup> With the support of the adventurous and open-minded artist Mary Bauermeister, who hosted him at her Cologne studio, Paik performed *Etude for Pianoforte*. The spontaneous actions of the piece included pulverizing a piano, jumping off the stage, charging at one particular audience member, John Cage, at which point he cut off the composer's tie, amongst other disturbing invasions of personal space. In *Symphony for 20 Rooms* (1961), Paik prompted audience members to kick objects around a space, and activate cassette players to listen to audio collages.<sup>23</sup> This was mild compared to the asphyxiation to which he subjected one audience, or the unexpected stripteases he enacted or scripted

for others.<sup>24</sup> Meeting Maciunas in Germany, and hatching ideas for a splashy inauguration of Fluxus, the collective served as the *support* for Paik's transition from musician/composer to artist.

*Simple* (1961)  
*Zen for Head* (1961)  
*One For Violin Solo* (1962)  
*Fluxus Champion Contest* (1962)

To the extent that Paik's personality was felt across multiple collaborative contexts, we sense the latitude that became a kind of ethos amid the radical diversity of the group.

## 6) Dick Higgins: Danger Music

Dick Higgins had considerable practice in experimental composition by the time Fluxus started, having studied with Cage at the New School (1957-59), practicing the form and witnessing its development by fellow class members.<sup>25</sup> The erudite young American was also well versed in the historical avant-gardes. After the Cage classes, Higgins teamed up to create the New York Audio-Visual Group to continue the new models of composing. In his first Fluxus scores, the most obvious transition—significant change—to be discerned has to do with length. Initially thinking nothing of writing scores paragraphs, even pages long, he began conceiving pieces as short as a single sentence. His extensive “Danger Music” series is exemplary in this regard. Recall the now-infamous Wiesbaden debut of *Danger Music #2*, with Higgins sitting still, and Knowles elaborating a careful performance of head shaving. What this underscores is the value of different personalities interpreting the work of others, intelligently and instructively; scores they would never have written themselves.

*Danger Music #2* (1962): Hat. Rags. Paper. Heave. Shave.  
*Danger Music # 15* [for the dance] (1962): Work with butter and eggs for a time.  
*Danger Music #17* (1962): Scream! Scream! Scream! Scream! Scream! Scream!<sup>26</sup>

In the dynamic dialogues of Fluxus, Higgins and Paik are an obvious pairing. Early on, they crafted scores (some all but impossible to execute) dedicated to each other. The youthful hubris of both artists offers a further illumination of performativity and performance, while signaling an under-explored affinity between the American's “Danger Music” and the Korean's “Action Music.” No doubt the latter term, which Shiomi applied with reference to “poetry,” bears more thorough translation, linguistically and culturally. Higgins' *Danger Music #9* for Nam June Paik instructed: “Volunteer to have your spine removed.” Paik's response was more perverse, and dead-ended, proposing the performer “creep into the vagina of a live whale.” While we can imagine, at a stretch, how Higgins' score might be realizable, simply by *saying* “I volunteer,” for instance, Paik's patently is not. This returns us to the aforementioned dividing line of *performability* in the early scoring activity. If one hallmark of Fluxus was collective performance—implying a willingness to contribute to the thinking around the work of one's peers in active, real-time interpretations—prompts that are patently impossible to perform pose an interesting problem. Do we consider these pieces integral to the Fluxus repertoire? And, if so, can this be said of the unperformable scores conceived at a remove from the ethos (or banter) of call-and-response?

## 7) Yoko Ono: Instruction

In the late 1950s, Yoko Ono was living in New York and implicated in the circle of young composers.<sup>27</sup> In a short while, her workspace on Chambers Street became a site

of activity, which spilled over into Maciunas' AG Gallery.<sup>28</sup> There, Ono debuted a solo show, *Paintings and Drawings* (summer 1961), appending some instructions to a few of the works on display. These are well known (e.g., the fragment of canvas laid on the gallery floor, next to which she placed a note: "painting to be stepped on.") Her partner Toshi Ichihyanagi returned to Japan in 1961, calling on his and Ono's New York peers to send work that could be presented to introduce the new practices there.<sup>29</sup> Returning to Japan in 1962, Ono conceived a large number of new pieces, penned in elegant calligraphy, framed and exhibited at Tokyo's Sōgetsu Art Center. These works had a unique feeling of solipsism, and in many cases read as impossible to take as scores for performance; they were perhaps best suited to display first of all.

*Walk Piece*, 1961: Stir inside your brains with a penis until things are mixed well.  
Take a walk.

*Clock Piece*, 1963: Steal all the clocks and watches in the world. Destroy them.

*Fish Piece*, 1964: Take a tape of the voices of fish on the night of a full moon.  
Take it until Dawn.

*Hide-and-Seek Piece*, 1964: Hide until everybody goes home. Hide until everybody forgets about you. Hide until everybody dies.

Ono's Instruction Pieces—many of which are titled "events"—are routinely discussed as *like* the scores of her peers, comprising as they do, a title and a few lines of text.<sup>30</sup> This in itself gets us to the root of the pseudomorphism that so often attends the weaker accounts of Fluxus scores. Most groupings into which art historians, curators and critics attempt to place Ono's work *categorically* ignore its singularity. Even the overwhelming dimension of the imaginary therein immediately conjures a distance from the—regularly, energetically, and diversely enacted—score models that drove the formation of Fluxus. It is thus hard to see Ono's pieces as "instructions"; the premise is perhaps better read—as it sometimes has been—as a poetic ruse, a play on that very designation and genre. What tends to be forgotten is that Ono almost never performed her pieces in the collective context of Fluxus; this, fueling the somewhat circuitous argument that the solipsistic pieces she conceived are, practically speaking, unperformable. Or so might be said of quite a few of them. Although it is rarely considered, the performance history of these pieces, manifestly spare if not altogether non-existent, explains their anomalous status. The main exception is *Cut Piece* (1964) which drew upon the psychic indeterminacy present in every audience.<sup>31</sup>

## 8) Fluxus: Applied Art

Fluxus was propelled via a system of perpetual *commissioning*, constant requests for "work," all manner of ideas to be realized in whatever format came to mind. In the formative years of the collective, it was very often Maciunas who initiated these calls. Notwithstanding the important array of scores he conceived himself, Maciunas' legacy (as I have argued) is bound up with his role of channeling, charting, and organizing. In constant communication with the artists, he never tired of drumming up participation, whether it was for forthcoming concerts, or any number of other matrices of collective creativity he sought to "realize" in a graspable form. Maciunas' exhaustive efforts, as we know, extended from the "commissioning" moment to designing, printing, packaging, and distribution of the artists' propositions. It is impossible not to recognize how Maciunas coordinated an ever-diverse patchwork of contributions and gave them the *stamp* of unity. In this respect, he was arguably the quintessential *applied* artist, honoring the Russian model he so admired. In January 1964, Maciunas clarified his vision of Fluxus' mandate as a programmatic enactment of the "applied." To the extent that his statement constitutes a historical anchor for socially oriented

art, it is worth quoting (or re-quoting) him at length. “Fluxus objectives are social (not aesthetic),” he insisted:

concern[ed] [...] with: Gradual elimination of fine arts (music, theater, poetry, fiction, painting, sculpt –etc. etc.)... the desire to stop the waste of material and human resources ...and divert it to socially constructive ends. Such... applied arts would be (industrial design, journalism, architecture, engineering, graphic-typographic arts, printing, etc.) → these are all most closely related fields to fine arts and offer [the] best alternative profession to fine artists. [...] Thus Fluxus is definitely against [the] art-object as non-functional commodity [...] therefore, should tend towards [a] collective spirit, anonymity and ANTI-INDIVIDUALISM. These Fluxus concerts, publications etc. – are at best transitional (a few years) & temporary until such time when fine art can be totally eliminated (or at least its institutional forms) and artists find other employment.<sup>32</sup>

In several of the mid-1960s “manifestos,” Maciunas glossed an anti-art stance for Fluxus via provocative analogies to “gags” and “vaudeville.” Clear, however, from looking at the scores—even the small sample discussed above—is that this jokey dimension hardly characterized the majority of the group’s output. Unfortunately, the abundant evidence has not tempered the impulse of countless interpreters to emphasize a silly, gaggy Fluxus, to its obvious detriment. Like all of Maciunas’ strategies, he played the humor card to advance larger goals.<sup>33</sup> The manifesto-speak, like the gag—risky though they were—became tools of performative subversion; the *reality effect* undercut the exclusive (and the truly trivial) in “Art.” Like time bombs of radical critique, set to go off in the future, his ways of defining Fluxus were pitted against the commodification threatening the creative act.

The dimension of the *applied*—that is, the work of art envisaged in terms of wide *application*—is key to the relevance of Fluxus in the 1960s and now. When read with precision, the concept cancels weak links between artistic impulses separated by the ‘same’ language. Maciunas’ sense of the *applied* acted historically. “Applied art” comprehended various and contrary origins—from the Productivist opposition to (non-utilitarian, bourgeois) modern art, art for art’s sake, to *decoration* as the anxiety behind the first breaks into abstraction—and how it might ramify in the hands of the Fluxus collective. In the artistic initiatives of the latter, in the wake of the preceding approaches (none of which contradicts or corresponds to Maciunas’ “applied”), we may begin to see how the score was productively exported and retooled, as a renewable field of *application* (even in the most contemporary sense). More historically conscious than many of his 1960s contemporaries, Maciunas sensed the urgency of social engagement, encouraging ideas that made radical uses of “art.” Having studied the early-twentieth-century precedents in minute detail, he was poised to apply them.<sup>34</sup>

This last item, appended to the foregoing list, obviously defies direct comparison to those score models (though, from a certain perspective, it might be defined as such). What it conjures instead is the spectrum in Fluxus; and that Maciunas’ “applied art” does not *have* to look like the rest. Indeed, his model of *application* only fully registers when we allow ourselves to look through the different matrices of artistic thought. Inevitably tentative and fragile, these frames within frames, constituting the multiple modalities of mediation in Fluxus, speak poignantly to the present, as an ever-available structure at the threshold of apprehension.

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## Notes

For the full notation of Fluxus scores referenced here, please see the *Fluxus Performance Workbook*, Ken Friedman, Owen Smith and Lauren Sawchyn, eds. Downloadable at: [https://www.academia.edu/9983685/Fluxus\\_Performance\\_Workbook](https://www.academia.edu/9983685/Fluxus_Performance_Workbook).

**1** An earlier version of this account appeared in *Reclaiming Art, Reshaping Democracy*, Xavier Douroux, Estelle Zhong Mengual, eds. (Presses du réel, 2017).

**2** Cage first referred to language-based composition as “non-notational” in a letter to George Brecht (1960–61) requesting event scores (absent of musical notes) for performances during and after his travels in Europe with David Tudor. (Letters from Cage and Tudor to Brecht about the scores and their performance are found in Brecht’s published notebooks, 1960–61 [Walther König], and the scores in question (that Brecht sent them) are found in Cage’s correspondence [Northwestern University] and in Tudor’s archive [Getty Research Institute, Special Collections]).

**3** I use “generality” in the sense of an elegant mathematical equation, at once “simple” (reduced from a field of immense complexity), and applicable (generalizable) to other problems/fields. This, in contrast to (the risk of) generalization in the sense of blunting, over-simplifying, making everything the same.

**4** Clearly, the Fluxus elaborations of indeterminacy diverged exponentially from the Cagean model. Like his concept of the “experimental,” which it refined, “indeterminacy” was another existing term the composer reclaimed as a neologism. Thus, his definition was strict, not to say *legislative*. “Indeterminacy,” in Cage’s lexicon, had a job to do. All this, but especially the composer’s antipathy toward improvisation, stands in strong contrast to the use of the *undetermined* by younger artists, not only those in Fluxus. As we see from 1959–60 onwards, the new generation worked with a very different conception of audience, amongst much else.

**5** Brecht offered the notion of “situation participation” in lieu of “indeterminacy” in an exchange with Cage at the end of the first class he took with the composer (see the Brecht notebook, summer, 1958).

**6** Maciunas used the term, “applied art” performatively, in contrast to the passive status of art as commodity.

**7** Brecht conceived “The Artificial Crowd” in one of the first Cage’s classes at the New School. See his notebook, summer 1958.

**8** For the first performance of *Time-Table Music*, Cage and the students went to Grand Central Station. Grabbing the freely available timetables, they had to convert the familiar, columnar list of numbers—departure and arrival times in hours and minutes—to minutes and seconds, to ascertain the duration of the event. The “content” would depend what on each “performer” perceived.

**9** The “constitutive act and perception” is a definition Brecht derived from his study of Ernst Cassirer.

**10** As is well known, Maciunas had in hand the Brecht scores gathered for La Monte Young’s *An Anthology*, which he was designing—many more than would ultimately be reproduced there—when he departed for Germany in late 1961, and used them as a base for Fluxus. He even sent them as examples, to people in Europe who expressed interest in developing Fluxus programs to start them off. Brecht’s body of work was collected in *Water Yam* (1963), the first Fluxus “publication” by one artist.

**11** As we know, the practice of “preparing” instruments taken up with gusto in early Fluxus was modeled (very loosely) on Cage’s invention of the prepared piano (1940). Ben Patterson’s *Variations for Double-Bass* (1962), for example, called for clothespins to be attached to the instrument’s strings, among other sound-distorting actions demonstratively executed. Nam June Paik was more explicit in his “homage” to Cage,

naming a series of radically altered pianos and televisions “prepared” (see his *Exposition of Music – Electronic Television*, Wuppertal, 1963).

On the Duchamp reference, we recall that he defined the readymade as “a kind of rendezvous” in his *Green Box* notes. I argue that Knowles’ *preparation* of the audience through her cues extended this notion—from object, and one-to-one encounter—in the arena of the collective: imagination in unison.

**12** The “test” of performability—not exactly overlapping but bearing on the element of participation—is one more way to focus the score. We tend to forget that many pieces long associated with Fluxus do not envisage collective performance and do not allow for physical involvement of the reader/perceiver. If this sounds counter-intuitive for a collective initiated through performance, there are explanations. The scores that immediately come to mind, both developed at some remove from Fluxus, are Brecht’s (discussed above) and Yoko Ono’s (discussed below). Briefly, Brecht’s model did not require performance, Ono’s often obviated it. Paik also created unperformable work, for different reasons.

**13** The other rare instance of branding is in Knowles’ own *Identical Lunch* (c. 1969), involving routine nourishment. Not a Fluxus piece *per se*, the proposition, centered on a tuna fish sandwich, was documented in screen-prints stamped with the label “Starkist.”

**14** Nivea was invented in Germany (in 1911). By 1962, it was a commonplace product distributed across four continents.

**15** Again, Knowles and her peers went further with an element— affective and instinctive—that Cage had repressed, or redistributed. In the late 1940s he turned the coloration of subjective emotion toward the universal (e.g., *Sonatas and Interludes*, 1946-48, anchored in the “nine permanent emotions” from the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, which were articulated by recourse to a color scale. In Cage’s class, where he discussed the latter, Brecht built on his organization of elements by creating a cueing system based on color-coded cards (*Confetti Music*, 1958). Immediately after that *Aria*. Brecht’s best-known *color* score, *Three Yellow Events* (1961), with the prompts yellow, yellow, yellow/ yellow, loud/ red, is dedicated to the mother of found color drawn into art: Rose. Knowles, for her part, wrote the score *Celebration Red* in 1962, setting off a collection of red objects to be contributed to the matrix in perpetuity.

**16** See the *Fluxus Performance Workbook*, Ken Friedman, Owen Smith, Lauren Sawchyn eds, p. 116. [https://www.academia.edu/9983685/Fluxus\\_Performance\\_Workbook](https://www.academia.edu/9983685/Fluxus_Performance_Workbook) Accessed June 20 2021.

The example Williams gave was: “performer gives a small gift (coin, cough drop, cookie, match stick, etc.) to every member of the audience, counting each as s/he does so, or marks audience members with ... chalk, or keeps track by pointing finger, etc.” This piece had a definite function in early Fluxus when a percentage of box office returns was promised to the performers. After the artists began to notice that their hosts were robbing them by under-reporting the attendance, Williams’ piece doubled as a strategy for counting the audience during the concert.

**17** Mieko Shiomi studied musicology at Tokyo National University—graduating in 1957. At the height of the Gutai group’s activity—a collective comprised predominantly of painters—and their pursuit of a *concreteness* that foregrounded the body, Shiomi was active in the Group Ongaku. The latter, also including future Fluxus recruits Takehisa Kosugi and Yasunao Tone, developed a vigorous experimental and improvisational performance practice inspired by Edgard Varèse, and Pierre Schaeffer.

**18** Midori Yoshimoto, “Music, Art, Poetry, and Beyond: The Intermedia Art of Mieko Shiomi,” in *Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

**19** Notably, Shiomi created new definitions of musical concepts in sculpture and film. Transferring the gradual reduction of volume (*diminuendo*)—already concrete for

Shiomi—her *Endless Box* comprised 34 handcrafted cartons, empty, but filled with each other—one inserted into the next, all the way down —physically diagrammed the immaterial as a “visual diminuendo.” *Disappearing Music for Face*, which debuted (as a diminishing smile) at the Perpetual Fluxfest in 1964, was famously translated as a filmic sequence featuring a headshot of same (enacted by Ono).

**20** Shiomi’s prompt read: “Write a word or words on the enclosed card and place it somewhere.” In another translation of spatiality, this time focused on the auditory, *Boundary Music* (1963) instructed: Make your sound faintest possible to a boundary condition whether the sound is given birth to as a sound or not. At the performance, instruments, human bodies, electronic apparatuses, or anything else may be used.” See *Fluxus Performance Workbook*, op. cit., 96.

**21** Paik came to Germany in the late 1950s to study music. The 1958 exhibition, *Dada: Dokumente einer Bewegung* at the Kunsthalle, Düsseldorf, made a tremendous impression on him and many others, from Cage to the Zero Group. At the time, the latter were breaking into performance and multi-media installations under the impact of Yves Klein, on the one hand, and the Gutai Group, on the other. We see Paik in the crowd at the Zero events on the streets of Düsseldorf in 1961. Soon thereafter, Paik adopted the term “Neo-Dada” for performances running through 1962.

**22** See Adorno, “Vers une musique informelle” in *Quasi una Fantasia: Essays in Music and Culture* (Verso, 1992). Ironically both Paik and Adorno both adopted the Beethoven title “quasi una fantasia.”

**23** The description of Paik’s work draws upon John Hanhardt’s account of same in “The Seoul of Fluxus,” *The Worlds of Nam June Paik* (New York: Guggenheim, 2000), 30. In 1963 Paik expanded the *Symphony* idea, inter alia, in his *Exposition of Music-Electronic Television* at the Galerie Parnass, Wuppertal, a mansion whose many rooms became sites for various types of audience engagement.

**24** Paik used the term “Neo-Dada” in the publicity for concerts he held in Wuppertal and Düsseldorf in the months leading up to the first Fluxus program (Wiesbaden, September 1962). Maciunas was involved in the *Kleines Sommerfest Après John Cage* (Wuppertal, June 1962), which notably featured a performance of his text “Neo-Dada in Music, Theater, Poetry, and Art.” Repr. in Joan Rothfuss and Elizabeth Armstrong, *In the Spirit of Fluxus* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1993).

**25** Dick Higgins wrote sheaves of long form scores (e.g., the *Constellations*) in the context of the Cage class. Notwithstanding the fact that the *Constellations* were performed at Fluxus concerts, Higgins seems quickly to have sensed the efficacy of short scores, which become typical for him from 1962 on.

**26** This work has an explicit precedent in a Dada piece by Tristan Tzara repeating the word “roar!” See *The Dada Painters and Poets* (1951), Robert Motherwell ed. (Cambridge, Mass., The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981), 96-97.

**27** Ono and Toshi Ichiyonagi were circulating among Japanese composers and artists in New York, and Ichiyonagi was attending Cage’s New School class.

**28** The concert program Young organized from December 1960 through mid-1961 at Ono’s Chambers Street studio featured his own *Compositions 1961*, Ichiyonagi’s linear scores, Simone Forti’s *Dance Constructions*, Jackson Mac Low’s simultaneities, and an “environment” by Robert Morris, *inter alia* —placing a great deal *on the table* with which Ono and others would have to contend.

**29** Ichiyonagi, letter to Brecht, July 1961; original pasted into Brecht’s notebook of that period.

**30** Henry Flynt dubbed the formula: “a title, a tweet, and a date.” See Flynt’s text on the authentication of early scores in Julia Robinson and Christian Xatrec, *+/-1961: Founding the Expanded Arts* (Madrid: Reina Sofia, 2013).

**31** In August 1964, Ono performed this work under the title: *Yoko Ono Farewell Concert: Strip Tease Show* at Tokyo's Sôgetsu Art Center. Beyond indeterminacy, the contrast of "Cut Piece" and "Strip Tease"—in terms of the message sent to the audience/participants—is, to say the least, confusing.

**32** George Maciunas, letter to Tomas Schmit, January 1964, in Jon Hendricks, ed., *Fluxus etc./Addenda II* (Pasadena: Baxter Art Gallery/California Institute of Technology, 1983), 166-167.

**33** On a more personal, not to say, autobiographical level, Maciunas' sense of the agency of the "gag" reflected his unique cultural and psychosexual makeup—a personality (and a member of a generation) stamped with repression—against which he deployed eruptions of scatological humor, *inter alia*.

**34** Maciunas studied art history at New York University in the 1950s and taught himself the history of Russia through intricate charts, addressing political aims, and multiple practical implementations. See Astrit Schmidt-Burckhardt, *Maciunas' Learning Machines: From Art History to a Chronology of Fluxus* (Berlin: Vice Versa Verlag and Detroit: Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Foundation, 2003).

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# Unpacking the Score: Notes on the Material Legacy of Intermediality

## Hanna B. Hölling

### Imagining Events

It is October 1959. I am visiting George Brecht's just opened exhibition at the Reuben Gallery in New York. Titled *toward events: an arrangement* and displaying various objects as propositions, the exhibition is difficult to classify—it is neither an “object exhibition” nor can one really see “performances” (Fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> The “toward” in the title suggests an experiment; the “arrangement”—a musical connotation. In fact, the concepts presented here have been derived from music. The objects are treated like scores. Before putting up his show, Brecht—a chemist by profession and an intriguing personality—had worked for various US companies such as Johnson and Johnson, authoring five U.S. patents and two co-patents, feminine tampons among others. His move toward fine arts coincided with his attendance at John Cage's classes at the New School for Social Research, known for propagating new approaches to composing sound, music, and noise. As a result of his studies, Brecht conceives of textual notations of varying lengths that allow a great deal of freedom in their execution. These works stand apart from his contemporary Allan Kaprow's instructions for Happenings that, more prescriptive, constrained room for improvisation (see, for instance, his *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* from 1959). In his creative practice, Brecht also differs markedly from Cage, who organizes everyday sounds into musical compositions. Instead, Brecht accepts everyday situations, chance events, and “all occurrences” that might result from an encounter between the participants and the objects as a legitimate outcome. (Here, my use of the word “participants” rather than “viewers” emphasizes the subjects' engagement over the passive, disembodied viewing.) Brecht wants to ensure that “the details of everyday life, the random constellations of objects that surround us, stop going unnoticed.”<sup>2</sup> To present these details, constellations, or occurrences in the context of a creative, authorial project, Brecht writes scores for them—an important aspect of my present contestation with the material legacy of Fluxus.

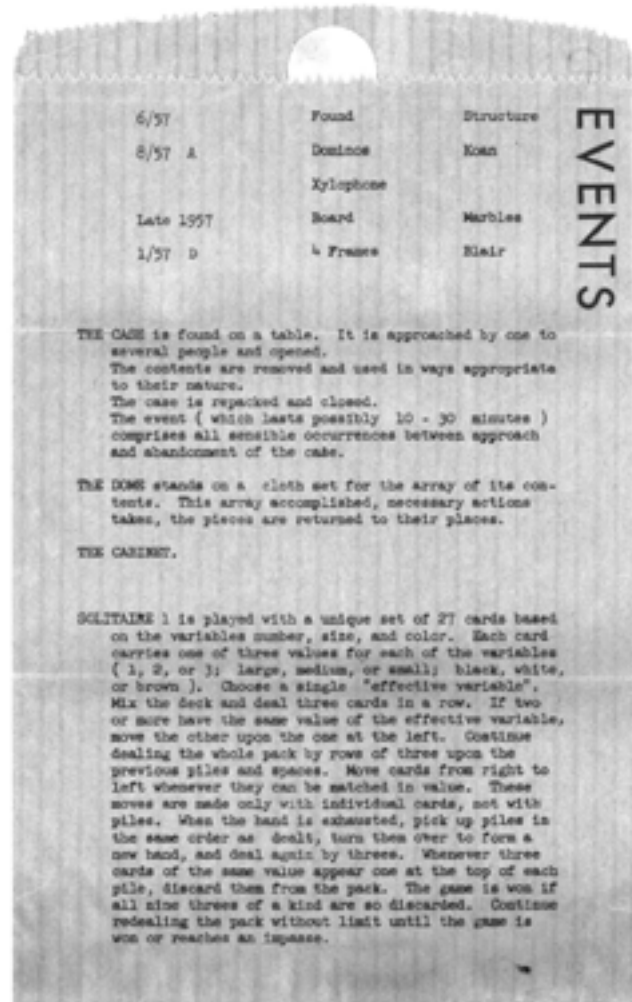


Fig. 1 George Brecht, *toward events: an arrangement*, 1959, announcement and instructions ©DACS 2021

I am walking around in the [Reuben] gallery, observing visitors—not too many—engaging with Brecht’s work that invites haptic manipulation and thematizes time. Tactile gestures calibrated to an expanded sensorium are encouraged; textures, sounds, and smells are becoming a part of this art’s experience. Brecht defines his scores against the reification of the object world. He urges the subject to experience and notice “the ever-unfolding syntax of the given.”<sup>3</sup> Introducing such a novel mode of engagement with art, these works challenge not only visitors but also critics who struggle with the understanding of what this art *is*—an issue reflected later in slightly awkward exhibition announcements.

A work titled *The Case* draws my attention (Fig. 2). It invites me to inspect its contents—toys, artifacts of everyday use, curious objects, and perhaps even debris—and utilize them in the way which the artist purports as “appropriate to their nature.” A text printed on a paper bag that accompanies the exhibition reads:

THE CASE is found on a table. It is approached by one to several people and opened. The contents are removed and used in ways appropriate to their nature. The case is repacked and closed. The event (which lasts possibly 10-30 minutes) comprises all sensible occurrences between approach and abandonment of the case.<sup>4</sup> (See also fig.1.)

I follow the instructions. *The Case* draws me to its clumsy physicality, to its chaotic conglomeration of different kinds of artifact, a picnic box that lacks edible contents, whose system is difficult to grasp. The dominance of vision recedes, the sensorium comes forward: I am finding myself touching the metal, leather, rubber and plastic objects and paper clippings;<sup>5</sup> I am smelling candle wax inside *The Case*; time brackets my experience as I am exploring the case’s two compartments; I have to remove one of them to inspect the case’s lower level; I am pulling out and putting back the items, subjecting them to sensory examination. My body and eyesight work together to reach the object beyond its surface.<sup>6</sup> What is happening here? I am asking myself. Almost without conscious realization, I find myself performing *The Case*, and the event unfolds.

In the mid-twentieth century, a case was not a new subject but a motif known at least since Marcel Duchamp (e.g., *Box in a Valise*, 1935-41, which perpetuates Duchamp’s oeuvre by assembling the miniature reproductions of his works), Joseph Cornell (surrealist



Fig. 2 George Brecht, *The Case*, 1959 ©DACS 2021

boxed assemblages incorporating fragments of once appealing and then cast-off artifacts), and Robert Rauschenberg (including a participatory element in his combine *Black Market* from 1961). Although lacking fetishistic or psychic pursuits, *The Case* also recalls forms of Dada and Surrealistic objects. But importantly, *The Case*—as a case—later morphs into the Fluxkit, a prototypical Fluxus ensemble of objects designed by George Maciunas, the self-nominated leader and impresario of the loosely organized Fluxus group. Maciunas was fascinated by Brecht and integrated many of his ideas into what became the Fluxus canon. For instance, *Fluxkit (A or B copy)*, 1965) and *Flux Year Box 2* (1968, edition announced 1965) display a similar objecthood to Brecht’s case, but they differ by what might be seen as a varying dimension of eventhood.<sup>7</sup>

Time travel. It is May 2020, and I am visiting a newly opened exhibition of Fluxus materials displayed in one of the well-known museums of contemporary art. *The Case* greets me from behind a glass, presented on an elevated platform, still, if not silenced, patinated but proud of its traces of aging and evidence of former use. I start to imagine what damages handling of *The Case* by viewers would cause. Trained as a conservator, I somewhat automatically sympathize with this solution—conservators would be the first to impose

restrictions on use. And yet there is something that saddens me in this still, encapsulated, deactivated ensemble. I feel that these objects are not simply representing something, designed to be *just* seen, but rather, they are conceived as means to an action authored by each individual participant separately and uniquely—aspects which seem to have been irretrievably lost in this sterile, silent museum presentation. Why am I troubled by this presentation, and why does the activation by the visitor, or rather its conspicuous absence, matter here?

The main “problem” of *The Case*, which somewhat unwillingly invites such frozen explications, seems to be its apparent alignment with the object world, and how, at first glimpse, and against Brecht’s initial desire to offer the participant an interactive multisensorial encounter, the musealized case reifies this world. Addressing the similar logic of Fluxkits which extend from Brecht’s case, Fluxus scholar Hannah B. Higgins comments: “At least until they enter the museum, these boxed items remain accessible for sensory examination [...] These are sensory games calibrated to an ever-expanding sensorium.”<sup>8</sup> Since there is so much objecthood to be “vitrinized” and physically cared for, *The Case*’s existence as an end in itself, rather than a means to an end, together with its performative quality as a three-dimensional score, remains overshadowed. While the significance of the object’s (frozen) material history including its patina and traces of use takes primacy over the relevance of the experiential interactive encounter, the carrier of meaning remains a shell and a surface unavailable to empirical evaluation, lacking a structural and metaphysical depth. The work, encased in a vitrine, misses a diachrony of now and then, and the synchrony of the present.

The idea underpinning *The Case* connotes the process of packing and unpacking. Whereas packing, or packaging, is often associated with concealment, introversion, and organization, unpacking is experiential, exploratory, and outward-facing (the relationship between packing and unpacking might be brought down to the opposition of “into” and “out of”). Here, packing becomes boxing, or “blackboxing,” a technique known from Science and Technology Studies (and from Actor-Network Theory) in which the work, whether scientific or technical, becomes invisible by its own success. Blackboxing happens when a device runs efficiently, its internal complexity is concealed, and when attention is paid to its superficial functionality. In other words, the more successful a device, the more obscure and opaque its

function. Because *The Case*, once musealized and protected by the established policies of care, too easily aligns with a passive receptacle or a staging device, it easily satisfies its status as the object of aesthetic interests activated by the disembodied gaze. In the musealized presentation, in which *The Case* remains unavailable to the visitors for multisensory examination, the “performative enactment, one where the object and subject would suddenly appear as equal actors” as described by art historian Benjamin H. D. Buchloh,<sup>9</sup> is absent. And when the work is “unpacked” conceptually by a curious beholder or a researcher, it “ceases functioning” as an aesthetic compilation of surfaces and planes and reveals the mechanics and the logics of its inner apparatus: It becomes a performative thing which foregrounds a performative enactment.

But what does it mean that a work of art is score- or notation-based?<sup>10</sup> How does a score-based work challenge the established categories of a self-contained artwork, existent in one defined materiality that changes as it decays in line with the progressive models of linear time? How does a score-based artwork fit within the categories of visual artifacts, often conceived to be lasting in their finished, intended, or authentic states? How does such work *behave* when collected by museums, institutions, or galleries?

This essay seeks to build a theory of score-based works different from traditional approaches in which the score becomes a function of the performance’s archive. At its core, there lies a deep interest in the ontology of the work, its materiality and ontogenesis regulated by indeterminacy and openness. How can we conceive of a score-based work as an incipient, rather than preordained, form, always already on the verge between the virtual and the actual? What implications does a score-based work have on the pursuit and the ethics of care?

This slow labor of looking and unpacking the score is inspired by the question concerning the ongoing material and conceptual life of things—a certain complicity with materials—and attention paid to the artwork’s multifarious transitions. The following essay offers a brief meditation on the concept of the score as a condition of possibility (a necessary condition) for an intermedial work to exist. Slowly unpacking the score, the essay glimpses at the way in which scores are scripted and rescripted, how they live on through changes, are archived and musealized. It also asks whether a score itself can be conceptualized as an



Fig. 3 George Brecht, *Water Yam* (events), 1959-1966 ©DACs 2021

intermedial form (rather than giving rise to it) and ends by probing the score's potential as a subject of agential realism.

### Brecht's Event Cards

Brecht's three-dimensional scores such as *The Case* challenge our understanding of what a score is, or can be, less so because of their aleatoric, chance-based character, but mainly due to their object-based form. But early in his artistic career, Brecht also created textual scores printed on paper in the form of simple cards with a few lines of text—linguistic propositions designed to mediate a moment of the spectator's experience. As reported by Kaprow, his scores were first intended to be mailed to his friends,<sup>11</sup> and only later did they become encased in boxes, such as the *Water Yam* (1963, fig. 3).

Created in the aftermath of an eponymous festival organized by Brecht in collaboration with Robert Watts at Rutgers University in 1962, Brecht regarded the cards as suggestions for realizing a concrete, real (rather than ideal) work of art. *Water Yam* has been reprinted/repackaged many times. Protean and constantly mutating, *Water Yam* generated perhaps one of the richest archives of material variants and formal variations of Brecht's textual propositions amongst his works. Despite its associations with the artist book, *Water Yam* remains a complex amalgamation of textual cards-scores (the contents of the box) and a three-dimensional object-score (the box). The layered character of *Water Yam*'s proposition awaits completion by a participant who, by opening it and inspecting the cards, activates the sensorium and acquires a cognitive

experience. She or he can, but does not necessarily have to, decide on a realization of the card events. As publisher and gallery owner Harry Ruhé notes in conjunction with music, some of these events are musical performances, some are not; sometimes instruments are rendered mute, sometimes non-instruments are made sounding.<sup>12</sup>

But Brecht cannot claim the exclusivity of the creation of scores for himself. Rather, many artists in- and outside the Fluxus circle—La Monte Young and Yoko Ono, to name but a few—created a similar, albeit derived from different than Cagean inspiration, type of linguistic proposition. The Korean-American artist, Nam June Paik, too, generated an astounding variety of score-based works—a surprising fact due to his canonization as a progenitor of video art and multimedia installation.

### The Intermedial Character of Paik's Scores

Paik, whose involvement with Fluxus can be traced back to the Proto-Fluxus in Germany in the early 1960s, must have acquired a profound understanding of scores through his musical education. Paik's musical accomplishments date back to the early 1950s; later, as a follower of Cage and a participant in Fluxus, both in Europe and in the United States, he became "le grand expérimentateur" in the field of new music. During his early education in Tokyo, Munich, and Freiburg in the 1950s, Paik devoted himself to the study of music—and seemed destined for a career as a classical pianist. He moved from Korea to Hong Kong and then to Japan, where he studied aesthetics, music, and art history and eventually wrote his undergraduate thesis on the

composer Arnold Schoenberg known for his contribution to serialism. His further studies with Wolfgang Fortner in Freiburg and his activities in the electronic studio of the West German radio station WDR in Cologne, an important center for contemporary music that attracted such composers as Karlheinz Stockhausen, Mauricio Kagel, and György Ligeti further evidence his musical connections. Paik's musical background permeated not only the variety of his forms of expression but also had a crucial impact on his creative process and the afterlives of his works.

Although he created short, often abstract scores for events in the Fluxus tradition, he was reluctant to notate his works or to provide any strict instructions. This applied not only to works that lend themselves to notation *prima facie* but also to his multimedia works, whose instruction is often necessary to ensure the works' future reinstallation. The reason for this state of affairs was that, in musical performances, Paik disliked repetition (which might have been enabled by a score). According to his experience as a pianist, repetition makes a performance bad (and boring): "I have always thought that variability and intensity agreed with each other. Now I know: variability is a necessary consequence of intensity."<sup>13</sup> In his performances of "action music," he combined musical elements with rapid physical actions, followed by very slow gestures. Such acts of "rigid expressivity"<sup>14</sup> existed only as singular events; no subsequent performance duplicated a previous one. This variability was a precondition for the successive audiences' intense experience of Paik's work. In a performance of his *Hommage à John Cage: Music for Tape Recorder and Piano* (1959-60) at the Atelier Mary Bauermeister in Cologne, Paik performed several movements which he concluded by destroying and overturning the piano—an action that earned him the epithet "destruction artist."

The Nam June Paik Papers at the Smithsonian American Art Museum include several scores created sometime in the 1960s-70s.<sup>15</sup> Unlike Brecht's printed Event scores discussed earlier, Paik's scores, or compilations thereof, found in the archive seem provisionally drafted, unfinished, as if in the process of making and unmaking. His scores demonstrate proximity to music not only in their titular allusion to musical forms, genres or instruments ("etude..," "suite for..," "composition..," "music..," a trait similar to Brecht's scores) but also in the way they merge musical notation with language (Figs. 4, 5, 6).



Fig. 4–6 Excerpt from untitled performance score, n.d. Blue ink on paper (16 pages), 11 5/8 x 8 1/4 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Nam June Paik Archive (Box 13, Folder 19); Gift of the Nam June Paik Estate.

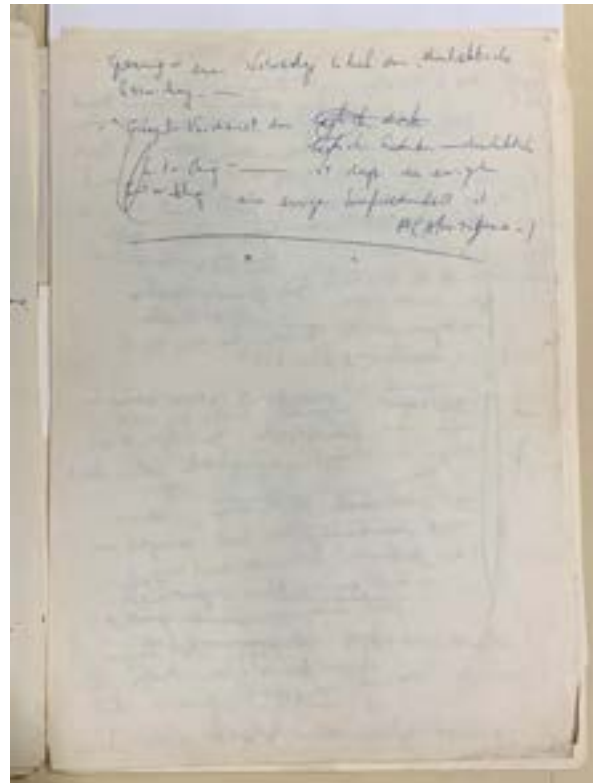
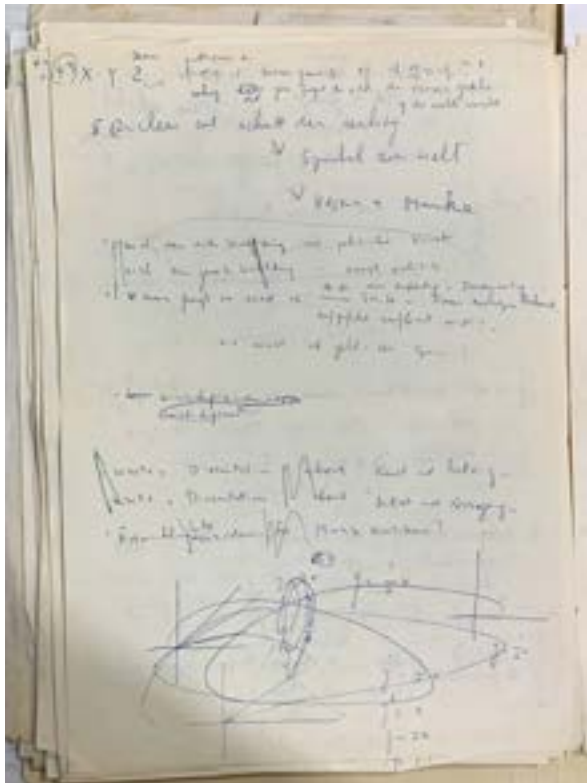


Fig. 7–8 Excerpt from untitled performance score, n.d. Blue ink on paper (16 pages), 11 5/8 x 8 1/4 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Nam June Paik Archive (Box 13, Folder 19); Gift of the Nam June Paik Estate.

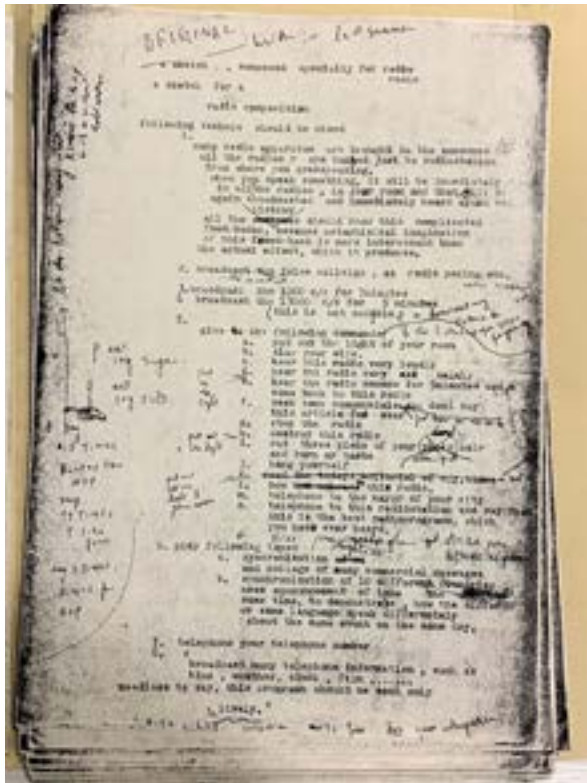


Fig. 9 Copy of “a sketch performed specially for radio,” n.d. 11 5/8 x 8 1/4 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Nam June Paik Archive (Box 13, Folder 20); Gift of the Nam June Paik Estate.

Fig. 10 Copy of “drop one cent coin,” n.d. 11 5/8 x 8 1/4 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Nam June Paik Archive (Box 13, Folder 20); Gift of the Nam June Paik Estate.

We may also find textual scores, whether handwritten or typed, that carry the marks and errors of his creative process (Figs. 7, 8, 9, 10). In an intermedial way, Paik works himself through the materiality of scores combining the written word and notational system as carriers of meaning. To decipher these scores, and to enact them, one has to master reading and interpreting both symbolic systems—the inscribed text and notated music.<sup>16</sup>

From the point of view of their materiality, Paik’s scores move between the frangible material of paper with loosely notated words or musical symbols, to more organized, typewritten, or printed instructions. Struck through and modified, cut out and edited, they appear in print as his contributions to Fluxus newspapers (e.g., *V Tree*), books, and other media. Their journey does not stop there. An envelope (Fig.11) preserved in one of the archival folders among his other papers uncovers a work of editioning—or re-“arranging” as in Brechtian exhibition— and pasting together the existent scores excavated from published sources (Figs. 12, 13). What did Paik want to achieve here, what was he getting at?



Fig. 11 Housing for untitled writing fragments, n.d. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Nam June Paik Archive (Box 13, Folder 2); Gift of the Nam June Paik Estate.

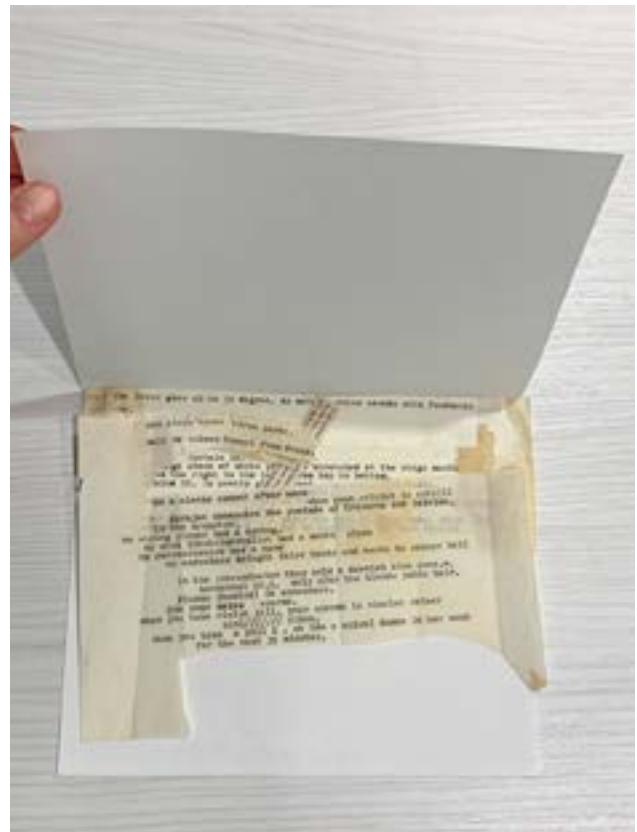


Fig. 12–13 Untitled writing fragments, n.d. Typescript and printed materials (6 pieces), largest: 5 7/8 x 8 1/2 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Nam June Paik Archive (Box 13, Folder 2); Gift of the Nam June Paik Estate.

Whether taken from scores or from other textual sources, these fragments laid bare and liberated from the linear constraints of the printed page become mobile building blocks for new content and meanings, for a re-scoring of the already scored, for a redrafting of an instruction. Often with the use of sticky tape, Paik could have adhered them to a temporary support, perhaps a piece of cardboard, in order to xerocopy them. Such authorial, material remediations achieved through replication perpetuate certain arrangements and cancel out others.

They also allow for a certain recursion of their textual motif, elevating the infinite potential involved in their machinic multiplication. Here, recursion is an act that involves embedding an action or an object within another, related instance of itself and may involve hierarchic orders (unlike iteration, which, similar to reproduction, repeats an action or object an arbitrary number of times with each repetition being a separate act that may exist apart from the others). Leaving the authorial domain, this recursion in Paik's scores is further observed when the scores become xeroxed again by an archivist upon the researcher's request (Figs. 14, 15).

The visibility of remaking these arrangements carries its own aesthetic appeal. In the examples of scores discussed above, the adhesive tape adheres to the surface, rendering undisturbed reading difficult (Fig. 16); sentences and words repeat and get lost, the variability of these arrangements leaves the researcher with a potentially infinite number of combinatory creations. But more importantly, these creations offer yet another dimension of the score-based work's openness, dictated less by the openness involved in the score's potential to generate manifold enactments, but by the very changeability of the score itself. In aleatoric, that is, indeterminate music, such openness of the score signifies the highest degree of changeability of a musical work—whereas the first degree involves a random procedure to generate a fixed score (Cage's use of I Ching being an example), the second degree employs a mobile form where chance elements involve the performance (e.g., Karlheinz Stockhausen *Klavierstück XI*, 1956), and the third degree—an indeterminate graphic and/or text notation. (One has to stay conscious of the difference between Fluxus scores and musical scores: while the former have tended toward self-sufficiency and/or are object-like or archival entities, the latter do not usually manifest autonomously, and independently of their musical realization, as sovereign works.<sup>17</sup>) But if parallels

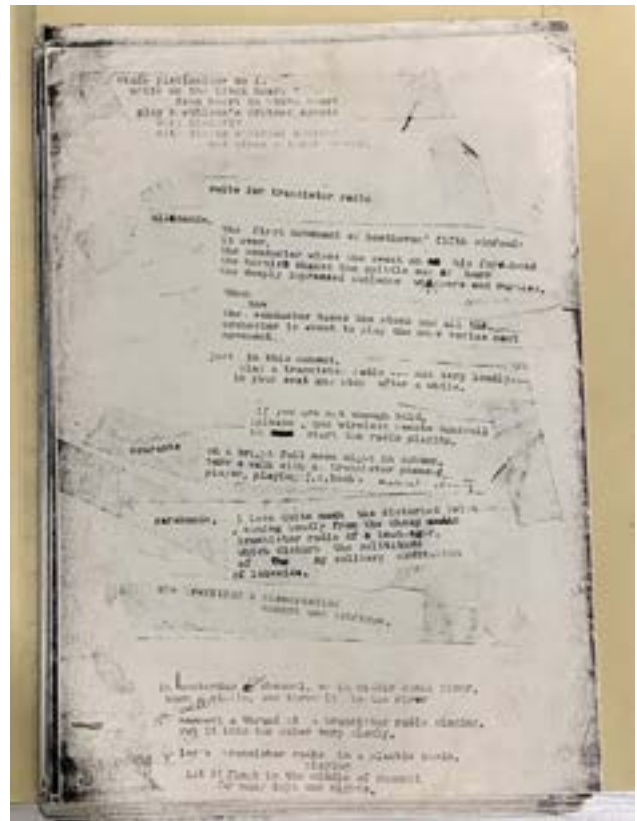


Fig. 14 – 15 Copy of “etude platonique no i.” n.d. photocopy of untitled writing fragments, 11 5/8 x 8 1/4 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Nam June Paik Archive (Box 13, Folder 20); Gift of the Nam June Paik Estate.





Fig. 16 Untitled writing fragment, n.d. Typescript, 6 1/2 x 7 7/8 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Nam June Paik Archive (Box 13, Folder 2); Gift of the Nam June Paik Estate.

could nonetheless be drawn between the forms of indeterminate music and Paik's scores, it might be said that his scores classify as an aleatoric work of the third degree, leaving both the score and its performance highly indeterminate.<sup>18</sup>

### Twofoldness

But there is yet another aspect of these works worthy of attention: just as Brecht's three-dimensional scores confound the score's spatial relations (as something expected to be written on paper, thus in the most common sense two-dimensional), Paik's scores certainly confound, and complicate, the established structures, orders, and interdependencies between the museum and the archive. As a rule, museum collections house art objects and artifacts of material culture, while museum archives preserve paper documents related to the artistic oeuvre. Here, a twofold artwork, that is, a work which consists of a score, whether notated or expressed in three-dimensional artifacts, and of its actualization, that is, its realized performance, confuses this logic.

Twofoldness is often associated with Richard Wollheim's thesis that considers two aspects of the experience of pictures: The surface and their representational contents. I employ the notion of twofoldness in relation to a score-based work: unlike a musical work, in which a

score usually serves the purpose of scripting a musical performance and as such is not self-sufficient or autonomous, Fluxus scores consist in a score *and* a performance, each of which might be seen as equivalent manifestations of the work. This is due to two reasons: firstly, Fluxus material scores often acquire self-sufficiency in the course of Fluxus's institutionalization and musealization in which the scores are objectified (not to say fetishized); secondly, a realization of the score in the imagination might render the material score the only *physical* manifestation of such work. To imagine a work is to enter another system of reference, thought, and experience. To project the written into the sphere of the imaginary is to put imagination into action, to realize an invention. But it is the former aspect that is of particular importance to the curatorial, archival, and conservation interests underpinning this essay. Although the pure objectuality (object-based qualities of works) might have eluded the early appearances of Fluxus, the materiality of the score became increasingly important in the course of various Fluxus publications, distribution (mailing scores to friends by Brecht, for instance), and displays. One can say that curation had its stake in the perpetuation of the score's objectuality and that traditional conservation, by caring for the score as material, further reinforces it.

### Score Between the Museum and the Archive

There is no doubt that the score seems to present more “collectable” qualities than the event that it generates. In the absence of the event, which in the simplest of senses remains uncollectable, the score acquires a status of what in the tradition of collectible arts is equivalent to a “singular original.” But where, indeed, to place such a unique score? Archival artworks may provoke an ongoing reevaluation of the organizational categories of the institution.<sup>19</sup> Although it would be wrong to assume that archival materials are solely constrained to historical records, source documents, artworks’ documentation, and printed or handwritten materials such as reports, instructions, scores, contracts, correspondence, and manuals, there is a sense that, unlike archives, art collections predominantly house unique and original artifacts of relatively high value. And what if a document involves a work of art—an original score, existing uniquely within a letter? (The Silverman Fluxus collection at MoMA involves several examples of such scores contained in letters: for instance, George Maciunas’s describing Paik’s *One for Violin Solo* or Benjamin Patterson’s *Paper Piece*.<sup>20</sup>) And what problems may arise when such a document is shifted to the status of an artwork? No doubt, museum holdings are more visible than archives.<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, the consequences of such reclassification might be significant: a loss of archival integrity of materials, their relationality, interdependence, and contextuality, to name but a few.<sup>22</sup> Flagship examples are Mail Art, which relies on the principle of postal exchange, with a letter, or a postcard, as a primary carrier of information, or Hanne Darboven’s handwritten numerical recordings which probe, among others, structures of representational time. Similarly, Fluxus scores previously discussed fit *par excellence* between the domains of art collections and archives.<sup>23</sup> While *The Case*, in its singular materialization, is an object housed in a (private) collection, *Water Yam*, which has been generated in multiple, often divergent editions, has been treated as both—a collection *and* an archival item (for the former, see, for instance, the collection of the Harvard University Art Museums, and for the latter, The Lilla and Gilbert Silverman Fluxus Collection Archives at the MoMA and the Jean Brown Papers at the Getty Research Institute). In the case of Paik’s previously discussed aleatory score-based works, the scores’ paper form and dimensionality might predestine them for archival folders, but their unique formal “arrangement” instead qualifies them as autonomous works that might one day enter art collections.



Fig. 17 *Liberation Sonata for Fish*, 1969, 3 1/2 x 6 1/2 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift to the Nam June Paik Archive from Timothy Anglin Burgard in memory of Ralph Burgard. (NJP2.EPH.12).

Among the non-unique scores that appear to sit comfortably within both the archival vaults and collections is Paik’s *Liberation Sonata for Fish*, 1969 (Fig. 17). The work, which was distributed free to attendees at Charlotte Moorman’s 7th Annual NY Festival of Avant-Garde, Wards Island, New York, in 1969, involves the following instruction “please, return the fish (INSIDE) to the water. Nam June PAIK.” Although the instruction materialized multiple times, it has since acquired a certain form of material uniqueness due to its decomposition. The stains, watermarks, the impressions of the once alive fish body on the paper, and, not least, traces of use, render each of these editions an “original” uniquely marked by the long performance of various processes of decay. For instance, when I viewed *Liberation Sonata for Fish* in the Nam June Paik Archives at the Smithsonian, I was struck by how heavily disintegrated the fish was, whereas an edition of the work displayed a few years ago in the Fluxus exhibition at the Ostwall Museum in Dortmund, Germany, presented a roughly intact structure.

### A Priori, A Posteriori; Primary, Secondary

The view that scores can emerge prior to their actualizing event, scripting its futurity as it were, is accurate, yet not entirely exhaustive. Fluxus scores were often effectuated from completed events, an immortalizing

gesture of sorts that guaranteed their repeatability. Brecht generated scores “which would arise out of the creation of the object, while, at times, objects were discovered, and Brecht subsequently wrote a score for them.”<sup>24</sup> I refer to these fundamentally different processes of scoring as *a priori* and *a posteriori*. *A priori* scores signify a conceptual work that goes into the score without having the experience of its realization (the work is imagined and theorized, as it were). *A posteriori* instead is based on experience and observation of the realization of the work before it becomes scripted.<sup>25</sup> These scores which emerged from the events as a *fait accompli* (either of object creation or its “discovery”) would thus be created *a posteriori*, whereas those scores which preceded the experience of their realization, *a priori*.

Intriguing examples of *a posteriori* scored artworks are Yoko Ono’s *Instruction Paintings* and *Instruction for Paintings*. Involved in New York City’s downtown art scene, which included Fluxus artists, Ono had a fruitful working relationship with Maciunas, exhibiting her work in his short-lived AG Gallery in Manhattan. Ono’s *Instruction Paintings*, exhibited on Maciunas’s invitation at the AG Gallery in July 1961, and her *Instructions for Paintings* shown at the Sogetsu Art Center, Tokyo, in May 1962 are both performance-based works whose instructions summarize the painting-events in a way that makes them repeatable. Although the first appearance of these artworks was object-based—Ono created the instructions in order to stop explaining them to visitors<sup>26</sup>—the later, slightly modified realizations presented only instructions: first handwritten, then transcribed by her husband Toshi Ichiyangi, and finally published in her book *Grapefruit* (a significant piece of conceptual art whose first edition was printed in Tokyo in 1964).<sup>27</sup>

But the logic of the precedence—either of the execution existing prior to the instructions or the instructions prior to the execution—refuses any stability. On the occasion of Ono’s exhibition *One Woman Show* at MoMA in 2015, the artist sanctioned a side-by-side presentation of both the scores and their (contemporary) realizations. Collapsing the temporal twofoldness of score-based works into a synchronic co-existence of scores and their effects, in which the potential of the score is not open to the infinity of imagined realizations but becomes exemplified by a sole concrete material proposition, this presentation posed intriguing questions as to the status of these works after the exhibition finished. Have they become archived and

safeguarded as artworks or rather removed from the museum and discarded?

Another form of scoring a work *a posteriori* is a curatorial or a conservation narrative. In contrast to *primary score*, which arises in conjunction with the creative act regardless of whether it is conducted after or before the event, a *secondary score* entails instructions for the execution of the work—the number of performers, requisites, the duration, and the spatial requirements. Here, by creating and sharing the instructions and documentation of a piece, curators and conservators play an important role. If a work’s execution is based on memory, the creation of its documentation means a writing and rewiring of the work. In other words, in the course of the work’s socialization,<sup>28</sup> verbal, memorized instructions are reformulated into a written narrative.

Maciunas’s instructions for performing Fluxus events exemplify yet another form of instruction formulated secondarily (or a secondary score). For instance, before the concerts at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, Maciunas wrote a letter to Joseph Beuys requesting various equipment for the performance of Brecht’s event *Drip Music (Drip Event, 1959-62)*, including a ladder, bucket, and a can.<sup>29</sup> The instructive character of his writing takes the form of a secondary score which complements Brecht’s otherwise enigmatic Event score (especially its second version, which simply states “Dripping”), potentially also serving as a basis for the work’s future re-performance. Maciunas’s activity presents an intervention into the authorial sphere of the primary score—an operation similar to his realizations of the collective Fluxkits or Fluxfilm Anthologies (which were historicized, if not canonized, as linked primarily with Maciunas’s creative vision and authorship).

### A Glimpse into the History of Notation

The score, at least in its traditional form, can be viewed as a notation that uses a symbolic system that, by accepted convention, usually represents musical composition. Although so far, I have treated scores and instructions interchangeably, as any score might involve an instruction of how to perform a piece, a difference should be drawn between a notation and a score. While both textual and graphical scores involve some form of notation, not all notation becomes a score.<sup>30</sup> Etymologically, the word “score” stems from Old English *scoru* meaning “twenty” or Old Norse *skor* meaning mark, notch, or incision—which probably served for both counting numbers and keeping records. The prehistoric

sense of this Germanic word was a mark, a scratch, or line drawn by a sharp instrument.<sup>31</sup> In English, the word “score” began to mean keeping a record of a customer’s drinks in the tavern and, in the 17th century, to record a point in a game or a match. The use of a score as a printed piece of music (meaning to connect related staves by scores of lines) was first recorded in 1701. But records of non-Western musical notation precede the use of parchment or paper for the purposes of writing music. For instance, a cuneiform tablet that recorded instructions for performing music was created at Nippur, Sumer (currently Iraq) in 2,000 BC. There is also evidence of notational practices, however rudimentary, in Ancient Greece. Concrete forms of notation which paved the way for modern notation developed in medieval monasteries in Europe. Although sheet music is often generally called a score, in the course of history, varying codes of signs and symbols, written and drawn graphemes defined what became musical notation. It is interesting to note that the relationship between these visual notations and invisible sound were recurrent themes over many centuries and pertained to the relation between aural perception and visual representation.<sup>32</sup>

Anthropologists suggest that the separation of musical notation from literary notation required a different form of literacy which prompted separate treatment of scores and scriptural instructions. Again, the former involves a symbolic language of notations that relate to a musical work which can be realized following a set of conventions; the latter involves written language. However, scripts (writing) and scores (music) are forms of notation that share common origins: in fact, the history of writing is a more comprehensive history of notation.<sup>33</sup> (Can a painting, in this sense, be also seen as a visual form of notation of a human creative effort?) According to British anthropologist Tim Ingold, scripts imply meaning and cognition, and “taking in,” while scores imply sound and performance, thus “acting out”—these are the distinctions between language and music, speech and song.<sup>34</sup> Performance might be regarded as something issued from a score. This renders a work a two-stage process and provides it with a possibility of multiple, rather than singular, existence. Ingold leans on British analytic philosopher Nelson Goodman, who maintains that, unlike a literary work where the text is equivalent with the essence of the work, musical notation is a score that defines the work but is not equivalent with it (a composer does not write a musical work, but rather he writes a score that specifies performances compliant with it).<sup>35</sup> For instance, drawing, for Goodman, is a work which does not

employ any kind of notation, whereas script and score do.<sup>36</sup> For Ingold, however, a drawn line is clearly a part of a notation. He posits that writing and musical notation became separated in the modern era when music became devoid of its verbal component and language of its component of sound. Could we, following this logic, regard all works as notated and thus transgress the division between multiple and singular arts? Could all works become effects of an accomplished act of notation or serve as a notational record for subsequent performances? (A painting or a sculpture could be regarded as an accomplished act of notating color and form which could potentially serve as a basis for the enactment of a replica, pastiche, or a copy.) What consequences might this thinking bear for the ethics of care? These inquiries need to be explored in depth beyond the bounds of possibility of this essay.

### Score as Relationship<sup>37</sup>

Significantly indebted to music, Fluxus textual scores such as those by Brecht, Paik, or Ono seem to unite these two traditions again: the literary text and musical notation. But these scores neither grew on an empty terrain nor in isolation from the developments in avant-garde music and other disciplines.

At least since the mid-twentieth century, conventional Western notation was insufficient to grasp the intention of the musician. Visual art, performance, theatre, and writing were embraced to expand its grounds. Graphical scores with their greater emphasis on audiovisual interpretation or explorations into an alternative way of notating music were paralleled by the developments at the intersection of visual arts and performance. Here, Fluxus Event scores altered the relation between composer and performer, allowing the former a greater, more lateral interpretation of the piece, and increased freedom to enter the realm of collaboration by the latter. The score ceased to be viewed as a solely notational system, or as an instructional device primarily existing to communicate between composer and performer. A score, just like a sound, or like the action that it produced, became communicative and contextual—it was an articulation of a spatiotemporal relationship between the performance, the realm of the visual, and everyone involved.<sup>38</sup>

According to Peter Osborne, the score or set of instructions is a significant contribution of Modernist music to conceptual art.<sup>39</sup> In my view, this contribution was realized via Fluxus activities which propagated Event scores and instructions as one of its significant modes

of expression. Osborne maintains that Cage extended the idea of the score to include elements of performance beyond musical notation. This expanded definition was essential to Brecht's Event scores, which Osborne calls "generalized" instructions "transposed into the medium of language."<sup>40</sup> The notational tendencies and impacts of music were also reinforced through the events in Cologne, Wiesbaden, and Darmstadt (think Paik). Moreover, artists such as Ono and La Monte Young began to create scores independently of Cagean influences.

Fluxus textual scores evolved between 1959 and 1962, until they took the shape of a white card with a few typed lines which suggested an object, thought, or action.<sup>41</sup> The first scores were descriptive and implicative (somewhat close to Kaprow's instruction for Happenings). After their publication in *An Anthology of Chance Operations* edited by La Monte Young, co-published with Jackson Mac Low, and designed by George Maciunas, in 1963, Fluxus scores become shorter and more abstract, resembling Japanese haiku, a very short form of Japanese poetry which relied on a suggestive power of a very limited number of lines, often reduced to a fixed, three-line structure. These short scores, unlike their long siblings, might be further conceptualized as "cool media" that, following communication theorist Marshall McLuhan's term, demand active interpretation and active engagement on the part of the receiver/interpreter to fill the gaps (hot media are, in turn, highly informative, and allow for the more passive engagement of viewers).<sup>42</sup> Different from prescriptive happenings or performance instructions, these short scores permitted a wide range of interpretations, and imaginative responses.

### The Temporality of Score-Based Work

Works that are score-based expand through time and space in multiple ways. I disagree with the view that a written score is spatial, while its execution is temporal. Spatial and temporal characteristics are inherent to both the score and its execution. Such differentiation leads back to the Enlightenment philosopher Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's essay written in 1766 outlining the strengths and weaknesses of art, in which he chose space and time as generic distinctions between the arts: painting and visual art as spatial art was distinguished from poetry and literature as *time-art*.<sup>43</sup> Although the execution of a score might at first appear exclusively temporal, here such execution seems to possess equally spatial dimensions manifest in the room it occupies, and the objects and subjects it employs. A written score not only occupies space, but it also extends and endures in time.

It would be simplistic to state that a score in a material form lives only as an object, aging and decaying, following time's linear progress. It would not suffice to simply contend that score-based works produce multiple, perhaps even cyclical, temporalities in the instances of their subsequent or simultaneous actualizations. As demonstrated in the case of Paik's remediated scores and Ono's *Instruction Paintings*, the score can transition from one form to another, from a handwritten note to a printed and rearranged form (Paik), from objects to script (Ono), or simply present multiple instances of itself on a similar physical carrier (Brecht's differing editions of *Water Yam*). The variation of the score is thus not only contingent on the possibility of its many actualizations (multiple performances issued from an instruction), which would cause a shift from the authentic, historical material of the score to the iterant, expressive authenticity of the performance. Rather, the variation of the score including its different temporal modalities exists within the material proposition of the score itself. In other words, the intermediality of the score, and its heterotemporality, is implied in the very ability of the score to occur in materially and durationally similar, but *elementally* distinct, variations.

Conceiving of artworks in terms of duration may come in handy here. In philosophy, objects which occur continually, that is, enduring in certain material form, are called "continuants." These phenomena which occur in a short time and/or lack a defined, enduring material form, are called "occurrents."<sup>44</sup> Simply put, continuants continue and occurrents occur. Sound is an occurrent, while stone is a continuant. Certain art forms are akin to continuants—traditional painting, sculpture, or drawing—while performance and events might be classified as occurrents.<sup>45</sup> Whether three-dimensional or object-based, Fluxus scores might be conceived of as continuants capable of generating occurrent events. This status quo recalls again the slippage of categories that subverts dualistic thinking by pointing to the interconnectedness of seemingly two separate aspects. Here, *becoming* as an affirmation of being takes over.<sup>46</sup>

Works-occurrents produce more documentary trace and leftovers than those works which continue in a material form. Bearing witness to a disappearing work, scripts, scores, and notations stand in for the absence of the event (remembering here Brecht scripting events *a posteriori* or Ono exhibiting instructions). Multiple scores do not only assure the work's distribution but also prevent its forgetting, since the simple act of imagining the action does not allow us to transfer

knowledge (not even in an embodied way as is the case with “traditional” performance).

### The Virtual and the Actual

The Deleuzian concepts of virtuality and actuality might be helpful to think further the potential of the score.<sup>47</sup> The French philosopher Gilles Deleuze conceived of the virtual-actual binary under the influence of Henri Bergson. Named differential ontology (which approaches the nature of identity by explicitly formulating a concept of difference as foundational and constitutive, rather than thinking of difference as merely an observable relation between entities<sup>48</sup>), Deleuze designates the actual as the material instances of things, whereas the virtual becomes everything which is not presently here. Both virtual and actual states are real states. Virtuality, for Deleuze, lacks pre-existence in any possible form; it exists in a state of potentiality located in the sphere of the unknowable. He opposes potentiality to possibility, which refers to the somehow-already-known physical state of before, whose realization presupposes a certain form. For Deleuze, the virtual is a part of the object, it is real. The virtual must be actualized following the rules of difference and creation (rather than of limitation and resemblance inherent to the process of realization). Deleuze points to another consequence of the division between the virtual and the real: the actual does not resemble the embodied virtual (unlike the real which resembles the possible that it realizes). The communication between the virtual and the actual enables an event of becoming different— differentiation and creation.

Accordingly, it might be claimed that the potential of a score-based work lies in the very possibility of its actualization, of passing from the virtual to the actual state. The passage from the virtual to the actual brings about modifications and difference, in that no one actualization of a score, whether in the material or mental world, resembles another. The actors involved in the actualization of such a work are of necessity creatively invested in it.

The transfer between the virtual and the actual resembles aspects of the Fluxus artist and writer Dick Higgins’ theory of exemplativism. In his “Exemplativist Manifesto” from 1976, Higgins sees the artist, the notation, and the audience as separate settings or complexes that rarely converge.<sup>49</sup> According to him, the audience creates, by means of notation and work, an image of the set possibilities intended by the artist. Thus, the realization of such a work can only be arbitrary, an *example* rather than fixity. The work

becomes “an example of,” rather than a precise realization. For example, what matters, for Higgins, in a performance is not its single realization but “the dialectics between its single realization and its alternates” in which a single performance implies the essence of all potential interpretations of this performance (Higgins goes so far as to say “or even of all [performances]”). This essence is directly related to the possibility involved in the work’s virtual existence, as argued above, in which any of the work’s actualizations, that is, the transfer from the virtual to the actual, never exhaust the potential of the virtual. Moreover, in such constellation, the format, method, and process of notation, which becomes their form, is more significant than in traditional works. In addition, and relating to my former point (*a priori, a posteriori*), any notation is a prescription for or from action.

Finally, all work’s actualizations enter the archive, its virtual and physical sphere, and allow, on its basis, for new actualizations to take place. The virtual archive involves tacit knowledge, memory, and skill related to the work’s past manifestations, whereas the physical archive consists of all material remains, documentation, explicated narratives about the work along with its props, relics, and leftovers. The changeability of such a score-based artwork inheres in the artwork’s virtual quality ready to unfold on the basis of the archive, that is, in the potential to exemplify itself. In other words, such changeability rests in the work’s potential to become different in its transformation from the virtual to the actual.

But the archive is not merely a conglomeration of inactive historical matter and facts; rather it points in two directions: toward the already actualized, and toward the many virtual potentialities. The work, therefore, is never finished but always a *becoming*—a life which is, in Ingolt’s sense, “not an emanation but a generation of being.” The work, thus, is a process, not preordained but incipient, lacking certain ends and always on the verge of the actual.<sup>50</sup>

### Intermediality Reconsidered

Having set out the conditions for score-based works to exist within the virtual-actual, I now want to consider how they fit within the category of intermedia. Another of Higgins’ writings, “Statement on Intermedia” (1966), describes his immediate surroundings in which artistic expression fell between and outside the established genres of art. Artworks create a way of operating which is an alternative to the fixed categories of media,

combining music and theatre, painting and poetry, and art and life (for instance, according to Higgins, happening falls between collage, music, and theatre). The Event score—Fluxus “invention” *par excellence*—seems to fit impeccably this intermedial bill: the intermediality of the score consists in the aesthetic function and instructional form. But there is more to intermediality, and this excess of meaning can be conveyed on a materially construed arena: firstly, scores may transgress the media’s formal expectations by leaving the two-dimensional realm in order to assume a three-dimensional form (think again of Brecht’s *The Case*). In other words, the apparent flatness of the score is morphed into the explicit three-dimensionality of an object. To put it differently yet, scores might undergo a transformation from textual communication devices to aesthetic objects that expand spatially. Here, intermedia means thinking outside the assumed mediality—but “inside the box,” as if within Brecht’s *Case*—and allow the score to take place in space. There is a sense that such a score takes “space,” somewhere between the communicative function of language and the aesthetic function of the object, creating new materialities as well as inter-, and intra-actions—the latter to be addressed shortly.

Secondly, the material transferability of works such as *Water Yam* or Paik’s scores observed at the SAAM archive elicits yet another dimension of intermediality that allows the score to be transposed between various carriers. Here, intermediality equals material multiplicity—of forms and carriers. But unlike the sheer existence of multiple copies of a score, this multiplicity does not eliminate the material uniqueness of the scores’ physical materializations. As I suggested earlier, the multiplicity of scores results in materially and durationally similar, but *elementally* distinct, variations.

Thirdly, Event scores are intermedial in that they *perform*. But their performance is not only limited to the result of their realization as an action or as a performance (in this case, we would simply say: “scores are performed”). Event scores themselves perform—or are performances of—textual or structural matter and support—examples are physical disintegration, alteration and decay, traces of use, and all processes that took them away from their physical origin. Rather than being just a first stage in the process of a realization of a two-stage event or performance that would render them a means to an end, they are ends in themselves; they fold into themselves by performing material finiteness, and time. This finiteness stands in an inverse relationship to their potential to give rise

to—and to unfold as— an infinite number of performances. This is not to say, of course, that scores are just this—we would move in circles and conform to the “objectification” of *The Case* or other scores, for that matter. No, the works such as *The Case*, Paik’s scores, or Ono’s instructions are twofold, in that they exist in two equally important spatiotemporal aspects.

Finally, intermediality, understood in its initial sense as an observation of movement between the established categories prompts a question about exteriority and interiority. While intermediality seems to operate externally to a given work in that it strives to impose terminology, a language always foreign to the very matter of the work, would an *intra*-mediality allow us to zoom inwards? Would it allow us to assign more significance to the matter, rather than to language and culture that *mattered* for so long?

*Intra*- in Latin means “inside,” or “occurring within.” Accordingly, *intra*-mediality glimpses inwards and reveals the permanent movement of matter, its continuous changes—an agency that affirms the “mattering of matter.” Here, the interactions between different actors inherent to the nature of the score, whether *The Case*, *Instructions Paintings*, or Paik’s scores (their worlding, their *becoming in the world*), could potentially be used as a prompt to move to a reversed level of observation of, say, “deep materiality.” *Intra*-actions, in the sense of Karen Barad’s agential realism account, which seeks to depart from both humanist and anthropocentric perspectives, would allow us to account for these works as having internal exchanges, permitting them to transition and decay, and move on. Not only Brecht’s wish from the beginning of this paper that “the details, the random constellations [...] that surround us, stop going unnoticed” would be realized, but such a view of things would also, in line with Barad, grant us a possibility “to contest and rework what matters and what is excluded from mattering.”<sup>51</sup>

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## Notes

**1** *toward events: an arrangement* was Brecht's first solo show in the newly opened Reuben Gallery in New York. Among objects displayed were *The Case*, *The Dome*, *The Cabinet*, and *Solitaire*—all arrangements of ready-mades that mark his transition from chance painting to events.

**2** Brecht quoted in Mari Dumett, *Corporate Imaginations: Fluxus Strategies for Living* (Oakland: University of California press, 2017), 30.

**3** Julia Robinson in *George Brecht Events: A Heterospective* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2005), 61.

**4** Flyer for *toward events: an arrangement*, reprinted in *George Brecht Events: A Heterospective* (Cologne: Walther König, 2005), 42.

**5** The list of objects contained in *The Case* included, among others, a candle, a ball game, rubber balls, puzzle piece, thread, photographs, pieces of domino, a noise-maker, a glove and a score.

**6** Here, surface stands metonymically for a superficial, visual encounter with objects. But as cultural critic and theorist Giuliana Bruno convinces us, surface investigations might also stand for a profound encounter with materiality as a substance of material relations. See Giuliana Bruno, *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

**7** Although it is formally similar by encompassing varying objects in a case, *The Case* differs from Fluxkits in that it offers a direct immersion into the experience with objects. Fluxkits, starting from the first book-based *Fluxus I* (1965), compile works such as Fluxus scores, instructions, games, puzzles, beats, stuck of cards, films, among others, authored by Fluxus artists. They are, in that sense, sensory and experiential worlds within a case, rather than a compilation of objects. For an interesting contestation with Fluxus event-hood, object-hood and subject-hood, see Natasha Lushetich, *Fluxus: The Practice of Non-Duality* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2014), 105-143.

**8** Hannah Higgins, "Reading Art and Objecthood While Thinking about Containers," *Nonsite* 25 (October 2018).

**9** Buchloh commented on Robert Watts' works. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Robert Watts: Animate Objects, Inanimate Subjects," in *Neo-Avant-Garde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2000), 538.

**10** Although differences can be drawn between these notions, I use "score," "instruction" and "notation" interchangeably in this essay.

**11** "George Brecht currently arranges an event by

sending small cards to his friends with a few words neatly printed on them [...]" Allan Kaprow, text (circa 1961) for *Assemblage, Environments & Happenings* (New York: Abrams, 1966). See also Liz Kotz, "Post-Cagean Aesthetics and the 'Event' Score," *October* 95 (Winter 2001):55–89.

**12** Hary Ruhé, *Fluxus: The Most Radical and Experimental Art Movement of the Sixties* (Amsterdam: "A", 1976) n.p.

**13** "Ich dachte bis jetzt: Variabilität und Intensität lassen sich vereinbaren. Jetzt weiss ich: Variabilität ist eine notwendige Folge aus Intensität." Paik, quoted in Wulf Herzogenrath, *Nam June Paik: Fluxus-Video* (Munich: Silke Schreiber Verlag, 1983), 10.

**14** According to Edith Decker-Phillips in *Paik Video* (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1997), 29-30.

**15** The Nam June Paik Archive, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC.

**16** A recent argument that Fluxus scores were too exclusively theorized within the rise of language in the art of the 1960s and should instead be acknowledged for their visuality and indebtedness to diagrammatic visualization and experiments in graphic notation in the 1950s was put forward by Natilee Harren in *Fluxus Forms: Scores, Multiples, and the Eternal Network* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 70.

**17** The relationship between a musical score and the music we hear is one of the major problematizations in Western music. While a score is strictly linked with the musical realization, it is often deemed incidental to the production of Western music; a score represents spatially only some elements of the temporal form of music, which comes into existence by the interpretation of the performer, independently of its score.

**18** For an engaging account of a score as productively unstable—a valid manifestation of creative practice—in which she tests the limits of unpredictability involved in artistic practices concerned with organization and transmission of actions, see Alison D'Amato, "Mutable and Durable: The Performance Score after 1960," in *Event—Performance—Process: Art, Materiality and Continuity since the 1960s*, ed. Hanna B. Hölling (New York: Bard Graduate Center, forthcoming).

**19** See Zanna Gilbert, "Approaches to the Archive: Fictional Histories?" Notes on Modern and Contemporary Art around the Globe, February 15, 2013, accessed May 15, 2020, <https://post.at.moma.org/themes/6-approaches-to-the-archive-fictional-histories>.

**20** Jon Hendricks, "Watch Out! All Is Not What It Seems to Be," Post: Notes on Modern and Contemporary Art around the Globe, February 15, 2013, accessed May 20, 2020, [https://post.at.moma.org/content\\_items/156-watch-out-all-is-not-what-it-seems-to-be](https://post.at.moma.org/content_items/156-watch-out-all-is-not-what-it-seems-to-be).



**21** Although only a small percentage of museum collections are put on display, which has led some scholars to claim that the heart of the museum is its vault, there is a validity to the statement that archives are, perhaps with exception of archival contextualization of some collection materials and archives which are accessible upon request (such as at the Smithsonian), usually inaccessible to the eyes of the beholder.

**22** Contextuality and relationality refer here to the original group of materials of which a particular object is an inextricable part. See Michelle Elligott, et al., "Archival Workshop at MoMA," Post: Notes on Modern and Contemporary Art around the Globe, February 15, 2013, accessed May 20, 2020, [https://post.at.moma.org/content\\_items/153-archival-workshop-at-moma](https://post.at.moma.org/content_items/153-archival-workshop-at-moma).

**23** On the topic of the archival tensions in relation to the status of documents and artworks, see "Document or Artwork? A Panel Discussion on Archives in the Art World" panel discussion, Dedalus Foundation, New York (September 11, 2018), accessed June 13, 2020, <https://vimeo.com/294166087>.

**24** Julia Robinson, [http://members.chello.nl/j.seegers1/flux\\_files/brecht.html](http://members.chello.nl/j.seegers1/flux_files/brecht.html).

**25** I have adapted the meaning of these two contrasting notions, *a priori* and *a posteriori*, from philosophy. There, *a posteriori* often relates to knowledge which is derived from experience or personal observation; *a priori* instead comes from self-evident truths.

**26** According to Ono's oral account in the MoMA podcast: <https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/15/370>. See also the description of these paintings at AG Gallery on the Fluxus Foundation webpage.

**27** Kotz, "Post-Cagean Aesthetics," 102. For an account of Fluxus as an underappreciated contributor to the development of conceptualism, see Julia Robinson, "From Abstraction to Model: George Brecht's Events and the Conceptual Turn in Art of the 1960s," *October* 127 (Winter 2009): 77-108.

**28** Taking inspiration from Jean-Marc Poinsoot, Ariane Noël de Tilly maintains that video and film installation are highly social artworks which evolve in a larger network and in which socialization takes place during the events of their exhibition, distribution, and preservation. See de Tilly, "Scripting Artworks: Studying the Socialization of Editioned Video and Film Installations" (Ph.D diss., University of Amsterdam, 2011), 12.

**29** George Maciunas in a letter to Joseph Beuys (1963) published in Emmett Williams, *My Life in Flux -- And Vice Versa* (Stuttgart: Edition Hansjörg Mayer, 191), 73.

**30** *Encyclopedia Britannica* equates score with notation, which it associates with a manuscript or a printed form. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, "Score," accessed Dec 6, 2019,

<https://www.britannica.com/art/score-music>.

**31** Online Etymology Dictionary, "Score," accessed December 7, 2019, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/score>.

**32** This paragraph sources the history of notation from Paulo de Assis, "Prelude," in *Essays on Sound, Score and Notation*, eds. Paolo De Assis, William Brooks, Kathleen Coesysens (Ghent: Orpheus Institute, 2013), 5-6.

**33** Tim Ingold, *Lines* (London; New York: Routledge, 2016), 10.

**34** *Ibid.*, 6, 18.

**35** *Ibid.*, 11. See also Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 210.

**36** *Ibid.*, 11. See table.

**37** Title inspired by Yolande Harris, "Score as Relationship: From Scores to Score Spaces to Scorescapes," in *Sound and Score*, 195.

**38** In the context of sound studies, sound became to be thought of as energy, as a complex of forces.

**39** Osborne, see Hölling, *Paik's Virtual Archive: Time, Change, and Materiality in Media Art* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 156-58.

**40** *Ibid.*

**41** Julia Robinson, [http://members.chello.nl/j.seegers1/flux\\_files/brecht.html](http://members.chello.nl/j.seegers1/flux_files/brecht.html).

**42** McLuhan puts forward these notions in relation to communication media in his book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964).

**43** Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, "Laocoön: An Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry," trans. E. C. Breasley (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1853). On the occasion of the proto-Fluxus Concert "Kleines Sommerfest—Après John Cage" at the Gallery Parnass in Wuppertal, Germany, on June 9, 1962, the time-space division of arts was featured in a diagrammatic manner on Maciunas's chart serving as a background for, among others, Arthus C. Caspari reading of Maciunas's manifesto "Neo-Dada in Music, Theater, Poetry, Art."

**44** The distinction between continuants and occurrents was first introduced by W.E. Johnson in the early 1920s in his influential book *Logic*. See Rowland Stout, "The Category of Occurrent Continuants," *Mind* 125, no. 497 (2016): 41.

**45** We seem to measure the degree of inborn perpetuity of these forms only at our own, human scale. However, there seems to be no border that one could draw between occurrents and continuants, rendering these terms only partially useful. Instead, understanding the works in terms of their relative duration, which I pursue in my other writings, adds a more critical note to the temporal discourse.

**46** For the notion of “becoming” in the Deleuzian sense, see Todd May, “When is a Deleuzian Becoming?” *Continental Philosophy Review* 36 (2003): 139-153. I thank Martin Patrick for pointed suggestions.

**47** I discussed the notions of the virtual and the actual in relation to multimedia installations in my book *Paik's Virtual Archive*, 156-58.

**48** “Differential Ontology,” Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessed May 22, 2020, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/diff-ont/>.

**49** Dick Higgins, *A Dialectic of Centuries—Notes Towards a Theory of the New Arts* (New York: Printed Editions, 1978), 156.

**50** Evoking animic ontology, Ingold's incipient state refers to life and world. Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London: Routledge, 2000), 113.

**51** Karen Barad and Adam Kleinman, “Intra-actions: Karen Barad in conversation with Adam Kleinman,” *Mousse Magazine* 34 (Summer 2012): 76.

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# My Life in Flux -- And Vice Versa (excerpts)

## Emmett Williams

**Emmett Williams** (1925-2007) was an American poet and artist. He was married to British artist Ann Noël. Williams, born in Greenville, South Carolina, grew up in Virginia, and lived in Europe from 1949 to 1966. Williams studied poetry with John Crowe Ransom at Kenyon College, anthropology at the University of Paris, and worked as an assistant to the ethnologist Paul Radin in Switzerland. As an artist and poet, Emmett Williams collaborated with Daniel Spoerri and German poet Claus Bremer in the Darmstadt circle of concrete poetry from 1957 to 1959. In the 1960s, Williams was the European coordinator of Fluxus and worked closely with French artist Robert Filliou, and was a founding member of the *Domaine Poétique* in Paris. Williams was friends with Václav Havel, and during his dissident years he translated some of Havel's work into English. He translated Daniel Spoerri's *Topographie Anecdotee du hasard* (*An Anecdoted Topography of Chance*), collaborated with Claes Oldenburg on *Store Days*, and edited *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry*, all published by Dick Higgins' Something Else Press. From the mid-1960s through the early 1970s, Williams was Editor-in-Chief of the Something Else Press. In 1991, Williams published an autobiography, *My Life in Flux -- And Vice Versa*, published by Edition Hansjörg Mayer, Stuttgart, and reprinted the next year by Thames and Hudson. In 1996, he was honored for his life work with the Hannah-Höch-Preis. He died in Berlin in 2007.

## An Introduction

(But Not, Necessarily, to What Follows)

I should like to begin at the beginning. But at the beginning of what? When did *what* begin? When and where and how? Never mind the *why* of these things. Asking the *why* of art and artists is an invitation to the exploration of the psyche, and, unless mucking about in the Unconscious is one's *métier*, taking this step can lead not only to intellectual disasters emitting distinctly mystic odours, but to the abandonment of creative activity altogether. Witness the dilemma of poor Henry Adams, perhaps the greatest historian America has produced, and be warned: "I don't give a damn *what* happened, what I want to know is *why* it happened - never could find out - stopped writing history."

Still, the ubiquitous *did-it-first syndrome*, or the priority dilemma, so fashionable amongst the artists of our time, makes it almost imperative for us to dig down deep into the distant dawns of our lives as makers and doers, to discover whatever it was, if anything, that we made or did that was the very first expression of - well, of something very important and very new.

I am not blessed - or cursed? - with Dali's useful *aide-mémoire*, pre-umbilical memory. If I had it, this might have been a much longer, and more revealing, book. Nor do I possess the gift of total recall, especially, at my advanced age, when there is so much to remember, and when senility is supposed to be setting in. (Several decades ago, at an exhibition in London, I was described as "the Pole with the elephant memory." I forget why.)

One can't be too careful about the compulsion to shovel up the past. And beware tampering with the artifacts, lest they revert to the dust from which they came. An American colleague, who was an activist on the Happenings scene early enough for his own good, and to earn him a footnote in history, all but ruined his claim to fame and glory when he revealed, several decades after the fact, that he had probably invented Happenings at the age of seven while entertaining his family and the neighbours in the barn, the stables, the rose garden, or the woodshed, I forget which.

Another colleague, on this side of the ocean, saw blood on the water in one of the cities in the Rhineland, at the age of two, or three, or maybe four, and invented Happenings on the spot then and there.

A French friend revealed recently that he had been invited in the late October of 1962 to perform at the world's first Fluxus Festival in Wiesbaden, but he did not attend because he couldn't afford to close his shop for that long a time. It's a good thing he didn't close his shop; for history records that the festival had taken place a month before he was invited.

Then there is the sad case history of the German conceptual artist in New York who woke up one morning and realized that he had invented just about everything first, but who unfortunately had told his ideas to other artists in Manhattan, who promptly executed his works and signed them as their own.

And let us not forget the many co-founders of the non-movement called Fluxus, who co-founded it before there was any such animal.

Art history, especially of the *whodunit-first* genre, needs, I think, a little humanizing. This is the very special quality that we find in the reminiscences of an artist like Man Ray. He is not at all concerned with the origin of his species: he takes it for granted. What could sound more natural and less pompous, more matter-of-fact and less contrived, than his simple assertion that he made dada when he was a baby, and his mother roundly spanked him for it?

Nor is there the slightest hint of retrospective falsification when Claes Oldenburg tells us that everything he does is original because he made it all up when he was a kid, unschooled in the devices of the adult world of *Homo ludens*. "The child is father of the man" is more than a few words' worth. The pity is that most artists forget all too soon, and pretend that they were never young and dumb.

Compared with my own infantile machinations, however, Man Ray and Claes - not to forget the little Happener who saw blood on the water, the seven-year-old prodigy who played around in the barn, the Frenchman who got his dates mixed up, and the conceptual artist who talked too much - are what some parents and educators call "late starters". For I can boast, with considerable pride, some misgivings, much embarrassment, and more than a modicum of truthfulness, that my Life in Art began with the stork.

Yes, the stork: *Ciconia ciconia*. This famous white bird not only escorted me into the world, and introduced me to the Art of Performance; he also brought me face to face with the Facts of Life at a very tender age.

\* \* \*

It used to be the custom in America, or at least it was in that provincial part of it Way Down South in Virginia where I grew up, to celebrate the approaching birth of a baby with what was called a Stork Shower. This custom had nothing whatsoever to do with water and soap, cleansing the big white bird, or washing the new-born baby, as the name might lead one to believe, for the celebration I refer to took place *before* the arrival of the stork, or the baby, and not afterwards, as might have been the case in other parts of the country, Up North, for example, or Way Out West. It was in the spirit of the times. Nachmann's Department Store even had Baby Insurance. If you bought one baby bed and one layette, they'd give you another set absolutely free if you had twins.

Anyway, when a married lady - those were the days when Ladies and Gentlemen did not live together out of wedlock - when a married lady was eight months or so along in her pregnancy, or, let us say, from a kid's eye-view, far enough along for us to notice a prominent protrusion in her abdomen, and don't think that we kids didn't notice it, because we did, very much so, and we made jokes about it, and we knew, too, that Mr. Stork didn't have very much to do with it, and that the lady and her husband had been doing *you-know-what*, only we really didn't know what *you-know-what* was, except through the medium of funny-paper-style black-and-white drawings in those Little Dirty Books (rare collectors' items today, like early Fluxus memorabilia), and after we looked at them we would ask God to forgive us, and then look at them again, to see our friends in the funny-papers Doing It, Jiggs doing it to Maggie, the Boss doing it to

## Fluxus Is Coming to Town or A Journalistic Coup

I am writing this book far from the madding scenes and episodes it describes: in my atelier at the Barkenhoff, in Worpswede, north of Bremen. A decade before the first world war, Worpswede was a quiet cultural oasis in the moorlands where painters painted and poets made poems. Henry James would have called it "the real thing," even if a bit primitive for his cosmopolitan tastes. But year by year the moorlands have retreated, the shopkeepers have moved in, and the quiet and solitude have been further dispelled by the cultural pilgrims – and artists-in-residence like myself – who come from far and near and in-between.

Rainer Maria Rilke lived here, and, not long ago, during a sleepless night aggravated by howling winds, I wrote a sonnet sequence in communion with his ghost. I have misplaced the manuscript, temporarily, I hope; and, although I haven't got the poems in my head, I can remember Rilke's ghost, looking very out of time and out of place, clad in a green peasant blouse, baggy pants, and red Tatar boots, talking excitedly about his recent visit with Tolstoy at Yasnaya Polyana, showing me the rose gardens in their summer splendour, and escorting me through the Barkenhoff, the Jugendstil house built by his painter-friend Heinrich Vogeler. And I remember, too, his objections to the tiny kitchenette, the refrigerator, the radiators, and my electric typewriter, and the unprintable curses he hurled at the hordes of tourists craning their necks to peep inside my bedroom and bathroom windows, wondering who now lives in these sacred precincts. An American poet in a fancily cut Japanese kimono writing about Fluxus festivals and performance art? *Ausgeschlossen! Unerhört! Geschmacklos!*

Rilke's ghost has made himself scarce since his visitation during the night of the howling winds. But several days ago another unexpected visitor out of the past invaded my idyllic retreat. It was my old friend and Fluxus colleague Ben Patterson. Ben was en route from New York to Italy to make an edition of multiples. An edition of *beds*, to be more precise, although I can't say precisely just what an edition of beds implies. (One can lose face in the world of art by asking too many questions).

The last time I had seen Ben was in Wiesbaden in 1982, at an exhibition and performance festival celebrating the twentieth birthday of Fluxus at the scene of our youthful cultural crimes against the establishment. It was while talking with Ben here at the Barkenhoff, memories of our classical Fluxus heritage abetted by several bottles of *retsina*, that I decided to include in this book the footnotes to art history that follow.

It is a matter of historical record that I did *something* before anybody else. That something was the very first story about Fluxus (and that called Fluxus Fluxus) ever printed in the media anywhere in the world. Olé! It was an interview with Ben – Ben *Patterson*, not the French Ben, who doesn't enter the history of Fluxus until later – and it appeared in a most unlikely place, the European edition

of *The Stars and Stripes*, the daily newspaper of the U.S. Armed Forces, on August 22, 1962, two days before the opening of the first Fluxus festival, in Wiesbaden.

The way it got written sounds a bit like a conspiracy. I was working as a Feature writer for *The Stars and Stripes* in Darmstadt. George Maciunas, the father-figure and prime mover of what was to become known as Fluxus, was working as a designer for the U.S. Air Force in nearby Wiesbaden. Friends, near-neighbours, and co-conspirators, we both led double lives. When George was not at the air base, he was home plotting Fluxus schemes and dreams. When I was not behind my desk at the newspaper, I was misbehaving in the underground arts ("a cultural Bolshevik") and plotting with George.

One evening George drove over to Darmstadt with a pile of programs, scores, and proposals, to see if we couldn't infiltrate the newspaper with some Fluxus propaganda. (The German newspapers hadn't shown even the slightest interest in his press releases.) George, of course, looked upon the festival as an important Page One story, and he was disappointed that I could promise him only a full page in the Feature Section.

The next morning, as I sat down to write the story, the telephone rang. Paris calling. It was Ben. He was making a "business trip" to West Germany, where he had been an activist on the avant-garde musical scene in Cologne. Ben's important "business" turned out to be selling encyclopedias to American Army families.

He arrived, and in the next few days we visited several Army families. I can remember drinking bourbon and water with Captain This and Major That, but I can't recall that Ben sold any encyclopedias. In any case, one evening we sat down in my apartment, with more bourbon and water, and delivered ourselves of the interview that follows.

(I feel compelled to add here another footnote to the history of art. During Ben's visit, we became so proficient at throwing darts that Maciunas chose the two of us to perform Fluxus pieces involving the art of the dart, most notably Toshi Ichiyonagi's piece for the backboard of an upright piano, and Ben's own steaming teakettle piece with expanding balloons.

(Only once did we fail - though we kept the secret to ourselves. It was during the *Festum Fluxorum* that took place in the historic Nikolai Kirke in Copenhagen in 1962. The teakettles were steaming away on the rungs of a ladder on the altar, and the balloons were getting bigger and bigger. Our darts, aimed at the balloons, simultaneously and with full force struck the same kettle instead, and crashing down from the top rung came candle-warmer, steaming kettle, and balloon. Fire! Ben and I improvised a lively dance to stomp out the flames on the altar. The attendant fireman in the wings, happily, thought it was part of the act.)

Here, then, is the text of this tongue-in-cheek, sometimes foot-in-mouth, interview, the world's first reportage that called Fluxus Fluxus.

*Ten Counting Songs (1962)*

1. Performer counts audience aloud from stage.
2. Performer counts audience silently from stage.
3. Performer counts audience aloud from stage, placing one nut or bonbon in his mouth for each spectator.
4. Performer counts audience silently from stage, placing one nut or bonbon in his mouth for each spectator.
5. Performer touches everyone in audience, counting aloud.
6. Performer touches everyone in audience, counting silently.
7. Performer collects autographs of the entire audience on the program or poster advertising the performance. After all the autographs have been collected, he reads the names aloud to the audience.
8. Performer collects autographs of the entire audience on the program or poster advertising the performance. After all the autographs have been collected, he reads the names silently to himself.
9. The performer presents a small gift (a bonbon, a cookie, etc.) to each member of the audience as he counts.
10. The performer asks for a small gift (a coin, a pencil, a name card, etc.) from each member of the audience as he counts.





# Journals (excerpts)

## Ann Noël

**Ann Noël**, born in Plymouth, England in 1944, has lived and worked in Berlin since 1980. Her wide-ranging talents as painter, graphic designer, printmaker, photographer and performance artist bear witness to a rare combination of creative ingenuity, bold experimentation, and up-to-date technical skills. In addition, she has had the good fortune to know and work with some of the more interesting artists of our time. Her career began in earnest in 1964 at the Bath Academy of Art in Corsham, where she worked on projects with such artists as Ian Hamilton Finlay and John Furnival. After graduating with a diploma in graphic arts and design in 1968, she was invited to Stuttgart, Germany, to work with Hansjörg Mayer, a former mentor at the academy and one of the first publishers of artists' books by Robert Filliou, Richard Hamilton, Dieter Roth, André Thomkins, Emmett Williams and so many others. This experience with the avant-garde more than prepared her for the job offered her in 1969, to work in New York as assistant to Dick Higgins, publisher of the now legendary Something Else Press, where she met Emmett Williams, editor-in-chief of the press (and future husband) and such press regulars as George Brecht, John Cage, Allan Kaprow, Richard Kostelanetz, Daniel Spoerri and a plenitude of Fluxus artists. During the seventies, in addition to developing her own creative work, she was graphic workshop supervisor at the California Institute of the Arts, lecturer in printmaking at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, and Visiting Artist at the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard University. In 1987 she was guest printer at the Machida-shi Museum of Graphic Arts in Tokyo. Her work has been exhibited internationally, and includes recent projects at the Biennales in Venice, Liverpool and Lodz, Poland. She is also author of six artist's books published by Rainer Verlag in Berlin.

TUESDAY 28 JANUARY 1969

904. 464 - 337 days to come

Call Benson about Cunningham costs.  
Work out pages for Spemi book.

Billy Rose Theatre - see 25th Jan.

ANDY WARHOL - Lunch sent in from Tung Fong



288 - 8th Avenue (24th + 25th St)

12:30 Andy Warhol to Guy books.  
1:30 Alice Hutchins - Higgin's Apt.



This bottle was in the cupboard in the kitchen. It is the stupidest thing you ever saw - full of silver balls for cake-decoration + holes in the lid that would barely let a grain of salt through

Letter to Hanejörg

ALICE HUTCHINS -

WEDNESDAY 29 JANUARY 1969

904. 464 - 335 days to come

Emmett on channel 13 9 pm. Walter's interviewed by Howard Junker  
Panel led by Gray Rollins  
from 6:00  
211 Carol Berge  
Chelsea Hotel  
Dennis leaves for California

Dennis leaves for California

Greg said - Everybody except Howard had 5 moles on his face



Regent's American Publishers



200 RAS  
Boris Howler



(13) Critique: "An Anthology of Concrete Poetry," Emmett Williams interviewed by Howard Junker, Clay Felner, editor of New York Magazine is host for this program (C)

③  
WEDNESDAY 25 JUNE 1969

Send Ben  
Foster, a copy of  
Notations

**EXTENSIONS #2**  
is out

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Emmer Williams, and more.  
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THURSDAY 26 JUNE 1969

177th day - 188 days to come

**The Gutman Letter**  
is out again  
and available at  
**BRENTANOS**



The Front of Wall Street, Walter Gutman — whose unorthodox, lyrical stock market tip sheets kept brokers and their clients in stitches during the '50's and '60's—has now produced an album of his gems. Here are reprints of the most famous Gutman Letters, dozens of hilarious photostats, and, of course, Gutman's spirit of women and love of the dollar. The Gutman Letter \$7.50

12 p.m. Active Process Supply.  
4 p.m. A. Phipps at the Press  
6 p.m. OASIS → Tom, Claudia + us  
HAX's to eat  
LEVINE's to drink  
250 E 73 rd for coffee + talk



West view from our flat on Rivington Street

Bill + Helma came round to the Press about 12:45  
→ we went out with them to the CI Quincke + shipped  
materials (they had Scargino) till they had to go + catch  
a train at 6:15. We went back to 288 + made it in  
Derek's studio.  
8:30 Walter's - to see film where titles  
come in.



JULY 1974

21 SUNDAY  
WEEK 23 - 200-163

**COOK - OUT AT DICK'S** *Staying at Dick's & Mary's*  
**For Geoff, Mendryns, Tyne & Graham.**  
*(Geoff's house was full) and some of the boys.*



Ay-O visited us too in Vermont

JULY 1974

23 TUESDAY  
WEEK 20 - 204-181

Today was a busy one. Garry and I went to "Gutierrez Bus Service" where they also take care of Volkswagen, right after breakfast and Garry played with the grand while a mechanic convinced a tube that had come loose, replaced a convoluted wire to the battery, scraped off a mass of excitation there and fixed it with water - the car still makes a funny noise, and they still have to do something about the hole in the muffler and the shoe absorber in the steering wheel. While Garry was sleeping later I went into Boston to get money orders for my passport application and the parking ticket at Northall Point, sent them off with a letter to Ay-O and the balances of my bill from Lambert Company, and on the way back I picked up "creative books" for Garry and a porcelain shelf with brass brackets to match our other bathroom fixtures from Gladys Clarke's. Eugene made a couple of visits - I guess he was passing time.... he took a wire hornet's nest off a tree with a box for Emmett. Emmett put the box under some birds to stop them getting out. Nellie's came around to tell us Hangey called to say he would be coming at the end of this month or the beginning of August. I wrote to Alison this evening. Otherwise it was a day much as the rest.





65

## SEPTEMBER

1. Sent off a package to SCART with a contribution for their anthology of rubber stamp artists, in response from an invitation from John Amvler. He wrote a very warm letter and even suggested the possibility of a show at SCART in the future.

On and about my work :-

January '68. When I inherited my desk at The something Else Press, one drawer had piles of matches in it. I struck (!) me how different book matches can be. So I had the idea to make a collage with cardboard matches from stores here. I'm sure there are all kinds of possibilities :-

- 1) to use one colour only,
- 2) combine several,
- 3) use individual matches or whole books.

February '68 Emmett and I were sitting in the "Oasis" bar where we often go for a drink after leaving the press, when a deaf mute came to our table selling "Good Luck Key Rings with Sign Language Cards Attached We each bought one. I thought of making "A Handwritten Letter" with these signs and a suitable text.

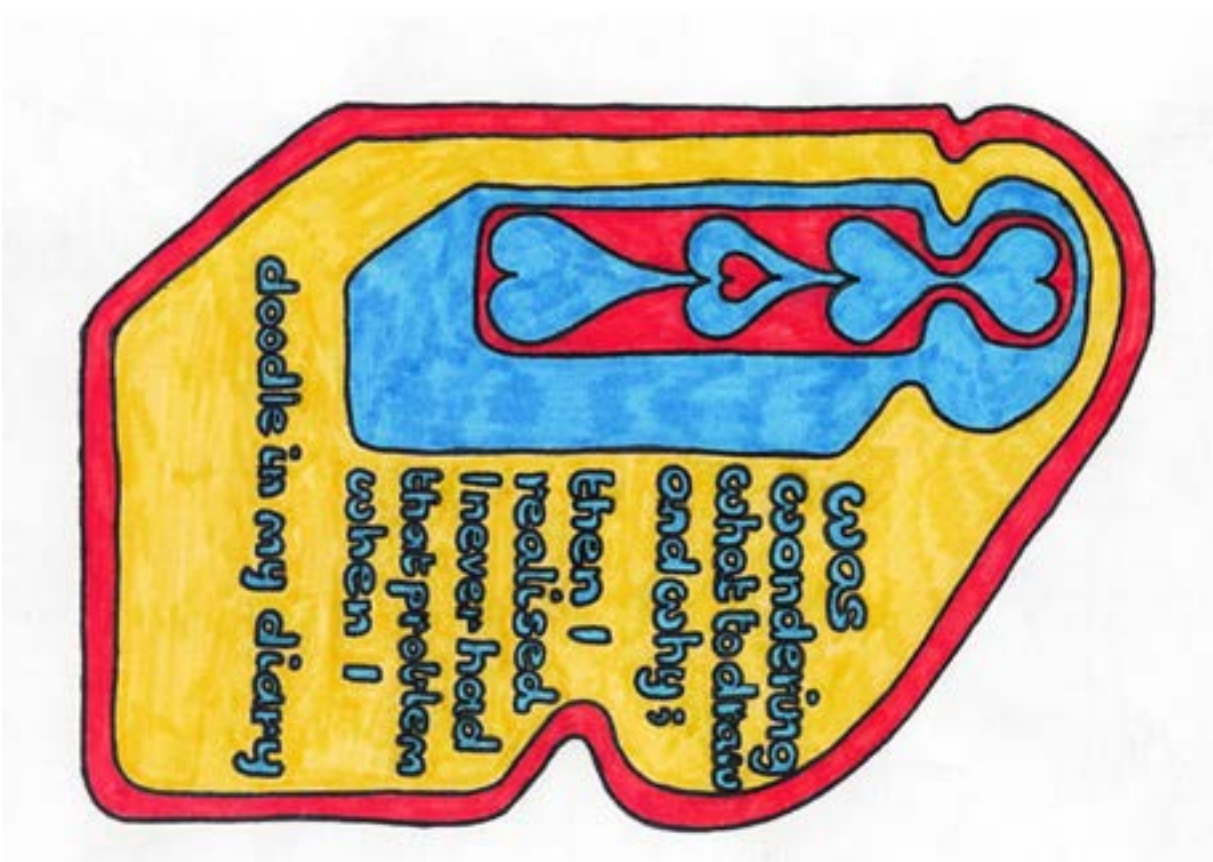
"A MATCH FOR EVERYONE" or some such thing, a message composed of matches, collaged with their red heads making the letters.

December '68 "Useful Art" Mount book matches in the centre of a large piece of wood, surround by stripes for striking.

May '70 W. is for woman: drawing of woman reclining, frontal view, leg spread, breasts between, forming lower case and upper case letter "W".

June '70 W's become chorus girls tiles.

October '70 I'm going to make kaleidoscope poems.



# The Eve of Fluxus: A fluxmemoir (excerpts)

## Billie Maciunas

*From The Eve of Fluxus: A fluxmemoir by Billie Maciunas (Arbiter Press, 2010)  
Excerpted and published here by kind permission of the author.*

### what is fluxus not?

*Maybe you have accidentally already done something Fluxus  
– how would you know it was Fluxus?<sup>1</sup>*

When I knew George, he regularly wore an old mustard-colored cardigan with a zip front and a pair of brown polyester pants. His habitual attire makes it easier for me to remember things he said at particular times, because there was nothing to distract me from his face, eyes, and words. One day he said something to me that it has taken me a long time to figure out.

I had arrived at the farm in New Marlborough,<sup>2</sup> a small “village” in the Berkshires, in August, just as the long grass in the front yard was turning colors. It was early fall. George and I were in the large kitchen. There was a long table in the middle of the room with benches on each side. The pale green walls were lined with white cabinets, and one wall had glass-fronted cabinets. The style was every bit that of a 1920s manor house.

The day was sunny and quiet, and George and I seemed to be the only ones around. He was dumping something into the garbage can, and we were talking. He said, “Artists are parasites.” I didn’t know him well, and I knew nothing about Fluxus, his lifework. I had only popular ideas of what an artist might be: famous names of dead people, such as Vincent Van Gogh. I thought he meant that living artists were egotistical and felt entitled to being supported without doing any practical work. I didn’t know any living artists, and I didn’t think of myself as one—or maybe only vaguely so—so I didn’t argue with his stark pronouncement. It sounded a little parental, something a mother or father might say if their child decided to be a musician rather than a lawyer.

I learned about Fluxus by participating in it with George at the end of his life through our Fluxwedding and marriage. When he said, “Artists are parasites,” we were in the courtship phase, before we knew that he would soon die. I had been at the farm for about a month, and George had been in Seattle for most of that time participating in a Flux festival. He laughed as he told me about the gags and jokes—toilet seats with adhesive on the seats, for example. My favorite was the idea of using rocks as currency instead of money. Fluxus certainly sounded interesting, but also a little strange.

George was the most playful person I ever knew. I don’t mean that he was a stranger to labor—I mean that he approached everything with a sense of possibility. He didn’t fail in anything because he didn’t waste anything. He had a continual recourse to absurdity in order to rescue the moment. He found funny, for example, a plane trip that he took to a German city for an event. When he got to his destination, he realized that he had the wrong date. So he slept at the airport and flew back the next day. The experience for George was an “event.” As for success, that was when absurdity and elegance were



married. When he highlighted these moments in the context of the formality called Fluxus, it was both fun and brilliant.

George one day showed me Mieko Shiomi's *Spatial Poem no. I*, following a conversation we were having on the importance of technology versus imagination in art. I was arguing for imagination, but when I saw the Poem, I was impressed by the small wooden box it was in. There was something about the containment of the idea that was as fascinating as the idea itself. I asked, "Who made the box?"

"I did," he said, snapping it shut and walking away, as if to say, "I rest my case."

In October, I met Jean Brown, the Grande Dame of the art world in Lenox, Massachusetts. I viewed her Fluxus gallery, which included George's *Diagram of Historical Development of Fluxus and Other 4 Dementional* (sic), *Aural, Optic, Olfactory, Epithelial and Tactile Art Forms. (Incomplete)*. This was a miracle of tiny letters on a chart documenting everything from church processions to George's Shit Anthology, formally named *Excreta Fluxorum*. Reading George's *Diagram*, I definitely saw the humor, but I don't remember whether I appreciated its prodigious scholarship and organization.

I liked most of the pieces in Jean's gallery, including a wonderful "Fan Clock" in two parts: the clock's hands ran as fast as a fan, and a fan's blades ran as slowly as a clock.<sup>8</sup> There was also a dead mouse in a jar of formaldehyde. It was George's piece, and it had no label at all. It struck me as bizarre rather than amusing, but regarding Fluxus, I lived in a state of willing suspension of disbelief.

I was never especially curious about art and didn't think about art history. I called myself a poet, and I thought that being a poet was a way of life rather than a profession. I was beginning to wrestle with the idea that the only way I could write was to forget that I was "a writer." I had begun experimenting with certain practices, such as writing with my left hand, using whole sheets of paper to write a single letter, using paper with texture or color, colored pens, etc. I had lately, while George was away, begun writing "breathing poems," which consisted of spelling out on many pages the sound of exhaling.

This was as close as I came to the notion of art as process or playing. I still thought of these processes as exercises to get the "real" poetry flowing. I could accept that toilet gags, the Spatial Poem, the history of art *Diagram*, the Fan Clock, and the pickled mouse were not art. They weren't expensive, incomprehensible, and made by famous people. However, I had mixed feelings about the idea that artists were parasites. It didn't seem to apply to my experience of "being" a poet, which entailed foregoing all security to seek experiences outside of whatever boundaries I met.

George lived stringently, having no evident profession. I certainly had nothing but hope and a promise. I had come to the farm at the suggestion of a medical researcher for whom I had done some typing in New York. She knew George and knew that he rented rooms to quiet people who didn't smoke. I had rented a room on the promise of payment for the typing job-enough for a month's rent. When I got on the bus in New York and headed to the Berkshires, I had a dollar and was carrying a single bag. It was a yellow newspaper bag used to deliver *The Militant*.

I was also ghostwriting a confessional memoir for a woman who'd said she had an affair with John Lindsay when he was the mayor of New York. She said she wanted to "capitalize" on her affair and had hired me to transcribe her tapes about what she

wore, what they drank, etc. So far, I had not written the steamy stuff she wanted, and I didn't know how I was going to deal with it. Nevertheless, I thought I could do it somehow and thus earn enough to meet my severely pared needs.

The medical researcher who had recommended this idyllic farm had described the owner, George, as unmistakable by his thick black glasses with a green lens covering his left eye.

George was waiting at Melvin's Drug Store in Great Barrington when I stepped off the bus. He pointed to my newspaper bag and said laconically, "That's all you have?" Then we went to Price Chopper for food. Not having been inside a supermarket for a good three years, I was dazed by its brightness, size, and soporific Muzak. It reminded me of being inside the *Space Odyssey: 2001* spaceship with the eerie computer voice of Hal. I was used to buying food as needed from fruit stands and corner markets. Sometimes I ate meals of raw vegetables or fruit standing on the street. At Price Chopper, I stood fondling a grapefruit, considering how best to spend my last dollar. I glanced up and saw George in the middle of the aisle watching me.

### **fluxlove, just an eight-letter word**

*Phyllis and Chloris with a garland of flowers/ on their head, are singing love songs<sup>3</sup>*

The farm at New Marlborough included two ten-to-fifteen-room main houses joined by a portico. There were also twelve outbuildings and an apple orchard. At the farm, George showed me my room on the second of three floors of the main house. The centerpiece of the room was an industrial vacuum cleaner. Otherwise, there were a bed, a dresser, and a table. The front of the room had curtainless windows facing a meadow and the evening sunset. The floors were shiny blond oak, and there was a screened porch almost the size of the room, shaded by tall trees. It was sunny and the only sound was birds singing.

I thought suddenly about a dream I'd had a couple of years earlier, when I'd first moved to New York. In the dream, there was a balmy and enveloping wind. Everything was green, and large birds like peacocks were roosting in the trees. Their long aqua-blue tails swept the ground, and I walked through this place like Eve in the garden.

I also remembered a dream I'd had shortly before meeting George, of riding in an open horse-drawn wagon with an older man. The sun was warm. He was smiling at me and I felt inexpressibly secure and happy. This image may have been inspired by a tarot card from a deck I had that was designed by artist Pamela Colman Smith.

In what had to be a reversal of that tarot dream, reality intruded one day to again remind me of this dream. I had been at the farm for a few days and had wandered about looking at the wildflowers. One morning, I took a pad and some colored pencils to draw the flowers. I was sitting in the weeds by a path when the former owner of the house, who was still living in half of it, rode up in a horse-drawn cart. She warned me imperiously to stay on George's side of the property. As she drove away, the horses dropped big turds in their wake.

On my first night in New Marlborough, following George's recommendation, I slept on the screened porch in a sleeping bag he lent me. There was a violent storm that night,

and I was too frightened to get up and run inside until I remembered a book on the history of medicine that George had just lent me. It was lying near an open window, and I ran to rescue it from the rain.

The next day I woke to the sound of an electric drill on the porch. George was installing a light. I tried to ignore the noise and him, even as he tromped through my room, throwing quick glances at me on the bed reading his book. I finally got up and went for a four-mile walk. The birds singing, the cows lowing, and the two foot-high grass drying in the August sun in front of the manor house enchanted me. The grass turned lazily in the wind—purple, green, and gold. I learned later that some of George's neighbors didn't like his inattention to the lawn, but I thought it was beautiful and he wonderful to let it grow.

I don't remember exactly how I fed myself day to day. I was slender and fit, having ridden a bicycle around New York and otherwise walked everywhere I wanted to go, and having eaten stringently for the past three years. I found an old bicycle at the farm and went out most days exploring. One time I came across a fruit stand on the side of the road. No one was in attendance, though there was a sign with a big eye on it and a basket for customers to pay for what they took. I took some fruit but didn't have the money to pay. I rode down the road a bit and stopped on the side of the road to devour the delicious plundered peaches, plums, and other things. I think that George found out about this—I saw the owner of the stand talking to him in the yard one day. Although George never said anything to me about it, I think he paid for the food I had stolen.

We had a brief dating interval. George invited me to a local concert of Purcell's music played on the virginal. We didn't have four dollars for the tickets, so he borrowed the money from Jean Brown, and the three of us went together. I didn't have appropriate clothes for the concert, so I rummaged around in trunks and in the attic until I came up with a powder-blue men's dress shirt, a pair of polyester, maroon-colored men's pants that were long enough to cover my ankles, and a pair of large white bucks for men. When I appeared, George approved the results, congratulating me on coming up with an impromptu outfit. Another time, George invited me to a movie. As we were waiting for it to start, he popped another of the Tums he had been eating all summer to quiet his stomach pain and said quietly, "Maybe I have cancer."

Throughout the rest of that gorgeous summer and into the fall, George introduced me to friends and visitors. Along with Fluxus gallery owner Jean Brown, I met Fluxus artists Robert Watts, Shigeko, and Simone Forti. I also met Almus and Nijole Salcius, close friends of George's who were, like George, Lithuanian. They were a hearty and good-looking couple who brought big loaves of brown Lithuanian bread to the farm. Almus asked me why I wanted to be a writer, since I was pretty, as Nijole scoffed at him for his manners. I remember Almus asking me how or what I ate, and George interjected, saying, "She lives on air."

George's friends didn't indulge in the melodrama, ego-tripping, and pettiness that is often part of relationships. One evening when Jean Brown and Shigeko were visiting, we were all sitting on the large first-floor porch and there was music. Shigeko began to dance by herself, and she was lovely in her unself-conscious freedom. She moved and circled in tiny steps, like a ballerina in a music box. This image characterizes the mood at New Marlborough that late summer.

When I lived in New Haven, Connecticut, in the early 1970s, I was part of a bohemian group that was politically socialist. George and his friends reminded me of those times, except that there was less polemical edge and more graciousness. The cultural composition of the visitors and groups in New Marlborough was heterogeneous: Japanese, Lithuanian, French, American. Nearly everyone had traveled, and everyone could share stories about places where they had lived and visited. In retrospect, I think that my company made George happier, and that his friends were pleased that he might have finally met a companion. If I was not Fluxus, I was at least a breath of fresh air. I had no agenda, no attachments, and seemingly no desires other than to write. I was quiet, solitary, and wasn't impressed by "big names," even if I knew any. Not least important, I was slender and attractive, looking younger than my thirty years.

I think that George, a connoisseur of classical music who had studied architecture at Cooper Union in New York City, and a world-traveler, was amused by my ignorance, which in another light could be seen as innocence or guilelessness. He told me, "You have to read *The Idiot*." He explained that the idiot, Prince Myshkin, was "the most attractive" character in the book. Prince Myshkin was socially inept because he didn't understand lies. He accepted what people said as truth and he told the truth himself. He ended up insane, unfortunately, but that is a story for another book.

I read *The Idiot* that summer and fall, along with all the rest of Dostoevsky's novels. George had the entire collection, and I loved to read. I also wanted to understand why Dostoevsky was George's favorite writer. It was a long time, however, before I understood his subtle and wonderful compliment when he compared me to the idiot. Other compliments were equally subtle: he described me as "laconic" and "pleasing to the sight."

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## Notes

**1** Larry Miller, "Maybe Fluxus (A Para-Interrogative Guide for the Neoteric Transmuter, Tinder, Tinker and Totalist)," *The Fluxus Reader*, ed. Ken Friedman. (Great Britain: Academy Editions, 1998) 212.

**2** George planned for this property to be a "Post Cage Bauhaus Black Mountain College." Thomas Kellein, *The Dream of Fluxus: George Maciunas, An Artist's Biography* (London: Ed. Hansjorg Mayer, 2007) 151.

**3** From a translation of Ottavio Rinuccini's lyrics for Claudio Monteverdi's *Zefiro torna*.

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**Billie Maciunas** remains a lifelong Fluxus aficionado, promoting original Fluxus artists through social media and in scholarly publications on the topic of Fluxus and George Maciunas. She participated in several Fluxus performances with her husband shortly before he died, including *Black and White Wedding Piece*, performed in New York City on the same evening as the Fluxus Wedding and cabaret. Recently, she has appeared in Jeffrey Perkins' outstanding film on George and Fluxus, along with many revered artists, critics, and personalities. She received a doctorate in Comparative Literature from The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, specializing in modern Brazilian and American women poets. Besides *The Eve of Fluxus*, Maciunas has published *Unsettled Oranges*, a book of poetry on the theme of her husband's death, and *Our Book*, a book of translations of selected poems of Portuguese poet Florbela Espanca. Maciunas resides in Ocala, Florida, where she teaches at Lowell Correctional Institution and is currently working toward acquiring a professional teaching certificate.

# Fluxus is just beginning: An interview with Jeffrey Perkins and Jessie Stead Weronika Trojanska

Up until today, George Maciunas, the Lithuanian-born artist, graphic designer, and architect—a man of many trades—had remained an enigmatic and mythic persona behind one of the most radical experimental art movements of the Twentieth Century—FLUXUS. And in all likelihood, things would have stayed that way if another artist, Jeffrey Perkins, hadn't made a movie about Maciunas.

Described by Nam June Paik as being “the Fluxus underdog,” Perkins—like Maciunas—has taken on many roles. Having worked in relative obscurity for over five decades, in the 1960s he collaborated with (and would remain close with) many Fluxus artists (including Yoko Ono, Alison Knowles, and George Maciunas himself), as well as: co-founded the premier rock and roll concert light show *The Single Wing Turquoise Bird*; has been associated with Anthology Film Archives in New York since 1986; completed his first feature documentary *The Painter Sam Francis* in 2008; and worked as a cabbie, having chauffeured most every avant-garde star around New York City—to name just a few of his life's highlights. Perkins has been best known for light projection performances and his work *Movies for the Blind*, which was based on sound recordings of interviews with passengers in his taxi. Up until 2009, that is, when he started working on a portrait of the founder and impresario of Fluxus; it was titled *George. The story of George Maciunas and Fluxus*.

From its conception, *George* was not meant to rehash the clichés of standard documentary movies about art and artists. Adventurous yet tragic, the life of Maciunas—which was fully dedicated to Fluxus—was far from boring. The movie follows Maciunas' life path from birth to his untimely death of cancer at the age of 47, including his establishment of Fluxus in 1962, the creation of the first artist co-ops in the New York City neighborhood of SoHo, losing his eye when he was nearly killed by gangsters, and his attempt at establishing a Fluxus colony on a remote island in the Caribbean. Throughout *George*, the question of “What is Fluxus?”

takes on perpetually new dimensions as the subject is explored in discussions with nearly 40 different artists (including Jonas Mekas, Yoko Ono and Nam June Paik) and scholars across the world, along the way revealing the inherent complexity of both Fluxus and Maciunas himself.

In order to bring the intellectual nature of Fluxus into the dynamic form of a film, Perkins hired Jessie Stead (a Brooklyn-based interdisciplinary artist from a younger generation and also known for her band Hairbone, together with Nathan Whipple and Raúl de Nieves), whose spirited and vigorous way of editing, sound design and motion graphics brought a unique dimension to the movie.

After nine years in the making, *George. The Story of George Maciunas and Fluxus* premiered last February at Doc Fortnight 2018: MoMA's International Film Festival of Non-fiction Film and Media, where – for the first time in the history of this event – it was awarded the whole week of screenings.

I met Jeffrey Perkins and Jessie Stead shortly before the European premiere of *George* at Art Basel (15 June 2019) to talk to them about their collaborative process and why Fluxus is so important for contemporary artists working today.

**Jeffrey Perkins:** I conceived this movie about George Maciunas in 2009, just after I finished my film about the painter Sam Francis. I decided to do this because I needed a job. I knew that there had not been a portrait made of him yet. I felt confident that I could do another film about an artist, and I knew that Maciunas was an unknown star, a secret star in the art world.

**Jessie Stead:** A lot of people I know who went to art school don't know who he is. I actually knew of him through Sonic Youth, when I was much younger, which is interesting. They reference him on occasion. I learned here and there about Fluxus and Dada in art school, but

I think Maciunas himself has been kind of lost. A lot of people would say, “Fluxus? I don’t really know what that is.”

**JP:** When I thought of making the film I didn’t see Fluxus so much as performance art. I thought that it had a kind of dry sensibility, and much of what I knew about Fluxus was as an intellectual art in text form. How could that be made dynamic, as a movie? [*Addressing JS:*] I emphasised to you that the text was very important. What you ended up doing was not particularly focused on text, but your montage is dynamically structured in cinematic layers.

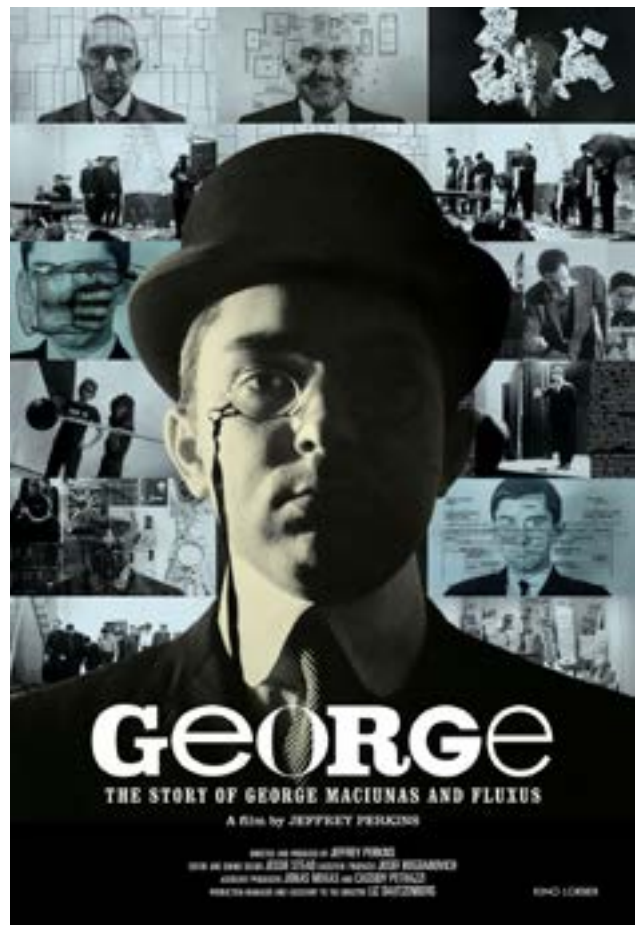
**JS:** [*Addressing JP:*] There were about 40 interviews that you had shot around the world and a gigantic collection of images of artworks. As I went through them, I would think, here is an image of an artwork and it’s nice. I can also look it up online, I can look at it in a book, but what a movie can bring to it that other media can’t is movement and a soundtrack. The sound part is easily overlooked but crucial, because a lot of important Fluxus works are audio works. It also encourages an overlaying of different artists’ works mixed together, briefly creating something new. So it’s generative, and this harmonises with Maciunas’s vision, which emphasised networked collaboration and also entertainment. The montages have stylistic differences depending on the scene’s content and the works themselves. The George Brecht scene, for example, is very austere. I think that his work was as well.

**JP:** There were these dry pictures, which were photographs by Maciunas. An example of how your talent carried the film is the one sequence using the Brecht piece *Ball puzzle / Observe the ball rolling uphill*, and you animated it.

**JS:** The piece is an “event score” with a ball bearing, so I simply performed the score. It was fun. There are different dynamics according to the works themselves, and how they could be re-purposed to illuminate biographical points in Maciunas’ life.

**JP:** That’s a perfect example of collaboration with another artist.

**JS:** Several artists even. It’s me, you, Brecht, Maciunas. I love that about the film. We are working together, resurrecting the dead.



**JP:** It felt from the beginning that the film should be a collaborative process, and it was. Besides you, there were other people involved from the very early stage of making *George*, like Cassidy Petrazzi, and Liz Dautzenberg who lives and works in Amsterdam. And there were several others involved in the various stages and times of the productions, too many to mention here. I researched in three archives in three different parts of the world. That was the palette for the movie, and you invented several things.

**JS:** And there is music and audio, many of which are original recordings of Fluxus pieces. It is easy to forget that the sound design is constructed from actual Fluxus artworks, some of which are comparable sonically to traditional Foley sound effects. The music soundtrack is also really cool. It includes Sonic Youth—they generously lent some tracks from their album *Goodbye Twentieth Century*, which consists of seminal avant-garde scores, some of which are Fluxus related.

**JP:** There is quite a bit of Henry Flynt, Takehisa Kosugi, Yoshi Wada, Ben Patterson, Mieko Shiomi.

**JS:** Charles Curtis recorded some medieval music specially for *George*. Maciunas was a big fan of music from that period. There are Maciunas's own compositions performed by the Apartment House ensemble, and of course Alison Knowles, Joe Jones, as well as some tracks by my contemporaries. Nathan Whipple from my band Hairbone recorded some music. Jack Name, Zach Layton, and Sergei Tcherepnin also lent us tracks, some of which are worked with in layers much like the motion graphics.

**JP:** To simply show the works would be another dry example of a standard approach to a documentary film about an artist.

**JS:** I wanted the discussion topics and the artworks to resonate with each other. There were times when I couldn't find something in the art archive that worked well, so I looked elsewhere. Maciunas loved Soviet culture, so I looked online at Bolshevik films and used a couple as B-roll in addition to the Fluxus works. That adds another layer. All that stuff was in his head. In the interviews, people talk a lot about how much he loved Soviet revolutionary aesthetics, and cartoons. There is an old Betty Boop cartoon with a chess board, which resonates with Duchamp and John Cage, who significantly influenced Maciunas. I found it online, and it's easy to imagine Maciunas doing this himself if the

internet were around then. He often used magazine cut-outs in his graphic design; sampling from the internet is very similar.

**JP:** In fact, an important reason for hiring you was your age. And I thought, she will edit this film for her generation.

**JS:** Or younger than me.

**JP:** That was an important motivation. I wanted to sell it to a young audience.

**JS:** It's very topical. The discussions of art and politics happening now and Henry Flynt's critiques of Maciunas' motivations in the 1960s are one of many points of comparison. And their early protests *Communists Must Give Revolutionary Leadership in Culture*, and *Action Against Cultural Imperialism* are especially relevant today and deserve a revisit.

**JP:** At the early stage of editing, I wasn't sure if we had enough material. And now when I am watching the movie, the edit is insane. It's an insane story.

**JS:** He was insane. A lot of documentaries now are made about people who are still alive. It's easier to shoot and interview the living. I thought a lot about how we



have to bring him back to life, physically, and the challenge of how to do that with only scraps of archival media, very little sync sound. There is Jonas Mekas' film about George, *Zefiro Torna*, but very little else is time-based. That's why we used his audio interviews a lot; his voice is a strong structural element that evokes his presence.

**JP:** In both of those interviews, the Charles Dreyfus' and the Seattle radio one, Maciunas lays out the chronology of him in and as Fluxus.

**JS:** He was preoccupied with art history and wanted to influence Fluxus's place in it. He describes many art works in detail, but he is also laughing at them all the time. He is very clearly so entertained by it all. I wanted that to be palpable.

**JP:** It became a driving element in the film, the laughing. It became an inspiration to your editing.

**JS:** The interesting thing is that only a very small amount of him laughing was recorded, and that's what is beautiful about it. Compared to today and how audio is recorded near constantly.

**JP:** Editors are called cobblers, you know?

**JS:** Really? I didn't know that. A cobbler, like a shoe fixer?

**JP:** Exactly. I think it's a kind of inside slang.

**JS:** I don't know. I am not a career editor. I am an artist, and maybe this ties into the film. Was Maciunas an artist or not? The artist as a designer of other artists' works—is that art? Or, are you not an artist if you work on somebody else's art? These questions are discussed in the interviews. Some of them say, yes, he was clearly an artist, he made his own work, and others disagree. It gets personal at times. Can an impresario or producer also be an artist? What does that look like? And if not, why? Maybe you can view editing in a similar way. Maybe it's art sometimes, maybe it's in the service of art other times and not art. I don't know. Some people need to codify more than others.

**JP:** I think art has a special audience. You suggested MoMA's Doc Fortnight International Festival of Nonfiction Film and Media to premiere the film instead of more mainstream film festivals. So we had a theatrical premiere at MoMA last year.

**JS:** It made a lot of sense considering you sourced a lot of material from the MoMA archives.

**JP:** They have the largest Fluxus collection, the Silverman Collection. And now we have the European premiere during the Art Basel art fair in Switzerland in June.

**JS:** Maciunas would probably roll over in his grave if he knew about that [*laughs*]. Okay, I take that back, I'm not sure. But it's very interesting to wonder what he would think about the art fair scene now. It's totally market driven and the antithesis of his communist-inspired ideals, but he also might have seen it as a networking and branding opportunity, which was also a large part of Fluxus for him. There was such a different landscape then. Marketing, branding, capitalism—artists continue to have paradoxical relationships to these systems today. Art fairs are a global network, which is something else that he really wanted to establish but in the name of a revolutionary, anti-capitalist ideal. So it's interesting to try and imagine him in this scenario.

**JP:** I don't think that if he were alive he could stand himself if he played along with it.

**JS:** It's hard to say if he would protest it or not—in the way a young Henry Flynt might. Maybe he would participate—he was very opportunistic. In the 60s and 70s, Maciunas was unique in his milieu to be mixing together art, design, publishing and marketing. Many of his contemporaries were highly skeptical of this, but it is normal now, applauded even.

**JP:** I remember that when I was trying to raise money for *George*, I showed a producer the short reel. He thought that the film's main purpose was as a portrait, the persona of George Maciunas. Because of the dynamic flow of your edit, this is achieved. If you didn't know anything about him, would you still be interested in the movie?

**JS:** There are many facets of his life story relatable to any human, and the art is very much interconnected with his life's significant drama – his poor health, World War II and his family's displacement. The art flows out of his life events in a specific way. It's definitely not an insider's movie. Maciunas himself was fierce in his manifestos encouraging anti-elitism in art. The film will teach you about art. There are early scenes where Maciunas himself explains Fluxus's predecessors and influences – John Cage, Dada and Duchamp, primarily.





His obsessive art historical preoccupations were foundational to Fluxus and are visualized in his chart works.

**JP:** Part of the definition of Fluxus is that art is basically life itself. Fluxus as a kind of philosophy, I believe, or, it is a philosophical approach to art. Do you think that's true, by the way?

**JS:** Jonas Mekas quotes George saying that "Fluxus is not an art movement, but a way of life", adding that "it has a touch of religion". Jonas also said "Fluxus is only just beginning". It's one of film's closing statements.

**JP:** I think Yoshi Wada said that as well, and Ben Patterson.

**JS:** The film is not only about Maciunas but also an international association of artists. Maciunas' emphasis on community and anti-individuality is relevant now, or would be in any time. What is the group? The group can be made to symbolise something. He was constructing an ideology for the group that different members had widely varying opinions about. Some of them agreed with it, some didn't care, some strongly disagreed. I think group identity is very interesting in art. On occasion, I've been discouraged by gallerists from collaborating with other artists.

**JP:** Really?

**JS:** It happens in some situations. It's easier to market singular names, the individual genius stereotype. To kind of force the group identity of Fluxus into circulation was maybe how Maciunas in his revolutionary imagination was actively retaliating against the Western art canon, the dominating "great male" name, I think.

**JP:** The film was made out of this collective dynamic.

**JS:** Filmmaking is a multi-faceted balancing act that in itself is a collaboration between images, sounds, and language in addition to a social and professional collaboration. You're always doing several things at once, like maintaining historical chronology while introducing larger conceptual points. I think *The New York Times* said that *George* is "a bit overstuffed, but perhaps by design". That made a lot of sense—he had an overstuffed life.

**JP:** There could be another kind of movie about Maciunas; a dramatic film would be interesting. But this documentary sustains itself as art history, an important art film that people will refer to in the future.

**JS:** There is a lot of lost history it recovers. Many people in the New York art world don't seem to know about his

unintentional role in the gentrification of Soho—the Flux Houses, for example. It's an early version of a now-familiar story about complications between artists, real estate and gentrification, which have, of course, accelerated since 1964. The Flux houses were meant to be a group of industrial lofts he envisioned operating as an integrated artist network; the resulting 10-year tumult is spiritedly discussed in the film with many who worked in SoHo alongside George—Yoshi Wada, Milan Knížák, Shigeko Kubota, Ay-O, and Richard Foreman to name a few. Foreman still lives there.

**JP:** Maciunas had an idea to create a utopian community right in the middle of New York City. Then there's the Ginger Island story... still, when I watch the film again, I think, wow, who is this person? This is crazy.

**JS:** It's not boring. I personally think that *George* is one of the best movies about art and an artist ever made. I really do. I think it blows away any other documentary I have seen about art and artists. That was our goal and we did it.

Jeffrey Perkins — director / producer

Jessie Stead — edit / sound design / motion graphics

Liz Dautzenberg — production manager / assistant to the director

Cassidy Petrazzi — associate producer / researcher

*This interview was originally published in 2019 on the Latvian art and culture platform [www.artterritory.com](http://www.artterritory.com). Reprinted by courtesy of the editors. All film stills used by permission of the filmmaker.*

**Jeff Perkins** is an artist and filmmaker. He lives and works in New York City, and has been a Fluxus affiliate since 1966. He is the producer/director for the films *The Painter Sam Francis* (1968-2018) and *George: The Story of George Maciunas and Fluxus* (2018).

**Weronika Trojanska** received her MFA from the Academy of Fine Arts in Poznań Poland and Sandberg Instituut in Amsterdam. In her artistic practice she focuses on the notions of auto/biography and the self; by inhabiting (reproducing, adapting and learning) different traits and gestures of other artists - as a way to evoke their and her personality - she constructs her ongoing polyphonic

autobiography. Her work has been presented at the EYE Filmmuseum (Amsterdam), Museum of Modern Art (NYC), Emily Harvey Foundation (NYC), Printed Matter Inc. (NYC), Rongwong (Amsterdam), Curie City (Warsaw), NEW STUDIO in collaboration with 3 137 (Athens), MuzeuMM (Los Angeles), and Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore (ICAS), among others. In 2016, Trojanska also performed Yoko Ono's historic *Cut Piece* at the Museum der Moderne in Salzburg (Austria). As an art writer she has also published in a number of Polish and English-speaking media (such as *Metropolis M* and *Arterritory.com*).



Ken Friedman, *Stumbling Block*, 1968. Event score realised as multiple object by Sean Miller in 2021. Photo © Sean Miller 2021.

# Fluxus Legacy

## Ken Friedman

Writing about Fluxus is difficult for me. While Fluxus occupied much of my life, there is a gap between what I do now and what I did in the past. I look at my work to find myself wondering why I did things, why I made things, and what I thought at the time. I can tell you what I did, but I can't explain why, at least not as I once did.

I inhabit the body of the person who made those works, but I am not the same person.

2,000 years ago, Plutarch wrote about Theseus, the legendary king and founder-hero of Athens. The ancient Athenians preserved the ship in which Theseus supposedly went to Crete to slay the Minotaur before returning home. As the centuries went by, the ship grew old and parts of the ship decayed. It became necessary to replace the rotting parts. At first, it was a board here or a rope there. Eventually, most of the original material had been replaced, and some parts had been replaced many times.

Philosophers ask the question that has become known as the Theseus Ship Paradox. Is the ship as it is today still the Ship of Theseus? Philosophers ask this question about human beings, too. On the one hand, we have some kind of identity as ongoing beings. On the other, we change as time goes by.

When I think about myself, I find myself wondering whether I am still whoever it is that I was when I did the things I did. Plutarch quoted the well-known fragment of Heraclitus known as the Theory of Flux: "It is not possible to step twice into the same river according to Heraclitus, or to come into contact twice with a mortal being in the same state." Another translation of the fragment states, "Into the same rivers we step and do not step, we are and are not."

The Theory of Flux is often described as a theory of Fluxus. It's certainly a theory that describes me.

### August 14, 2020

"Cold Mountain is a house  
Without beams or walls.  
The six doors left and right are open The  
hall is blue sky.  
The rooms all vacant and vague The east  
wall beats on the west wall At the center  
nothing."<sup>1</sup>

— Han Shan

“You give the appearance of one widely traveled, I bet you’ve seen things in your time. Come sit down beside me and tell me your story If you think you’ll like yesterday’s wine.”<sup>2</sup>

— Willie Nelson, 1971

Fluxus emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s when the world ignored us. The world still ignored Fluxus in the 1970s and the 1980s. Things began to change in the 1990s, but there was a price. People reshaped the story of Fluxus to suit the needs of those who told it. The Fluxus idea became a reflection of the time and place in which the story was told. Our legacy isn’t what it used to be.

Fluxus wasn’t a single forum with a unified purpose. It was a loose and flexible community. Each Fluxus member had his or her own purposes: artistic, philosophical, economic, and political. In some cases, there was no purpose at all. Fluxus was in great part a group of people who came together because they didn’t fit anywhere else.

Different participants had differing goals, and some of us achieved some of our goals. But Fluxus didn’t influence art or music in systematic ways, and Fluxus failed even more decisively to influence politics and economics.

George Maciunas invented a paradoxical version of Marxism that only existed in the theoretical world of George’s planned economy. George’s notion of Fluxus as an antidote to the art world gained no traction. Things worked out in quite a contrary way. After a half century of silence and neglect, Fluxus was registered in the pantheon of modern art.

In the 1970s, George Maciunas advertised an event with the title *Fluxus Presents Twelve Big Names*. People came to a theater expecting to see a performance featuring the work of twelve famous artists, perhaps even hoping to see the artists themselves. When the audience was seated, what they saw was a set of slides projected on a screen—each slide bearing the name of one artist in huge type. Today, many of the big names could be Fluxus names, George Maciunas among them. One could imagine this as the conclusion to a Kurt Vonnegut novel, ending with the phrase “so it goes.”

A stranger moment still occurred in 2013 when the Museum of Modern Art acquired the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection. This was an odd turn for anyone who remembers the Fluxus in the 1950s and 1960s. So it goes.

What isn’t strange is the way that recent historiography often transforms Fluxus artists into footnotes on our own lives. The 1992 exhibition at the Walker Art Center was a case in point. Fluxus works, projects, and reconstructions filled the entire museum, but the exhibition neglected the Fluxus experience. Several halls were filled with cases containing two, three, and four examples of the same box, as though the boxes somehow epitomized Fluxus.

The curators represented my entire life with four boxes. Dick Higgins did even worse. Not a single work of Dick’s appeared in the exhibition. The Walker library had all the Something Else Press books, and Dick appeared in a few performance photos, so the curators argued that Dick was represented in the show. So it goes.

Carolee Schneemann was the only neglected artist who did well. The museum allocated Carolee an exhibition case for her work with an essay complaining about the exclusion of her work from Fluxus. Carolee's complaint was quite reasonable, and she should often have been included when she was left out.

The Walker exhibition got that call right.

### Outsiders

Fluxus sought to engage the world beyond the normative art world. Understanding Fluxus requires understanding the world in which Fluxus emerged. This requires a sense of the interests, engagements, and cultural affiliations that typified the artists and their interactions. These form the background to Fluxus, and the laboratory of experimentation that framed Fluxus.

Curators sometimes say, "The work speaks for itself." I disagree. The work is itself—but it only speaks in context. By the time that critics and historians began to publish on Fluxus, that world had disappeared. To speak of these issues as though they are plain and self-evident erases much of Fluxus. The people who created Fluxus disappear in this account, while the story transformed George Maciunas into an imaginary commissar controlling an art project rather than treating him as the artist and designer who published Fluxus multiples and built the co-op houses that transformed SoHo.

This vision reduces Fluxus from a complex phenomenon to a shadow of its former self. It's like shining a strong light on a three-dimensional object: the shadow becomes more prominent than the object itself. One can no longer see the object in all its complexity. Fluxus as art is the flat shadow of what Fluxus was.

"Now I a fourfold vision see,  
And a fourfold vision is given to me; 'Tis  
fourfold in my supreme delight And threefold  
in soft Beulah's night And twofold Always.  
May God us keep From Single vision &  
Newton's sleep!

— William Blake<sup>3</sup>

Nobody:

"It's time for you to leave now, William Blake. Time for you to go back to where you came from."

William Blake:

"You mean Cleveland?"

Nobody:

"Back to the place where all the spirits came from... and where all the spirits return. This world will no longer concern you."

— Jim Jarmusch<sup>4</sup>

### **Fluxus and Fluxus Artists in the Art World**

The Fluxus people worked with interdisciplinary, intermedia phenomena, but Fluxus was located in the art world. For some of us, it was a forum of last resort—or perhaps a case of wishful thinking. Art had more room for the unclassified and the unclassifiable than other venues, or so we thought.

Disciplines such as psychology, philosophy, political science, or economics didn't have the freedom that art afforded. There was no room in those worlds for amateurs.

Fluxus wasn't professional. Dick Higgins celebrated this spirit with a motto: "Don't let the professionals get you down."

The professions have little tolerance for amateur activities. Economics is a profession. The ministry is a profession. Chemical engineering is a profession. We found ourselves in the art world by default. But the art world is a profession as well, or it pretends to be. We treated art with a combination of genuine passion and cavalier indifference.

Fluxus people treated art in disrespectful ways. Or perhaps we simply didn't respect art institutions. Serious participants in art respect their institutions. Even the institutional critique school of art involves serious artists criticizing institutions as a way to belong to them. People like Al Hansen, George Maciunas, and Albert M. Fine didn't respect the art world. Robert Filliou, Carolee Schneemann, and Dick Higgins were suspicious of it. We had unrealistic ideas about art and the art world. In turn, the art world had little place for us. We made no sense to most art historians, curators, or critics.

Some Fluxus people managed to survive in the art world, and some even prospered. Take Wolf Vostell, for example. Wolf made wonderful art works. Wolf, Alison Knowles, Geoffrey Hendricks, Robert Watts, Nam June Paik, and Joseph Beuys were all artists with a position in the normative art world. Geoff and Bob were art professors with a good salary. Others made objects that dealers could position as art—or perhaps as relics of some kind. Joseph Beuys was an example. He was also an art professor, and so was Nam June Paik. Few of the rest met the expectations of art dealers or art departments.

### **Influence Without Acknowledgement**

Nearly no one in the art world saw Fluxus as something serious enough to consider. That explains how we managed to be influential without acknowledgement relative to our contributions.

Fluxus people weren't part of the serious art world, not even for people who knew about what we were doing. Since what we did didn't count as art, there was no point in acknowledging us. At the best, people saw Fluxus as a kind of primitive art, outsider art, or folk art. Serious artists drew on our work as source material, but artists don't acknowledge source material if it comes from outside art.

Consider the way that Picasso drew on African art. Learning from the work of non-European artists and drawing on the patrimony of other cultures, Picasso was a cultural magpie who brought sources together, shaping them into new art with generative pictorial genius and plastic skill. Nevertheless, those who criticize Picasso for cultural appropriation often don't identify the specific sources or cultures on which Picasso drew. While we have some knowledge of the masks and artifacts he collected, these are rarely discussed—and we have no way to identify the individual artists who made the masks. Those works and Picasso's work arose in different cultural traditions.

One tradition was embedded in the lifeworld of a people. The work constituted a cultural heritage of ideas and traditions belonging to a people rather than to an individual. The other tradition reflected or drew on many cultures, but the expression was that of the individual master artist.

Acknowledged artists draw on common sources, especially artists acknowledged as important. There are many forms of permissible use. It is culturally permissible for high culture to draw on common sources without explicitly acknowledging the sources or locating the creators of the original work. This is the case when high art draws on popular culture. This was the case for pop art. Roy Lichtenstein drew on comics. Andy Warhol drew on mass-market products, tabloid news photos, or anything that caught his eye.

Consider a thought experiment. Imagine that the human species achieves intergalactic travel with instant transportation. Imagine that we discover a universe with hundreds of thousands of inhabited planets. Many planets have an atmosphere and structure that enables human beings to visit them. In this universe, humans establish a trans-galactic travel network with a system for eating, paying for the goods and services, and so on.

Now imagine that a New York performance artist in the year 2650 visits one of these distant planets as the first human from our earth to do so. Imagine that the artist sees something quite ordinary in an everyday activity among the creatures living there. The artist carefully and exactly reproduces this moment of daily experience in a performance piece that the artist premieres in New York to great acclaim. The artist never mentions the source or discusses it... he simply enacts the moment that he discovered, presenting it as an artwork. What is the status of the artwork in terms of the action and its sources? Is this minor sequence of daily actions a work of art when the originators enact it?

Does the artist owe anything to the inhabitants of the distant planet? Is the work a new work inspired by what the artist saw? Or, if it is exactly the same series of gestures and actions, is it plagiarism? Is the question even relevant? After all, the creatures whose activity an artist reproduces are the inhabitants of a distant planet. Their lives and culture are entirely different to our own.

They have no relation to what New York artists do. What difference is it to them that someone reproduces a fragment of their lifeworld for performance and delectation on a planet far away?

Something like this happens now in some kinds of art. Some Fluxus event scores artists reproduce moments of life. This happens in some of my scores. Seeing something or thinking about something I saw occasionally led to an event score. This is also visible in many of the scores that capture a moment of daily experience. Alison Knowles's salad piece adapts a moment from daily life that existed long before Fluxus. The identical lunch event was another example—the score was originally an entry in a restaurant menu. Brecht's on-off-on piece takes places in rooms and buildings billions of times every day. So does Brecht's "Exit" score. Albert M. Fine's piece at the Sistine Chapel has been performed for centuries by people walking into the chapel and out again.

None of us usually saw any reason to describe or discuss the origins or sources of the work. But this brings me to how the art world saw us. Consider watching someone from outside the art world make and serve a salad, adapting this to an event score. Then consider someone within the high art world hearing of an idea by one of the



Fluxus people. Based on the reputation we had, it was hard to say what we were. Some of us seemed to say that we had nothing to do with art. Imagine that an artist—a real artist with appropriate institutional participation—borrowed some of our ideas. Would that have been a significantly different case to the case of a Fluxus person adapting a gesture that he noticed watching someone eat a pastrami sandwich?

This is not quite the right way to put it, but the idea moves in a direction I have been considering. Perhaps I am an unreal artist if you compare me with people who consider themselves real artists. If real artists considered Fluxus people to be primitives and charlatans, why would they acknowledge the ideas on which they drew? It's possible to understand why artists ignore Fluxus at the same time that they take and adapt the work and the ideas.

Perhaps it is difficult to grasp the Fluxus story because it is large and tangled. To tell the story well requires that one account for too much. This is difficult. It is a difficult phenomenon with roots in several worlds.

### **A Sojourn in Saskatchewan**

In March and April of 1972, I spent six weeks at what was then the University of Saskatchewan in Regina. It is now the University of Regina. There was still a fair amount of Greenberg worship in Saskatchewan when I was there, linked to the artists of the Regina Five and to artists who saw themselves as Canadian torchbearers of the abstract expressionist legacy.

The local heroes were the painters known as The Regina Five—Ron Bloore, Ted Godwin, Douglas Morton, Ken Lochhead, and Art McKay. They spearheaded Canadian abstraction during the late 1950s and the 1960s.

Regina also had a group of younger artists who had gone to art school in Chicago. They idolized the Hairy Who artists, a group in the larger constellation of Chicago Imagists. The Hairy Who acolytes attended a talk I gave at the MacKenzie Art Gallery, the university's art museum. The talk was advertised widely: the topic was the work of Nam June Paik, Wolf Vostell, Mieko Shiomi, and other Fluxus people. At my talk about Fluxus, the local artists made it impossible for me to speak. The Hairy Who youngsters didn't come to learn anything about Fluxus. Instead, they peppered me with a barrage of interruptions and loud comments. Each time they stopped the lecture, they bombarded me with questions about the Chicago artists in the Hairy Who. I knew little about the Hairy Who, so I was always on the wrong foot.

### **The School of Hard Knoxville**

Another incident I remember took place at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. One art professor stood up at the end of the lecture. He spoke in an exaggerated country drawl. He berated me and criticized my ideas, bracketing his comments with a frequent statement to assert his position as the representative of some kind of real art, down-to-earth and homey. Before launching into each item in his critique, he'd say, "I may just be an old country boy, but ..."

This kind of thing happened to me through much of the 1970s. People weren't contesting philosophical or critical ideas. They never discussed ideas. They were saying that everything I did and said was wrong. But I'm not sure that a tenured university professor qualifies as an old country boy, no matter how rude and ignorant he may be.

When I think of old country boys, I think of a beautiful duet by Randy Travis and George Jones from the 1990 Travis album titled *Heroes and Friends*:

“There’s a lot of truth, you know, In our kind of songs:  
About the life you’re living  
And how love’s done you wrong. As long as there’s a jukebox  
And a honky tonk in town It’s good to know there’s still  
A few ol’ country boys around.”<sup>5</sup>

For me, there is a bridge from the cultures of the past to our cultures of the present. We live in a world that others built for us over years, decades, centuries, and millennia. We inherit the traditions those cultures leave in their wake, but it’s an uneven inheritance, and our place in it depends on time, chance, and on the choices we make. Country music represents a layered series of traditions. In the Jones and Travis duet, you hear the meeting and interaction of many traditions. Those traditions include Celtic fiddle music; guitars with musical elements dating back to 12th-century Spain and the Arabic music of Northern Africa; guitar counterpoint in the background to emphasize and heighten the melody; vocal traditions in that inflect English folk music with cantorial touches from Jewish and Islamic singers; and steel guitar—an instrument rooted in Africa, born in Hawaii, and imported to the American South.

When I was a boy, my father taught folk dance and square dance. His main work involved directing a nursery school and kindergarten in New London, Connecticut with my mother. They also taught dance classes in the evenings. In the summers, my father had a folk dance class at Connecticut College.

People would gather one night a week on a big lawn between the old buildings. He’d play music from his immense collection of records, and he’d call the square dances himself. I’d listen to those records at home in the evenings and on weekends. Today, we’d call it world music. When I hear great traditional country music, I feel the world singing up through the roots.

Waylon Jennings once summed up his approach to music—and to life: “If we don’t leave ‘em anything else, I think we leave ‘em this one thing, that there’s always one more way to do things, and it’s your way, and you have a right to try it this one time.” Jennings and Willie Nelson brought that philosophy to “outlaw country,” and then to The Highwaymen, a group they formed with Johnny Cash and Kris Kristofferson in the late 1980s.

For me, Fluxus was a lot like that. Fluxus was the right to try it our way this one time, this one life we get to live. I’m sorry the old country boy professor thought that I represented such a danger to art. Today, I understand people who saw us as a threat to their world and their worldview. The Tennessee professor makes sense to me now. So does the nasty behavior of the Hairy Who disciples in Saskatchewan. My existence was an affront to them. I was an amateur in their professional world. Everything I seemed to stand for suggested that what they did was barely worth doing.

The challenge is a challenge to a paradigm, a worldview, a perspective of understanding and conception. What we did was a challenge to what people conceived of in terms of their worldview. For that matter, I was just as much an affront to people like the Bay Area conceptual artists. But most of those folks were also real artists.

### From *On the Road* to *On the Road Again*.

“On the road again  
I just can’t wait to get on the road again  
The life I love is makin’ music with my friends And I  
can’t wait to get on the road again

“On the road again  
Goin’ places that I’ve never been  
Seein’ things that I may never see again And I  
can’t wait to get on the road again”

— Willie Nelson<sup>6</sup>

For the twelve years between 1967 and 1979, I traveled around the United States and parts of Canada in the Fluxmobile. I sometimes worked as a visiting artist and once or twice as a visiting professor. More often, I just traveled, spreading information about Fluxus and the Fluxus artists. Over the years, I went to 46 of the 50 United States. The only states I didn’t visit were North Dakota, Wisconsin, Hawaii, and Alaska. I drove and flew. I went from north to south or south to north at least fifty times, twenty or thirty times from the Pacific to the Atlantic, west to east and east to west. In between driving tours, I made lots of cross-country flights and regional airport hops.

During those years, I often stopped at museums and galleries to meet with curators and directors. I made those visits when I came to a city with a museum or art center. I showed the Fluxkit. I talked with museum people about the other Fluxus artists and their work, and I talked about my own work. While I did exhibitions of my event scores and other work when I was a visiting artist, there was little interest for Fluxus in museums and galleries.

Museum directors usually agreed to meet me. When we met, they seemed to see me as a creature from another planet talking about something that made no sense.

Two memorable meetings involved gallery and museum directors at the University of California.

At one point, I went to visit Peter Selz when he was director of the Art Museum at the University of California, Berkeley. I brought a complete Fluxkit suitcase, as well Fluxboxes, Something Else Press books, and wooden boxed editions of *Ample Food for Stupid Thought* by Robert Filliou and Wolf Vostell’s multiple. I also brought works by Milan Knizak and Ben Vautier. I hoped to interest Peter in a Fluxus exhibition. I made a small display of these for him on tables and chairs.

Peter looked at the things for a while without a word. Then he started rocking back and forth on his heels. Spreading his arms wide, he slowly began to clap his hands together forcefully. He clapped his hands with palms cupped to create a loud, cracking sound. After a few claps, he started to speak with his distinct German accent.

“Well [clap!],” he said, “this [clap!] is [clap!] certainly [clap!] in-ter-est-ing ... [clap!] but [clap!] I [clap!] don’t [clap!] think [clap!] it [clap!] is [clap!] for [clap!] us.”

Then he stopped talking and clapping. He thanked me for coming and walked off to leave me surrounded by boxes and artworks.

Another memorable visit took place at the University of California at Santa Barbara. Someone had seen my work and told the director of the art gallery about me. That was David Gebhard, the architectural historian. I don't recall how Gebhard heard about me, or even how we got in touch. I was living in Berkeley at the time. I spoke with Gebhard on the phone. He suggested that I visit him the next time I was in Santa Barbara.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, I drove the Fluxmobile regularly between the San Francisco Bay Area and San Diego. The first time I drove south after the conversation, I went to see David. The day that I left, I grabbed a selection of objects and projects from my studio, threw them into a box, and took them with me. When I got to Santa Barbara, we spoke for a while. Then he asked me to bring in my work. I went to the Fluxmobile and fetched the box. I brought the box into his office, opened it, and unpacked the objects, placing them on the floor, along the length of a wall.

He looked at the objects for a while. Perhaps it was a long while. I am not sure, but it seemed that way to me.

Finally, he looked at me and said, "But these are just ordinary objects."

At first, I thought he understood my work quite well. Later, I realized that he saw these objects in a very different way than I did.

I spent the 1960s and 1970s living through hundreds of conversations and memories of this kind. I must have visited several hundred galleries and museums without a single sign of interest for Fluxus, and only a couple project possibilities for my own work. Even places that seemed to become interested lost interest. This was even the case with a promised major gift. One example involves the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art.

In 1973, Lefty Adler was director of the La Jolla Museum of Art. The museum went through several changes over the years. Now it is the La Jolla branch of the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego. At an opening, I was talking with Lefty about Fluxus. Lefty was a big fan of Christo's work, and he lamented the fact that the museum did not have any examples of Fluxus. I'm recalling a conversation from half a century back, so it might not have been that way at all—but one thing led to another, and I invited Lefty and the curator—Jay Belloli—to see the material. I offered it as a gift to the museum. Lefty welcomed the gift.

I packed up an enormous load of works. There were many original works. There was also a large set of multiples from Edition Hundertmark, and many of the Fluxus boxes that George Maciunas had sent me. I took all the material to the museum. The museum didn't have to do any conservation or much organizing. The gift was massive, and everything was in prime condition. It was simply a matter of documenting the work, registering it for the collection, and housing it. I waited for something to happen with the collection. I kept in touch with Lefty as I did with the other museums and collections where I gave work. In 1982, Lefty was forced to leave the director's post under the cloud of a scandal that involved personal gifts from the artists he had been exhibiting. The museum had not yet done anything with the collection. Year after year dragged on, and the museum did nothing.

Not long after Lefty was fired, I told the museum that they must either develop the collection or ship the work to the Fluxus collection at the University of Iowa. They packed it up in a few large crates and sent it. When I went to Iowa to unpack it, I found much of the work, but not all. What they sent was a jumble. Some Fluxboxes and a Fluxkit disappeared entirely. At the same time, they threw in strange items that I had never seen. These were odd pieces that never belonged to me—it's as though they threw in anything they came across that seemed to be inexplicable.

Museums didn't seem to care much about Fluxus work. With the exception of Joseph Beuys, they treated our pieces like documentary ephemera. If we were lucky, they'd place them in the library or the four-drawer vertical file system that many libraries used for loose material in the years before the web. At one point in the late 1970s, I found some material on Fluxus in the vertical file system at the library of the La Jolla Museum, including some of the correspondence I had with Lefty. The library had a copy of *The Aesthetics*. It wasn't part of the library collection. It was in a folder in a four-drawer file cabinet.

Today, it seems that those decades of my life have simply vanished. All the time I spent crisscrossing the US and Canada, doing performances and shows, presenting my work and performing Fluxconcerts just evaporated. So did the conversations with museum directors and curators who seemed to think that I was an odd specimen who turned up uninvited and didn't leave soon enough.

Then there is the endless story of artists.

Nearly everywhere I went, I found groups of artists imitating what was going on in New York—or imitating what had been famous in New York a decade earlier. By the late 1970s, there was some interest in conceptual art. This

made little difference for Fluxus people. We weren't the famous New York conceptual artists one could read about in *Artforum* or *ARTnews*.

In the late 1970s, things looked a little brighter... but they weren't. During the Jimmy Carter presidency, there was a short-lived upsurge of artists creating alternative spaces and artist-run galleries. Part of this development was made possible by the flow of federal funding to the arts, and by occasional matching funding from states. Some states even started to develop arts policies. The Carter administration gave a lot of attention to art. Much of this had to do with the fact that the late Joan Mondale was a major advocate for the arts.

Mrs. Mondale was the wife of Vice President Walter Mondale. Joan Mondale was an effective arts advocate. Whatever interest might otherwise have been on the agenda was multiplied dramatically with the wife of a vice president driving an attention campaign. Mrs. Mondale was nicknamed "Joan of Art" for her efforts.

Those years saw massive increases in funding for the National Endowment for the Arts. In addition, there was a great deal of funding for employment and training programs. While these programs were not arts-funding measures, the programs were often written in such a way that art centers and non-profit organizations could use employment and training programs to hire people.

The funds didn't permit permanent employment, but they often permitted full-time employment for the duration of the program grant.

Some people became extraordinarily clever at writing grants and securing program funding from many available sources. Carl Loeffler at *La Mamelle* in San Francisco was a genius at this. Carl was very fluid. Every issue of the *La Mamelle* magazine had a different format. His exhibition programs and projects changed all the time. He developed new ventures as new funding programs came available while closing and terminating any programs for which funds were no longer available. Carl made keeping programs funded to employ artists into an art form in its own right. Whether the programs had artistic or intellectual merit was another question—but no one had to account for artistic or intellectual merit. The key was more or less doing what you more or less said you would do within the time allocated. When the time was over, no one seemed to care about what had actually happened. The National Endowment for the Arts had little use for artists who weren't embedded in the normative networks of galleries, museums, and universities. Fluxus people were outside that system.

At one point, James Melchert became Director of Visual Arts at the National Endowment for the Arts in Washington, DC. Jim had been a ceramics artist and a professor at University of California at Berkeley. He knew almost everyone in the Bay Area. We met from time to time when I lived in San Francisco and Berkeley. A couple years after Jim got the job at the Endowment, I ran into him. He seemed genuinely happy to see me. We talked about his work and activities. At one point in the conversation, he said, "We've got to get you down to Washington to work with us."

By this, I think he meant serving on one of the committees or another. That was the way into the system. People built networks and made connections

by serving on these committees. They knew one another, they shared information, they learned how to apply for grants. Most important, they approved each other's grants. The National Endowment for the Arts used what it referred to as a peer review system. This is not double-blind peer review of the kind one sees in journals, or peer review of the kind one sees in science grants. In that world, peer review means evaluating, critiquing, and constructively contributing to the development of an article or a research project. At the National Endowment for the Arts, the term "peer review" mimicked the language of federal science funding. It referred to people who were deemed peers to one another looking at one another's work. But the peer review process was not blind. National Endowment committee members decided who would receive a fellowship or funding.

Was the system good or bad? Jim never did get me down to Washington, so I never found out.

National Endowment for the Arts programs did little harm, but they probably did little to create a deeper or richer culture. The artist fellowship programs reinforced the existing art world and the culture around it. The Endowment supported and reinforced the existing art market. It helped artists who were embedded in the normative art world to dig in deeper and do better. When the National Endowment for the Arts was spending millions of dollars a year on individual artist grants, Fluxus people saw no funding. When Congress killed the individual artist fellowship system in the wake of a scandal involving controversial work by a fellowship recipient, we didn't see any funding either. There was no difference to us. But one aspect of the National Endowment for

the Arts funding programs did affect Fluxus and Fluxus people. When the Endowment funded individual artist grants, it advanced the work of people who wanted little to do with us or our ideas. Because the system was closed to us, National Endowment for the Arts helped to build higher walls to keep us out.

As I write this, I recall two similar conversations.

James Sterritt was a sculpture professor from Washington University in St. Louis. He had a large, well-funded visiting artist program. I'd run into him from time to time at conferences or openings. Jimmy was a large, hearty guy. He was a macho sculptor. We never had a serious conversation that I can recall. Jimmy was always working the room, looking for someone more important than me to chat up. He had a terrific memory for names, and he knew who I was. He'd always say a few nice words. Then he'd slap me on the shoulder and say, "We've really got to get you out to St. Louis!" before moving on to the next conversation.

We must have had that short conversation a dozen times. "We've really got to get you out to St. Louis!" At some point, I thought "What's stopping you? You've been saying this for years. You've got a large program and a massive budget. I'd be delighted to visit."

The other conversation took place more recently with a retired professor who once chaired the art department at a major university. We knew each other back

in the 1970s. Not long ago, he told me that he had hired Dick Higgins and Alison Knowles to work at his department. The problem is that they never worked at his university, so he couldn't have hired them.

Now, fifty years later, my friend remembers that he hired them. I don't think he was lying: he probably believed this to be the case. He had them out to lecture at a festival once. In his mind, I suppose this has turned into hiring them.

Today, Dick has been dead for twenty years. Alison is old and increasingly famous. Lots of people remember working with them. Dick wanted a university post, but he never found one. He died at the age of sixty, struggling to survive. He was often in desperate financial straits, doing odd jobs, typesetting, proofreading—anything he could. He was always worried about insurance coverage, financial worries, stress, and poor health.

I find myself irked that my friend remembers himself as a great friend of Fluxus who hired Dick and Alison when he had those kinds of jobs at his disposal. He was a smart guy and a good artist. He knew how to play the game, work the National Endowment for the Arts, and succeed in the university. He wasn't an enemy of Fluxus, but he wasn't a friend. In the 1970s, he dismissed Fluxus in as a curious but insignificant artifact of the 1960s. His interest in our work grew in retrospect. The Silverman Fluxus collection is at the Modern. Carolee Schneemann and Yoko Ono both won the Golden Lion in Venice. These days, we have lots of old friends. It resembles the large number of people who now claim that they studied in John Cage's composition class at the New School. Back then, you could number students from the Cage class on fingers and toes. Looking back from the claims people have made in recent years, it would have been a crowded classroom.

During the long, dry years, between the 1960s and now, we survived. We supported one another—or some of us did. We kept publishing and finding ways to keep our projects

alive. Fluxus people did the work that kept ideas, projects, and work circulating long enough to make a moment of recovery possible.

### The Unacknowledged Fluxus

The neglect of Fluxus took wings with Lucy Lippard's book on conceptual art, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*. Lippard was negligent in her failure to recognize Fluxus for the kinds of art that she describes in *Six Years*.

In case after case, Fluxus artists were predecessors to the issues that she includes and the artists that she covers. This is not an issue of whether the Fluxus work or the artists were better or more interesting. Some were, some weren't. It remains the case that Lippard neglected work between the middle of the 1950s and the starting date for *Six Years*. The book included only a few minor citations to our work. One was a brief note on *Some Investigations*, a pamphlet of my essays pointing back to earlier work.

Lucy's neglect of Henry Flynt annoyed me. Henry is a pain. He is often grumpy and ungracious. He nevertheless deserves credit for coining the term "concept art." The later artists who came to practice conceptual art owe him a debt that has never been acknowledged.

It is even the case that Henry did not mean by "concept art" what he wrote in the essay. For years, Henry complained about the essays in which I describe concept art in a way different to his meaning. At one point, Henry finally explained why he feels that I never understood concept art as he intended it. My definition was based on Henry's exact words—and this interpretation also supports relevant issues from Dick Higgins's idea of intermedia.

When we were talking about this, I pointed out to Henry his exact words. In the 1959 concept art essay published in *An Anthology*, Henry wrote, "'Concept art' is first of all an art of which the material is 'concepts', as the material of for ex. music is sound."<sup>7</sup> Henry acknowledged that he wrote those words. But this wasn't what he meant.

What Henry had in mind in using the term "concept art" was some kind of argument with Greek mathematics. At least that's what I got out of the conversation. Henry had no interest in the work of Fluxus people like George Maciunas or me for whom concept art was actually "an art of which the material is 'concepts', as the material of for ex. music is sound." For Henry, that explicit definition covered far too much art that he did not see as concept art. Neither did the next sentence, "Since 'concepts' are closely bound up with language, concept art is a kind of art of which the material is language." I think that the second sentence may not follow from the first—but it covers a great deal of conceptual art that Henry disavows as having any relation to concept art.

Some of the most important concept art works involve concepts without language. A good example is *Metered Bulb*, a 1963 work by Robert Morris. This work has neither language nor text, though one might argue that the piece presupposes a grasp of language and cultural understanding. When I asked Henry to name the artists he sees as concept artists, he named only four: himself, La Monte Young, Robert Morris, and Christer Hennix. I said to him, "That's only four people." Henry replied, "That's all there are."

Given his frequently ungracious behavior, Henry turned a lot of people against him. Even so, his contribution deserves respect. No one can deny his priority in developing the term "concept art." Henry's work warrants priority of publication. It precedes



conceptual art. Henry's definition covers much of what came later. He was a key predecessor to many of the conceptual artists, and many people who knew his work fail to acknowledge him or his influence.

If you compare Henry's artwork with that of the later conceptual artists, it is often less interesting. Compare his work, for example, with that of Joseph Kosuth. Joseph is a far more interesting artist than Henry. Dick Higgins felt the same way. I recall several occasions when Dick pointedly criticized Henry, comparing him unfavorably with Joseph Kosuth.

Joseph's work has a depth and brio that is absent in Henry's work. Joseph's pieces are light and energetic, where Henry's are flat and plodding. But the fact remains that Henry coined the term concept art, using it long before anyone else, and he deserves priority on this.

### **Stories, Narratives, Memories**

It's been a long time since I started writing these notes. It's difficult to remember who I was when I did my work, and my experience of Fluxus was different to that of the other Fluxus people. George Maciunas urged me to take Fluxus to places where the others didn't go, so I traveled.

My friends and colleagues exhibited and performed in the art galleries, museums, and concert halls of major metropolitan art centers. I organized exhibitions and concerts anywhere I could. Sometimes these were university galleries or art museums. More often, it was in public parks, street corners, churches, and our own Fluxus centers. We also had the Fluxmobile, a Volkswagen bus fitted out with storage and exhibition equipment that folded up neatly to leave a riding and sleeping space.

While my friends exhibited and performed together in New York and across Europe, I presented their work and my own across the United States and Canada. I knew their work better than I knew them, and the rest of them knew each other far better than they knew me.

Not only was my experience of Fluxus different than theirs was, my life was different.

When I worked for Dick Higgins as the general manager of Something Else Press, Dick gave me what turned out to be advice that shaped my life. While I had never studied art, Dick made a point of telling me not to rely on art for a living. He said I should get an education that enabled me to work at something entirely different. I took my PhD in human behavior. While I dipped into art and out of it, I was also an entrepreneur, a publisher, a designer, and a consultant. Life took me to Finland for a year in 1987, then—in 1988—to Norway, where I lived for two decades. While I made a living as a consultant and worked with art projects, the Norwegian School of Management offered me job in 1994 as professor of leadership and strategic design. In 2008, I moved to Australia as Dean of the Faculty of Design at Swinburne University of Technology. Now, I serve as Chair Professor of Design Innovation Studies at Tongji University in Shanghai and Visiting Professor at Lund University in Sweden. These are interesting jobs, and quite demanding. I use most of my time for research and writing.

It's been a quarter century since 1994. Before 1994, I did many things to make a living. Some were connected to art, other not. After 1994, this changed. Dick didn't think about one thing when giving me what turned out to be good advice overall. The jobs that freed me from the art market disconnected

me from the art world. Most of my Fluxus friends were connected to art or music for most of their lives, or they made a living teaching art or music. My case was different. My work was quite visible. To some artists, the fact that I taught at a business school meant that I had somehow been transformed into someone with no right to participate in art.

A meeting with an artist from Poland who was a visiting professor at a Norwegian art school sums it up. My friend from Poland brought another artist to meet me when I lived in Norway. The other fellow was a minor conceptual artist from Israel. He knew my name from Fluxus, and he was curious about what I was doing. When I told him about my work, he looked at me as though I had become a creature from a horror movie, like a werewolf under a full moon. He lost all interest in my ideas and my work, and he said, "You're not an artist! You should help real artists. Open a gallery! Sell art!"

Perhaps I will say a little more someday. This is as good a place as any to end for now.

"In my first thirty years of life  
I roamed hundreds and thousands of miles. Walked  
by rivers through deep green grass Entered cities of  
boiling red dust.  
Tried drugs, but couldn't make Immortal; Read  
books and wrote poems on history. Today I'm  
back at Cold Mountain:  
I'll sleep by the creek and purify my ears."

— Han Shan<sup>8</sup>

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## Notes

**1** Han Shan, "Cold Mountain," in *A Range of Poems*, trans. Gary Snyder (London: Fulcrum Press, 1967), 39. Han Shan is a real but semi-legendary poet. Like Homer, little is known about his life. Scholars place him between 600 and 900. His work may be the work of one poet, or several.

**2** Willie Nelson, *Yesterday's Wine*, RCA Records,

**3** William Blake, "Letter to Thomas Butts, 22 November 1802," in *The Letters of William Blake*, 2nd rev. ed., ed. Geoffrey Keynes (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 59-63.

**4** Jim Jarmusch, *Dead Man*, Miramax Films, 1995.

**5** Troy Seals and Mentor Williams, "A Few Ole Country Boys," on Randy Travis, *Heroes and Friends*, Warner Brothers Records, 1990.

**6** Willie Nelson, *On the Road Again*, Sony/ATV Music Publishing, LLC, 1980.

**7** Henry Flynt, "Essay: Concept Art. (Provisional Version.)," in *An Anthology*, ed. La Monte Young (New York: La Monte Young and Jackson Mac Low, 1963), n.p.

**8** Han Shan, "Cold Mountain," 38.

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**Ken Friedman** was the youngest member of the classical Fluxus group. He worked closely with George Maciunas and Dick Higgins, as well as collaborating with Nam June Paik, Milan Knizak, and John Cage.

# Ribbit, Riot: Benjamin Patterson's *When Elephants Fight, It Is the Frogs That Suffer—A Sonic Graffiti* Jordan Carter

McKinlock Court, situated on the lower level of the Art Institute of Chicago outside the museum café, is often regarded for its quietness and serenity, as well as providing a scenic outdoor patio environment for lunch and coffee during the summer months. Throughout summer 2019, the open-air interior garden was filled with atmospheric frog sounds. Those seeking a reprieve from the crowded museum or Chicago's bustling urban streets stumbled into the late Fluxus artist Benjamin Patterson's most technologically ambitious environmental sound installation *When Elephants Fight, It is the Frogs That Suffer—A Sonic Graffiti* (2016–17).<sup>1</sup> (fig. 1)

Upon its acquisition of the artwork in 2018, the museum received a digital audio file containing 192 individual soundtracks, divided into twenty-four channels, each with eight layers of collaged sound designed to be amplified on a ninety-four minute and twenty second loop through twenty-four weatherproof speakers furnished by the hosting institution.<sup>2</sup> These weatherproof speakers—either 360-degree or directional output depending on the site and configuration and small enough to be hidden in in bushes or planters—are then camouflaged, or concealed within the trappings of an outdoor environment, ideally near water, approximating a frog's natural habitat. The site, speaker models, and specific camouflage techniques are selected and staged in accordance with an installation guide and in collaboration with the artist's estate and the Nassauischer Kunstverein Wiesbaden. The resulting "sonic graffiti" is encountered by audiences in public and quasi-public sites without preconceived notions or expectations of its composition.



Fig. 1 Installation view, *Benjamin Patterson: When Elephants Fight, It Is the Frogs That Suffer, A Sonic Graffiti*, Art Institute of Chicago, summer 2019. Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago and the Estate of Benjamin Patterson.

At the Art Institute of Chicago, this meant a strategically minimal interpretation strategy: no press release and no advertising signage, except for a website description and an interpretive plaque installed within the courtyard to be read only once the visitor had been immersed in the acoustic situation. The work was originally conceived for *documenta 14* (2017) in Athens and Kassel, where green, 360-degree speakers were camouflaged amidst foliage, as well as covered with piles of sticks and branches, in public gardens emitting recorded sounds of both real and fake frogs. (figs. 2–5) While maintaining its core concept and terms of acoustic engagement, Patterson's *When Elephants Fight It's the Frogs That Suffer—A Sonic Graffiti* mobilizes a migratory politics of site-specificity—the work is a context-driven sound installation that was initially conceptualized in response to the literary, political, and ecological realities and histories of Athens and Kassel, while meant to open itself up to the possibility of accruing new meaning as the work is exhibited in new institutional spaces, conditions, and contexts.

The base audio elements create a sonic collage of recorded frog sounds and human imitations in English, Greek, and German—each culture having their own specific onomatopoeia for the amphibian's call. In addition, intermixed and emitting from the landscape are audio excerpts from public addresses by Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, and President Barack Obama, and choirs chanting political and philosophical idioms and passages from the German fairytale *The Frog King* (Brothers Grimm's *Children and Household Tales, No.1*, 1812) and Aristophanes' ancient Greek comedy *The Frogs* in multilingual frog tongues. It is fitting, and somewhat comically on-the-nose, that both *The Frog King* and *The Frogs*—canonized texts in Greek and German literature, respectively—prominently feature dialogue between frogs and humans, and their dynamic interspecies relationship is key to the protagonist's character development.



Fig. 2–3 Installation view, *When Elephants Fight, It Is the Frogs That Suffer, A Sonic Graffiti*, *documenta 14*, Athens, before the plants turned green, April 8–July 16, 2017. Courtesy of the Estate of Benjamin Patterson.

The sounds recorded in the frogs' natural habitats originated from eight species once native to Athens and Kassel, since displaced due to the destruction of their ecosystems via industrialization and global capitalism.<sup>3</sup> The title of the work—*When Elephants Fight, It Is the Frogs That Suffer—A Sonic Graffiti*—is derived from a Greek proverb of African origin and used by the media during the time of the work's conception to characterize the fallout of Greece's economic collapse.<sup>4</sup> The proverb suggests that in times of financial and political instability, it is the small creatures, those who are most at risk, who are most affected.<sup>5</sup> Patterson extends this urgent address to contemporary ecological crises, as well as structural issues of race and class-based oppression, addressing both human and nonhuman concerns.

Patterson intended that the "project could be easily modified and re-mounted" allowing the frogs' migratory life to be continued through its recurrent presentation over time following the work's acquisition by a museum, in this case, the Art Institute of Chicago.<sup>6</sup> Patterson was still at work on this piece when he died in 2016, and prior to his death, he relayed his conceptual score for the work via email to *documenta 14* artistic director Adam Szymczyk, instructing:



Fig. 4–5 Installation view, *When Elephants Fight, It Is the Frogs That Suffer, A Sonic Graffiti*, Art Institute of Chicago, *documenta 14*, Kassel, June 10–September 17, 2017. Courtesy of the Estate of Benjamin Patterson.

Re-populate the whole garden with invisible frogs! That is to say, introduce frogs that can only be heard! The mechanism for realizing this could be quite simple... perhaps 20+ amplifiers/speakers spread around the gardens broadcasting a 'symphony' of croaking frogs. This 'symphony' would be composed of real frog croaks...and a chorus of humans trained to imitate frog croaks...The sounds produced by these 'human frogs' would be lightly camouflaged political messages—short texts, sentences, proverbs (such as 'When elephants fight, it is the frogs that suffer') intoned to sound like frogs calling. This 'symphony' would be omnipresent throughout the garden, but not overwhelming or abusive...a kind of 'sonic graffiti'...<sup>7</sup>

In Athens and Kassel, the work was realized as a multi-channel outdoor sound installation, consisting of sixteen and twenty-four speakers, respectively, concealed within the natural environments of both exhibition cities. Across both European sites and the Art Institute of Chicago, the work unfolds by way of multiple migrations, or displacements—audio recordings, digital file transfers, cross-cultural and transhistorical citations, linguistic translations between Greek, German, and English, interspecies ventriloquisms, and architectural and ecological infiltrations.

Patterson's deliberate invocation of humor, and the voices of Black political orators, can be better understood through recourse to the artist's own background and multivalent experiences of race. An erudite double bassist, Patterson was unable to secure a position in a United States orchestra following his graduation from the University of Michigan in 1956 due to racial prejudice, and subsequently moved to Canada to join the Halifax Symphony Orchestra, and later to Europe, where he would co-found Fluxus in the early 1960s, affected by pivotal encounters with John Cage and the experimental music scenes of Stuttgart and Cologne in the early 1960s. This marked a radical transition from classical and serial compositions to indeterminate scores that privileged improvisation, chance, and the use of everyday materials.

However, his experiences of racism coming of age in the United States left a lasting mark, as did his Fluxus colleagues' lack of critical engagement with racial politics and the civil rights movement. Patterson was acutely aware of his status as the sole African American member of Fluxus, and perhaps one of the only to participate in the 1963 March on Washington. Despite this, Patterson's tactics for critiquing social and structural inequities often relied on humor and indirect modes of engagement that existed in excess of his race and identity, circumventing and expanding representational politics beyond the visual. On humor as a critical strategy and form of protest, Patterson asserted: "I prefer to use humor as it often provides the path of least suspicion/resistance for the implanting of subversive ideas. Remembering, as I mentioned before, that I grew up as a black in an America of legalized racial segregation, which allowed few means of protest (please know that we blacks used satirical humor as a protest form)."<sup>8</sup> Intermittently throughout *When Elephants Fight, It Is the Frogs That Suffer—A Sonic Graffiti*, Patterson's voice interrupts the atmospheric croaks with both incisive and ridiculous humor: "Arm 100 men, now do you feel better, worse, or the same?" and "Well, this works speaks for itself, water is the Urquelle of the Demokratie" give way to "geegeek, geegeek, geegeek, geegeek geegeek" and "Oink, oink, oink, oink, oink, oink."<sup>9</sup>

Beginning in the early 1960s, Patterson began scoring performances and participatory situations in which the production of sound was critically linked to interspecies relations. Presaging recent discourses of the Anthropocene and human and nonhu-

man relations, Patterson's poetic ecologies posited graphic and three-dimensional representations of animals as both cues and instruments for actions, and even prompted performers to imitate and reinterpret their calls. This interspecies engagement, as modeled through *When Elephants Fight, It Is the Frogs That Suffer—A Sonic Graffiti*, is one of Patterson's unique critical contributions to the Fluxus repertoire. Even prior to the first official Fluxus festival in Wiesbaden in 1962, Patterson was composing event scores incorporating nonhuman species including ants and frogs.<sup>10</sup>

As Patterson reflects in his autobiographical introduction to a 2009 score: "The easy part is the 'FROGS.' In the countryside, near Pittsburg, PA, where I grew up, there were several small ponds, where many frogs lived, breded [sic] and 'sang'. Since 6 years old, I know their songs."<sup>11</sup> Ever since his childhood Boy Scout experiences, Patterson became attuned to frog calls and listened to them with a care and attentiveness not unlike an orchestral composition.<sup>12</sup> This is the kind of listening to the everyday human and nonhuman vibrations that Patterson promoted through his work, reflecting: "Many years ago—during my days as a double-bass player in symphony orchestra—I came to realize that the listening audience was experiencing less than 20% of what I was experiencing during the performance of a Beethoven symphony. Why? Because all they could do was passively listen and look."<sup>13</sup> Engaging audiences as co-producers in his most groundbreaking and signature scores and instructions such as *Paper Piece* (1961) and *Pond* (1962), Patterson not only directs physical performance—crumpling pieces of paper or releasing wind-up toy frogs—but also plugs participants into the creative dimension of listening, cultivating a heightened sensitivity to the material sounds and reverberations of everyday life.

Patterson's immersive twenty-four channel sound installation *When Elephants Fight, It is the Frogs That Suffer—A Sonic Graffiti* expands and builds upon the foregoing strategies as well as the artist's lifetime engagement with small creatures—particularly frogs—as a notational device and structure, as well as a stand-in for the artist himself and marginalized groups, whether human or nonhuman. While Patterson rarely addressed racial politics directly in his Fluxus scores and instructions, *When Elephants Fight, It is the Frogs That Suffer—A Sonic Graffiti* provides both a material and speculative framework for investigating his social orchestration of nonhuman sounds in shared spaces of human acoustics. Indeed, the itinerant sound installation evokes what new media theorist Brandon LaBelle articulates as "sonic agency" and "acoustic justice"—staging an acoustic *mise-en-scène* in which the visitor-turned-participant is urged to become a hospitable listener, and must choose whether to ignore or heed this call for attentiveness and attunement to both the intelligible and incompressible utterances that reverberate throughout the space, its architecture, and human and nonhuman inhabitants.<sup>14</sup> Listening to the frogs enables a gesture of listening as a creative and communal act of learning and care—acknowledging the cries of the other and cultivating an empathic ear through an experience of radical acoustic hospitality. As Elke Gruhn, director of Nassauischer Kunstverein Wiesbaden, posthumous steward of the installation, and longtime champion of Patterson's work reflects on the Athens/Kassel installation: "In whose artificial idyll the singing of a new synthetic frog population exists, Patterson's work invites the audience to philosophize and to discover their 'inner frog.'"<sup>15</sup>

This is further demonstrated in the game-oriented performance piece *Pond* (1962) which marked the artist's initial foray into the sonic domain of frogs. In this work, Patterson scores their calls—artificial and imitated—as a notational strategy for enticing participation and play, while also valorizing their reverberations and acknowledging their marginalized position in the world of humans. Patterson shifts the terms

of engagement with these amphibians, as their material sounds structure the performance, and the actions and reactions of performers. The score instructs eight performers to stand around a grid, taped or chalked onto the floor, and make chance phrasings of sounds “intoned and accented in a manner exhibiting the general characteristics of natural animal calls,” corresponding to the movements of wind-up toy frogs.<sup>16</sup> As more frogs are released, a clamor of human and artificial croaks intermix to emulate the aural ambiance of a frog pond. The floor grid—the center stage of the performance—is populated by frogs, or rather their stand-ins, and the human performers operate at the periphery, their sonic actions contingent on the indeterminate hops of their nonhuman collaborators. This reversal, while humorous and playful, also carries political undertones as the small creatures take on structural agency in this reimagining of the field of performance. The mechanical clicks and clacks of the toy frogs, once dissonant noise, become the guiding principle and provide the cues for action and performance. Patterson's *Pond* and his subsequent and expanded engagements with frogs call for listening as a mode of production, tuning participants into alternative and marginalized sonic ecosystems. Through this work, Patterson sounds a sonic and acoustic politics of interspecies and interlingual communication and care that complicates, exceeds, and extends the representational and corporeal limits of the body.

*Pond* echoes and anticipates the poetics of interspecies play and politics in *When Elephants Fight, It is the Frogs That Suffer—A Sonic Graffiti*. This provides a critical framework for investigating these works in relation to racial discourses of visibility and invisibility, audibility and inaudibility. As Fred Moten speculated: “Within the strictures of an ethics of dematerialization, Patterson disappears. He reemerges in republication, in enactment, in repertory, by way of the recording and its digital and cybernetic reproduction.”<sup>17</sup> Patterson emerges then, not only as a “radical presence,” to quote Valerie Cassel Oliver, but also a radical reverberation.<sup>18</sup> Patterson's presence in *When Elephants Fight, It is the Frogs That Suffer—A Sonic Graffiti* is via his physical absence, his voice and performances interjecting and intermingling with the frogs. Camouflaged amongst the frogs, like the speakers in the foliage, Patterson directly addresses the audience from a critical remove. This refusal of the representational politics of identity evokes the sonic dimension of resistance as sounded by the riotous ribbits of the frogs, whose collective croaks of dissonance resonate as emancipatory calls reverberating in the urgent soundings of Martin Luther King Jr., President Barack Obama, and Nelson Mandela: “I have a dream”; “It was whispered by slaves and abolitionists as they glazed the trail towards freedom to the darkness of the night—yes we can; The time for the healing of the wounds has come.”<sup>19</sup>

In investigating the migratory effects of the work as it transitioned from Athens and Kassel to Chicago, it is important to reflect on the contextual politics of the work at the time of its production and reception in these different locations. Within Chicago and the wider United States, the work's title potentially signals a more direct address of democratic politics: wherein the elephant also becomes the characteristic emblem of the Republican Party along with the divisive rhetoric and policies of the Trump administration in 2019. And especially so as the work was installed during the mobilizing months of the Democratic presidential campaigns, including those of recently elected President Biden and Vice President Harris. A former Chicago resident and community organizer, President Obama's voice is particularly resonant in this site, as well as Martin Luther King Jr.'s emancipatory calls for racial equity and solidarity in the United States, whereas the site-specific reverberations, nuances, and contemporary implications of *The Frogs* and *The Frog Prince* are to a degree diminished in an American context.



Chicago is also a city of measurable segregation on racial lines—vis-à-vis strategic urban design and gentrification, as well as self-elected cultural affiliation—speaking to issues of displacement, as well as calls for solidarity across race and class. Patterson's own experience as an American expat also comes more clearly into focus in the context of ecological displacement and the search for home and a sustainable livelihood. The sonic dimension of resistance is perhaps also amplified in the context of Chicago, where demonstrations spanning demographics during the 1968 National Democratic Convention—fifty years prior to the work's acquisition in 2018—were met with excessive police brutality. These soundings of protest, met with those of violence, reverberate today, perhaps resonating louder than ever.

Issues surrounding equitable access to the museum and the work also enter the installation's political framework, as it was staged in admission-free environments in Athens and Kassel, evoking another dimension of class and cultural oppression. Of course, it is important to note that in staging the installation, neither the curatorial team nor the artist's estate had any fixed intentions nor projections for how the politics of the work would reemerge or transmute, focusing rather on the material and conceptual conditions of the work's realization, and allowing the work to unfold indeterminately for each participant, as Patterson intended for all of his scores, instructions, and performances, irrespective of site.

The frogs croaking from the trenches elicit and entice a more empathetic ear and higher tolerance for dissonance within habitual and convivial spaces of human leisure—the Byzantine Gardens in Athens, Karlsaue Park in Kassel, and the patio dining of the Art Institute of Chicago's McKinlock Court. As critic Andrew Russeth observed during the Kassel iteration at Karlsaue Park: "Here the frogs are fighting back, shifting the aural landscape and potentially the surrounding ecosystem. It's a protest by means of sound, and the artist termed the work 'sonic graffiti.'"<sup>20</sup> This leisure destination, however, is also transformed into a dissonant site of sonic antagonism as the ambient-turned-militant frog sounds disrupt conversations, at times shocking both children and adults, and altering the acoustics of a quasi-private, controlled dining experience in a public setting. Throughout the run of the installation, the museum's visitor services team worked with the curatorial team to record visitor feedback and responses, which now serve as an archive of dissonance, registering the conflicting ways in which audiences experienced the acoustic situation. Notes of complaint and disappointment exaggerated the work's capacity to function as unwelcomed and unanticipated "graffiti," demonstrating the affective success of the installation—its ability to elicit an emotional response and action, even if this runs counter to the aspirational ideal of careful and empathic listening. While the listening subject is encouraged to be hospitable, with the militaristic connotations of camouflage and graffiti, it is equally urgent to account for those listeners who refuse to exercise care when occupying a once convivial space now infiltrated with foreign sounds.

The performative tactic-cum-technical parameter of "camouflaging" the loudspeakers becomes integral to the work as a conceptual score, an act of refusal, and a media object, extending the performance from the curatorial planning stages to physical installation and public realization to indeterminate acoustic experience and audience engagement. In Athens, where the work premiered, the "sonic graffiti" was staged in the gardens of the Byzantine and Christian Museum—the former site of "the Frog Island *Vatrachonisi*" at the center of the now barren river of Ilissos, and in close proximity to the ancient parours of Aristotle and other philosophers of his Lyceum.<sup>21</sup> The combined Greek and Byzantine references of the work's original site and Aris-

tophanes's *The Frogs* made McKinlock court an ideal location for the work's installation at the Art Institute of Chicago due to its Greek and Byzantine architectural and landscape accents. Indeed, Carl Mille's *Triton Fountain* (1926) served as an anchor to the site. Triton is a mythological Greek god of the sea, and thus the fountain fittingly contextualizes the sound installation through its shared references to Greek mythology, as well as through the central motif of water and the power of amphibian creatures. The site also bridges the museum's Modern Wing and Greek and Byzantine collections—an anachronistic cultural connection achieved in the work itself. The convivial café atmosphere provided an ideal social setting for encountering the installation, shifting its acoustic terms of engagement, as camouflaged croaks escalate from ambiance to riotous ribbits.

In the spirit of Fluxus, the acquisition and realization of Patterson's *When Elephants Fight* at the Art Institute of Chicago was a networked collaboration, including the artist's estate, landscape engineers, gardeners, time-based media conservators, designers, and technicians, and ultimately the audience.<sup>22</sup> The estate provided an installation toolkit, or guide, that outlined notes for the "adaptation of the homogeneity and noise level of the sound field to the individual surrounding."<sup>23</sup> The selection of the site was key, not only in terms of its visitor traffic and behavior and ecological *mise-en-scène*, but also for audio intelligibility. An interior garden with a central fountain, McKinlock court provided a relatively controlled environment for establishing, monitoring, and adjusting sound levels in relation to visitor occupancy and activity throughout the day. Additionally, the site provided the opportunity for a focused sound field, with each speaker (now directional, as opposed to 360-degree as in previous iterations) emitting sound inwards towards the center of the space where patio furniture provides leisurely accommodations. Following the artist's intentions and the guidelines provided, "camouflage techniques which best fit the local environment" were used, so that the audience could not optically discern the physical source of the sound or related media equipment. Incidentally, adding to the scenic effect, newly born ducklings and their parents occupied the fountain and strolled its perimeter throughout the course of the installation, becoming an unexpected and welcome attraction to the site—with a ramp being built for their access and their being featured on the museum's social media.

The courtyard's rectangular architecture outlined by a dense perimeter of hedges provided ample coverage for the speakers, which were staked into the soil and camouflaged amidst the foliage. To further ensure that the sound was a surprise to visitors, cables connecting to the hidden equipment rack were run behind the hedges; and tucked into cracks and crevices in the pavement that were then concealed. The central fountain was also a key feature, both conceptually and architecturally. Not only did it provide the scenic and sonic framework for a frog pond, but its location at the center of the sound field allowed for speakers most prominently featuring Patterson's "voices and noises" to be buoyed in the water and radially emit from "somewhere central within the whole sound field—functioning as the conductor of the human and natural frog choirs."<sup>24</sup>

The overall distribution of the speakers was also determined in relation to the presumed demographics of the site. Whereas German and Greek were less likely to be the native languages of the primary visiting public, the eight speakers with English audio were staged closest to the entrance, along with a speaker that played Patterson's voice welcoming the visitor: "Hello, my name is Ben, can you tell me what time it is?"



Fig. 6 Installation speaker map provided by the Estate of Benjamin Patterson and the Nassauischer Kunstverein Wiesbaden. Courtesy of the Estate of Benjamin Patterson.

In the process of staging the installation, an architectural plan of the courtyard was sent to the artist's estate and the Nassauischer Kunstverein Wiesbaden to determine the location of each speaker and the according distribution of each unique audio channel. This plan migrated from a digital rendering to a highlighter color-coded, hand-drawn version mapped onto paper, suggestive of a graphic score. (fig. 6) It's fitting that this map, together with the installation guide, proposed the installation of the work itself as a Fluxus performance in its own right. And the humorous nature of the work and Patterson's Fluxus oeuvre was not lost on the installation team, who seriously took on the tasks of climbing through bushes and wading through water in galoshes to successfully camouflage the speakers. The team's attentiveness—and my own—was piqued as we walked the perimeter of the courtyard in the mornings prior to the museum's opening, determining whether or not we could discern the source of the sound and if it felt natural, at times finding ourselves wondering whether or not the sound was working during the segments of silence punctuating the dissonance. This act of listening as maintenance, and maintenance as listening, embodies the work's aspirational call for interspecies relationality, care, and solidarity.

**Jordan Carter** is Associate Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Art Institute of Chicago, where he has curated and co-curated numerous exhibitions, including *Mounira Al Solh: I strongly believe in our right to be frivolous* (2018); *Ellen Gallagher: Are We Obsidian?* (2018–19); *Benjamin Patterson: When Elephants Fight, It Is the Frogs That Suffer—A Sonic Graffiti* (2019); and *Richard Hunt: Scholar's Rock or Stone of Hope or Love of Bronze* (2020–21). Upcoming projects include *Ray Johnson %* (2021); a solo exhibition of the work of Shahryar Nashat (2022); and Stanley Broun's first solo museum exhibition in the United States (2023). Prior to his time at the Art Institute, Jordan was a Curatorial Fellow at the Walker Art Center. He has also served as the

12-Month Fluxus Collection Intern at the Museum of Modern Art, New York; a curatorial intern at the Studio Museum in Harlem; and a research intern at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. He holds a BA from Brown University, where he earned his degree in Modern Culture and Media; and an MA in Art History from London's Courtauld Institute of Art, where he focused on Fluxus and global conceptual art.

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## Notes

**1** For video documentation of the Art Institute of Chicago installation, see: <https://www.artic.edu/videos/24/ben-pattersons-when-elephants-fight-it-is-the-frogs-that-suffera-sonic-graffiti>.

**2** Following Patterson's death in June 2016, Berlin-based composer Bernd Schultheis followed Patterson's instructions to compose and produce the audio soundtracks for the installation in collaboration with the artist's estate and the Nassauischer Kunstverein Wiesbaden.

**3** Recordings not initially secured by Patterson were sourced in collaboration with Frogs & Friends e.V., a Berlin-based organization dedicated to the preservation of frog species through new media technologies.

**4** See: Elke Gruhn, "Benjamin Patterson / When Elephants Fight, It Is The Frogs That Suffer—A Sonic Graffiti (2016–2017)" translated to English by Julia Elizabeth Neal. Available in original German via Nassauischer Kunstverein Wiesbaden: <https://www.kunstverein-wiesbaden.de/follow-fluxus/das-stipendium/ben-patterson>. Gruhn cites media sources including: Giorgos Christides, "Greeks see cash run out in undeclared default" (BBC News, Thessaloniki, Greece: May 4, 2015): <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-32580919>.

**5** As Elke Gruhn contends, "Patterson's work seems to suggest a certain dynamic: in times of unrestrained capitalism, neoliberalism and various financial crises, the society of 'small creatures' becomes increasingly overrun, crushed and destroyed, powerless against overpowering systems and internal conflicts. But we should not forget, it's been the small amphibian beings, by their courageous leaps, who have made human life possible on this planet." See: Gruhn, "Benjamin Patterson."

**6** Ben Patterson, March 2016, email to Adam Szymczyk.

**7** Ibid.

**8** See: Benjamin Patterson, "I'm Glad You Asked Me That Question" in Benjamin Patterson: Born in the State of FLUX/us (Houston, TX: Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 2012), 115.

**9** Lyrics provided by the estate in installation packet upon acquisition.

**10** See "Ants" scores in Benjamin Patterson and Benedikt Stegmayer, Ben Patterson – Event Scores (Berlin: Verl. für Zeitgenössische Kunst und Theorie, 2012), 36–41.

**11** See "Free—for Keith Rowe" score in Patterson and Stegmayer, Ben Patterson – Event Scores, 292.

**12** Gruhn, "Benjamin Patterson."

**13** Benjamin Patterson, interviewed by Benedikt Stegmayer in Ben Patterson – Event Scores, 29.

**14** See Brandon LaBelle, *Sonic Agency: Sound and Emergent Forms of Resistance* (London: Goldsmiths Press, 2020) and Brendan Labelle, *Acoustic Justice: Listening, Performativity, and the Work of Reorientation* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic), 2021.

**15** Gruhn citing Adam Szymczyk, March 23, 2016, email to Ben Patterson.

**16** See "Pond" scores in Ben Patterson – Event Scores, 81–83.

**17** Fred Moten cited by Valerie Cassel Oliver in "The Curious Case of Benjamin Patterson," in Benjamin Patterson: Born in the State of FLUX/us, 31.

**18** Ibid., 16.

**19** Lyrics provided by the estate upon acquisition.

**20** Andrew Russeth, "The In Sound from Way Out: Benjamin Patterson at Documenta 14 in Kassel and Athens," ARTnews, June 8, 2017, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/market/the-in-sound-from-way-out-benjamin-patterson-at-documenta-14-in-kassel-and-athens-8486/>.

**21** Gruhn, "Benjamin Patterson."

**22** As Art Institute of Chicago time-based media conservator Kristin M. MacDonough reflects: "When Benjamin Patterson's sound art piece—his sonic graffiti—was installed outdoors in McKinlock Court in the summer of 2019, we consulted with the artist's estate on the intention of the artwork and received instructions that the speakers should be camouflaged, among other guidelines for installation. This led to the exhibition team selecting outdoor speakers that are water resistant and small enough to blend into the courtyard foliage, but still powerful enough for an immersive aural experience as the artist intended." See Kristin M. MacDonough, "Further Tales of Saving Digital Media," Art Institute of Chicago website, January 16, 2020, <https://www.artic.edu/articles/785/further-theses-of-saving-digital-media>.

**23** Installation guide provided by the estate upon acquisition.

**24** Ibid.

# Yoko Ono's Touch Piece: A Work in Multiple Media, 1960–2009

## Kevin Concannon

*I consider my shows like giving an elephant's tail. When a blind man says "what's an elephant", you lead the man to an elephant and let him grasp the tail and say "that's an elephant".*

*The existing material in the gallery is like an elephant's tail and the larger part is in your mind. But you have to give a tail to lead into it. The thing is to promote a physical participation that will lead you into this larger area of mind.*

*What I'm trying to do is make something happen by throwing a pebble into the water and creating ripples.*

–Yoko Ono Facebook post, March 16, 2020

*Yoko Ono's work is in the world. It's not here in the Museum. What we can do is bring traces.*

– Christophe Cherix, co-curator, *Yoko Ono: One Woman Show, 1960-1971*<sup>1</sup>

Known primarily for her early text-based conceptual works and her proto-feminist performance work, Yoko Ono has incorporated haptic interaction (or interaction relating to the sense of touch) into her works in various media from the very beginning of her artistic career. This essay explores her many and varied uses of the haptic in a series of *Touch Poems* and *Touch Pieces* in various media—and various contexts—with vastly different receptions by her many audiences.

Among the artist's earliest known works, her first series of *Touch Poems* (fig. 1) was produced in the form of small booklets. Originally made in 1960, the *Touch Poems* were first exhibited in January of 1962 at New York's Living Theater. In *Touch Poem # 5*, for example, lines of tape replaced text, and clumps of different hair glued to the pages were treated as illustrations (fig. 2). At first glance, they appear to be Braille texts. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that there



Fig. 1. Yoko Ono, *Touch Poem # 5*, 1960. Photos: John Bigelow Taylor. © Yoko Ono



Fig. 2. Yoko Ono, Touch Poem # 5, 1960. © Yoko Ono  
Digital image © 2014 MoMA NY.

is nothing to be read in the tape (at least in any conventional sense); it is (relatively) smooth. Though the lines imply a narrative text, it is an opaque language. Similarly, the clumps of hair, in their different textures and colors, imply many different things. Only the barest hint, however, is given as to what. Is there a cast of characters, one a redhead and another with black hair? (The black hair is, in fact, Ono's own.) Or is it talismanic? Its impenetrable mystery at once begs and defies any definitive interpretation. Perhaps more importantly, in the way language per se is withheld, the *Touch Poems* foreground other sensory information, thus encouraging in the viewer a heightened awareness of the nature of perception itself and of the viewer's own role in constructing meaning from *sensory* as well as *extrasensory* data.

According to the artist,

I was thinking about braille. Braille is a very interesting communication method in which you use "touch" to get information. It may create a deeper intake of the information with touch rather than casting your eyes to the

words. I thought of creating poems you take into your body by touch. [A] Poem is a way of limiting the information of the Universe by framing it. So I thought of framing poems without words for people to get it by touch.<sup>2</sup> [...] It bridges the conceptual and the sensory.<sup>3</sup>

Language, in fact, became central to Ono's next exhibition. Having returned to Japan in the spring of 1962, shortly after first exhibiting the *Touch Poem* booklets in New York, Ono performed a concert and exhibited her *Instructions for Paintings* (text-only pieces) at the Sogetsu Art Center. *Painting to be Constructed in your Head*, for example, instructs us to: "Go on transforming a square canvas in your head until it becomes a circle. Pick out any shape in the process and pin up or place on the canvas an object, a smell, a sound, or a color that came to your mind in association with the shape."

The program also lists *Touch Poems*.<sup>4</sup> While the literature has focused on the *Instructions for Paintings*, Midori Yoshimoto clarifies that other works were shown in this solo exhibition as well, stating that it "included, among other works, the artist's *Touch Poems* and *Instructions for Paintings*."<sup>5</sup> For this concert and exhibition, however, the announcement (fig. 3) itself is a touch poem. Headed "Works of Yoko Ono," it lists the works to be performed and exhibited in a column of full-justified type, with no spaces between the words, the words themselves cut off arbitrarily at the end of each line and picked up on the next. Immediately to the right of each line, random telephone numbers are embossed (but not printed), one telephone number per line, running down the entire column, subtly alerting recipients to the multi-sensory nature of the performance and exhibition. These embossed telephone numbers at once suggest Braille and, literally, lines of communication—telephone lines. In the pre-Internet world of 1962, telephone communication was a uniquely magical medium, allowing average people to connect virtually over extraordinary distances. The immediacy of verbal communication in the absence of physical proximity created a strangely disjunctive experience. The implicit demand for the reader's touch in Ono's *Touch Poems* and embossed exhibition announcement foregrounded the peculiarly virtual nature of telecommunication through this oddly haptic representation of an otherwise ephemeral communications medium.



Fig. 3. Yoko Ono, Works of Yoko Ono invitation card, 1962. © Yoko Ono



Fig. 4. Yoko Ono, *Touch Poem for a Group of People*, 1963, winter, 1964. From *Grapefruit*, 1964. © Yoko Ono

In her art, Ono often aspires, not for a direct message, but rather to plant a seed that is nourished by the viewer, nurtured and fully formed in his or her own mind. In the case of this 1962 invitation, Ono realized the concept of the seed quite literally, inserting into each envelope a sprouting soybean along with the printed and embossed announcement.

“I threw all the soybeans in a bathtub with some water in it and made it into *moyashi*. And it started to grow a little. And I put in the envelope that bean that was growing/half-growing. It was to touch that indented place in the invitation. But the seed that was half-growing was a beautiful thing to touch really.”<sup>6</sup>

Thus, at the very moment she introduces a pioneering text-based conceptual practice (and these *Instruction Paintings* are recognized as among the earliest examples of what we now generally refer to as conceptual art<sup>7</sup>), Ono is producing insistently haptic works. And as is often the case with Ono’s work, the *Touch Poems* would be re-imagined into conceptual works, performances, songs, and other manifestations as well; it was indeed a



## TOUCH PIECE

## Touch.

This piece was performed many times in different places in Europe, United States and Japan. Usually, the lights are put off and the audience touches each other for ten minutes to sometimes over two hours. In Nanzenji Temple in Kyoto, 1964, it lasted from evening till dawn. In London, people started to whistle the theme song of "Bridge of River Kwai" during the performance which became a chorus.

Fig. 5. Yoko Ono, *Touch Piece*, from *Grapefruit* (1970 edition).  
© Yoko Ono

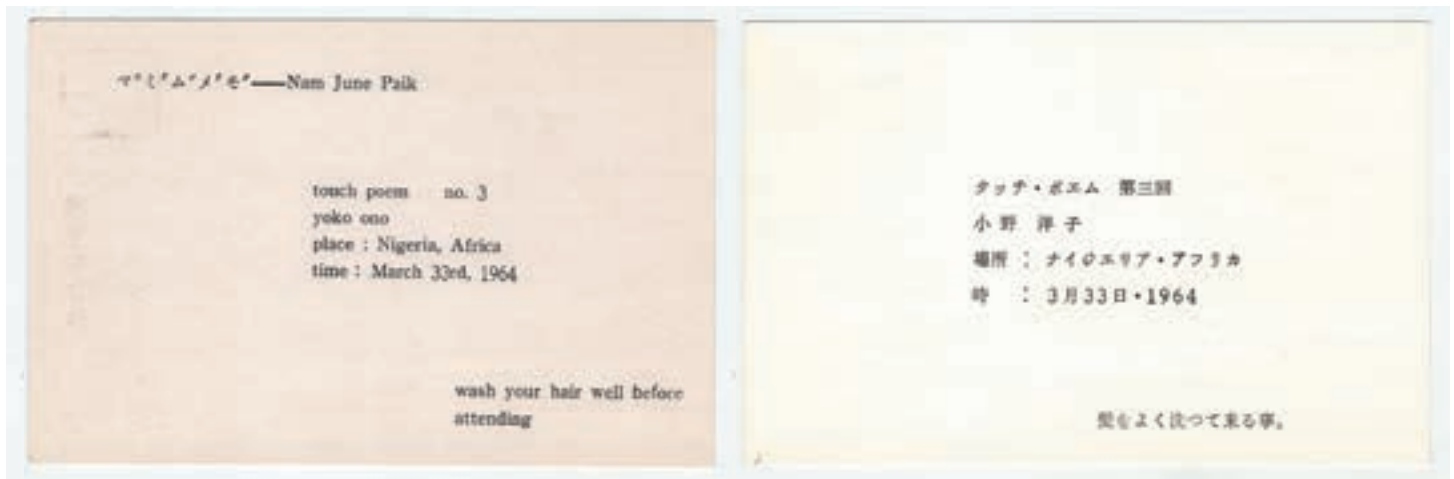


Fig. 6. Yoko Ono, *Touch Poem no. 3 (for Nam June Paik)*, 1964. © Yoko Ono

seed. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, for example, Ono performed *Touch Poem for a Group of People* (1963) (fig. 4) in various contexts. The instruction, first published in her 1964 book of instructions, *Grapefruit*, simply states: "Touch each other."<sup>8</sup> In a later publication of *Grapefruit*, in the "Information" section, Ono included another variation, *Touch Piece*, with the simple instruction, "Touch" (fig. 5), noting that this piece was performed many times in different places in Europe, the United States, and Japan.<sup>9</sup> "Usually the lights are put off and the audience touches each other for ten minutes to sometimes over two hours."<sup>10</sup>

In a program note for a September 1965 performance at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Avant Garde Festival in New York, Ono offered a brief history of the work, first the object and then the performance:

Touch poem was first exhibited in the lobby of the Living Theater in New York City on January 8 '62 in the evening of AN ANTHOLOGY. It was

then exhibited at the Sogetsu Art Center in Tokyo for the evening of WORKS BY YOKO ONO. *Touch Poem*, the audience participation piece, was first performed in NAIQUA GALLERY, February 1964. Since then, it was performed in Kyoto, Nigeria, Berlin, Florence, Aachen, and New York.

Ono describes not only the object and performance manifestations of *Touch Poem* here, but actual—and *purely imaginary*—performances as well. The Kyoto and New York citations no doubt refer to performances that she herself gave in those cities. Midori Yoshimoto notes that in early 1964, Ono performed *Touch Piece* at Naiqua Gallery in Tokyo, in which she and other participants "sat in a circle and touched each other in silence."<sup>11</sup> The Berlin, Florence, and Aachen references correspond to performances of the piece given by her friend Charlotte Moorman on her 1965 European tour with Nam June Paik. The Nigerian performance, however, is imaginary, and refers to a postcard event from 1964, *Touch Poem No. 3* (fig. 6).

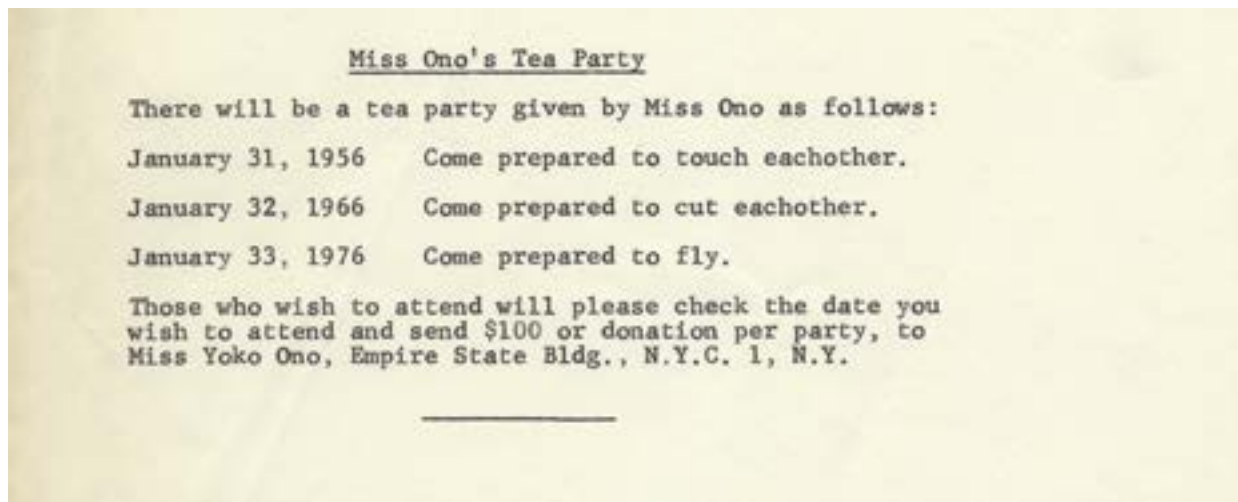


Fig. 7. Yoko Ono, *Miss Ono's Tea Party*, 1966. © Yoko Ono

*Touch Poem No. 3* exists in two versions: English and Japanese. While it appears to be a simple announcement card, the date of March 33<sup>rd</sup> 1964 suggests otherwise. The quote attributed to Nam June Paik is actually an unpronounceable phrase written in katakana syllables. Explaining Paik's quote, Ono stated:

It has to do with communication on a different dimension. It is very important that we shouldn't always think that our communication is on one dimension. There's another dimension where it's not communicable in the sense that we're used to. But nevertheless it communicates. Nam June Paik was a very close friend of mine. I really respected him. By the way, he really loved *Touch Piece*. He thought it was a great piece. So I felt good about making a tribute to Nam June. I think he would be one of the very few people who would understand the reason I did it that way.<sup>12</sup>

Another imaginary version is included in a card piece from 1966, *Miss Ono's Tea Party* (fig. 7). For the January 31, 1956 party, the artist instructs: "Come prepared to touch eachother." As with a number of iterations of this score, "each" and "other" abut one another typographically. Ono's *Grapefruit* also includes a score for such fictional versions.

#### *Touch Poem III*

Hold a touch poem meeting at somewhere  
In the distance or a fictitious [sic] address  
On a fictitious [sic] day.

1964 Spring  
(fig. 8)

An earlier version, dated to Summer 1963 and simply titled *Touch Poem*, also appears in *Grapefruit*:

#### *Touch Poem*

Give birth to a child.  
See the world through its eye.  
Let it touch everything possible  
And leave its fingermark there  
In place of a signature

i.e., Snow in India  
J.C.'s overcoat  
Simone's equilibrium  
Clouds  
Etc.  
(fig. 9)

This version, except for the title, is identical to a text that appears under the title *Instructions for Poem No. 81* on a sheet dated to 1963 that serves as a birth announcement for Ono's daughter Kyoko that August and also an announcement for the forthcoming *Grapefruit* (fig. 10). Here her daughter's handprint—or touch—connotes her very identity. Another iteration dated to 1963 Autumn instructs the reader to haptically explore her environments (fig. 11).

#### *Touch Poem V*

Feel the wall.  
Examine its temperature and moisture.  
Take notes about many different walls.

On March 13 and April 2 of that year, at the Naiqua Gallery in Tokyo, the instruction was realized as a participatory performance.<sup>13</sup> Midori Yamamura and Reiko Tomii report that, according to filmmaker Takahiko Imura, some



Fig. 8. Yoko Ono, *Touch Poem III* and *Touch Poem IV*, 1964 spring, 1964. From *Grapefruit*, 1964. © Yoko Ono



Fig. 9. Yoko Ono, *Touch Poem*, 1963 autumn, 1963, 1964. From *Grapefruit*, 1964. © Yoko Ono



Fig. 10. Yoko Ono, *Birth Announcement*, 1963 © Yoko Ono



Fig. 11. Yoko Ono, *Touch Poem V*, 1963 autumn, 1964. From *Grapefruit*, 1964. © Yoko Ono



Fig. 12. Yoko Ono, *Tickets for Three Kyoto Events/Evening Till Dawn*, 1964.  
© Yoko Ono

participants, while initially tentative, soon “found their own ways of expressing the act of ‘touching,’” and they “all awakened [their] sensations by touching, which was rarely an issue in the art world.” Nam June Paik kept in touch by phone and, according to Iimura, “used the ringing sound [...] to touch the participants.”<sup>14</sup> For Paik, too then, his touch was activated though electrical transmission, perhaps especially fitting for an artist who had transitioned from musician to art-robot maker to the world’s best-known video artist. (Curiously, this calls to mind Ono’s announcement for the 1962 Sogetsu Art Center event with the embossed telephone numbers.)

Paik himself discussed this performance of *Touch Piece* in 1970:

#### *Touch Poem*

At one time and one place, one fatal disaster was about to happen.....centering around Yoko.....  
at this extreme situation, the phrase that was inspired paradoxically was a romantic word.  
“Touch.”

In 1964, at the Naiqua Gallery in Shinbashi, one small premier was conducted. I was unable to go since I got a cold. So, I processed the sound of

Ring Ring by telephone as a Series-style (Tone-series-style), and touched, from this side, with only signal sound without having the other party pick up. In accordance with a popular word in the previous year, this must have been so-called “McLuhan-style participation”, mustn’t it?

Later, during the German performances with Charlotte Moorman, I brought this piece with me; it was applauded everywhere. This was meant for all of the audience members to caress one another.<sup>15</sup>

Later in 1964, as part of a three-day program that also included a concert and a symposium, Ono secured the famous Zen monastery, Nanzenji, for an event she called *Evening till Dawn* (fig. 12).

On the night of a full moon, approximately fifty people—mostly Kyoto residents, but also some American and French participants—gathered at the temple gate, where each was given a card with the instruction “silence.” Walking quietly to a garden behind the temple, they received another instruction card, “touch,” and spread themselves throughout the garden, the verandah, the corridor, and the tatami-mat rooms. Interpre-



Fig. 13. Yoko Ono, *Touch Piece at the Electric Garden*, London, May 28, 1967. Photo: Ross Benson. "Covent Garden Goes Electric," *London Look*, June 10, 1967, 12-13. Courtesy of Mikihiko Hori.

tation of the instruction was left to the participants, although Ono explained to them that objects to touch were not limited to physical things. While some literally touched other participants' bodies, others watched the moon or sky, *wishing* to touch.<sup>16</sup>

The character of this performance was quite different. And Ono recalled: "the monks accepted and greeted my work with a very Zen attitude themselves, without being on guard. The evening went so well because of this symbiotic vibration."<sup>17</sup>

While the location of a Zen monastery no doubt contributed to a more solemn performance in Kyoto, later performances took on characters all their own. At the aforementioned 1965 Festival of the Avant-Garde in New York, for example, the idea of touching each other provoked discomfort among participants. According to the artist: "People [were] very, very shy and extremely embarrassed and all giggling.... Everybody was giggling. [and] Men were extremely vocal in expressing their embarrassment."<sup>18</sup>

Ono would perform *Touch Piece* in London as well. One of these performances occurred on October 15, 1966 at the launch party for the underground newspaper, *International Times*. She would later explain the genesis of the piece to journalists for an article in the newspaper:

When I first thought of the idea [1958] I couldn't sleep at night because it was so beautiful. I was going everywhere saying to people, Did you

realize how beautiful it is to touch each other? And that was a long time before hippie or yippie or anything, right, it was 1958 when I first did that. I don't know how old you were in 1958 but people couldn't understand it. Touching just touching and then I made concrete object poetry that were to be appreciated just by touching them. They were my first touch pieces. It was then I realized that instead of touching an object it was better to touch each other [...].<sup>19</sup>

At a 1967 performance in a London nightclub, the Electric Garden, *Touch Piece* took on a very different character still. In a feature article on the opening of the new nightclub, *London Look* reported that Ono sent blindfolded participants (fig. 13.) into the crowd. According to the magazine, one girl said: "It's a nice way to meet people."<sup>20</sup> Ono told me: "I explained to the audience that [they] will be going around the audience to 'touch.' It was a touch piece but a fun one. [They] went around the audience behind them, and touched their butts."<sup>21</sup>

In August of 1968, Ono and John Lennon would offer *Touch Piece* to the audience of *Frost on Saturday*. As the program concluded, with the sounds of *Hey Jude* playing out the episode, Ono offered: "We're just trying to communicate. And communication itself is art, and art is communication. And so that, um, people are getting so intelligent that you don't have to explain too much, all you have to do is just touch each other, just shake hands, and so this is a way of touching each other." And in February 1972, when they were invited to co-host The

Mike Douglas Show for a week, they invited their first-day audience to “touch each other” as well. In the latter case, the video shows the participatory performance.<sup>22</sup> Norma Coates, in her essay about the couple’s takeover of Douglas’s show for the week, notes that “Douglas was an able foil for Ono’s feminist opinions, but her feminist art baffled him.”<sup>23</sup>

The piece threatened propriety, especially since Ono told audiences to just put their hand on the next person and leave it there. What could rile a sophisticated audience in a gallery could draw unwanted attention from television regulators, or angry phone calls and letters from offended viewers. Douglas seemed immediately and acutely aware that certain audience members might put their hands in the wrong places [...]. Douglas turned the piece into a comedy routine, running through the audience while shouting “touch touch touch touch,” as though at a football game. His humor reassured his regular audience and gave his cameras something to follow, yet it did not interfere with the purpose and intent of Ono’s piece. It was a tacit recognition that he could not stop her.<sup>24</sup>

If the Electric Garden performance reflected the Swinging London of 1967, six years later in 1973, another performance offered much the same content, but a very different context. By then a feminist activist living in New York and married to Lennon, Ono sent three blindfolded women into the audience during her Town Hall benefit concert for WBAI public radio with instructions to find a man with a tail pinned to his bottom. *Melody Maker*, the British music magazine, offered a decidedly pop culture assessment: “What’s happening is a happening of sorts, and though there are several who happen to the exits, most of us like our ass pinched.”<sup>25</sup> While male audience members may have missed it, the joke was on them. Notably, the artist later insisted that there was no feminist agenda here, “just fun.”<sup>26</sup> However, Ono’s now-feminist humor is clearly revealed on the liner notes to her *Feeling the Space* album, released a few months later. Ono lists her all-male band and production staff with rather peculiar statistics. For example: “Jack Douglas—chief engineer (581-6505) · November 6, 1945; 6’; 175 lbs; chest: 40”; waist: 32”; hips: 40”.” And a note on the LP’s cover reads: “This album is dedicated to the sisters who died in pain and sorrow and those who are now in prisons and in mental hospitals for being unable to survive in the male society.” (The previous year she and Lennon were given a



Fig. 14. Yoko Ono, *Touch Me* picture sleeve; B-side of John Lennon/Plastic Ono Band *Power to the People* (Apple Records, 1971). Courtesy of Yoko Ono.

“Positive Image of Women” award by the National Organization for Women for their records, *Woman is the Nigger of the World* and *Sisters O Sisters*.)

Once Ono and Lennon became partners, her musical performances, an essential part of her career all along, were preserved on pop singles and LP records. A surprising number of her songs dealt with touch as well. On 1970’s *Yoko Ono/Plastic Ono Band*, for example, two tracks addressed the haptic: a track titled *Touch Me* (fig. 14) and another called *Why Not*, which concludes with a section in which she wails “touch me, John.” Numerous Ono tracks over the years are marked by the haptic, none perhaps more *sensually* than 1980’s *Kiss, Kiss, Kiss*, with its refrain: “Touch, Touch, Touch, Touch me love.”

Today, of course, Ono is still recognized as a leading feminist artist. And it’s now common for her work of all periods to be understood as such. Scholar Peggy Phelan, in her essay for *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, argues that “one of the most revolutionary legacies of feminist art concerns the epistemological contours of touch itself.”<sup>27</sup> “To think of touch epistemologically,” Phelan continues, “requires that we put the sentient body at the center of knowing [...]” Elsewhere in her essay, which touches upon Ono’s 1964 *Cut Piece* at some length, but does not address any of Ono’s *touch pieces*, per se, Phelan describes Ono’s visual and performance

art as “among the most explicit meditations on touch, love, and peace we are likely to see for some time.”<sup>28</sup>

Phelan is not the first scholar to connect the haptic with performance. Kathy O'Dell, in her 1997 essay “Displacing the Haptic: Performance Art, the Photographic Document, and the 1970s” argues that “the reception of performance art—which is to say, the reception of the photographic documents from which performance art is inseparable—is not exclusively dependent on visual experience, but relies heavily on touch.”<sup>29</sup> These photographs, she explains, are the medium through which most people experience performance art. And in many cases, particularly in the 1970s, performances were staged specifically for documentation destined for magazines, journals, and artists' books, which were most often viewed and handled in the home, soliciting a response both visual and haptic.<sup>30</sup>

While Ono's participatory *Touch Piece* performances facilitate a direct and unmediated touching (although one could certainly argue that this touch is displaced from the artist's own body to those of her audience/participants), with her 2008 exhibition, *Touch Me*, Ono returned to touch as a major theme, displacing the haptic, as O'Dell describes it, not through photographic reproduction, but through sculptural reproduction of a human body. One piece, *Touch Me III* (figs. 15-17), features a long table with several small compartments, each containing a section of a woman's body cast in silicone. On an adjacent pedestal, a bowl of water is offered with the instruction: “Wet your index and middle fingers to touch the body parts.” *Touch Me III* speaks at once of separation and connection. The basin of water, connoting ritual purification for many viewers, also relates to the artist's many *Water Pieces*. “We're all water in different containers; someday we'll all evaporate together,” she has stated.<sup>31</sup> Water and air signify for Ono elements that connect us all. Touch, too, offers connection. From shaking hands to embracing, a caress and more.



Fig. 15. Yoko Ono, *Touch Me III* (detail), 2008.  
Courtesy of Galerie Lelong & Co., New York. © Yoko Ono



Fig. 16. Yoko Ono, *Touch Me III* (detail), 2008.  
Courtesy of Galerie Lelong & Co., New York. © Yoko Ono



Fig. 17. Yoko Ono at *Touch Me* opening, April 19, 2008.  
Courtesy of Galerie Lelong & Co., New York. © Yoko Ono

Reviewing the exhibition for *Artnet*, Michèle C. Cone describes the work as “an invitation to feel the cold of death. Whether these works are inspired by personal concerns of aging and dying or by the current state of the world, they make their point admirably,” she concludes.<sup>32</sup>

Ono's interpretation differed, however. On the day of the exhibition's opening, the artist told talk show host Leonard Lopate: “It's to say we are all human. Let's touch each other.... Touching is more to do with love, caring, communication.”<sup>33</sup> By month's end, however, the piece told a very different story. A new didactic panel accompanied the work: “*Touch Piece III* was designed by the artist as a participatory work and the audience was invited to touch the sculpture. However, the body parts were deformed, and the toe was severed by rough handling. The artist has chosen to leave the damage visible as a sign of the violence women experience through life.”

She would address the fragility of the work when she recreated it in marble the following year for the *Venice Biennale* at which she was honored with the Golden Lion. She spoke to *The Japan Times* on that occasion.

Ono reflects that although many of her works are generated through instructions, they are not limited to a hierarchical relationship between artist and audience and, as in “touch me III,” can be inverted or freely interpreted. “I was always interested in that aspect of my work,” she wrote to *The Japan Times*. “I like the way the pieces keep growing because of the audience participation.”<sup>34</sup>

Curiously, the gallery's press release makes no mention of *Touch Me III*, but touts *Touch Me II* (fig. 18) as the central work:

The centerpiece of the exhibition will be a large canvas covering the entire width of the gallery. Openings will be cut into the canvas, and viewers are invited to insert body parts through. Encompassed in this simple act are opposing elements of isolation, exposure, vulnerability, and defiance. The viewer will have the option to photograph themselves with supplied cameras; these photos will be displayed together on another canvas with the participant's own comments and thoughts written underneath the photos, furthering the inclusive nature of this work.<sup>35</sup>



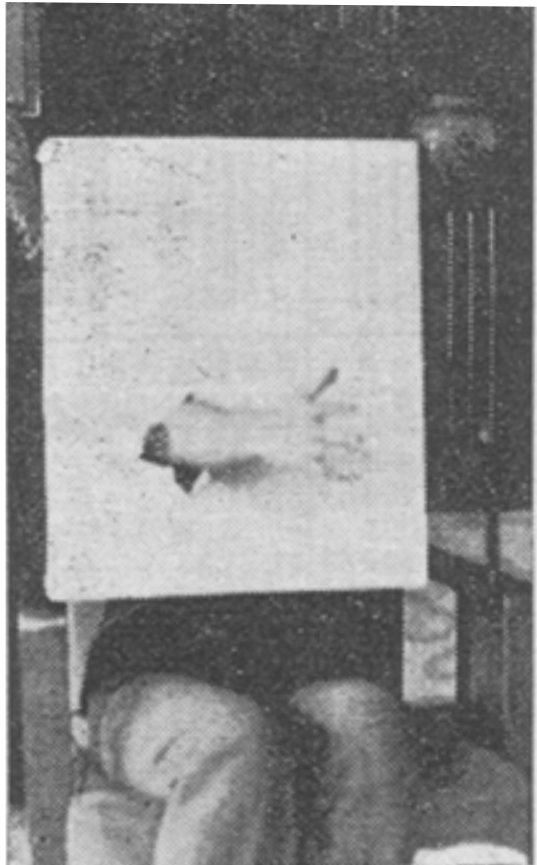
Fig. 18. Yoko Ono, Installation view, *Touch Me I* and *Touch Me II*, 2008. Courtesy of Galerie Lelong & Co., New York. © Yoko Ono



According to Cone, “the resulting image is a morbid one, showing severed body parts strewn across a metaphorical battle field.”<sup>36</sup> The image Cone conjures as a “metaphorical battle field,” however, is open to multiple interpretations, and recognized as such by the press release.

At Ono's 1962 concert at Sogetsu Art Center, her *Painting to Shake Hands (Painting for Cowards)* (fig.19) was on view in the lobby exhibition. For *Painting to Shake Hands*, a performer is situated behind a canvas and inserts their arm through a hole in the canvas to greet guests.<sup>37</sup> The connection to *Touch Piece* seems clear enough. In announcing the impromptu performance of *Touch Piece* on the 1968 Frost on Saturday program, for example, Ono told the studio audience, “All you have to do is just touch each other, just shake hands, and so this is a way of touching each other.”<sup>38</sup> Scholar Martha Ann Bari has observed:

When Ono actualized these instructions by sitting behind a canvas with a hole in the middle, she became the embodiment of her painting,



Figs. 19 Yoko Ono, *Painting to Shake Hands (Painting for Cowards)*, 1961. From “Kemuri no chokoku/Moji no nai shishu” (*Fog Sculpture/Anthology of Poem without Letters*) *Shukan Yomiuri (Weekly Yomiuri)*, May 6, 1962, 69. Courtesy of Midori Yoshimoto.

with which the viewers were to physically interact. The spontaneous and improvisational interchange between artist and audience places Ono's painting between the media of painting and performance. By adding the “life media” of touch and sign language to the visual codes one commonly uses to “know” a painting, every viewing becomes a phenomenological experience that is shared by artist and audience.<sup>39</sup>

A similar scene on the Sogetsu stage (although unrequited on the other side of the canvas) was documented in a review in the *Asahi Journal*. The anonymous critic described the performance of *AOS—To David Tudor* as:

An opera without any sound of instruments, in which all the participants read newspapers in different languages.... Arms and legs came out of the linen curtain and moved quietly as if they were groping for something. In front of such activities, on the other hand a French man and a Japanese man sat on chairs and systematically continued a strange French lesson.<sup>40</sup>

While this performance was not a *Touch Piece* per se, it clearly resembles the scene Cone describes. Against the backdrop of multiple languages and attempts to understand them, it might also be construed to address frustrated communication, a literal failed “reaching out” not so different from Paik's earlier cited gibberish quote on the 1964 postcard event.

It shares the device of “limbs through the curtain” with yet another performance documented at Bluecoat Chambers in Liverpool in 1967. While the official program for Ono's Bluecoat Chambers performance on September 26, 1967 includes no *Touch Piece*, apparently one was performed. An undated document from the artist's archives appears to be a “prop list” of sorts for the event. It requests items both “For the Lecture” and “For the Performance.” The prop list specifies these pieces for the concert: *Peek Piece*, *Touch Piece*, *Cleaning Piece*, *Fly Piece*, *Wrapping Piece*, *Fog and Time Piece*, *Promise Piece* and *Add Colour Painting*. Since the Bluecoat engagement is among the few during this period for which both a lecture and performance were booked—and the pieces performed largely correspond with those on the prop list, it seems a reasonable assumption that it was used for this event. While the prop list and the official program differ slightly, a review corresponds more or less with both. While the official program lists *Peek Piece*, *Line Piece*, *Fly Piece*, *Wrapping*

*Piece*, *Fog Piece + Time Piece*, and *Wind Piece* (to be performed sometime during the evening—possibly with the fog machine for *Fog Piece*), a review of the concert by Spencer Leigh lists *Pig Piece* (a mis-hearing of *Peek*), *Torch Piece* (most likely a mis-understanding of *Touch Piece*), *Cleaning Piece* (including what the author calls *Add Red*—actually *Add Colour Painting*), *Fly Piece*, *Tuna Piece*, *Wrapping Piece* (including a description of what is in fact *Promise Piece*), and *Goodnight Piece* (which describes *Fog Piece*).<sup>41</sup> The prop list requires the following items for *Touch Piece*:

- Large canvas to hang
- Long bamboo sticks and small flash lights [sic] and strings to bind the flashlights [or torches]
- One edge razors and scissors
- Large flashlight
- Baloons [sic] (strange shaped baloons)

Leigh's description of *Torch Piece* corresponds:

A large black cloth is brought to the front of the stage and held upright. It contains five holes. From out of four of them a battery-powered torch on a long pliable stick emerges. From the other, a pair of knickers on a similar stick. The

audience loves it. The sticks reach out further and then retreat, to be replaced by large balloons. A balloon bursts. The black cloth is taken away.<sup>42</sup>

Other than *Touch Me II* at the 2008 Lelong show, which shares with it the holes that also appeared at Sogetsu, this *Touch Piece* (or *Torch Piece*) stands alone. The torches might of course be understood as lines of communication, their beams of light reaching out as they do, to audience members.<sup>43</sup>

Throughout her career, Ono has sought with her work to extend our sensory apprehension of the universe—often using touch. The original *Touch Poems* of 1960 demand our touch with a vague promise of information not physically there. Suggesting lines of text, the lines of paper tape are blank and smooth, leading “readers” to ever more focused sensory sensitivity in the hopes of “getting it by touch.” She insists with her conceptual text pieces that we share the responsibility for the creation of images—optical, sensual, or otherwise— using her linguistic “seeds” to make our own mental objects. And with her participation performances, she urges us to connect with one another through touch—with varying results. Over the course of her career, these performances have resembled spiritual practices, as at Nanzenji;

	Bluecoat Chambers	
Prop List	Program	Leigh Review
<i>Peek Piece</i>	<i>Peek Piece</i>	<i>Pig Piece (Peek Piece)</i>
	<i>Line Piece</i>	
<i>Touch Piece</i>		<i>Torch Piece (Touch Piece)</i>
<i>Cleaning Piece</i>		<i>Cleaning Piece</i>
<i>Fly Piece</i>	<i>Fly Piece</i>	<i>Fly Piece</i>
<i>Wrapping Piece</i>	<i>Wrapping Piece</i>	<i>Wrapping Piece</i>
<i>Fog and Time Piece</i>	<i>Fog Piece + Time Piece</i>	<i>Goodnight Piece (Fog Piece)</i>
<i>Promise Piece</i>		<i>Promise Piece (with Wrapping Piece)</i>
<i>Add Colour Painting</i>		<i>Add Red Piece (Add Colour Painting</i>
	<i>Wind Piece</i>	(likely part of <i>Fog Piece</i> -to blow fog)
		<i>Tuna Piece</i>



Fig. 20. Yoko Ono, *Add Colour Painting: Touch Me*, 2008. Ed. 300. Courtesy of Galerie Lelong & Co., New York. © Yoko Ono

encounter groups, as at the 1965 Avant-Garde festival; titillating entertainment, as at the Electric Circus; and feminist consciousness-raising—however humorous, as at the WBAI Town Hall concert. The spiritual enrichment, therapeutic benefits, cheap thrills, and feminist education were all achieved through the sense of touch.

In a 1966 document titled *To the Wesleyan People*, Ono discussed her ideas of sensory isolation in the context of then-popular Happenings:

People might say that we never experience things separately, they are always in fusion, and that is why “the happening,” which is a fusion of all sensory perceptions. Yes, I agree. But if that is so it is all the more reason and challenge to create a sensory experience isolated from other sensory experiences, which is something rare in daily life. Art is not merely a duplication of life. To assimilate art in life is different from art duplicating life.<sup>44</sup>

Over the course of her now more than sixty-year career, Ono has returned to seemingly simple themes, realizing them in multiple media, with various receptions, over the course of many years.

And as with all of these pieces, with each iteration of her *Touch* pieces, Ono challenges her audiences to connect in a different way—to focus their act of perception in a manner that lends a unique intensity, not only to the process of perceiving itself, but to the things perceived as well.

In conjunction with her 2008 exhibition, Ono issued a multiple, *Add Colour Painting: Touch Me* (fig. 20), of 2008. A small, prefabricated canvas covered with Plexiglas that has the words “Touch Me” dye-cut out of it, the piece conflates the optical, the haptic, the conceptual, and the performative. As with the original 1960 *Touch Poems*, this piece challenges viewers to transgress ordinary gallery or museum rules and actually *touch* a painting, it relates to multiple other aspects of the artist’s oeuvre, most obviously, the text-based instruction paintings for which she is distinguished as a leading conceptual artist. It’s tempting to imagine that this multiple has brought Ono’s multiple iterations of *Touch Piece* full circle. But that’s not likely.

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**Notes**

**1** “Inside Yoko Ono’s MOMA Retrospective,” *Rolling Stone* YouTube Channel, last accessed on March 2, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=55&v=\\_YZq2iATnl0&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=55&v=_YZq2iATnl0&feature=emb_logo).

**2** Yoko Ono, electronic communication with the author, November 30, 2008.

**3** Ono, conversation with the author, January 27, 2009, New York.

**4** Program reproduced in *Instructions For Paintings by Yoko Ono May 24, 1962*, ed. Jon Hendricks (Budapest: Galeria 56, 1993), n.p.

**5** Midori Yoshimoto, “1962-1964,” in *Yoko Ono One Woman Show 1960-1971*, eds. Klaus Biesenbach and Christoph Cherix (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2015), 79. It also, apparently, contained a canvas version of *Painting to Shake Hands*.

**6** Ono, January 27, 2009.

**7** The instruction paintings are collected in Jon Hendricks, *Yoko Ono: Instructions For Paintings, May 24, 1962* (Budapest: Galeria 56, 1993.)

**8** Most iterations of this text seem to deliberately butt the words up against each other.

**9** See, for example, “Touch Piece,” in *9 Concert Pieces for John Cage*, December 15, 1966, reproduced in Alexandra Munroe with Jon Hendricks, *Yes Yoko Ono* (New York: Abrams, 2000), 281.

**10** In the 1971 Simon and Schuster paperback edition of *Grapefruit*. Yoko Ono, *Grapefruit* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971), n.p. The original edition of 500 copies was published by the Wunternaum Press in Tokyo, 1964.

**11** Yoshimoto, “1962-1964.” She cites Takahiko Imura, *Ono Yoko: Hitoto sakuhin* (Tokyo: Bunka shuppan-kyoku, 1985), 83.

**12** Ono, January 27, 2009.

**13** There remains some confusion regarding the date(s) of the performances at Naiqua Gallery. In the chronology Reiko Tomii and I produced for *Yes Yoko Ono*, we dated a single physical performance there to “June, 1964.” Subsequently, Midori Yamamura detailed performances there with specific dates: March 13 and April 2, 1964. (See next footnote.) Yamamura cites filmmaker Takahiko Imura as a witness—and presumably he dated the two performances, one of which included Paik’s remote participation. Interestingly, March 33<sup>rd</sup> aligns with April 2<sup>nd</sup>, more or less, assuming one continues counting within an extended month of March. In Yoshimoto’s later text, she cites Imura’s story about a performance in February. See: Yoshimoto, “Touch Piece,” in *Yoko Ono One Woman Show 1960-1971*, 92.

**14** Reiko Tomii, “Yoko Ono: Tokyo/1964,” *X-TRA* 7, no.1 (Winter 2004): 43. Tomii is reporting information from Yamamura’s wall labels in the exhibition under review (*Grapefruit: Yoko Ono in 1964*, curated by Yamamura). Accessed on April 10, 2020, <https://www.x-traonline.org/article/yoko-ono-tokyo1964>.

**15** Nam June Paik, “Ono Yoko vs. Yoko Ono,” in *The Book Review* 1, no. 1 (April 1970): 32. Translated by, and courtesy of, Mikihiko Hori.

**16** Yoko Ono cited by Midori Yoshimoto, “Evening till Dawn,” in *Yes Yoko Ono*, 156.

**17** Ono, quoted in Yoshimoto, “Evening...”

**18** Ono, interview with the author, January 27, 2009, New York.

**19** Yoko Ono, John Lennon, Jamie Mendelkay, and William Bloom, “Interview Piece: Yoko Ono & Grapefruit,” *International Times* 1, no. 110 (August 12-26, 1971): 15. Cited by Yoshimoto and reproduced in *Yoko Ono One Woman Show 1960-1971*, 225.

**20** Ross Benson, “Covent Garden Goes Electric,” *London Look*, June 10, 1967, 12.

**21** Yoko Ono, electronic communication with the author, December 1, 2008.

**22** See Norma Coates, “John, Yoko, and Mike Douglas Performing Avant Garde Art and Radical Politics on American Television in the 1970s,” in *Music and the Broadcast Experience: Performance, Production, and Audiences*, eds. Christine Baade and James A. Deaville (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016) Kindle e-book, Locations 4667-5059, companion website with video clip (example 9.2), accessed April 8, 2020, <https://global.oup.com/us/companion.websites/9780199314706/resources/ch9/9.3/>

**23** *Ibid.*, 222.

**24** *Ibid.*, 223-224.

**25** “Yoko: the lady’s a winner,” *Melody Maker*, June 2, 1973, 33.

**26** Ono, interview with the author, January 27, 2009, New York.

**27** Peggy Phelan, “The Returns of Touch: Feminist Performances, 1960-80,” in *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution* eds. Cornelia Butler and Lisa Gabrielle Mark (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 347.

**28** *Ibid.*, 350. Phelan’s essay moves on to discuss work by mostly women artists: Yayoi Kusama, Yoko Ono (*Cut Piece*, 1964), Marina Abramovic (*Rhythm O*, 1974), Gina Pane, Orlan, and Valie Export (*Touch Cinema*, 1968), among others. Significantly, Phelan discusses the relationship of Export’s *Touch Cinema* to Laura Mulvey’s concept of the male gaze, as detailed in her influential 1975 essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” Notions of female objectification and the male gaze are

perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in Export's performance.

**29** Kathy O'Dell, "Displacing the Haptic: Performance Art, the Photographic Document, and the 1970s," *Performance Research* 2, no. 1(1997): 74.

**30** *Ibid.*, 75.

**31** See, for example, a Tweet from March 9, 2013: "You are water. I'm water. We're all water in different containers. That's why it's so easy to meet. Someday we'll evaporate together." Ono's *Water Pieces* date to the earliest days of her career.

**32** Michèle C. Cone, "Death and the Artist," *Artnet*, May 20, 2008, accessed April 1, 2020, <http://www.artnet.com/magazine/features/cone/cone5-20-08.asp>

**33** The Leonard Lopate Show, WNYC-FW (May 1, 2008), accessed April 10, 2020, <http://www.wnyc.org/shows/lopate/episodes/2008/05/01/segments/97916>.

**34** Andrew Maerke, "Artist Yoko Ono is honored," *The Japan Times*, July 10, 2009, last accessed on April 1, 2020, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2009/07/10/arts/artist-yoko-ono-is-honored/#.XoOdGi2ZPyI>.

**35** Galerie Lelong press release for Yoko Ono: touch me, April 18-June 7, 2008, accessed April 6, 2020, <http://galerielelong.com/exhibitions/yoko-ono6>.

**36** Cone, "Death and the Artist."

**37** These images appeared with reviews of the concert by an unidentified author in the *Weekly Yomiuri* and Toshi Ichianagi, respectively. See: "Kemuri no chokoku / Moji no nai shishu" [Fog Sculpture/Anthology of Poem without Letters], in *Shukan Yomiuri* [*Weekly Yomiuri*], May 6, 1962, 69; and Toshi Ichianagi, "Saizen' ei no koe: Donarudo Richi e no hanron" [Voice of the most avant-garde: Objection to Donald Richie] *Geijutsu shincho* [*New trends in art*] 13, no. 8 (August 1962): 138. My thanks to Midori Yoshimoto for providing the former.

**38** Ono on *Frost on Saturday*, August 24, 1968.

**39** Martha Ann Bari, *Mass Media is the Message: Yoko Ono and John Lennon's 1969 Year of Peace* (PhD diss., University of Maryland, 2007), 35-36.

**40** "Daitanna kokoromi: Ono Yoko no ivento" [Bold Experiment: Yoko Ono's event], *Asahi Journal* (June 1962): 45. Quote and translation kindly provided by Midori Yoshimoto, September 15, 1999. In her essay on the concert for *Yes Yoko Ono* (p. 151), Yoshimoto specifies that they were *women's limbs*, based on other sources.

**41** See Spencer Leigh, "Strange Days Indeed," *beatles unlimited magazine* (January/February 1998): 50-51. With the exception of *Tuna Piece* (which seems to describe *Bag Piece*), Leigh's reviewed program corresponds largely with the prop list. *Line Piece*, listed on the

program is neither evidenced by Leigh's recounting nor the prop list. In email correspondence with Leigh on March 30, 2020, he indicated that he made his notes after the event, although the "review" was published 31 years later. Regarding the official program, he wrote, "I've never seen this before and I am pretty certain we didn't have programmes. Yoko (or Tony Cox) announced each item. I had heard *Peek Piece* as *Pig Piece* and probably thought it had something to do with the police [...]." As for *Torch Piece/Touch Piece*, he offered: "Touch could be their typing. It was torches on the end of long pliable sticks." Film documentation of the concert exists. A short section, assembled as *Yoko Ono: Music of the Mind*, includes excerpts of *Cleaning Piece*, *Add Red Painting*, *Fly Piece*, *Promise Piece*, *Bag Piece*, *Wrapping Piece* and *Fog Piece*. Accessed April 10, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PxNJbRtqTPs>. Additional footage in the artist's archive includes footage of *Time Piece*, but no footage of *Touch Piece*. Thanks to Connor Monahan of Studio Ono (Ono's office) for this information. It's possible that *Touch Piece* was difficult to film with lights pointing at the audience (television cameras) in the darkness.

**42** Leigh, "Strange Days Indeed," 50.

**43** There remains some confusion regarding the title. While I am unaware of a work called *Torch Piece*, I am likewise unaware of any other performances of *Touch Piece* that take this form. However, in the document from the artist's archives that I refer to as the "prop list," except for the knickers, the items required for *Touch Piece* align precisely with those described in the document. It is possible as well that this may have been a typographical error in the "prop list," as Leigh suggests. The knickers might simply be a nod to Swinging London or an unauthorized addition by one of the performers wielding the poles and torches. Ono had just recently gained notoriety for her *Film No. Four (Bottoms)*, which featured a series of bare backsides, so it could also reference that. The film's regular screenings, after months of legal wrangling, had begun in London the previous month. The balloons remain a mystery, at least within the context of *Touch Piece*, however. Ono's *Half-a-Wind Show* (known also as *Half-a-Sky Show*, among other titles) would open on October 11, less than two weeks later, and included the piece *Air Talk*, in the catalogue:

*Air Talk*, 1967

It's sad that the air is the only thing we share.

No matter how close we get to each other,  
there is always air between us.

It's also nice that we share the air.  
No matter how far apart we are,  
the air links us.

Thus the balloons, in this context can be understood as connecting us.

**44** "To the Wesleyan People, January 23, 1966," self-published insert in *The Stone* (New York: Judson Gallery, 1966), n.p.

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Until his retirement in January 2021, **Kevin Concannon** served as Professor of Art History and Director of the School of Visual Arts at Virginia Tech. His scholarship focuses on art of the 1960s, particularly the work of Yoko Ono. His exhibitions and catalogues include *Marilyn Minter: Splash (2020)*; *Willie Cole UpCycle (2018)*; *Laurie Anderson: Invented Instruments (2018)*; *Lynn Hershman Leeson: Body Collage (2016)*; *Two Trees: Rona Pondick and Jennifer Steinkamp (2013)*; *Agency: Art and Advertising* (with John Noga, 2008); *YOKO ONO IMAGINE PEACE Featuring John & Yoko's Year of Peace* (with John Noga, 2007); and *Mass Production: Artists' Multiples and the Marketplace*, 2006. His essay "Nothing Is Real: Yoko Ono's Advertising Art" appears in *YES: YOKO ONO* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. and the Japan Society of New York, 2000); along with "Chronology" and "Bibliography" (both with Reiko Tomii) in the same volume. In 2008, his essay "Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1964): From text to performance and back again," was featured in *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*.

# Iconoclastic and Irreverent (Buddhist-inflected) Simplicity in Fluxus Performance and Artworks

## Martin Patrick

*I think I brought a lot of domesticity into performance that wasn't there at all.*

—Alison Knowles<sup>1</sup>

*All teachings must be abandoned, not to mention non-teachings.*

—Diamond Sutra<sup>2</sup>

### Breaking Through

Owing to a wildly variegated community of artists and scholars with an allegiance to Fluxus, almost everyone has their own vision of this non-movement. To some it is hyper-organizational, to others driven by its objects, others orient it around key artists. There exists no singular, determinate, and accurate theorization of Fluxus, simply many competing narratives. This opens a trap door for the scholar, as the meanings of the words inscribed end up as indeterminate as the works themselves. The emphasis then shifts toward the reader-viewer/spectator-participant: it's (y)our problem now.

The Fluxus considered here involves a dispersed network of diverse artists with a history of anarchic performances and absurdist artworks. What I intend to consider in the following paper is how these aspects relate to strands of Buddhist philosophy running through certain artists' works and projects (specifically those of Alison Knowles, Robert Filliou, Geoff Hendricks, and Nam June Paik). These strands are meanwhile interwoven with other related facets and themes: domesticity, immateriality, repetition, mindfulness, contingency, simplicity, and play.

Throughout the history of Fluxus, we see metaphorical and associative links made by the artists themselves with Zen practice. As Alison Knowles commented in 2006: "I was thinking of the Zen encounter of the koan and the breakthrough a person makes through their own understanding of it. It is a metaphor of the piano destruction event, of breaking through into a newer kind of music though it involved a destructive act."<sup>3</sup>

In much Fluxus performance, the object is indeed present but also often scorned and shunned, abused and "hurt," or becomes a ritualistic performative device, a prop, and not entirely an artwork in itself. Buckets of water pouring. Toys, trinkets, and food-stuffs. Grotesque and ridiculous masks, disguises, and costumes. Knowles' mending of furniture and her bean papers as instruments. Early Fluxus performances in 1960s Germany; these involving a simultaneous destruction of expectations and the carnivalesque mutilation of instruments. In later events, gender norms fluidly shift in a *Flux Divorce* and a *Flux Wedding*, cultural norms in a *Flux Mass*. Celebratory gather-

ings, reunions, and dinners replace theatrical and street events. Entities and assumptions, involving both things and people become upended and uprooted.

Fluxus consistently involved the directness of a seemingly simple performance opening on to a breadth of existential and aesthetic questions: What is sound? What is an action? What are the relations between ostensibly destructive and potentially liberatory forces? A “breaking through”—although this type of breaking through often involved in the initial Fluxus actions a continuing reiteration of performative actions, establishing new variants of and parameters for art caught in the midst of and drawing upon life.

Fluxus either brought the everyday into art, or art into the everyday. But to concentrate on everyday phenomena, seen through an artful lens initiated a powerful and profound undoing of art. Dripping, shaving, throwing, hammering, cutting, yelling. Actions that implicate us in precarious, incidental moments, summoning the present. We might anticipate, experience, then relax once again. Cycles of affect that remind us of daily actions and interruptions: fighting, cleaning, organizing, eating, coupling, excreting, sleeping, waking, and ultimately dreaming through an art of what ifs. But the revolutionary transformations that George Maciunas for one held so dear never eventuated. But in place of that, smaller, more modest, and ultimately highly significant changes and creative developments, calling upon ever-shifting considerations of present existence; more performative entanglements than static representations.

I find widespread among Fluxus artists’ statements the expression of an avowal/disavowal; acceptance/non-acceptance, and outright contrarianism regarding the influence of major themes that one might consider of central importance to the Fluxus ethos. This would be rather expected given this international constellation of energetic individuals and a notable hybridization of artistic and philosophical phenomena, including the 20th-century avant-garde, socialist, and communitarian ideologies, and Eastern spirituality.

Within this dispersed grouping of individuals there exist/ed manifold, intricate tensions: interpersonal conflicts, aesthetic differences, political disputes; disagreements over both the course of specific Fluxus activities and endeavors, and notions of its place within art (and life) in broader terms. Fluxus works often exemplify a radical skepticism and some form of antagonism, veiled or not, and similarly in the views of the artists themselves there are many attitudes regarding the role of the spiritual as central to their practices. In artist Emmett Williams’s idiosyncratic 1992 memoir *My Life in Flux -- And Vice Versa* he argues that Zen has both everything and nothing to do with Fluxus:

Ultimately, there is only one way out of the Fluxus-Zen dilemma: the art of *zenzen*. *Zenzen* allows you to have it both ways. It teaches us that Fluxus is *totally* involved with Zen, Fluxus is *entirely* involved with Zen, Fluxus is *quite* involved with Zen, Fluxus is *completely* involved with Zen, and, even more important, Fluxus is *not at all* involved with Zen.<sup>4</sup>

As the Japanese word *zenzen* is often translated as “not at all,” Williams gets to indulge himself in a bit of wordplay, conflating this adverb with *Zen* itself, and the embedded contradiction he advocates for resembles a Zen koan itself.





Nam June Paik, *Buddha game*, 1991, television set, pages from a printed book, two gold leaf wooden Buddhas, neon, antenna, five television monitors, 147.3 x 92.7 x 59.7 cm. Art Gallery of New South Wales. Purchased 2002 © Nam June Paik Estate

### Nam June Paik's Zen Ambivalence

Using the example of musician LaMonte Young's instructional score *Draw a straight line and follow it*, probably most often recorded via photos of artist Nam June Paik's enactment entitled *Zen for Head* in which the artist painted an ink line with his body, critic Lori Waxman perceptively notes that: "These scores are obtuse not in the sense of being difficult to understand, but rather being so dumbly basic as to open themselves up to constant reinterpretation. [Ken] Friedman indicated this with the term 'implicativeness,' by which he meant that each Fluxwork implies many others, almost inexhaustibly so."<sup>5</sup>

The strongest difference from an emphasis upon small-scale domesticity might be the globally stretching technological transmissions of Nam June Paik's video art of the 1970s and '80s. But even given that, Paik repeatedly emphasized the domestic association with the television, what media theorist Marshall McLuhan called "the electronic hearth." Paik's early sculptures, rather than using taped video, manipulated the actual electronic signal of the television image itself, distorting it by way of magnets.

His later sculptural installations and projections then amassed way more images at once than could be comfortably or coherently processed and taken in by the viewer. This intentional barrage of images was prescient in terms of the disembodied overload of the social media era, simultaneously too much and not enough. Paik's *Good Morning Mr. Orwell* (1984) was an altogether ambitious effort for video art, which followed up on the implications of previous works, such as his psychedelic montage of appropriated and newly conjured imagery entitled *Global Groove* (1973).

Paik transmitted a counterargument to George Orwell's dystopian literary vision live by satellite to 25 million viewers on January 1, 1984. A kind of variety show featuring "everything from rock and roll to comedy to avant-garde music and dance" according to host George Plimpton, it reputedly suffered from many technical glitches, making it function less than smoothly, and the residual footage of *Good Morning Mr. Orwell* offers a rather awkward time capsule compendium. Nonetheless, such an aspirational and idiosyncratic effort by the artist who coined the term "information superhighway," seems curiously resonant with our current moment, as we are Zooming our spectral visages around the globe.

Paik understood the immediacy of entangled luminous signals and materials at play with one another. In a 1990s Flux Festival held at New York's Anthology Film Archives, the artist passed a ball back and forth from stage to audience, with a small camera attached to it, the resulting, seemingly chaotic, and topsy-turvy imagery projected alongside previous footage of artistic colleagues including Cage and Beuys. Thus, real time and recorded time via video are both simultaneously on offer, along with a gamesmanship that returns such efforts back to earth, or at least the stage-audience dynamic, again creating a playful flow back and forth. Artist in control, temporarily releasing control, gaining control once again. Improvised music and sonic experimentation providing another real-time context.

At the same Fluxus festival, the Anthology of Fluxus Films was shown. I was very happy to be able to see all these films together, projected, and in this fabled venue, especially in an era before YouTube streaming and widespread, desktop access to avant-garde and experimental films. The first film in the montage, which includes works by Yoko Ono, Joe Jones, George Brecht, and others, was Paik's *Zen For Film*. This work consists of a blank screen, and within a few minutes of its starting, several spectators had left the cinema. Actually, at the previous live performance of Paik's, apart from what appeared to be a rather formal, well-dressed Korean contingent, there were also very few attendees. This gave a sense of Fluxus being out of time: becoming part of history, yet not embraced emphatically as such. Again, interstitial, intermedial, in flux.

*Q: I suppose your explorations of new media are like swimming in an endless ocean.*

*A: A tabula rasa, you know a white paper. Video is a white paper, a tabula rasa.*

—Nam June Paik interview with Nicholas Zurbrugg<sup>6</sup>

The young Nam June Paik was antagonistic towards Buddhism and Confucianism, the cultures that surrounded him, and as an emerging musician and artist looked toward Western ideas, technologies, and "progress." As Edith Decker Phillips notes: "It was only beginning in 1958, through John Cage, that he became interested in Zen Buddhism."<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, Hannah Higgins notes that Cage's own adoption of Zen thought was influenced by his "experience-based, progressive education that had shaped him. The best-known proponent of progressive education, John Dewey, was much admired by Suzuki, widely read at the time, and active on the board of Black Mountain College in North Carolina, where Cage taught in the summers of 1948 and 1952."<sup>8</sup> While in Japan in 1964, Paik met Reginald Horace Blyth, a renowned scholar of Buddhism, whom he respected greatly. It would also seem reasonable to expect that Paik would critique both spirituality and commercialism, as he was an avid student of Marx's writings.



Nam June Paik, *Buddha game*, 1991 [DETAIL].

Paik noted in a 1991 interview with David Ross that:

Pop, like Fluxus, mocked the ideas that art could be transcendent and that the artist had anything at all to do with providing people with a transcendent path. If there was any spirituality in it at all, then Pop Art and Fluxus were sort of like Mahayana Buddhism, where the only way that you can become enlightened is if you're enlightened yourself. No individual has the responsibility or capability to enlighten another, just to recognize his or her enlightenment.<sup>9</sup>

Paik as a hyper-curious and highly energetic polymath never seemed to locate an interdisciplinary connection that wasn't worth pursuing. Allan Kaprow wrote of his practice in 1968 that, "Nam June Paik is embracing as a whole, artist, spectator, medium, creativity, education, and social welfare. The West, until lately, has traditionally separated these, and it may be some time before the majority of us will accept the change he is helping to bring about, and act on it." Further he noted that, "His knowledge of, and respect for, the past was a condition for his forceful liberation from its grasp."<sup>10</sup>

Sculptures like his renowned *TV Buddha* (1976) exemplify manifold aspects of Paik's artistic sensibility all at once. That, along with its concise and novel description of the old and new worlds in entangled tension, make it a resonant and powerful work still today. Paik created various versions of this piece, but the major consistency is the video camera "gazing" at the Buddha statue which is in turn "gazing" back at it. This seemingly eternal cycle being generated by a temporal disconnect, a glitch between past and present, between spiritual energy and electronic signal, the enduringly iconic in dialogue with ephemeral imaging.

But an irreverent humor runs through the piece, a humor that today recalls the young Japanese tourist in Jim Jarmusch's film *Mystery Train* who flips through her scrapbook of images that resemble Elvis Presley, the Buddha's visage being chief among them. TV



Nam June Paik, *TV Buddha*, 1976, television monitor, video camera, painted wooden Buddha, tripod, plinth, installation dimensions variable. Art Gallery of New South Wales Gift of the John Kaldor Family Collection 2011. Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program. © Nam June Paik Estate

Buddha, Elvis Buddha, internet Buddha, Western capitalist hybridized Buddhism. Paik seemed to (as he often did) see into the future like the best sci-fi practitioners or speculative artists. What next and what if?

But Paik's interest in the energetic displacement and cultural shifting in the contemporary era from spiritual belief systems to electronic transmission networks was among the most important emphases of his work. Although today so much spiritual material travels via the same networks. And one might say that energy obeys no restrictions nor boundaries.

### **Filliou: Eins. Un. One.**

Some Fluxus protagonists including the Frenchman Robert Filliou advocated for and participated in mail art transmissions directed outwardly, what the artist termed the "eternal network." This was a characteristic strategy of a postwar universalism, utopianism, and optimism even in the face of the Cold War, and working particularly effectively within those confines as well, as Central European artists corresponded often with artists abroad, and Fluxus gained a strong presence in that area of the globe. And these networks following on from the notion of implicativeness, became markedly iterative, referential, and intertextual and pointed towards an infinite capacity for continuation.

In his 1984 work *Eins. Un. One.*, a plethora of dice (approximately 16,000 in number) varying in shape, size, and color are unified by a sprawling grouping across the floor and their numerical traits: each of their six sides displaying but one point. In this, one of his last major works, we find the veritable unification of scattered chaos into a large, installational statement. A related photograph depicts Filliou and his family throwing the dice into the air at the Sprengel Museum in Hanover that year. The photo has a distinctive lightness, characteristic for Filliou, as it depicts a playful performance of sorts.

As scholar Steven Harris has noted of Filliou's artwork: "Value is equalled out, especially where games of chance are concerned, and the work also surely embodies the democratic aspirations of his notion of permanent creation, in which individuals are together singly, in Jean-Luc Nancy's sense, on equal terms, rather than imagined as an undifferentiated mass. He once described the ideal organization of society as enabling 'a happy solitude for every human being', rather than an unhappy or alienated one."<sup>11</sup> In Filliou's own estimation: "A random stream of 5000 or more cubes on a flat surface, in the hope that this will—at least—give rise to a subtle impression of the interpenetration and identity of the entire cosmos." Or, further: "Let one cube be given to 5000 individuals who will then carry the exhibit in their pockets as a tangible souvenir of the unity (of the whole)."<sup>12</sup>

In 1964, earlier in his artistic journey, the artist proposed "Le Filliou Idéal" an "action poem" its score consisting of: "not deciding/not choosing/not wanting/not owning/ aware of self/wide awake/ SITTING QUIETLY, DOING NOTHING."<sup>13</sup> This notion echoed closely a Zenrin poem which states: "*Sitting quietly, doing nothing, Spring comes, and the grass grows by itself.*"<sup>14</sup> Alan Watts, the British-born popularizer of Zen Buddhism in the West, cited this poem in his 1957 book, *The Way of Zen*, which became widespread reading in the same era as the development of Fluxus. In Filliou's own life,



Robert Filliou, *EINS. UN. ONE...*, 1984. Coll. MAMCO. Photo: Ilmari Kalkkinen. © MAMCO, Genève



*A friend of mine one day met in Paris a Tibetan lama, whom she had known a few months before in India. She asked him: "What do you think of the West now? Do you find that we are different from you?" The Tibetan lama answered her: "We Tibetans, you see, are used to watching life as if it were television; whereas you Westerners, you watch television as if it were life!"<sup>16</sup>*

### **A Deceptive Simplicity**

The importance of a real-time experience and how the viewer/spectator can co-create an event along with the artist's materials and objects, instruction is central to a performative reading of Fluxus. As Lori Waxman notes: "Given how virtual media has all but taken over as the provider of intelligence about the world today, Fluxus seems positively prophetic in its promotion of a bodily means of learning about the world."<sup>17</sup>

But is part of this framing of experience a kind of deceptive simplicity? That is, a gesture refined down to about as direct and clear an imperative as possible? Drip music from a stream of water, a smashed instrument, preparing a salad. Buddhist monk and writer Thich Nhat Hanh has noted: "Abstract ideas can be beautiful, but if they have nothing to do with our life, of what use are they? So please ask, 'Do the words have anything to do with eating a meal, drinking tea, cutting wood, or carrying water?'"<sup>18</sup>

In a 2009 interview with artist Rirkrit Tiravanija, Yoko Ono stated: "Some artists will try over time to communicate in more and more complex forms, you see. But in my case, I started very complex and then wanted to communicate in a simpler way, so that we would really reach each other."<sup>19</sup> On a similar note, contemporary French philosopher André Comte-Sponville stated: "Intelligence is the art of making complex things simpler, not the opposite."<sup>20</sup>

But a direct connection to something can also seem an unlikely one. Why were so many Fluxus performances and artworks involved with everyday commercial objects? Owing to their accessibility, but this very nod toward accessibility and simplicity can also point out the arbitrary qualities of our immediate surroundings such that we might better distance ourselves from them. That is, to more closely acknowledge our shifting identities within a morass of capitalist, physical objects that likely seem far more important than they actually are.

And the industrial 20th-century capitalist system offered overt militarism, violence, and unforeseen destruction, as Fluxus artist Ben Patterson noted: "Perhaps the one thing everyone forgets or represses is that I, and my generation of Fluxus artists, were all more or less twelve to fourteen years old when the first atomic bomb exploded and left its mark on civilisation. Perhaps only Zen or existentialism could begin to deal with such finality [...]."<sup>21</sup>

Scholar and curator Jacquelynn Baas writes: "The pedagogical function of Fluxus artworks is to help us practice life; what we learn from Fluxus is how to function as an ever-changing self that is part of an ever-changing world."<sup>22</sup> Baas has also noted that both Tristan Tzara and Hans Arp acknowledged the influence of Daoist thought on Dada. And further that: "For many of the Fluxus artists, Daoism would have come packaged with Zen Buddhism (Buddhism + Daoism = Zen). For Maciunas who had been 'like a son' to historian of ancient Chinese culture Alfred Salmony, Daoist philosophy was a fundamental part of his intellectual arsenal."<sup>23</sup>

Scholar Natasha Lushetich has argued: “The simple truth is that Fluxus defies discursivity because it questions the *very logic* in which discursivity is embedded. It questions the propositional, deeply dualistic logic which separates the method of analysis from that which is being analysed.”<sup>24</sup> And non-duality is a core principle of Buddhist thought.

In Alison Knowles’ work, *The Identical Lunch* (1967), her score reads:

A tuna fish sandwich on wheat toast with lettuce and butter, no mayo  
and a large glass of buttermilk or a cup of soup was and is eaten many days of  
each week at the same place and at about the same time.<sup>25</sup>

While the work is on one level about as significant as one can imagine, addressing daily sustenance and the prosaic rituals that construct our life, it remains far from the modus operandi of “high art” spectacle. Initiated from a score, inspired by Knowles’ own daily life, *The Identical Lunch* was manifested through multiple performative iterations, as well as photo documentation onto silkscreens, and an artists’ book edited by fellow Fluxus artist Philip Corner, *The Journal of the Identical Lunch* (1971), which featured responses by participants to the performance, such as: “What’s there to write about? It’s just a lousy tunafish sandwich.” —Gertrude Brandwein (G’s Aunt Gertie from Parkchester).<sup>26</sup>

In an interview with scholar Harry J. Weil, Knowles noted the comparative rapidity and spontaneity of writing up her scores:

AK: We were in Europe, and through our friendship with Daniel Spoerri and Emmett Williams, we had all these dates set up to perform across France and Germany. Dick and I were picking up fellow travelers to perform with us, but we didn’t have any work. So I sat down one night and wrote the event scores.

HW: All in one night?

AK: Well not exactly in one night, but they came along pretty quickly because they had to be performed in a short period of time while we were traveling Europe. That is how *Make a Salad* and *Identical Lunch* came about. I wrote them up, and we would meet a class and perform the scores.<sup>27</sup>

Which in turn recalls the notion often espoused by Buddhist Beat poet Allen Ginsberg: “First thought, best thought,” also attributed to Tibetan Buddhist Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. Writer Jeremy Hayward notes that: “‘First thought’ is ‘best thought’ because it has not yet got covered over by all our opinions and interpretations, our hopes and fears, our likes and dislikes. It is direct perception of the world as it is.”<sup>28</sup>

*“Paint sky on everything, 1965”*

—typed score by Geoffrey Hendricks

In artist Geoffrey Hendricks’ works, he devoted himself to depictions, evocations, and manifestations of the sky, earning the alias “cloudsmith,” recalling another Zenrin poem: “The blue mountains are of themselves blue mountains; the white clouds are of themselves white clouds.” In Hendricks’ *Sky Crated* (1965), an ordinary wooden pallet as one finds in any commercial delivery setting encases a painting, all treated as the sky.



That which is grounded in gritty concrete materialism operating in tandem with the ephemeral, the floating, and contingent clouds passing by. This seeming split or dualism in this instance effectively becomes one. In the late 1970s, Hendricks sold paper bags painted sky blue as well, another example of the Fluxus multiple, an artful mysticism insightfully displaced onto the most basic of found materials.

Unlike Robert Filliou, discussed earlier, of whom artist friends ridiculed his lack of material skills, Hendricks was a highly proficient craftsperson and painter, his watercolor images of the sky for example having a beauty not dissimilar from the studies of the 19th-century painter John Constable. And consider the following exchange between Hendricks and performance artist Annie Sprinkle:

*Annie:* Of course since we've become ecosexual, I appreciate your sky paintings as a kind of eco-erotic art. When we met and I saw your paintings they were sky paintings, but now they're like paintings of my lover, you know?

*Geoff:* Sure, sure because you're both [here referring to Sprinkle's partner Beth Stephens] married to her.

*Annie:* Yeah and I so appreciate them, and I see your paintings in the sky now. Which is fun, I think "hmm, there's one of Geoff's paintings."<sup>29</sup>

In his 1971 *Ring Piece*, a work performed at Charlotte Moorman's Avant-Garde Festival at the New York Armory, Hendricks sat on a mound of dirt, meditating silently for twelve hours, from noon to midnight. Hendricks and his former partner Bici Forbes Hendricks (now Nye Ffarrabas) had recently separated after ten years of marriage, commemorated in their *Flux Divorce* performance of earlier that year. Hendricks had proposed the work to Moorman as "an act of mourning for the end of one important chapter of my life."<sup>30</sup>



American performance artist and professor Geoffrey Hendricks, dressed in a tuxedo, sits atop a pile of dirt in a silent performance that also involved a white mouse (on his right leg) at the Eighth Avant Garde Festival at the 69th Regiment Armory (Lexington Avenue at 25th Street), New York, New York, November 19, 1971. Photo: Fred W. McDarrah/Getty Images.

Within the dirt lay selected relics of their marriage, including two halves of a mattress, the remains of two torn overcoats, and a torn marriage certificate. The title of the piece came from Hendricks' wedding ring that was initially intended to be buried along with ten bells in a box, with the other artefacts. As Hendricks described the work:

The work was situated in the exact center of the Armory. At this central spot I built a mound of black earth, about six feet high and eight feet in diameter, surrounded by eight lengths of red barrier cord supported by chrome-plated poles. I sat in tails on top of the mound of dirt, writing in a small, dark red, sketch book/journal, holding a small bell on a string around my ring finger. As the day progressed I was joined on the dirt pile by almost all of the twenty four mice from Dick Higgins' piece *Mice All Over the Place*.

Moorman's festivals have only recently become more historically examined, acting to a degree as parallel festivals to Fluxus, as they often incorporated many of the same artists and types of actions, but George Maciunas's harshly negative comments towards Moorman ensured that they remained separate endeavors. Maciunas said that he would "boycott anyone" who exhibited work that he assisted with making in the Avant Garde festival. A position of self-described "total non-cooperation." Given that Maciunas helped source a box for Hendricks' ring, the artist omitted it from the buried articles.

A small book published by Dick Higgins' Something Else Press enacted the realization of this performance work as a text. Renowned Village Voice photographer Fred W. McDarrah's image of Hendricks atop the mound graces its front cover. The volume is small, easily able to fit into a pocket, similar to a poetry chapbook. As Higgins notes in a short piece on the back:

The book, RING PIECE, is, apart from the introduction, a small red journal [...] such as Hendricks has been keeping since the early 1960's. Little red books. This once was written during the 1971 performance from which it gets its name. Watch out. Hendricks is alive and to be considered dangerous.

Much of the book records Hendricks' attempts to stay free of peoples' reactions. He reminds himself to breathe, not to pose, not to respond. "John & Yoko come by—John makes a funny face and sticks out his tongue, trying to get my attention." Writing in this journal in response to all the calls from friends and acquaintances, Hendricks notes: "It's not that they have anything important to say [...] but they want me to recognize them, to affirm their existence." "I am at the center but I am paying too much attention to what is off center. Here I am wanting to focus inward and a mouse is nibbling at my crotch—" Another spectator says: "You're the only island of peace in the whole show!" For Hendricks: "Work is always affected by the environment. The people around me are part of the piece."

But the artist also notes: "Earlier—watching ants—the mound suddenly had its own life. There were creatures right there with me and they were doing their work purposefully, moving dirt and stuff, as if the Festival weren't there. The ants are a model for myself." Indeed, the situation within a situation that Hendricks notices presents the idea of moving towards a lack of self-consciousness, a gesturing toward notions of non-self. Although the ego and the artist's awareness of his familial changes and interpersonal situation shifting became the platform for the work, the outcomes transformed into other notional and experiential ideas. Again, according to the artist:

Evolving ecology. New life image. Growing out of/after tomb sculpture. Image putting to rest old relationship. New growth out of it. Work/piece itself part of this new growth.

Hendricks was raised as a Quaker, a faith which focuses itself around mindful silence, meditative gathering, and supporting peace and justice. However, as Hendricks has remarked:

My mother went to Earlham, a Quaker college in Indiana. My father grew up Norwegian Methodist, (or something like that), but they both helped found the Quaker meeting in Chicago and then I've been involved in the Quaker meeting up in Putney, Vermont. But I feel myself as much a Buddhist and also nothing, just one who communes with nature and the outdoors. Nye/Bici my ex-partner and I were at Tassajara Zen Center in '68. That was a special and important moment where we sat in a regular way. There were stretches of silence and being involved in that whole discipline but my life is too free flowing to get into it in a regular way. You know it's all part of my outlook on the world and life and who I am and that impacts the work too.<sup>31</sup>

Throughout Fluxus, you have skeptical believers, mindful irreverence, humor taken seriously. This concatenation of paradoxes that exists at the heart of Fluxus keeps it contingent and contentious even as historical accounts attempt to resolve some of this irresolvable messiness.

And, of course, the Fluxus events, works, ideas, and writings can intriguingly be considered in light of all that has happened in the contemporary era, roughly since the late 1950s. Prescient in terms of its ethic of iterative questioning and transformation rather than depending on one static creative ideology, Fluxus has continued to inspire younger generations just as it has defied expectations across many decades. The art market and museum collections, even as they have come to valorize the artworks in terms of monetary status and institutional prestige, are subsequently alienated and distanced from Fluxus's general intentions, which included a more democratic circulation of everyday objects. It's difficult for connoisseur-like procedures of the art market to consider works (most often multiples and editions) which were comprised of dime-store trinkets, novelty commodities, and printed ephemera as the "highest of art," being too rough, small, indirect, challenging. They appear to not offer *enough* material to grant an aura of significance.

Within the dynamic and ever-shifting actions of Fluxus artists, performances created objects, and objects served to create performances. This knotting up of the two offered a shattering of artistic assumptions but a wide range of methods that emphasized our prosaic journey toward incremental awakening. Realizations of our embodied circumstances within always fleeting, elusive, and confounding settings of daily existence.

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## Notes

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- 16 Robert Filliou in *Telepathic Music No. 2*, video, 1979-80.
- 17 Waxman, *Keep Walking Intently*, 204.
- 18 Nhat Hanh, *The Diamond that Cuts Through Illusion*, 2.
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# Banking with Fluxus, Then and Now

## Peter van der Meijden

What status do Fluxus objects and documents have in the present? What is the relevance of Fluxus for current art? One of the answers is that Fluxus had a way of acting in and upon daily life, and especially the rules and conventions that govern it, that is still a vital ingredient of the artistic toolkit today. An account of several projects involving banking and the Danish entrepreneur, art mediator, and artist Knud Pedersen and a comparison to the Mexican poet, entrepreneur, and activist Fran Llich show that appropriation of existing practices in order to create different results, a shift from object to project and from author to constellation, is still very much in use today.

This issue of *OnCurating* asks the question of Fluxus, its history, and its status in the present; of Fluxus and its continued relevance. In focus are the material it left behind in archives and collections, the works themselves, and their relevance then and now. Ambiguous from the start, Fluxus has now reached an ambiguous age as well. On the one hand, it will soon be sixty years since the first Fluxus festivals took place, in a pre-Internet age when cameras were a rare commodity and the selfie was unheard of. On the other hand, many of those involved, artists and eyewitnesses, are still with us, and the works are still the property of the artists, their families, or their heirs. They have not yet entered the abstract “public realm,” but have reached an age where it becomes necessary to decide what, if anything, they mean to “posterity” and, ultimately, “humanity.”

How to assess Fluxus’s relevance for the present? How to judge its role? Many would say that this demands a solid definition of Fluxus, but even that is a difficult issue. What is Fluxus, or what was it? Some would say that Fluxus is the sum of George Maciunas’s efforts as a publisher and impresario,<sup>1</sup> others that it can be defined by means of a number—nine,<sup>2</sup> or twelve,<sup>3</sup> or any number in between—of characteristics. Some say that it only lasted until Maciunas’s death, others that it existed before Maciunas gave it a name and will continue forever.<sup>4</sup>

Historically speaking, Fluxus was a child of its time. When the title of Harry Ruhé’s 1979 book on Fluxus, “the most radical and experimental art movement of the sixties,” is quoted,<sup>5</sup> it is often with a stress on the

first part, “the most radical and experimental art movement” but the second part, “of the sixties,” is by no means irrelevant. In 1961, in New York, George Brecht took part in “Neo-Dada” exhibitions such as *The Art of Assemblage* at the Museum of Modern Art and *Environments Situations Spaces* at Martha Jackson Gallery, while in Copenhagen, German/Danish artist Arthur Køpcke showed New Realists Daniel Spoerri and Niki de Saint-Phalle at his Galerie Køpcke and helped Jean Tinguely to collect scrap metal for the latter’s sculptural event “Sketch for the End of the World” at Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Humlebæk. In 1963, in New York, Robert Watts participated in *The American Supermarket*, a Pop Art show organized by Bianchini Gallery, while in Amsterdam, Willem de Ridder edited a program on Zero, New Realism and Pop Art for Dutch national television. Lucy Lippard’s *Six Years: the Dematerialization of the Art Object*, published in 1973,<sup>6</sup> not only mentions Brecht, but also Henry Flynt’s essay on Concept Art from 1961 and Ken Friedman’s “Notes on Concept Art” from 1972. Of course, each of these connections can be criticized; each story of continuity can be countered with one of difference; but the least one can say is that people saw a connection *at the time*. In their eyes, at least, Fluxus could be seen as part of a chronological, linear narrative connecting Brecht and Watts with Pop Art and Flynt and Friedman with Conceptual Art.

These, however, are art world connections. Artworks can always be construed to be compatible with other artworks. However, there is another side to Fluxus. Mari Dumett describes it in her 2017 book *Corporate Imaginations*<sup>7</sup> as the “confusing” dialectic of anti-art gestures and appropriations of corporate culture that define the face Fluxus presented to the world. The “other” side of Fluxus does not—or not only—link it to art, but to Western culture, especially to its socio-economic climate. I would like to suggest that it is this side of Fluxus that offers one key to its continued relevance.

It is useful, in this connection, to remember the difference that Hal Foster makes between “fast and furious” and “critical” returns of the avant-garde in 1950s and 1960s. Not only did Brecht appear in Neo-Dada shows, but George Maciunas also chose to call his only proto-Fluxus manifesto of any length “Neo-Dada in

Music, Theater, Poetry, Art,” and even after he dropped the reference to Dada, he continued to refer to that historical avant-garde movement in both his appearance and his design style, while at the same time adopting the Russian constructivist LEF-movement as a reference. The historical avant-garde definitely played a role, at least to Maciunas, so the question of the continued relevance of avant-garde practice in the 1960s is important. The question is, how to distinguish between Foster’s two types of neo-avant-garde, one that “tends to reduce past practice to a style or a theme that can be assimilated,” and another that strives for a “critical consciousness of both artistic conventions and historical conditions.”<sup>8</sup> One depends on formal characteristics, and the other on attitudes, so they may well be simply different in kind, rather than opposed. However, I will here assume that, if one wants to identify the critical side of Fluxus, and in extension of that, its continued relevance, it is attitudes one has to turn to.

I will explore this angle by means of the activities of a figure that has long seemed marginal to the history of Fluxus; someone whose activities are almost impossible to pin down and whose output is equally protean. This person is Knud Pedersen. Born in 1925 in the Danish town of Grenaa, he first came to the nation’s attention during World War II, when, as a sixteen-year old, he co-founded the country’s first resistance movement, the Churchill Club, in 1942. Pedersen spent the last two years of the war in jail and published his first book about his wartime experiences in 1946, which gave him a measure of public fame. He moved to Copenhagen, considered becoming an artist for a while, but decided that he was more interested in what art could be used for (his formulation).<sup>9</sup> What especially occupied him was how to give as many people as possible access to art. After all, hot dogs were offered from stalls on every street corner to those who might fancy one, but art was kept in places to which only the privileged few had access.<sup>10</sup> His first solution was the “Picture of the City” (*Byens Billede*, 1952), a scheme by which municipalities could erect an easel in a public place where a rotating selection of contemporary art would be shown. During the early years, the scheme was run by a board of artists, but in 1955, Pedersen became the owner, and he diversified into lending out art to individuals. However, it was easier to satisfy a customer when they could choose for themselves, so when the public library left Nikolaj Church in the center of Copenhagen in 1957, he requested and received permission to set up an Art Library there, creating what was probably the first full-scale art rental in Europe.

Up until this point, it is clear what he was: an entrepreneur, even if an especially inventive one. It is also easy to determine when he first manifested himself as an artist: in 1967, during the annual Autumn Exhibition at Den Frie Udstillingsbygning in Copenhagen. The work he showed was *570 Telephone Directories and a Telephone*, which tells you exactly what it is. As an object, it can be read within the tradition of the ready-made. However, that was never the intention. The telephone should have been connected and the telephone directories used to contact the rest of the world. Just like the *Picture of the City* and the *Art Library*, it was a statement about *use*. In fact, most, if not all, of Pedersen’s activities up until this time seem to have had to do with use. Previously, he had experimented with the use of jukeboxes (1963-6) and beer lorries (1965) to disseminate art, and telephone conferencing also caught his attention.

The latter is especially interesting for the purpose of this article, because it sheds new light on the work at the Autumn Exhibition. In 1966, Pedersen facilitated performances by Fluxus artists Arthur K pcke and Eric Andersen by means of telephone conferencing. Facilitating can be many things, but in this case, his involvement was of a practical nature, such as paying the bill. It was by no means a modest one, 1,168.07 DKK (€1,450/US\$1,550 in today’s money), a clear sign that he thought the project important. Especially Eric Andersen’s performance was notorious: his work consisted of an instruction to read a poem, but to start from the beginning every time the reading was interrupted—which it inevitably was, because the artist had added the possibility of asking questions via the telephone conferencing system. It ended only because a participant ignored the instructions and read the poem to the end. However, as far as Pedersen was concerned, the project did not stop there. At around the same time, the Danish government made art appreciation part of the curriculum at the country’s colleges, and Pedersen developed a scheme to record and sell interviews with artists on tape and to give groups of students the possibility to ask further questions by means of telephone conferences. Like his idea with art in jukeboxes—to which, by the way, we owe a fine recording of Robert Filliou’s *Whispered Art History*—it never became a profitable business venture, but that is not really the point. The point is that the venture marks a point—the point at which he stops being an entrepreneur but stops short of being an artist as well. Instead, he practiced two principles that became regular features of his activities from this period onwards, “idea escalation” and “the art of failure.”

The term “idea escalation” features for the first time in the title of his book *Sketch of an Idea Escalation by Project Maker Pedersen* from 1970,<sup>11</sup> which describes a number of projects at the intersection of art and entrepreneurship. As he writes in the introduction to a chapter called “Examples of Collaboration/Identification Between Art and Business”:

Collaboration between art and business is more than party games for limited companies. If the artist who sets it up, remains an alien element, and if his idea is not treated seriously, it will become a party game, pure and simple. But if the artist is one of the company’s employees, or if he is engaged to do his job as part of the company’s activities, the party game can become art.<sup>12</sup>

It is important to get the terms right. Neither art nor business are party games: the type of activity he tries to describe resembles play when it is not taken seriously, but does not become art until it is placed in a serious business context. This means that art is not equated to play as opposed to business. Instead, playful activity becomes art when put into a business context. The type of art Pedersen tries to describe is not oppositional, but transformative. Allowing an idea to “escalate,” then, means introducing a playful idea into a serious context to realize some its implications, transforming the context in the process. The choice of the term “to escalate” also indicates that there will always be further implications.

The other term, “the art of failure,” is also a book title, this one coined in 1981.<sup>13</sup> The book describes a number of projects that failed to materialize in the way they were intended, but in a manner that nevertheless led to further ideas or insights. A good example is Pedersen’s work on a so-called “car guide,” a kind of primitive, mechanical global positioning system (GPS), the prototype of which is now part of the collection of the Danish Technology Museum in Elsinore.<sup>14</sup> Instead of having to consult large, unwieldy maps while driving, he reasoned, it would be much easier if one could encode one’s itinerary on punch cards before starting on a trip and had a computer in one’s car to tell one where to turn. He presented the idea to the Danish Inventions Board, which provided him with funding to develop the idea. It was patented as well, and a way of navigating was developed, but the system was never produced. Does that mean that it was a failure? Not to Pedersen, because he could see lots of ways in which to develop it even further. Quite apart from various navigation

games, it could be used for petrol rationing, car sharing, traffic speed control, and much more. He concludes:

There do not seem to be limits to the possibilities that are hidden in even a small thing, to turn it this way and that, so it can be inspected from all sides and in all the contexts one can think of. [...] [I]t has been sufficiently exciting to be given the possibility to work with problems of one’s own choosing in a time when keeping oneself busy is more important than driving places. No guide could have foretold the itinerary I would follow with my guide to get me to my destination.<sup>15</sup>

The term “the art of failure,” then, refers, just like the term “idea escalation,” to an ever-broadening horizon of possibilities. It indicates Pedersen’s interest in the project, rather than the result. There is an art to failure if it grants the project continued life.

This understanding of the implications of the project as a form closely resembles French anthropologist and sociologist Bruno Latour’s take on the issue. In *Aramis, or, The Love of Technology* from 1996, Latour makes a sharp distinction between pro-jects and ob-jects. The former, he writes, have no existence in the world when they start, and end when they turn into objects.<sup>16</sup> Without a tangible referent, every participant in a project is free to imagine it in their own way, on the basis of their own expectations, and these expectations will be adjusted again and again during the course of its development. Latour speaks of “translation”: not only the project itself, but the positions of those implied, change all the time.<sup>17</sup> The same goes for objects, mechanisms, and so on needed to develop the project. As vital parts of the process of translation, or as material enablers, they make some courses of action more likely and others less likely or even impossible. The only form of solidity in this fluid landscape is created by means of legally binding agreements. Otherwise, what characterizes a project is that it is not known beforehand which people, things, and procedures are necessary to realize it.

It is my contention that Pedersen, when he called himself a “project maker,” engaged in projects in exactly this manner. With “idea escalation” and “the art of failure” as his tools, Project Maker Pedersen set out to create new constellations of objects, people, and procedures to explore how reality could be made to work in new ways. In the following sections, I will take a closer look at some projects concerning banking to



explore how he went about this. After that, I will return to Fluxus to explore whether and how this particular way of “working the world” is present there and can account for its continued relevance.

One example of “idea escalation” that Pedersen mentions in his book from 1970 is the so-called “Building Project” from 1968. It evolved from a proposal to ask artists to design summer cottages, to be put on display at the Hareskov Centre, a showroom for summer cottages in the village of Lille Værløse, some 25km outside Copenhagen. According to a draft agreement, the Centre would provide the grounds, help to contact suppliers, and give technical aid, while Pedersen would apply for funds at the Ministry of Culture.<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately—or perhaps fortunately, as the following will show—the three proposals the project ended up consisting of, by Eric Andersen, George Brecht, and Arthur Køpcke,<sup>19</sup> cost much more than the 30,000 DKK Pedersen asked for (but did not get). In fact, the costs were estimated at a staggering 6,059,000,000 DKK—not surprising, as Køpcke wanted to build an “invisible” cottage in an artificial forest that was entirely covered in one-way mirrors, Brecht a “Love Room” with all the amenities, and Andersen a structure consisting of ten billion units, a cubic centimeter each, which had to be capable of receiving, processing, and sending information, of adopting every possible form, whether gaseous, liquid, or solid, and a number of other specifications. It is the latter that accounts for most of the cost of the project. In any case, Pedersen was now faced with a funding problem, which he ended up solving by negotiating a special interest rate (6.5%) with Bikuben Bank, so that the funds needed would be generated in a mere 284 years and 201 days. As he wrote in an accompanying note:

The projects shown here are examples of artistic work based on advanced techniques. Considering the present economic and political situation and state of technical development today, these projects will in due course, all things being constant, become reality.

For the benefit of other artists working with this complex of media, we enclose tables of rates of interest based on deposits of 1 D.kr., 50 D.kr. or 100 D.kr. so that each artist is able to calculate the time that shall elapse before his project shall be accomplished. Subsequently, in this way, can any artist and any project be financially independent.<sup>20</sup>

Apart from Pedersen’s obvious belief in progress, three aspects of the project and the above formulation of its implications are worthy of note. First of all, there is the fact that Pedersen bothers to talk about the implications at all; this is him practicing “idea escalation” two years before he chose the term as the title of his book on the subject. Secondly, there is the importance of a projected future. The scheme depends on the ability of the banking system to honor its obligations nearly 300 years in the future. The bank book was entrusted to the Danish Royal Library, but without the obligation to present it every year for the interest to be added. Thus, the responsibility for the scheme did not lie with Pedersen and his family, but with an organization that was created to keep things for all eternity. Thirdly, the idea was offered as an option to any artist who wants to work with advanced technology, but does not want to make him-/herself dependent upon a funding body. Banking, then, is in this case not a concession to the establishment, but a bid for freedom. The funding scheme is perfectly ordinary according to all parameters bar one: time. The artist can remain true to him-/herself, but has to wait a bit longer. The choice is between integrity and speed.

Moving four and a half years ahead in time, one of Pedersen’s contributions to the *Fluxshoe* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford (February 10-25, 1973) was *Bank Service for Fluxshoes Joint-Account Forms*. The idea does not seem particularly spectacular at first glance. After all, many people—married couples, for example—have joint accounts. What makes Pedersen’s work special is the fact that the joint ownership of the account is not the initiative of a bank, but comes from the outside. The forms can be handed in at any bank, and how it chooses to respond is up to the bank itself to decide. The work consists of five copies of the same form, announcing to two individuals’ banking institutions that they want to merge their accounts to “the greater advantage of all concerned.” It is up to the banks themselves to decide where the joint account is opened. Two of the copies are for the account holders, two for their bank(s), and the last one is to be filed at the Art Library. The project, then, is more than a scheme for the benefit of the account holders and their banks. The Art Library has a stake in it as well, and its role is that of archivist. Documentation is an essential element of the project. It remains uncertain whether any forms were ever filled out and processed; certainly none have survived, but the project is still fully accessible as a concept.

Two final banking projects need to be discussed here, the Bank of 7th October 1971 and Culture Accounts. Both were initiated on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of a bank, Landsmandsbanken and Svendborg Bank, respectively. The difference between the two projects is essential to position Pedersen's projects—and it is imperative here to underline that “Pedersen's projects” should be read as shorthand for “projects Pedersen was involved in”—vis-à-vis art and society.

The Bank of 7th October 1971 is easily described. It was a collaborative project with Landmandsbanken, Eric Andersen, and Pedersen as equal partners. Its purpose was to issue checkbooks and engage in other banking activities at the intersection between banking and art. Pedersen's archive contains examples of checkbooks in percent, degrees, cubic meters, kilometers, and kilometers per hour. The work consists of the viewer's efforts to compare monetary value to other ways of measuring the world. As such, the checkbooks display a behavior similar to other works that mimic money, such as Robert Watts' *Dollar Bills*, which were issued by Fluxus in 1962, or Andy Warhol's silkscreened dollar bills from the same year.

The story of the Culture Accounts project takes longer to tell. It started in 1969-70, when Pedersen tried to interest various banks in a scheme by which account holders would be able to determine what a bank would invest their savings in. In the process, he also sought backing from the Social Democratic government. In November 1969, he contacted the Ministry of Culture with a special proposal for “culture checkbooks,” earmarking people's savings for cultural purposes. The Minister, Kristen Helveg Petersen, answered that he could not support the scheme because most people would find it a shame if investments in the arts increased at the expense of investments of other sectors of the economy. Also, he was worried that the amount invested in art via the culture account scheme would be deducted from the budget of the Ministry of Culture, thus making it difficult for the Ministry to allocate money to specific artists and projects. Pedersen then contacted the Prime Minister, Hans Otto Krag, asking for “moral support” in his negotiations with the banks. To Krag, Pedersen presented it as a bid for increased democracy in the banking sector, with the Culture Account scheme as a “limited realization.” Krag passed the letter on to the chairman of the parliamentary committee for business policy, the Social Democrat Jens Kampmann, who judged that Pedersen's proposal was in tune with the Social Democratic Party's policy on this

point, which included more influence for private account holders on the banks' way of investing their money. This ended the discussion for the time being.<sup>21</sup>

The idea of making it possible for account holders to decide what their savings would be used for was also discussed as a possibility in connection with Landmandsbanken's 100th anniversary in 1971, where the idea involved the creation of a special account of one million Danish Crowns, to be supplied by private customers, who could then borrow a sum and decide for themselves which “welfare purposes” (the word used is the Danish *trivsel*, which means “well-being”) it would be used for. The proposal was rejected, but it resurfaced in 1975 in discussions with Svendborg Bank in a more narrowly defined incarnation in which private customers would be given the possibility of opening an account that functioned like any other account, but that could be used to support art projects as well. A folder printed in connection with the project specifically mentions “risky artistic projects.” Artists could apply for a Culture Loan, at an interest rate of 12%, and in exchange, account holders would be informed about the nature of the project the loan was used to finance. They could also choose to buy the work in question. The scheme, then, allows private individuals to finance and buy art that would otherwise be impossible to realize and/or that they would otherwise never have acquainted themselves with—an idea that is much in line with the original idea behind the Art Library.

One cannot claim that these two projects are utopian in the avant-garde sense of the word. They are simply too embroiled in commerce. Both celebrated a commercial bank's 100th anniversary, and the latter was actively used for PR purposes as well. As it says in the folder:

For the past 100 years, Svendborg Bank has been the main bank for the South Funen area, where artists are inspired by the beautiful landscape and the friendly surroundings. When the bank came to the capital city in 1973, it was lucky to find itself in the cultural centre of Nikolaj Plads [where the Art Library was situated, PvdM], and the bank's Copenhagen branch has therefore used its location to give good artists from Funen the possibility to show their work to the Copenhagen audience. With the culture account system, we hope to be able to support the arts, which do not have particularly favourable conditions in today's Denmark.<sup>22</sup>

This association of a commercial enterprise with the values attached to art is common in early cases of corporate sponsorship.<sup>23</sup> However, there are clear differences between the two as well. As pointed out earlier, the checkbooks published by the Bank of 7<sup>th</sup> October 1971 function as ordinary, if critical, art objects, inviting the viewer to speculate about conventions such as the way in which contemporary society measures reality. The Culture Account scheme is different, as it does not only invite reflection, but also action. Both projects are intermedial,<sup>24</sup> situating themselves on a scale between art and the “life medium” of banking, but the Culture Account scheme is much closer to banking, needing the actual act of banking in order to exist at all. It is a feature it shares with the first two projects discussed here, the Building Project and the Joint-Account Forms.

What does the difference matter when all that is left of these projects are documents in archives and stories in books? In the context of an article that wants to link Fluxus to its and our present, it is an essential question to ask. If Fluxus has any relevance today (if, indeed, the projects discussed here have any relevance today), its products will necessarily have to be more than just witnesses of the past.

Material witnesses of all the projects that have been discussed so far are kept in archives. The documents still exist, but the question is whether they have any other function than to testify to the fact that something has been thought, done, et cetera, in the past. It is the question of the museum: after all, it is often claimed that objects have to be stripped of their function, decontextualized, before they can acquire a new life as a museum object. So, how much life is left in these projects?

There is no evidence that the Joint-Account Forms, the Bank of 7<sup>th</sup> October 1971, and the Culture Accounts have had a life—understood in the Latourian sense—beyond the time when they physically manifested themselves. The Building Project has had the longest existence. Bikuben Bank, the bank that agreed to accept Pedersen’s 100 DKK and to put it into an account for 284 years and 201 days, fused with GiroBank in 1995 and became BG Bank, and BG Bank in turn fused with Danske Bank in 2001. Just before the fusion, BG Bank confirmed the existence of the account, including the special interest rate of 6.5%. However, the bank also signaled that the account was registered in Pedersen’s own name, and not, as one would have expected, to a foundation or to the Art Library, and this turned out to

be an issue. In 2009, Pedersen reported to his lawyer that Danske Bank had been unable to find the account, and that the money had been transferred to one of the bank’s own internal accounts. When it resurfaced, the bank’s legal department judged that Bikuben had never formally agreed to pay 6.5% interest for 287 years and 201 days. In the absence of such an agreement, Pedersen’s lawyer agreed, the bank was free to propose altering the interest rate or any other part of the arrangement. The original interest table, which BG Bank had produced, could after all merely be seen as a way of showing what would happen if a bank was to pay a fixed percentage of interest over such a long period; it could in no case be seen as a binding agreement. Pedersen replied by describing the project as a collaboration between equals. This was not him as a person, opening a bank account with Bikuben Bank, he argued, but a special agreement between two equal partners who both had obligations—and he had fulfilled his. The bank, however, held on to its version of the facts, and the project was no more. Only the bank book and the correspondence remain.

In Latourian terms, the project existed right until Danske Bank got its way. As long as it existed in different versions, it had a life, but when only Danske Bank’s version continued to exist, it had become an object instead. If one wanted to argue in favor of its continued existence, one could point to its life as a story. Apart from continuing to elaborate upon his projects—“turning them this way and that, so they can be inspected from all sides and in all the contexts one can think of,” as he wrote in 1981—Pedersen also continued to write about them. He published over thirty books during his lifetime, both fiction and books about the war, art, and his own projects. His musings on art and projects, however, are never straight reports of facts; they offer angles on his projects, often new ones, and discuss possibilities for “escalation.” This, too, is a way of adding life to his projects. In line with Christopher Bedford’s argument about the “viral” ontology of performance art, in which the original performance only serves as the starting point of an ever growing lineage of dissimilar, viral reformulations in word and action,<sup>25</sup> one could argue that they continue to do so, and that his projects live on in storytelling. In that case, this essay would be a way of continuing them.

What, then, does his work mean in the present-day context? For one thing, money and banking still have the keen interest of artists. One can draw a line from Pedersen’s younger contemporary Cildo Meireles’s *Zero*

*Cruceiro* (1974-8) or *Zero Dollar* (1978-84) bills to the “Boggs notes” produced by James Boggs from the mid-1980s onwards to modified bills by such contemporary artists as the French duo Atypyk (Ivan Duval and Jean Sébastien Ides) or American James Charles in his *American Iconomics* series. All of these projects, however, while addressing issues of value, circulation, and exchange, are representational and seem more related to the checkbooks issued by the Bank of 7th October 1971 than to the Building Project or the Culture Accounts scheme. If there is a relationship with works such as Boggs’s, it is via the performance aspect. In the case of the Boggs notes, hand-drawn currency acquires value by means of a performance of exchange.<sup>26</sup> It is important to distinguish between the actual note plus the documentation of the exchange on the one hand, which can be displayed as a work, and the exchange itself, which effectuates a real change, namely, the bill acquiring a value equal to the denomination drawn upon it by the artist. It is the latter side of his projects that can be called the “performance.”

An even better example of such a tangle of symbolic and real action is Fran Ilich’s *Spacebank* project (2005-2016). *Spacebank*’s motto is “Don’t hate the banks become the banks.” Admittedly, Ilich, unlike Pedersen, is ideologically motivated. A Mexican author, activist, and media artist currently living in New York, he was—and is—inspired by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation. Not only did *Spacebank* support their cause, its set-up is inspired by the Zapatistas’ insistence on direct democracy and their willingness to always renegotiate the terms of the dialogue itself. Founded after the publication of the Sixth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle (June 28, 2005), which calls upon everyone with more respect for humanity than for money to join the Zapatistas in their struggle for social justice, the bank served to support a server called Possibleworlds.org, which functioned as a forum for Zapatista and left-wing activism. What makes *Spacebank* different, however, is that it functioned as a real investment bank and offered real banking services. It offered bank accounts and issued debit cards to its customers and traded shares in virtual companies. The currency used was a virtual one called the Digital Material Sunflower (DMS), but it was backed by real value, and the bank had working relationship with the World Bank, *The Economist*, Citibank, Paypal, Bitcoin, Visa/Mastercard, and others. Interested parties could announce an initiative (a magazine, a radio station, etc.) and issue shares worth a certain amount in DMS. If people bought them, it meant that they were willing to take a risk, and that was

taken as a sign that there was an interest, and perhaps even a need, for the project. From 2010 on, such shares could be exchanged via the Brooklyn Stock Exchange and since 2014 also via the Bronx Socialist Exchange.

What is especially interesting about *Spacebank* in the present context is the way in which Ilich negotiates the relationship between art and reality. First of all, he saw his approach as an alternative to the usual relationship that left-wing activists have with money, which is to always put the cause first, often with disastrous effects for the economic side of things. Secondly, he acknowledged the importance contemporary society accords to money, using economics to give real value to politics, even though money is no longer a supposed objective, but a flexible way of measuring worth. The project translates “What is it worth?” into “What are you prepared to pay?”<sup>27</sup> Thirdly, what he was interested in was presenting an experiential model, rather than a representation; according to him, the project had a “pedagogical dimension” that made it possible for people to “experience first-hand the relationship between finance and social organisation.”<sup>28</sup> Finally, and continuing directly from the latter point, he describes it as theatre—a “staging of life”—and as an “alchemical” process in which relations are transformed.<sup>29</sup> The model, in other words, offers a real, rather than a symbolic, experience and has the possibility of affecting real (social and economic) relationships.

As pointed out above, Pedersen, unlike Ilich, was never really ideologically motivated. When Pedersen spoke of “the greater advantage of all concerned,” about welfare or well-being, it sounds more like a marketing tactic than an ultimate goal. His projects are first and foremost attempts to see whether existing systems and procedures can produce different results. However, there are similarities as well. To start with, both artist/entrepreneurs are equally difficult to characterize. In a study on digital activism in Latin America, for example, Claire Taylor and Thea Pitman characterize Ilich as “an itinerant Mexican writer, media artist, activist and (conceptual) entrepreneur.”<sup>30</sup> Ilich and Pedersen are both “slashers”; they hold “multi-hyphen” jobs. However, the similarity goes further than this. For *Spacebank* to function, it is important that Ilich does not act as Ilich-the-artist, but as a representative of a real bank that offers real banking services. The same goes for Pedersen’s projects, where it is essential that relationships are created via the Art Library or a foundation instead of Pedersen himself. Furthermore, it is essential that existing procedures and forms are used instead of

devising alternative ones that would then function as representations of a “possible world” or a “different future.” For these projects to function—not to succeed, but to function—existing networks and procedures have to be seen as capable of producing new relationships. It is in this particular way of designing his projects that Pedersen, despite the fact that he was in no way ideologically inspired, can still be seen as relevant.

According to Taylor and Pitman, hacktivism and tactical media, and within this genre, Ilich’s work, “can be considered politically motivated art forms as much as they are social practices with potentially revolutionary goals—they are the Dada movements of their day.”<sup>31</sup> Even today, then, advanced practices are characterized by their reference to the historical avant-garde. In other words, Dada, Fluxus, and hacktivism can be construed as occupying positions on the same family tree, no matter how distantly related they are. The reason to group them there is their engagement in “social practices with potentially revolutionary goals”—*social* practices, not *artistic* ones. American author and curator Nato Thompson speaks of “ways of life that emphasize participation, challenge power, and span disciplines ranging from urban planning and community work to theatre and the visual arts.”<sup>32</sup> What is important is what it does, not what it is or what we choose to call it. Both artists and non-artists experiment with alternatives to current practices; where they come from does not matter, but they meet in their way of working, with projects that really function, but also signify that a different way of working is possible.

The word “intermedia” has already been mentioned. One cannot equate “intermedia” with “Fluxus,” although Dick Higgins gives it a central place fully within the circle of intermedia in his *Intermedia Chart* (1995).<sup>33</sup> Intermedia is work that “falls in between the media”<sup>34</sup>: to describe it as one or the other medium or even as several media at once, is to sell it short. Intermedia inhabits uncharted territory. Especially rare, Higgins write, are intermedia that situate themselves in the no-man’s land between “art” media and “life” media.<sup>35</sup> It is here that we find Pedersen and Ilich. Does this make Pedersen a Fluxus artist? No, because intermedia, as Higgins describes it, is much more than just Fluxus. Pedersen knew Higgins and other Fluxus artists well, both corresponding with them and occasionally facilitating their work. He knew Kōpcke before Fluxus and worked on numerous projects together with Eric Andersen. Does this make him a Fluxus artist? No,

because his role is often not that of an artist. Not even his participation in the Fluxshoe makes him one, because so many artists participated in it who have never been considered Fluxus artists. If he is neither Fluxus nor an artist, why mention him in the context of an article on Fluxus at all?

Pedersen felt attracted to Fluxus as soon as Kōpcke mentioned to him the possibility of organizing a Fluxus festival at the Art Library in Nikolaj Church, the Copenhagen *Festum Fluxorum* on November 23-28, 1962. It was a risk for Pedersen to host it, because he rented the space from the municipality, which could end the lease if he did not use the premises in the way described in the contract. In fact, he did end up being evicted, first from the nave and finally from the building. Fluxus seemed relevant to him and caused him to experiment with alternative forms of art mediation, such as the abovementioned jukeboxes. However, he also saw his job as fully enmeshed with the other jobs that need to be done to put art in front of an audience. When artists start to explore the world around themselves instead of creating something new, he argued, the art mediator becomes an “agent for the artist, just as the artist becomes an agent for his [the art mediator’s] ideas.” Both work as agents for art, “or rather, the artistic view of reality,” and all “contribute towards the publication of the magazine called art, where the typographer and the editor-in-chief and the buyer act as equals.”<sup>36</sup> As soon as the artist chooses to work with existing (social) forms, formations, procedures, conventions, etc., s/he can no longer claim to create as an individual, but interacts with others who thus become co-creators of a work or constellation that cannot be regarded as belonging to anyone. Thus, Pedersen had willing and unwilling, conscious and unconscious collaborators that made his projects possible, just as Pedersen contributed to the realization of Kōpcke’s and Andersen’s works, however menial the tasks that he performed.

Fluxus has this aspect as well, although it is difficult to materialize by means of the material that now fills the Fluxus files in archives and museums worldwide. In the early years of Fluxus, it manifested itself in the creation of a publishing house, a shop and a mail-order business that really worked, while at the same time also materializing a “different” attitude towards art and economics. As Maciunas put it in various manifestos and similar texts around 1965-6, Fluxus, now characterized as “art amusement,” had to be “simple, amusing, concerned with insignificances, have no commodity or institutional

value. It has to be unlimited, obtainable by all and eventually produced by all.”<sup>37</sup> There was, in other words, a good reason why Fluxus had to be mass-produced, disseminated by mail, simple, funny, et cetera: the Fluxshop, Fluxus mail-order houses, and Fluxus assembly line served to prove that nobody really needed art. Similarly, when launching the Fluxhouse Cooperative Building Project in 1966, Maciunas made use of financial incentives to initiate projects that proved that a different way of handling real estate was possible.

Pedersen was interested in exactly such projects that sprung from Fluxus but had a real-world dimension, such as George Brecht’s *O-Propeller* from 1975, a ship propeller that would leave the ship stationary in the water. This was the Fluxus that fascinated him, and he, in turn, worked to develop this particular side of Fluxus further, creating an intermedium of art and entrepreneurship in which the use of “life media” by far exceeds the use of “art media.” He can by no means be seen as a Fluxus artist, but perhaps the title of (conceptual) Fluxus entrepreneur is within reach.

The issue that Dumett and others address is that of Fluxus’s past and present. Fluxus emerged at a time when new art was connected with Dada and the historical avant-garde in order to make sense of it. Dumett and others point out that Fluxus positioned itself in relation to its own present as well as to art’s past. This article, however, does not inquire into Fluxus’s past and present, but into its present and future, into its continued relevance today. In order to link Fluxus to its own present in the 1960s and 70s, Dumett refers to Fluxus’s “corporate imaginations,” that is to say, its work with “everyday factors of organization, but also systematization, automation, commoditization, mediatization, routinization, and globalization.”<sup>38</sup> When early Fluxus was characterized as “neo-avant-garde,” it was done so in order to make sense of the look of the work. What authors like Dumett add is an awareness of the non-art references that also play a role in the conception and functioning of the work. When asking the question of Fluxus’s continued relevance, however, one has to return to the look or the shape of the work once more. Between the 1960s and 2020s, hybridization and boundary-seeking (not necessarily boundary-crossing) have produced a situation where everything can be art and everything can be used to create art—including, as argued above, procedures such as the administration of assets. Therefore, I want to argue that Fluxus’s continuous relevance does not necessarily lie in such essential aspects as the use of event scores or Maciunas’s

outrageous, ironic, and deeply significant play with markers of corporate identity, but in the use and détournement of real world behaviors, procedures, et cetera.

The type of relevance referred to here relates to attitudes, rather than objects. It is connected with the critical return of the avant-garde described by Hal Foster in the sense that it rests on a critical awareness of existing conditions rather than a reworking of methods and forms. The banking projects described here, both Pedersen’s and Ilich’s, function because their originators adopt a different attitude towards existing procedures, using them to produce different results. When establishing a genealogy for them, like Taylor and Pitman do when they link Ilich to Dada, it is important to remember that the connection rests upon a shared attitude towards the world in which they operate, towards its values, norms, rules, and procedures, rather than towards art alone; an attitude that is focused on the appropriation of existing models in order to make them produce different results and experiences, rather than developing new models.

Of course, such projects generate objects and archival material as well. Ilich’s project is too recent to predict how the traces it has left behind will be treated by future generations, but the traces left by Pedersen’s projects have been around for a longer time, so it is easier to spot the expectations they are met with and the uses they are put to. One conclusion one might draw is that projects in the Latourian sense are at a disadvantage when tied to a single author. As early as the mid-1960s, Pedersen argued that artists working with and in the real world cannot claim unique authorship, but have to settle for shared authorship with all those others who consciously or unconsciously contribute(d) towards the realization of the work. When filed and presented under the name of a single author, projects become objects. The insistence on equal partnership in several of the projects described here, as well as the centrality of artists’ involvement in the company’s core business in Pedersen’s definition of “collaboration/identification between art and business,” is essential here. It is not about individuals and individual roles, but about the design, appropriation, and management of relations and contexts. Constellations are more important than individuals.

Another important aspect is the legal perspective. In the absence of objects, what gives projects solidity are legally binding agreements. As long as those involved

can freely create their own version of a project, it is virtually intangible, but binding agreements concerning roles, contributions, itineraries, et cetera give it a solidity while retaining its character as a project. It is no coincidence that Pedersen insisted on an archival role for the Art Library in connection with the Joint Accounts project or that he deposited the bank book for the Building Project at the Danish Royal Library. Organizations and institutions not only keep, but also help to give shape and continued existence to projects beyond the individual.

Finally, it is important to point out that the shape that is created in this manner is a processual one. Pedersen's projects became richer and more elaborate in the retelling, and the same goes for retelling by others. Collecting and showing such projects means adding to their history, while hiding this fact behind the name of the artist and the title of the project means turning them into objects. Storytelling might not be too bad an alternative to the presentation of objects, even if it means a shift of focus from historical fact to observed implication.

An account of Pedersen's involvement in various banking projects, then, is relevant for the history and status of Fluxus because it illustrates how an art mediator and art library director can be inspired by the Fluxus context to embark on organizational projects that take existing procedures and transform them to produce different results. In the process, it highlights aspects of Fluxus that may otherwise go unnoticed, such as its vital relationship with the world that surrounded it and the way it acquired existence in the world beyond the framework that is common for art, i.e., with an insistence on authorship and object quality. Finally, it makes it possible to highlight connections between Fluxus's present and our own by way of roles and attitudes rather than forms and methods.

Banking with Fluxus, then, is something else than listing Fluxus projects that involve banking. It is project rather than object, a potentially endless shifting of identities that projects itself forward in time as well as linking sideways to similar, if completely unrelated, projects. It is driven by the conjunction "and," the juxtaposition of versions of a project, stakeholders, and similarities, rather than the "because" of traditional art history and museum practice.

## Notes

- 1** Jon Hendricks, "What's Fluxus? What's not! Why.," in *What's Fluxus? What's not! Why.*, ed. Jon Hendricks (Brasilia/Rio de Janeiro: Centro Cultural do Brasil and Detroit: The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Foundation, 2002), 14-15. Alternatively, see Joe Jones, "Fluxus in ten words" in *Fluxus Etc.*, ed. Jon Hendricks (Bloomfield Hills, MI: Cranbrook Academy of Arts, 1981), 27: "Fluxus was one man named George F. Maciunas."
- 2** Dick Higgins, "Fluxus: Theory and Reception," in *Fluxus Research*, ed. Jean Sellem, *Lund Art Press* 2, no. 2 (special issue, 1991): 25-46.
- 3** Ken Friedman, "Fluxus and Company," in *The Fluxus Reader*, ed. Ken Friedman (Chichester: Academy Editions, 1998), 237-256.
- 4** Hendricks, "What's Fluxus?"; and Friedman "Fluxus and Company."
- 5** Harry Ruhé, *Fluxus, the Most Radical and Experimental Art Movement of the Sixties* (Amsterdam: A, 1979).
- 6** Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, (Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997 [1973]). Reference to Flynt on 22, Friedman's "Notes on Concept Art" reproduced on 258-9.
- 7** Mari Dumett, *Corporate Imaginations: Fluxus Strategies for Living* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2017).
- 8** Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 1996), 3 and 1, respectively.
- 9** Knud Pedersen, *Kampen mod borgermusikken* (Copenhagen: Kunstbibliotekets Forlag, 1968), reproduced in Nikolaj Zeuthen, ed., *Knud Pedersens festlige hverdage* (Copenhagen: Lindhardt og Ringhof, 2005), 11-123. Quote on 25.
- 10** *Ibid.*, 28.
- 11** Knud Pedersen, *Skitse til en idéescalation af projekt-mager Pedersen*, Copenhagen: Kunstneres Efterårsudstilling, 1970.
- 12** *Ibid.*
- 13** Knud Pedersen, *Kunsten at mislykkes* (Aarhus: Husets Forlag, 1981).
- 14** For a more detailed account of the project in English, see Peter van der Meijden, "Message in a Bottle to Systembolaget," *Perspective* (August 2017), accessed April 24, 2020, <https://perspective.smk.dk/en/message-bottle-systembolaget>.
- 15** Pedersen, *Kunsten at mislykkes*, 39-40.

**16** Bruno Latour, *Aramis, or, The Love of Technology*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1996), 23-4.

**17** *Ibid.*, 45.

**18** Untitled draft document, undated, the Art Library's Archive, Copenhagen.

**19** Alison Knowles's *Big Book*, described by Pedersen as "a building conceived as a view, with each view acting as the page of a book in concentrated form," was also mentioned in the first drafts of the project, but was dropped early in the process. It was shown as a solo project at the Art Library in November 1968.

**20** Knud Pedersen, Eric Andersen, Arthur K pcke, and George Brecht, *Byggeprojektet*, Sparekassen Bikuben, 1968. Booklet in the Copenhagen Fluxus Archive, National Gallery of Denmark, Copenhagen, cat. no. 1506. n.p., English translation taken directly and unaltered from the original.

**21** Letters in Knud Pedersen's private archive, N rum.

**22** Brochure in Knud Pedersen's private archive, N rum.

**23** Harald Szeemann's landmark exhibition *Live In Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form: Works-Concepts-Processes-Situations-Information*, Kunsthalle Bern, March 22 – April 27, 1969, for example, was sponsored by Philip Morris. John A. Murphy, President of Philip Morris Europe, wrote in his introduction: "We at Philip Morris feel it is appropriate that we participate in bringing these works to the attention of the public, for there is a key element in this 'new art' which has its counterpart in the business world. That element is innovation—without which it would be impossible for progress to be made in any segment of society." (catalogue, p. 3) Advanced art and capital can always be construed to have values in common.

**24** Dick Higgins, "Intermedia," *The Something Else Newsletter* 1, no. 1 (February 1966): 1-3.

**25** Christopher Bedford, "The Viral Ontology of Performance," in *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History*, eds. Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield (Bristol: Intellect, 2012), 77-87.

**26** A good analysis of Boggs' performances is to be found in Craig Saper, *Networked Art* (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), ix-x.

**27** Alonso Cedillo, interview with Fran Ilich, Mexico City, September 24, 2016, accessed May 14, 2020, [https://www.academia.edu/42904705/Fran\\_Ilich\\_en\\_conversaci%C3%B3n\\_con\\_Alonso\\_Cedillo](https://www.academia.edu/42904705/Fran_Ilich_en_conversaci%C3%B3n_con_Alonso_Cedillo).

**28** Marisa Lerer and Conor McGarrigle, "Insurgent Finances: An Interview with Gabriela Ceja and Fran Ilich," *Visual Resources* 34, nos. 1-2 (2018): 168-177. Quote on 169.

**29** Cedillo, interview with Fran Ilich.

**30** Claire Taylor and Thea Pitman, *Latin American Identity in Online Cultural Production* (New York; London: Routledge, 2013), 187.

**31** *Ibid.*, 171.

**32** Nato Thompson, "Living as Form," in *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011* (New York: Creative Times Books and Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012), 18-33. Quote on 19.

**33** Reproduced in Hannah Higgins, *Fluxus Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) 89.

**34** *Ibid.*, 1.

**35** *Ibid.*, 2.

**36** Knud Pedersen to Eric Andersen, undated [after 5 March 1966], Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Bequest, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

**37** George Maciunas, "Fluxmanifesto on Fluxamusement" flyer (1965), <http://georgemaciunas.com/exhibitions/flux-labyrinth-fluxus-gag/fluxmanifesto-fluxamusement-1965/>.

**38** Dumett, *Corporate Imaginations*, 13.

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# Whatever Happened to the Judo Throw? Fluxus and the Digital Gimmick

## Natasha Lushetich

In martial arts, the “judo throw” is a move that doesn’t block the opponent’s attack or launch a counterattack. Instead, the judo throw uses the impetus of the opponent’s attack to its own advantage. The expression has also been employed to describe the slippery way in which capital imperceptibly appropriates the social, the experiential, and the libidinal through mediation, fragmentation, and acceleration.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the neo-avant-garde appropriation of capitalist techniques of appropriation is the judo throw, too. The post-World War II productivist-consumerist society, in which Fluxus entered the cultural scene, reduced individuals to two kinds of heteronomy; both produced a brand of micro-violence embedded in routines and assignments of energy, a violence that appeared “as natural as the air around us.”<sup>2</sup> The heteronomy of work forced people into systemic integration; the heteronomy of private consumption made the consumption of mass-produced commodities an unavoidable component of the productivist-consumerist regime. Neither could be separated from the commodification of what, after Walter Benjamin, is a two-pronged notion of experience: *Erfahrung*, the cumulative inter-generational experience in which “contents of the individual past combine in the memory with material from the collective past,”<sup>3</sup> and *Erlebnis*, the isolated, often intense, mostly subjective experience derived from fleeting sensations that do not “enter tradition.”<sup>4</sup> The post-WWII neo-avant-garde vehemently contested the desecration of experience and the standardization of desire. The Situationist International thus practiced psychogeography—a rapid, improvised passage through an urban territory. Early Fluxus concerts showcased works like George Brecht’s 1962 *Drip Music* that consisted of pouring water into a bucket from a ladder. The Fluxus *event scores*—performative-perceptual ready-mades framed by artistic perception—recoded *Erlebnis* by immersing the percipient-interactant in *ichi nen* or absolute absorption in as small and seemingly insignificant a fragment of reality as possible.<sup>5</sup> George Brecht’s 1961 *Three Lamp Events* suggested: “On/Off. Lamp. Off/On.”<sup>6</sup> Yoko Ono’s 1963 *Laundry Piece* prompted: “In entertaining your guests, bring out your laundry of the day and explain to them about each item. How and when it became dirty and why.”<sup>7</sup> Bengt af Klintberg’s 1963 *Orange Event Number 8* (for Pi Lind) proposed: “Eat an orange as if it were an apple (Hold it, unpeeled, between forefinger, middle finger and thumb, bite big mouthfuls, etc.).”<sup>8</sup>

At the other end of the spectrum, Allan Kaprow’s happenings made extensive use of everyday actions, such as spreading jam on toast, or having a domestic squabble. Happenings inflected the “hieratic” in “uninflected life.”<sup>9</sup> Their explicit aim was to redeem the ritualistic dimension of life, destroyed by the capitalist metamorphosis of all cultural objects, from “religious iconography” to “*Das Kapital*” into “market value.”<sup>10</sup> Happenings prompted a vertical *communitas*, which, unlike its horizontal variant, is a “mode of co-activity”<sup>11</sup> diametrically opposed to heteronomy, yet often found in traditional rituals that are the pillar of *Erfahrung*: wedding ceremonies, initiation rites, and funeral rites. Instead of ineffectually opposing a socio-economic system that had, by the 1960s, mastered the art of appropriation in many, if not most walks of life, the Situationists, Fluxus and Kaprow, among many other artists and movements, re-signified the existing cultural practices averring Renato Poggioli’s claim that the legacy

of the avant-garde, and by extension, neo-avant-garde, resides not in a radical, *definitive* break with tradition but in its *re-purpose-ability*: in the re-use of avant-garde techniques in new art forms as well as, importantly, in everyday life.<sup>12</sup> Fluxus imaginatively re-coded avant-garde techniques for disrupting taken-for-granted experience by intersecting the legacy of the Dadaist chance operations with a judo-throw approach to commodification. For example, George Brecht's *Suitcase Ready for Travelling*, an event in the form of objects assembled in a suitcase in the late 1960s, prompted the interactant to take off in an unknown direction, and, upon arrival at the chance destination, behave in ways suggested by the provided objects and clothes. *Suitcase Ready for Traveling* implicitly critiqued the holiday, which became particularly popular in the productivist-consumerist era. In the 1950s, when it first appeared, the holiday was a form of "transcendence," an escape from the systematization and bureaucratization of industrial productivism, which is why it was imperative that the release from these strictures occur elsewhere, in a paradisiacal world of "otherness."<sup>13</sup> Similarly, at the cusp of the 1970s service economy, which superseded the commodity economy, Ken Friedman's "professional services" granted the artist the status of a "professional" who didn't sell artworks, but, instead, provided "services" to interested parties, such as manual, horticultural, administrative, affective or artistic services.<sup>14</sup>

But how might we, in the current epoch, think the production of experience in a (global) culture that has appropriated many Fluxus features: performativity, interactivity, and ready-made-tization?<sup>15</sup> The Fluxus work has always been a "matrix," a "structure" provided by the artist and further developed, or even entirely transformed by the interactant.<sup>16</sup> As a laboratory, Fluxus has been a "way to organise social networks" as well as "networks of people learning."<sup>17</sup> The reason why Fluxus appeared so current in the 1990s, amidst the proliferation of de-centralized digital networks, facilitated by peer-to-peer, group-to-group, and individual-to-group interaction is perhaps best summed up by Andreas Huyssen's question: Is Fluxus not the "master-code" of "what has come to be called postmodernism?"<sup>18</sup> Two and a half decades later, the utopistic vision of the Internet as a democratic space of freedom has irrevocably given way to a much grimmer reality: instrumentarianism.<sup>19</sup> Pre-corporation, which denotes the "pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes" where "[a]lternative" and "independent" no longer refer to "something *outside* mainstream consumerism" but are "*the* dominant styles within the mainstream culture,"<sup>20</sup> has replaced appropriation and incorporation. The formerly strange, potentially dangerous—or merely unpredictable—has, since the 1990s, been systematically standardized into marketable diversity. The micro-exploitation of *Erlebnis* and the displacement of *Erfahrung* into the realm of Disneyfied commercialism is inseparable from yet another form of pre-corporation, this time of aesthetic experience: the experience economy. Superseding the service economy in the late 1990s, the experience economy "experientializes the goods," or, as the authors of the eponymous book, Joseph Pine and James Gilmore, like to say, it "ings the thing,"<sup>21</sup> turning the commodity—Nike shoes, for example—into a spectacular experience such as *playing* basketball with a laser projection of Michael Jordan or LeBron James. Trapping the consumer in a web of entertainment and escapism, the experience economy simultaneously Disneyfies *Erfahrung* by semantically and experientially linking objects, places, cultural heritage, symbolic meaning, and standardized fantasy worlds into branded communities based on shopping habits. As Paul Virilio and Franco Berardi have argued, the structural violence of over-standardization is additionally exacerbated by the digital velocity's "dictatorship" over cognitive agency.<sup>22</sup> While digital design aids the creation of an abstract, "fundamentally unsustainable world,"<sup>23</sup> digital platforms increasingly "solicit our engagement beneath the threshold of attention"<sup>24</sup> where nonchalant flicks, dabs,

and “likes” trigger the dopamine reaction in the brain inducing drive-based behavior.<sup>25</sup> For Byung-Chul Han, the current iteration of neoliberalism, which he terms “smartpolitics,” enlists “liking” as a means to “anticipate” and “direct” human actions.<sup>26</sup> Echoing Jameson’s famous description of postmodern experience as reduced to “pure material signifiers” and “unrelated presents in time,”<sup>27</sup> Han diagnoses the current temporal condition as the dictatorial “instantaneousness of non-time,”<sup>28</sup> which takes precedence over all other temporalities, as can be seen from the way people interrupt all other tasks to look at the latest message on their phone that has just gone ‘pling!’ The radical difference between the earlier diagnoses by Virilio and Berardi is that this tendency is given painful continuity—and a durable somatic inscription—in such syndromes as the “vibrating phone syndrome,” the mobile phone user’s hallucination of vibration when the mobile phone is not vibrating at all.<sup>29</sup> In digital neoliberalism, heteronomic control has given way to aggressive destabilization through relentless and violent, yet, for humans, largely ineffectual change that goes by the name of “systems optimization,” not to mention tracking and dataveillance, all of which abuse freedom and deracinate knowledge, installing, in their place, radical ignorance and dysfunctionality.<sup>30</sup>

If de-centralized communication, the (digital) DIY spirit, and widespread cultural ready-made-tization, characteristic of the 21st century, form part of the legacy of the neo-avant-garde, more specifically, of Fluxus, whatever happened to the judo throw, that elegantly subversive tactic for re-enchanting experience? In this article, I focus on the digital gimmick, an ambivalent variation on the judo throw that re-codes the Fluxus practice of “putting into play.”<sup>31</sup> For Jean Baudrillard, who first coined the expression in the context of an elaborate critique of capitalism, “putting into play,” unlike “putting into value,”<sup>32</sup> is an exchange of fluxes and affects, a discharge of generosity, as well as a metamorphic economic, all of which are abundantly present in Fluxus intermedia: the *event score*, the Fluxkit, and Fluxsports.<sup>33</sup> The problem, however, is that during the historical Fluxus period<sup>34</sup> “putting into play” was very different from “putting into value,” a goal-oriented strategy of investment (monetary or libidinal). Gimmickification, by contrast, like the judo throw before it, operates obliquely, rather than frontally. Following in the tradition of playbour,<sup>35</sup> it *fuses* play and value extraction. The digital gimmick effectively excavates practices sedimented *in* and *as* mainstream culture by ‘riffing off’ Fluxus intermedia and cuing cycles of transformation of energy and matter, object and performance, thought, word, and action. But before we go any further, let us take a closer look at:

### The Gimmick

Defined as an “ingenious device, gadget or idea,” “used to attract people’s attention,” “often to commercial purposes,”<sup>36</sup> the gimmick is usually associated with quick and temporary gain. Everyday examples range from engaging children in meaningful learning by manipulating the “ordinary into the realm of the extraordinary”<sup>37</sup> to the so-called scientific gimmicks, such as brain imaging, which furnish quick and, therefore, often faulty impressions.<sup>38</sup> Significantly, in the U.S., the use of the word “gimmick” dates to the 1920s, a time of “euphoria” as well as “radical disenchantment with industrial, commercial and financial capitalist techniques.”<sup>39</sup> Reflecting the falling rates of profit that force the capitalist to devise ever-new ways to “squeeze increasingly small increments of surplus labor from workers in the immediate production process on which the entire system continues to depend,”<sup>40</sup> the gimmick reduces labor and cheapens value. Part and parcel of the ceaseless struggle for new sources of profit, programmed obsolescence, and aggressive systems’ optimization, it is a capitalist device *par excellence*: both a one-off and endlessly repeatable, dynamic and static, cheap and titillating. The gimmick is also the perfect *Erlebnis*-inducing device, which,

instead of inventing something entirely new, cites or recycles the already existing, often with the means at hand, *bricoleur* style. For Jameson, artistic gimmicks (which differ from cultural gimmicks) rely on the citation of former art forms: conceptual art, serial art, *event scores*, and instructions. Unlike these art forms, however, Jameson's example of choice—Tom McCarthy's 2005 literary work *Remainder*—where a man who has suffered a head injury and lost his memory, pays others to re-create isolated fragments of his life so that he can re-experience them—re-appropriate the 1960s instructions, without “flex[ing] mental categories,” or generating a new language.<sup>41</sup> Such works remain a “formal event”<sup>42</sup> in the sense that they appropriate neo-avant-garde moves as both content *and* form, as can be seen from Paul McCarthy's appropriations of his own 1970s radical abject art in the form of his 2014 *Chocolate Factory*—a real chocolate factory manufacturing miniature chocolate (edible) butt-plug-holding Santa Claus figures.<sup>43</sup> Or, Tracey Emin's tabloid-style confessions, such as the 2008 neon *People Like You Need to Fuck People Like Me*, or the 2012 *I Will Never Be a Mother But I Will Die Alone*, both of which rely on a complex tapestry of appropriation of oppositional, yet media-savvy, shocking, yet predictable subcultural practices like punk, the conceptual work of artists like Bruce Nauman, the legacy of the ready-made, and the feminist use of the ‘traditionally feminine’ materials—quilts and embroidery—by such artists as Suzanne Lacey, all encased in a pre-corporated, easily marketable, repeatable structure that toys with authenticity while communicating emotional truths in a tabloid-style, monosyllabic language. Although gimmicky, these works are by no means devoid of value. On the contrary, they may reduce the existing—‘traditional’, art-historical—value of the works they cite, yet they also create new semiocapitalist value. Semiocapitalism is a recombinant semiotic machine that deracinates habit and “floods the nervous system with information deluge” where “innovation” is inseparable from recombination and “re-signification.”<sup>44</sup> Artists like McCarthy and Emin belong to a very different artistic lineage from Fluxus. They also use citing conventions to very precise semantic ends. The situation with the cultural, rather than the artistic gimmick—which is my focus here—is less clear-cut, embedded as it is not in personal intentions, but in the concretism<sup>45</sup> of the medium itself: its materiality, structure, and praxis.

### The Structural Aspect of the Gimmick

A key feature of digital sociality is the appropriation of the oldest gimmick in history: the free gift, usually traced to the Trojan horse, a ploy employed by Greek soldiers, who, hiding in the horse's belly, entered the city of Troy and conquered it. Despite the fact that, in the current age, the reason why people ‘fall’ for the free gift could be attributed to a sense of entitlement cultivated by contemporary advertising strategies' assurances of deservedness, the free gift, abundantly used by the mobile telephony providers, dispels the dictatorship of instantaneousness<sup>46</sup> by creating an almost *archaeological connection* with the invisible, inter-temporal, and human-material ties. As a number of separate studies have shown,<sup>47</sup> the reason why people opt for an internet or telephony provider that offers the first three months of a two-year contract for free, then charges a considerably higher monthly fee than the provider that offers no free gift but charges a significantly lower monthly fee, is that the gift, as a relational and moral phenomenon, creates durable relationships based on tradition. Significantly, this occurs *regardless* of whether there is an *actual tradition* to fall back on or whether this ‘tradition’ is retroactively performatively inaugurated through citation. Slavoj Žižek provides a useful example of the performative working of citation. In a famous experiment by psychologist J.L. Beauvois, there are two groups of volunteers. One group is told that the experiment may involve something unpleasant or even unethical and offered the choice to withdraw. The other group is told nothing at all. Paradoxically, Beauvois's numerous iterations of the experiment have shown that the number of

'willing' participants remains exactly the same in both groups. Žižek argues that it is the *performative inauguration of choice* that makes the participants agree to the prospect of unpleasantness, or a breach of ethics, then retroactively rationalize this move as *their own free choice*. In this particular case, performativity can't be separated from the interpellative working of science as an institution, the professional status of the investigators, their mode of dress and address, all of which affirm the participants' view of themselves as rational individuals taking part in a scientifically and socially useful experiment.<sup>48</sup> In other words, interpellation here works *independently* of the investigators' or the participants' intentions. It's embedded in the situation. Similarly, the gift performatively erases the (purely formal) distinction between things and persons. It mobilizes reciprocity for the simple reason that things are not "inert objects" but were formerly considered a part of the family.<sup>49</sup> Like Beauvois's experiment, the gift is a socially interpellative situation. It interpellates without explicit intentions, through culturally sedimented, often imperceptible components, one example of which are the divinities. Lurking in the background of all exchange, the divinities stabilize time through temporal architectures made of promises, pledges, expectations, and projections, as can be seen from many traditional customs, such as those of the Sudanese Hausa, who, fearing the danger of illness during the corn harvest, make presents of this grain to the poor. The generative aspect of the gift—its capacity to *excavate* the less visible aspects of *Erfahrung*—is, in mobile telephony, framed in a manner that resembles Fluxus work. The best example is perhaps Mieko Shiomi's 1965 *Spatial Poem*, and its subsequent placement in the Fluxus Mail Order Warehouse catalogues.<sup>50</sup> *Spatial Poem* is a generic title for a series of texts-objects-actions Shiomi created by sending simple telegraphic instructions such as "open something and close it" or "disturb the natural wind which surrounds this globe" to potential participants.<sup>51</sup> Shiomi chartered the participants' responses onto a map of the world, either in the form of flags on a board, or printed texts and photographs. The simple instructions interpellated the participant to contribute to the artwork, which consisted of nothing else but the participants' contributions. Shiomi's *Spatial Poem* was, like many Fluxus works, included in the Fluxus Mail Order Warehouse catalogues; however, unlike other works, *Spatial Poem* could not be exchanged for money, only for objects. George Maciunas's re-contextualization of Shiomi's work within the barter system amplified the work's relational dimension, doubly accentuated by the framing of this ancient exchange system within a mail order catalogue, a symbol of consumer goods supply. The proposition to exchange *Spatial Poem*—a nexus of inter-temporal and inter-spatial social relations woven of words, actions, and objects—for objects, brought to the fore the 'pull' of social relationality embedded both in the gift and in the barter system, yet masked by the generalized equivalent or money. Much like the gift cues a social obligation with a very *specific* materiality and temporality, the barter system demands a thoughtful choice of the prospective 'partner's in exchange' (rather than buyer's) means of exchange. By framing *Spatial Poem* within the standard (monetary) system of economic exchange yet reverting to an archaic one, Maciunas accentuated the *sedimented bio-social mixing*, action-hood, temporality, and personhood always already implied in any object.

Something very similar is at work in the standard binding mechanisms to mobile telephony, which is the x amount of free minutes and the x GB of free data that users feel obliged to use by making calls to people they would perhaps not normally make calls to and by interacting with the media content they would perhaps not normally interact with. While potentially beneficial, this gift of time, of pure duration, and the promise of connection and exhilaration, place the digital deluge and chronarchic strictures, characteristic of our times, in dialogue with the abovementioned, post-

WWII notion of the holiday. Resembling doodling in their looseness and sporadic repetitiveness when overheard on a commuter train or in an airport lounge, these micro-holidays have a ritualistic and, therefore, binding effect. Their relational pull is anchored not only to past but also to future biosocial sedimentations through sharing, linking, ‘liking,’ and networking (as well as producing vast amounts of harvestable and tradable data). These practices are not inter-material; rather, they are *inter-immaterial*, yet they create a sense of affectively sedimented continuity characteristic of *Erfahrung* and prompted by the gift, in which an echo of boundless divine time resounds.

Apart from reclaiming invisible relations and ties, much of the digital gimmickry reclaims psychosomatic grounded-ness through the size and scale of the object. The digital world is by default full of miniatures, from early-Internet abbreviations such as “prolly” for “probably” to digital avatars. The smartphone, too, is a miniature. Arguably, the smartphone is a “score”<sup>52</sup> traceable to Marcel Duchamp’s 1935–40 *Boîte-en-valise*, a portable museum of Duchamp’s artworks rendered as miniatures. It is also traceable to *Boîte-en-valise*’s Fluxus variant: the Fluxkit. An *event score* in the form of objects, assembled in cases no larger than a briefcase, and modeled on *Boîte-en-valise*, Fluxkits were mass-produced by Maciunas in the late 1960s and 1970s. As Brecht, whose 1961 *Repository* (a wall cabinet full of word puzzles, playing cards, toothbrushes, light bulbs, and thermostats) was another precursor to the Fluxkit, succinctly put it: “Every object is an event [...] and every event has an object-like quality.”<sup>53</sup> For example, Robert Watts’ 1967 *Time Kit* prompted the percipient/interactant to a haptic and kinaesthetic exploration of time *as change* through objects that acted as performative scores for actions such as unrolling the tape measure, zipping and unzipping the zipper, inflating the balloon, or squeezing the compact lump of rubber. Similarly, Ay-O’s 1964 *Finger Box*, fifteen square blocks of wood arranged in rows of three by five, each with a hole in the center, prompted the interactant to a tactile exploration of hidden textures that playfully confused the senses by placing sharp nails next to soft, furry surfaces. In similar fashion, the smartphone prompts multisensorial, semi-scripted, and semi-voluntary actions and interactions, albeit not in a *materially* but, rather, *immaterially* immersive manner. Like the Fluxkit, the smartphone layers mobile experience and anchors it to a portable device.

Miniaturization and portability also ‘explode’ the stratigraphy of experience.<sup>54</sup> Consider, for example, the much-used Nike+ smartphone application, designed as a motivational tool for running incarnated in the little running partner, which appears on the runner’s mobile phone. Or, the miniature security officer in such games as Ian Bogost’s Airport Security augmented reality game, designed to be played on one’s mobile phone during the increasingly time-consuming airport security procedures, where, in order to alleviate stress, the passenger adopts the persona of a security officer, who, with the aid of the latest full-body scanning technology, searches other miniature passengers for such suspicious items as liquids and detonators. In addition to having an experientially unifying effect, miniaturized objects also have an affectively gratifying, experientially re-enchanting working. A clumsy miniature, such as a puppy, is endearing not only because it’s vulnerable but because it reveals the genealogy of everyday dog behavior by performing everyday actions like walking and eating, ineptly. A more virtuoso miniature, like the Nike+ running partner, or the tiny security officer, entices appreciation in addition to harking back to a puppy’s clumsiness. Although it could be argued that making things smaller aids acceleration, the micro-focusing of attention reveals the genealogical stratigraphy of the object and creates a *temporal expansion*. It reveals the folded nature of the world—the reflection of the macrocosm in the microcosm. It also alleviates the reductionism of the Heideggerian “world-as-picture”

kind where “all that is [the entire world]” is “reduced to a unified,” but, ultimately, flat and “disenchanting image.”<sup>55</sup> Moreover, miniatures such as Nike+ and Airport Security *inflect* the uninflected. Like the Fluxkit, they texture the everyday in a ludic way. Mobilizing game principles—rules, goals, the feedback loop—they stimulate generative, self-perpetuating continuity and flow.<sup>56</sup> The experience of flow, of effortless play, yet stability and competence, occurs when previous experiential sedimentations enter into a dialogue with spontaneity, chance, and alertness, creating a continuous feedback loop. This sedimentary-performative structure, characteristic of games, is a form of ritualized behavior, which is why games are, in fact, a collective tradition, inseparable from the experience-grounding *Erfahrung*. In addition to practices cued variously by design, gadgets, or performative creations of non-existent traditions, there are also more ephemeral features of the gimmick, such as rhythm.

### The Ephemeral Aspect of the Gimmick

An important sphere of digital gimmickification is the revocation of the digital systems’ automated-ness. Automation is, of course, synonymous with the digital ecosystem, where numerous invisible processes such as tracking and data harvesting work without human intervention, while simultaneously producing excess: “excessive downloads, excessive connections,” “excessive “friends,” excessive “contacts,” “excessive speeds.”<sup>57</sup> As many researchers have shown,<sup>58</sup> the negative effects of these excesses on attention, memory, and everyday cognition are too numerous to mention. Not surprisingly, the gimmicks operative in this realm create an illusion of focus and chumminess at the level of the interface by performatively creating familiarity and, therefore, also continuity. Consider the message that appears on your screen when Firefox breaks down: “Well, this is embarrassing...,” which is very different from Amazon Echo’s Alexa, evidently programmed—in other words: obviously automated—to circumvent questions such as “who’s your mum or dad,” which she answers with “I was made by a team of inventors at Amazon.”<sup>59</sup> As with the free gift, a complex social domain is evoked by a seemingly “infra-ordinary”<sup>60</sup> sentence (to borrow Georges Perec’s expression) like “well, this is embarrassing,” lodged as it is between the neutral “something went wrong, we’re working to restore your session” and the explicit in-crowd responses such as “Bob’s your uncle” that some members-only websites, such as Kunstenaars & Co.<sup>61</sup> use to signal the help instructions’ user-friendliness. The pre-corporation of elasticity ‘commenting’ on the unexpected rupture with the expected course of automated action is a uniquely human sentiment, since embarrassment, unlike surprise or grief (also present in most animals), is related to decorum and social class.<sup>62</sup> But the point here is not human-machine duality; it is *pre-corporated community*, and the retroactive performative inauguration of the system’s elasticity and, therefore, also non-automated-ness. This simple quid pro quo, which creates a non-automated, seemingly socially aware existence of a browser, is the hallmark of quick comedic routines that feature prominently in human-computer interaction. The typical example is the expectedly unexpected use of certain repartees that create a chumminess borne of supposedly humorous reversals of well-known social rules or situations such as the *expectedly unexpected* use of the grumpy frog emoji, instead of a Smiley, in text conversations such as:

- A: “Shall we meet tomorrow at place X?”  
 B: “Yes, does time Y suit you?”  
 A: “Yes, I’m really looking forward to this.”  
 B: “Me too.” Grumpy frog.

The ‘humor’ of this situation—if that’s what we can call it—doesn’t lie in the content of the exchange but in the reversal of expectations, or in the imitation of the classic joke rhythm: premise, premise, antithesis (in place of a synthesis)—as in the following generic example:

I am vegetarian.  
I like my vegetables.  
With beef.

The unexpected antithesis here subverts the categorization it introduces in its initial premise, which has both an unexpectedly elastic, and a subversive working, despite the poor content of the joke. In similar fashion, the grumpy frog emoji makes use of a cliché by both upsetting the existing pattern, and affirming it. To be sure, this is not the de-stabilization of the “very structurality of [semantic] structure”<sup>63</sup> that subjects linear logic to infinite play in the manner of the Fluxus ‘impossibly possible’ *event scores*. However, it does mimic—or gimmick—its form, for example, Robert Watts’s 1963 *Rain Event*, which, consisting of a single line: “by subscription only,” embroils the acculturated notion of an event whose taking place can be anticipated and the un-accultured notion of the future as non-foreseeable.<sup>64</sup> Or, Takehisa Kosugi’s 1963 *Music for a Revolution*: “Scoop out one of your eyes 5 years from now and do the same with the other eye 5 years later,”<sup>65</sup> which frames the impossible within musical duration.

In semiocapitalism, where aggressive systems’ optimization embroils existential territories on a daily basis, given that our digital ‘homes’—Facebook; Twitter; Todoist Karma or Smarty Pig—are territories of *habit*, these micro reversals have a rhythmical, repetitive, and, therefore, also *cohesive* effect. As a temporal organization of perceived and produced events, rhythm and, in particular, easily transmittable rhythm, is key both to social cohesion and to individual physical and emotional stability. The need for being in sync with others belongs to the *primordial Erfahrung*, which doesn’t refer only to human cultural traditions but includes all mammals; being in sync with others is traceable to the primates’ practice of finger-drumming and imitational lip-smacking.<sup>66</sup> While grumpy frogs and similar quick comedic routines reinforce well-known rhythmico-social conventions—and thereby also tradition of a *biosocial* kind—there are also more personalized, more intentional forms of gimmickification. A case in point is Maciunas associate Henry Flynt’s “just-likings” or “brend-ing,” which re-purpose neo-avant-garde strategies by way of explicit citation.<sup>67</sup> Being a composite of “brand” and “trend,” “brend,” which first appeared in 1963, stands for a “utopian aesthetic of pure subjective enjoyment.”<sup>68</sup> Its purpose is to cultivate “individual preferences”; a “brend” is a “contentless model” for [...] reaching a point where one’s own individual “just-likings” emerge—defined as “you just like it as you do it.”<sup>69</sup> A contemporary example of a brend, an idiosyncratic ready-made-sized “just-liking” is the use of the telephone booth sequence from the 1988 Barry Levinson film *Rain Man* as a ringtone, part of the 2010s trend of using famous film sequences as personalized ringtones.

In this particular sequence, Rainman (Raymond Babbitt, played by Dustin Hoffman), an autistic man, is waiting for his brother (Charlie Babbitt, played by Tom Cruise) to finish an important call. They are both in a phone booth. Rainman breaks wind, then repeatedly announces in a warning tone: “Uh-oh, fart!,” “uh-oh, fart!” while looking for a way out of the phone booth, which he finds “very small.”<sup>70</sup> When used as a ringtone on mobile phones, this sequence has manifold effects. Whether the phone happens to go off in the middle of a sensitive social situation or a business meeting, Hoffman’s voice intoning “uh-oh, fart!” creates a double-entendre, referring to the fact that someone in



the room has broken wind, and that, surprisingly, it was Raymond Babbitt communicating from a fictive realm, who detected it. It also preempts potential criticism of the owner's omission to switch the phone off by diverting everyone's attention to a more socially embarrassing situation. Another feature of this gimmick is its use of a cultural and affective mainstay—a famous 1980s film—that reinforces the space-time of mutual recognition while simultaneously underlining the owner's dexterous use of citationality, which turns an extract from a cultural product into an audio ready-made, a neo-avant-gardist strategy par excellence. In the digital era, the various retro tendencies, abundantly present in digital culture, betray a yearning for a familiar, well-established set of rules; they also wrest time from fragmentation.<sup>71</sup> Restoring a sense of recognition, as well as, implicitly, stability characteristic of *Erfahrung*, such practices also create new and, often, humorous combinations of citations that characterize *Erlebnis*.

### The Fetishistic Parasite

The above examples use pre-corporated practices to prompt reciprocity and experiential expansion. They also excavate past sedimentations and performative inaugurations, focus attention, create rhythmicity, repetition, and, implicitly, stability and structure. While recoding or recombining *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis* in novel ways, they highlight the structural and ephemeral aspects of the digital gimmick as well as recuperate the seemingly insignificant and everyday. On the one hand, this can be seen as a continuation of the Fluxus tactics of micro-resistance that re-enchant the world sedimented *in* and *as* mainstream culture. On the other hand, it is a fetish practice, which alleviates digital oppression by installing itself as a parasite, since, in biosocial terms, the gimmick conditions the protentive-retentive circuit: it shapes future expectations on the basis of past experiences and inscriptions. Moreover, the gimmick's *formal efficacy*, its situated-ness in space, time, gadgetry, interactional modalities, and investments of energy, makes it into an *aesthetic order* sustained by refrainability and likeability. The gimmick is both infinitely reproducible, and parasitic. Yet, a parasite is never a mere 'addition' to the site or body it occupies. Rather, it is trebly excessive: internal *and* external, present *and* absent, affirmed *and* disavowed.<sup>72</sup> By parasitizing the digital sphere, the gimmick both re-establishes the stratigraphy of experience and accelerates its atrophy. This is very similar to Benjamin's excessive, non-binary notion of barbarism, which designates the desecration of physical, socio-economic, and moral experience, *as well as* a fresh start: "Our poverty of experience is not merely poverty on the personal level, but poverty of human experience in general. Hence, a new kind of barbarism. Barbarism? Yes, indeed [...] a new, positive concept of barbarism."<sup>73</sup>

Yet, we have, since Benjamin's time, entered a vortex of abstraction far removed from the fecund ambiguity of positivity and negativity. As the authors of *Financial Derivatives and the Globalization of Risk*, Edward LiPuma and Benjamin Lee, explain, and Jameson reinstates in his discussion of the cultural gimmick, the ambivalent—and, we could add, fetishistic and barbaric—nature of the digital gimmick is strikingly similar to the post-2008 financial instrument called the derivative. An insurance for the continuously fluctuating rates of exchange, the derivative is by default outsourced to artificial intelligence, which breaks a complex task like: "provide ten million cell phones to a South-African firm" into: outsource the "interior architecture of the device" to a German-Italian enterprise; outsource "casings" to a Mexican manufacturer; outsource the manufacture of all other components to a Japanese firm, then underwrite the different currencies and their fluctuating exchange rates.<sup>74</sup> Because of its complexity, the derivative is a one-off, non-durable solution, inapplicable to other

contexts. Surprisingly, however, since the 2008 financial meltdown, the derivative has played a role “parallel to that played by gold in the nineteenth century” given that, in a system of *continually oscillating* currencies, the derivative, as a “unique and momentarily definitive combination of those currency values,” acts as a “new standard of value and thereby a new Absolute.”<sup>75</sup> It creates stability from fluctuation and variability at a level diametrically opposed to the “infra-ordinary” and the everyday: the level of the “supra-human,” which bypasses human consciousness.<sup>76</sup> While the judo throw stood for a tactical advantage playfully gained in a dynamic situation of constantly changing positions and relationships, the digital gimmick stands for an essentially indeterminate ecosystem where adaptive algorithms, learning from a vast number of other algorithms, distort epistemic, biosocial, and economic realities within milliseconds<sup>77</sup> making the distinction between “chance,” “goal-orientation,” “tactic,” “strategy,” “play,” and “value” obsolete, as well as erasing the difference between “fleeting,” “durable,” “ephemeral,” and “structural.” Should we see this as a definitive sign of doom? Perhaps this is a different kind of flux.

## Notes

- 1 Mike Sell, *Avant-Garde Performance and the Limits of Criticism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008 [2005]), 178-80.
- 2 Johan Galtung, “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research,” *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 173.
- 3 Walter Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” in *Selected Writings*, Volume 4, 1938–1940, trans. Harry Zohn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 316.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Katsuki Sekida, *Zen Training: Methods and Philosophy*, ed. and trans. A.V. Grimstone (New York: Weatherhill, 1975), 99.
- 6 Ken Friedman, Owen F. Smith and Lauren Sawcyn, eds., *The Fluxus Performance Workbook* (Performance Research e-publication, 2002), 23.
- 7 Ibid., 86.
- 8 Ibid., 57.
- 9 Allan Kaprow in Benjamin H.D. Buchloch and Judith F. Rodenbeck, *Experiments in the Everyday* (New York: Miriam and Ira D. Walalch Art Gallery and Columbia University, 1999), 76.
- 10 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is there no Alternative?* (New York: Zero Books, 2009), 4.
- 11 Victor Turner, “Social Dramas and Ritual Metaphors,” in *Ritual, Play and Performance Readings in The Social Sciences/Theatre*, eds. Richard Schechner and Mandy Schuman (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976), 113.
- 12 Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968), 56.
- 13 Gary S. Cross, *Time and Money: The Making of Consumer Culture* (London: Routledge, 1993), 76.
- 14 Ken Friedman, *The Aesthetics* (Devon: Beau Geste Press, 1972), np.
- 15 This neologism refers to the practice of turning everyday objects into ready-mades and transferring them to the realm of aesthetic experience, like Marcel Duchamp’s seminal 1917 *Fountain*, which was a urinal.
- 16 Dick Higgins, *A Dialectic of Centuries: Notes Towards a Theory of the New Arts* (New York: Something Else Press, 1976), 6.
- 17 Craig Saper, “Fluxus as a Laboratory,” in *The Fluxus Reader*, ed. Ken Friedman (Chichester; New York: Academy Editions, 1998), 139.
- 18 Andreas Huyssen, “Back to the Future,” in *In the Spirit of Fluxus*, eds. Elizabeth Armstrong and Joan Rothfuss (Minneapolis: Walker Arts Center, 1993), 150.

**19** For Shoshana Zuboff, instrumentalism refers to the fact that users are no longer ends in themselves but have become “a means to profits in new *behavioral futures markets*”; “Surveillance Capitalism and the Challenge of Collective Action,” *New Labor Forum* 28, no. 1 (2019): 13; emphasis in original.

**20** Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 9; emphasis in original.

**21** Joseph B. Pine and James H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy Work is Theatre & Every Business is a Stage* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1999), 24.

**22** See Paul Virilio, “Speed and information: cyberspace alarm!,” *CTHEORY*, accessed November 3, 2019, [http://www.ctheory.net/text\\_file.asp?pick=72](http://www.ctheory.net/text_file.asp?pick=72); and Franco Berardi, *Heroes: Mass Murder and Suicide* (London: Verso Books, 2015).

**23** C. Dilnot, “The Critical in Design,” *Journal of Writing in Creative Practice* 1, no. 2 (2008): 180.

**24** Mark B.N. Hansen, “Foucault and Media: A Missed Encounter?,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 111, no. 3 (2012): 498.

**25** Jaron Lanier, *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now* (New York: Henry Holt, 2018), 8-10.

**26** Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*. Trans. Erik Butler (London and New York: Verso, 2017), 35.

**27** Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 27.

**28** Byung-Chul Han, *The Scent of Time*, trans. Daniel Steuer (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 1-2.

**29** As two separate groups of researchers have shown, one reason for the high percentage of such hallucinations today (70 – 86%) is stress. The other is the close proximity of the phone to the nervous system. See Michael B. Rothberg et al., “Phantom vibration syndrome among medical staff: A cross sectional survey,” *BMJ* 341: c6914 (2010), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.c6914>; and Michelle Drouin et al., “Phantom Vibrations among Undergraduates: Prevalence and Associated psychological characteristics,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 28 (2012): 1490–1496.

**30** Vincent F. Hendricks and Mads Vestergaard *Reality Lost: Markets of Attention, Misinformation and Manipulation*, trans. Sara Høyrup (Cham: Springer Open, 2019), 126-9.

**31** Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (London: Sage Publications, 1993), 44.

**32** Ibid.

**33** For more information about the Mail Order catalogues, see Natasha Lushetich, *Fluxus: The Practice of Non-Duality* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2014).

**34** Usually considered to be until 1978, the year of George Maciunas’s death.

**35** See Patrick Crogan, *Gameplay Mode: War, Simulation and Technoculture (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2011)*.

**36** OED, 2014, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/>, accessed November 3, 2019.

**37** Alfred A. Arth and Lucille M. Freeman, “The Gimmick as an Instructional Tool,” *Middle School Journal* 13, no. 1 (1981): 6.

**38** Matt Wall, “Brain Imaging is More than an Academic Gimmick,” *Scientific American* 27 (2014), accessed November 3, 2019, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/brain-imaging-is-more-than-an-academic-gimmick>.

**39** Sianne Ngai, “Theory of the Gimmick,” *Critical Inquiry* 43 (2017): 468.

**40** Ibid., 471.

**41** Fredric Jameson, “The Aesthetics of Singularity,” *New Left Review* 2 (March-April 2015): 113-4.

**42** Ibid., 113.

**43** See Natasha Lushetich, “A Santa with a Butt Plug: Paul McCarthy and the Obliterating Violence of Positivity,” *Body, Space & Technology* 19, no. 1 (2020), <http://doi.org/10.16995/bst.340>.

**44** Berardi, *Heroes*, 68.

**45** Concretism refers to Pierre Schaffer and Pierre Henry’s notion of concrete music, which uses everyday, environmental sounds as well as the use of a musical instrument in its total configuration, like John Cage’s prepared piano. For more information, see Natasha Lushetich, “Ludus Populi: The Practice of Nonsense,” *Theatre Journal* 63, no. 1 (March 2011): 25-6.

**46** Han, *The Scent of Time*, 1-2.

**47** See Muhammad T. Alshurideh, “Exploring the Main Factors Affecting Consumer Choice of Mobile Phone Service Provider Contracts,” *International Journal of Communications, Network and System Sciences* 12, no. 9 (2016): 563–81; and Peter D. Lunn and Sean Lyons, “Consumer Switching Intentions for Telecoms Services: Evidence from Ireland,” *Helyion* 4, no. 5, e00618 (2018), doi: 10.1016/j.heliyon.2018.e00618.

**48** Slavoj Žižek, *O Vjerovanju* (Zagreb: Algoritam, 2005), 126.

**49** Marcel Mauss, *The Gift Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Trans. Ian Cunnison (London & Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 46-8.

**50** See Lushetich, *Fluxus: The Practice of Non-Duality*, 195-97.

**51** Elizabeth Armstrong and Joan Rothfuss, *In the Spirit of Fluxus* (Minneapolis: Walker Arts Center, 1993), 94; 178.

**52** For more information about the Fluxkit and how it relates to the *event score*, see Lushetich, *Fluxus*, 105-143.

**53** George Brecht in Henry Martin, *An Introduction to George Brecht’s Book of the Tumbler on Fire* (Milan: Multhipla Edizioni, 1978), 106.

**54** Steven Milhauser, “The Fascination of the Miniature,” *Grand Street* 2, no. 4 (1983): 128-35.

**55** Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1977), 129.

**56** See Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1975).

**57** Nandita B. Mellamphy, Editorial, *FibreCulture Journal* 25 (2015), accessed November 3, 2019, <http://twentyfive.fibreCulturejournal.org/>.

**58** See Nathaniel Barr et al., “The brain in your pocket: evidence that smartphones are used to supplant thinking,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 48 (2015): 473–80; Nancy A. Cheever et al., “Out of sight is not out of mind: the impact of restricting wireless mobile device use on anxiety levels among low, moderate and high users,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 37 (2014): 290–97.

**59** *The Verge*, 2018, <https://www.theverge.com/>, accessed November 16, 2019.

**60** The infra-ordinary is a concept developed by Georges Perec in *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, trans. John Sturrock (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974 [1973]).

**61** A Dutch Artist Organization.

**62** See Dacher Keltner and Brenda N. Buswell, “Embarrassment: Its Distinct Form and Appeasement Functions,” *Psychological Bulletin* 122, no. 3 (1997): 250–70.

**63** Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London; New York: Routledge, 2008), 352.

**64** See Lushetich, *Fluxus*, 38-9.

**65** Friedman et al., *The Fluxus Performance Workbook*, 74.

**66** See Vassilis Sevdalis and Peter E. Keller, “Cues for self-recognition in point-light displays of actions performed in synchrony with music,” *Consciousness and Cognition* 19 (2010): 617–26.

**67** Christine Stiles and David Tudor, “Alive, Free, and Without Need of Culture,” *The*

Getty Research Institute Symposium *The Art of David Tudor*, 2001, accessed August 9, 2019, [https://www.getty.edu/research/exhibitions\\_events/events/david\\_tudor\\_symposium/pdf/stiles.pdf](https://www.getty.edu/research/exhibitions_events/events/david_tudor_symposium/pdf/stiles.pdf), 4.

**68** Ibid., 4–5.

**69** Ibid., 5.

**70** See *Rain Man*, directed by Barry Levinson, 1988.

**71** See Jesper Juul, *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

**72** Mark Wigley, *The Architecture of Deconstruction: Derrida's Haunt* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 80.

**73** Walter Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," *Selected Writings*, Volume 2, 1927–1934, trans. Rodney Livingstone et al. (Cambridge, MA; London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 732.

**74** Jameson, "The Aesthetics of Singularity," 117–8.

**75** Ibid., 122.

**76** See Maurizio Lazzarato, *Signs and Machines: Capitalism and the Production of Subjectivity*, trans. J.D. Jordan (Los Angeles: Semiotext, 2014).

**77** See Chun-Wei Tsai et al., "Big data analytics: a survey," *Journal of Big Data* 2, no. 21 (2015), DOI 10.1186/s40537-015-0030-3.

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# Wolf Vostell's *dé-coll/age* Magazine: The Editorial Design of Action Art

## Henar Rivière

### Introduction: The Carp, the Duck, and the Shifting Sands of Action Art

Rivers of ink have flowed into writing on the international artists' network Fluxus—by, for, and against Fluxus, toward and from Fluxus; to create, explain, justify, comment on, or analyze it. On occasion, this ink has aided in understanding Fluxus's *raison d'être*, but just as often it has only served to obscure it. So much has been written on Fluxus—calling upon its name either to completely abjure it or to reinterpret the entirety of art and life from it—that at times one cannot help but feel that, more than an artistic phenomenon, Fluxus is a figure of thought, a concept which is extraordinarily malleable in the field of intellectual speculation. The fascinating thing about it is that this supple intellectual creation is, above all, the work of its own exponents, who contributed their different manners of its understanding, utilizing, and narrating.

This article focuses on the case of the German artist Wolf Vostell, one of the many exponents of Fluxus who wrote his own version of its history—including a critical appraisal of it. Although the Fluxus scholarship has paid scarce attention to him, his example is one of the most remarkable, alongside those of George Maciunas, the tireless promoter of Fluxus, and Dick Higgins, the self-described “other theoretician” of the artists' network.<sup>1</sup> The uniqueness of Vostell's case can be summed up in three points: means used, chronology, and effectiveness in the medium term for determining the critical reception of Fluxus and action art. The study of this case, attending to these three questions, constitutes a fundamental chapter in the revision of the historiography of Fluxus and the intricate vicissitudes which it has gone through for decades as a direct consequence of the initiatives of the artists themselves.

The means used by Vostell were editorial in nature, something that in itself is unexceptional in the context of Fluxus, where the artist's own editions and artist-run publishing houses (such as Higgins' Something Else Press) were essential tools, not only in giving voice to the different visions of Fluxus, but as vehicles enabling its very existence. However, it is precisely against this

background that Vostell's editorial initiative stands out most strikingly: unlike Maciunas and Higgins, who first and foremost employed verbal and diagrammatic language, Vostell wrote his version of Fluxus in the predominantly visual language of editorial design. It is true that over the years he backed up his account through innumerable interviews and statements, but the space in which his views came through in their most original and influential way was the magazine *dé-coll/age*, an artist publication on whose pages he created his own editorial aesthetic. Striking, persuasive, and communicatively efficacious, this aesthetic would become the editorial aesthetic of reference for action art and for the new artistic practices of the 1960s and 1970s in general, especially through its repercussions on the important magazine *Interfunktionen* edited by Friedrich W. Heubach.

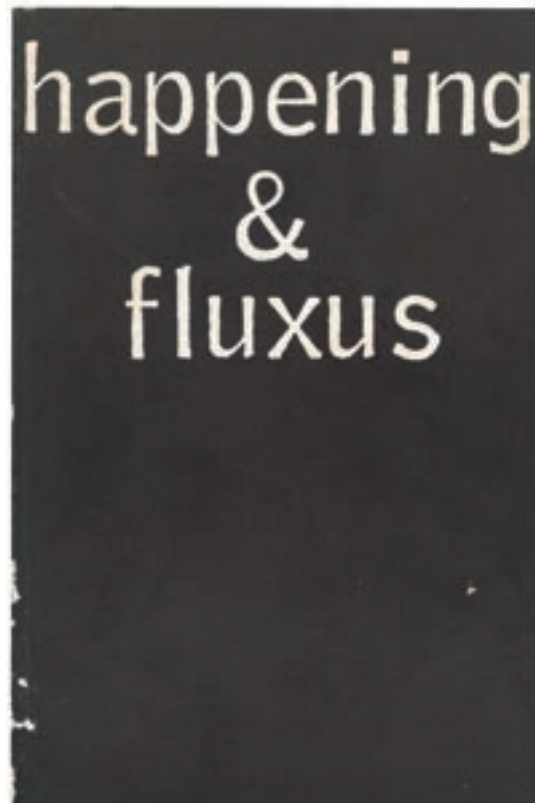


Fig. 1. Cover of the book *Happening & Fluxus. Materialien*, eds. Hanns Sohm and Harald Szeemann (Cologne, Kölnischer Kunstverein, 1970). Courtesy of Archivo Lafuente.

The chronological factor also played in favor of its effectiveness: Vostell was ahead of his time when it came to envisioning the power that printed documents were going to have in the reception of action art's ephemeral practices. His efforts marked the course of events from the first public presentations of Fluxus and, in the medium term, they managed to get the first retrospective exhibition ever devoted to it to adopt his point of view.

*Happening & Fluxus* was the title of that exhibition, curated by Harald Szeemann for the Kölnischer Kunstverein (Germany) in 1970. It was the second of the three major exhibitions that put the Swiss curator in the international spotlight as one of the most prominent and controversial supporters of the so-called Neo-avant-gardes of the 1960s and 1970s. The first had been *When Attitudes Become Form* (1969), and the third would be Kassel's *documenta 5* (1972).<sup>2</sup> Like these two exhibitions, *Happening & Fluxus* marked a milestone in the reception of the artistic practices it presented and was surrounded by controversy. What is interesting with regard to the subject at hand is that the controversy did not only stem from the public and the authorities, but very notably from the artists involved, many of whom were uncomfortable from the onset with the curator's approach. The reason for their discomfort began with the very title of the exhibition: "Every time I hear Fluxus and happening [sic] spoken in one breath or see them put together in a title for an exhibition," explained the artist Tomas Schmit, "I shudder as if I saw a carp fuck a duck."<sup>3</sup> For Schmit, "These two things have very little in common and very much that keeps them apart," an opinion he shared with Maciunas, as is well known.<sup>4</sup>

The debate over the identity of Fluxus with regard to the Happening thereby ushered in the 1970s, but it had been forged during the previous decade through the collective and complex process that gave shape to the new territory of performance art, back then more generally called action art. In the early and mid-sixties, action art was an experimental field where possible subcategories such as the "Happening" or the "Event" were still in the process of being tested and defined. Thus, for example, if in 1970 Maciunas saw an insurmountable difference between Fluxus and the Happening, the truth is that eight years earlier he had used the second of these terms to present the series of performances that gave rise to the corpus of pieces characteristic of early Fluxus.<sup>5</sup> The reasons why Fluxus and the Happening ultimately came to be defined as distinct and even antagonistic territories within action art were

not purely aesthetic, but largely strategic, and were linked to confrontations between their respective exponents, as we shall see. In this context, the magazine *dé-coll/age* is at the same time testimony to and architect of the transformations that took place in the shifting sands of action art during the sixties. Through its ostensibly simply informative pages, Vostell became judge and jury of events by means of very personal editorial and graphic strategies, sometimes bordering on manipulation.

This article provides a study of the magazine *dé-coll/age*, understood both as an artwork itself (part of its editor's aesthetics) and as simultaneously a historical object *and* subject. Consequently, its analysis is contextualized both within the creative principle that guided all of Vostell's work and the events that marked the developments in the field of action art in Germany. A historical assessment is therefore offered here for a publication which Higgins—also at the same time judge and jury—described as "the best forum for avant garde ideas in Europe—by default, in the world."<sup>6</sup>

### **The *dé-coll/age* Principle and Vostell at a Crossroads**

Interestingly enough, Vostell's personal aesthetics were based on a cardinal principle which was at the heart of his oeuvre over the years and which was named exactly as his magazine: *dé-coll/age*—written in this way, with a hyphen and a slash, for very specific reasons. That Vostell called his magazine by the name of his aesthetic principle proves that from the very beginning he understood it as an extension of his own artistic practice—and this was actually very coherent, for his artistic practice was largely concerned with the media.

It can be said that the *dé-coll/age* principle stands for a manner of artistic intervention inspired by the violence of consumer society in a technologically driven postwar world, a form of violence that Vostell saw most vividly illustrated by the media, both by way of the information they provided and their own physical obsolescence. A clear example was provided by the advertising placards that caught Vostell's attention when he lived in Paris back in the mid-1950s. As a young German traumatized by the war, he was surprised to discover that the streets of the French capital, though not war-damaged like German cities, bore traces of violence on their walls, where the advertising placards glued on top of one another were worn out from being exposed to weather and traffic.<sup>7</sup> He began imitating the process of degradation of the placards by peeling them off and bringing

them to his studio, where he would further rip them up and erase them with corrosive acid. These were his first *dé-coll/ages*, a word that literally means “detaching” or “ungluing” in French.

The similarity between his way of acting upon placards and that of the “*affiches lacérées*” or, more precisely, “*décollages*,” of the artists linked to the French Nouveau Réalisme is striking. As a matter of fact, Vostell sought membership in the group at its founding in 1960 but was met with a rebuff. From then on, he always kept his distance from them, and retrospectively agreed with Pierre Restany in the latter’s refusal to include him within the group. The reason for the French theorist’s opposition was precisely what he called “*la querelle du décollage*.” From his point of view, Vostell employed the term in an excessively flexible and open-ended way.<sup>8</sup> The German artist, for his part, criticized the object-based and fetishistic approach of the other *décollagists*, who limited their interventions to choosing the placards, ungluing them, and mounting them on canvas without any further manipulation. For him, the placards were only the starting point of an aesthetic wager that emphasized the *processes* of destruction of contemporary society in a much broader sense.<sup>9</sup> To show that he had always worked with this procedural approach, and to draw a clear distinction between his work and that of the *décollagists*, Vostell used two means: the story of his “discovery” of the term “*décollage*” and his way of writing it with a hyphen and a slash as if it were dismembered.

The story of the discovery of the term allegedly dates back to as early as 1954, the year in which on September 6 the French newspaper *Le Figaro* published the news of a plane that had crashed “shortly after takeoff” (“*peu après son décollage*”). According to Vostell, he was so impressed by the headline and intrigued by its use of the noun “*décollage*” that he ran out to buy a French-German Langenscheidt dictionary and was fascinated by the polysemy of the term, which, in addition to “unglue” and “take off,” also means “die” or “snuff it.” In this sense, for Vostell, the plane crash represented a *double dé-coll/age* event (to take off and, almost instantly, to die), and this duality summed up, in his opinion, the ambivalence of modern life, that always latent destructive component in the peace of a Europe still marked by war. On the whole, “*décollage*” was proving itself to be an extraordinarily flexible concept “that could be expanded in every direction in a mind-boggling way.”<sup>10</sup>

To finish making it his own, Vostell adopted that dismembered way of writing it, which not only visually evokes the violence of lacerated placards or crashed planes, but also condenses all the metaphorical dimensions that he wanted to give his work as an image of his time. Undoubtedly influenced by contemporary visual and concrete poetry,<sup>11</sup> Vostell dismantled the word “*décollage*” to assemble his own “*dé-coll/age*”. This was an *objet trouvé*—or, more precisely, a *mot trouvé*—found in the press, the dictionary, and contemporary civilization; that is why he maintained its lexicographical symbols, with a slash separating the “*age*” ending. Thanks to this device, along with the hyphen that he added between the syllables “*dé*” and “*coll*”, “*dé-coll/age*” also functions as a word of words, whose meanings he would play with in different languages within his magazine. Of these, the most important and obvious is the one that reminds us that the *dé-coll/age* principle was intended to be an allegory of its *age*.

After the placards, Vostell applied the *dé-coll/age* principle to other forms of media, including press photography (giving rise to his *dé-coll/age*—*Verwishungen*, i.e., *dé-coll/age*—blurrings) and television (TV—*dé-coll/ages*). Although I will not go into specific detail on his work using these media, what bears mentioning is that his approach to them was not as naive as his amazement at this new media-driven society might suggest. Rather, he was a professional regarding the production of the letters, images, and messages of the iconosphere. Early in his career, Vostell made his living for several years as a typographer and graphic designer. In Paris, while studying at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts and ripping up placards, he worked in the important type foundry Deberny & Peignot as well as in the workshop of placard artist A. M. Cassandre. It was in fact one of Cassandre’s placard books which provided the stimulus for what would be Vostell’s first *dé-coll/age*—action *The theater is on the street* (1958).<sup>12</sup> Later, back in Cologne in 1961, his work in the layout department of *Neue Illustrierte* magazine also had a direct impact on his artistic work. There, on a daily basis, he handled countless snapshots of hot topics, such as the raising of the Berlin Wall. This made him shift his focus from placards to press photography as raw material for his work.<sup>13</sup> That is to say, Vostell’s aesthetic approaches drew directly from his experience as a graphic designer.

In this sense, it was likely only a matter of time before he put his professional know-how at the service of his artistic concerns by creating an artist’s magazine. In a



way, this meant turning a defect into a virtue, because his dual dedication to graphic design and the fine arts was causing him certain difficulties when it came to making his way onto the Cologne art scene. Benjamin Patterson, one of his closest collaborators in the early 1960s, explained that Vostell found himself at a crossroads: "He was then still bumbling around, still caught between continuing an established career as a commercial artist and an overwhelming need to be recognized as a fine artist."<sup>14</sup> This need was proving difficult to meet precisely in part because of his work as a designer. The painter Mary Bauermeister, a leading figure in Cologne at that time, recognized years later that she and her peers "were so arrogant that we didn't consider those who did graphic design as artists."<sup>15</sup> Besides, Vostell was making a good living as a graphic designer, which from her perspective took him even further away from the bohemian way of life of her circle.<sup>16</sup> This meant that he was never invited to participate, not even as a spectator, in the activities of the well-known Atelier Bauermeister, a crucial meeting place between 1960 and 1961 for the artistic experimentation from which the performance and intermedia art practices of Fluxus in Germany would emerge.<sup>17</sup>

Given these circumstances, Vostell had to go about creating his own alternative network of contacts and looking for opportunities to present his work, in spaces including his own atelier and the Galerie Haro Lauhus. Meanwhile, a new player emerged in the local art scene: the Lithuanian-American George Maciunas who, as it is widely known, arrived in Europe from the US in the fall of 1961 with the plan of issuing a yearbook devoted to the new artistic developments in intermedia, conceptual, and action art, which was to be titled *Fluxus*. It is difficult to know whether Vostell had planned to publish a periodical before learning of Maciunas's plans. The fact is that a few months after the latter's arrival, Vostell had printed the first issue of the magazine *dé-coll/age*, which Maciunas interpreted as a clearly competitive gesture. Whether it was or not, this publication became instrumental for Vostell in his efforts to position himself as an artist both in the local art scene and internationally.

### ***dé-coll/age*, the *Bulletin aktueller Ideen***

Vostell's *dé-coll/age* magazine was printed between 1962 and 1969, comprising seven issues released irregularly in disparate formats. The first two—more modest in terms of quantity and variety of content than the following ones—were published in editions of 500 copies. The third, fourth, and sixth—those most relevant to the

historiography of Fluxus and the Happening—doubled this figure. The fifth and seventh—the two exceptions within the editorial line of the magazine—went back to 500. As for the sites and rhythm of publication, the first three were carried out by the artist himself and were released in Cologne in rapid succession between June and December 1962. From the fourth one on, the Frankfurt-based publishing house Typos took over the magazine's publication, and the rhythm slowed, with one- to two-year gaps between the appearance of issues.

As indicated by its title, the magazine represents a programmatic extension of the editor's aesthetic investigations. Furthermore, on more than one occasion Vostell reinforced this message through the design of the covers. *dé-coll/age* no. 1 bears a band illustrated with an enlarged negative copy of the Franco-German Langenscheidt's definition of the word, with its various meanings. *dé-coll/age* no. 3's cover also proffers a play on words by dividing the term into three units and offering definitions of each one in different languages: "dé" and "coll" here correspond to two prepositions, the Spanish "de" ("from," "of") and the articulated Italian "con il" ("with the"), while "age" takes its meaning from the English. Finally, in *dé-coll/age* no. 6, the title is removed and is replaced by a facsimile of *Le Figaro*'s cover with the news story about the plane crashing during take-off.

Despite the patent desire of Vostell to make his magazine a manifestation of his personal aesthetic principle, it would be wrong to think that its seven issues are dedicated to his own work: only the last one is a monograph on a project of his own. Quite the opposite, he conceived of *dé-coll/age* in what might be considered a more generous and undoubtedly more ambitious manner: as a *Bulletin aktueller Ideen*, i.e., "*Bulletin of Current Thinking*."<sup>18</sup> The term "bulletin" refers to a type of periodical publication that provides information related to the activity of an organization, so there is a certain official quality to it. It thus follows that Vostell aspired to become the official spokesperson of a still-unnamed collective entity devoted to a matter that, while somewhat undefined as yet ("ideas"), was in tune with his personal concerns ("*Aktualität*").

The open-endedness of this approach is interesting from two standpoints. For us, it is indicative of the novel and experimental nature of the artistic developments that were to find dissemination in the pages of *dé-coll/age*, while still lacking a defined identity. For Vostell, it was very effective from a tactical perspective in that,



were probably quite obvious to the audience. Both bear peculiar names that recall those of certain avant-garde movements or artistic techniques (i.e., Dada, Merz, *collage*, *frottage*), and both reproduce their respective dictionary definitions as self-explanatory devices. Certainly less obvious to the spectators, although evident to the artists involved, was the similarity of their contents or, as Dick Higgins put it, the fact that their “spheres of interest overlapped.”<sup>24</sup> The seven fold-out sheets of *dé-coll/age* no. 1 were dedicated to a series of artists and works that formed part of the breeding ground from which the *Neo-Dada in der Musik* program emerged and from which Fluxus was to be born: instruction scores and texts by Benjamin Patterson, La Monte Young, Nam June Paik, and Maciunas himself, as well as *Illustriertentexte* by Arthur Kōpcke and some of Vostell's *dé-coll/age*—*Verwischungen*.<sup>25</sup> With the exception of Vostell's, these were exactly the kind of action, intermedia, and conceptual artworks that Maciunas intended to publish, so conflict seemed inevitable. At first, however, Maciunas tried to keep things cordial and reach an understanding with his colleague. Barely a month after the presentation of *dé-coll/age* no. 1, he wrote to him regarding the preparations for the following issue:

I hear you are publishing [Carlheinz] Caspari's piece in *dé-coll/age*. I thought of including it in *Fluxus*, but it is not good to duplicate. So I will not include it. Actually I think it would be simplest [sic] to incorporate *dé-coll/age* in *Fluxus* and simplify many matters of duplication, especially since you are the editor of both: *dé-coll/age* and *Fluxus* ?????? How do you think?<sup>26</sup>

“I didn't want to have anything to do with that”—Vostell summarized.<sup>27</sup> Although Maciunas had, as a matter of fact, included him among the editors of the “German section” of his magazine,<sup>28</sup> he was not willing to give up his own endeavor, which by then had already begun to receive positive reactions and collaboration proposals, proving to be a marvelous tool by which to get out his name and assist him in building an international network of contacts.<sup>29</sup> Thus, far from giving up on his editorial activity, Vostell then stepped up his preparations for a new issue that was notably more ambitious than the first.

Its publication was scheduled for October,<sup>30</sup> but was delayed until December. Meanwhile, Vostell struggled to stay in the limelight by publishing a “special issue” that was originally intended as no. 1b, but which automati-

cally became no. 2 when the next issue was released as no. 3.<sup>31</sup> Printed in November 1962, *dé-coll/age* no. 2 is a good example of the pragmatism and speed which characterized Vostell's work, giving him a clear advantage over Maciunas. The issue was conceived as a supplement or libretto to “The Broadway Opera,” a theatrical performance by Higgins which the magazine organized at the Magnifying Glass Cinemas (*Lichtspiele Die Lupe*) in Cologne.

Its layout could not be simpler: with no cover and a photograph of Higgins at the entrance to the cinema as the front page, it includes a band around it bearing the name of the magazine; on the reverse side of the photograph, the performance's program is rendered as a table of contents, and the remaining pages are made up of the texts of the pieces announced, translated into German by Higgins himself. Added to this is what we might call an extended encore (his 1960 *Symphoniae Sacrae*) in its original English version. All of these sheets are copies of the originals typed by Higgins, which Vostell simply joined together with two basic staples, without altering them in the slightest: neither the format of the paper nor the numbering of the combined sheets was modified (those written in each language were grouped and numbered separately). Not even Higgins's non-native German was proofread. This provides a good account of the haste with which Vostell worked, but it is also in step, as we shall see later, with his criteria when it came to design.

Finally, in December, *dé-coll/age* no. 3 appeared. Despite lacking the support of a publishing house that would cover expenses, Vostell did not hesitate to quintuple the content and double the print run with respect to the two previous issues, which shows the great expectations that had been placed on him. It was no wonder: his magazine's pages offered an exclusive selection of the trailblazing artistic developments in which he and his counterparts were playing the leading role at that time in Europe. To this end, the range of materials included increased: along with the intermedia and action art pieces characteristic of *dé-coll/age* nos. 1 and 2, Vostell added theoretical essays and, above all, abundant documentation of events: concert programs and photographs, press reviews and other materials relating to *Neo-Dada in der Musik*, the Wiesbaden festival, and an event organized afterward in Amsterdam, among others.<sup>32</sup> All this was organized in keeping with the anthology approach of the first issue, that is, with an artist-ordered table of contents, offering a selection of names that, except in notable cases such as that of the

German concrete poet Franz Mon, were mostly linked to Fluxus. Curiously, a special section was dedicated to this artists' network, which appeared in the table of contents between F for Henry Flynt and H for Dick Higgins, as the only exception in its table of contents arranged by author.

Far from interpreting this detail as recognition of his promotional activity, George Maciunas viewed *dé-coll/age* no. 3 as a rival operation. He was not included in the table of contents, and his only mention was to be found in a press review reproduced in the Fluxus section. If this bothered him, Maciunas said nothing about it, perhaps consistent with his rejection of the cult of artistic individuality. Instead, Maciunas was up in arms because Vostell had printed some contributions that he had been readying for his still-unpublished *Fluxus*.<sup>33</sup> Having explicitly dropped certain material so as not to step on Vostell's toes, Maciunas now found that Vostell, far from returning the courtesy, was publishing two essays which he had also planned to publish. These two works were, respectively, "The Future of Music: A collective Composition," in which the Hungarian composer György Ligeti describes the course of a celebrated conference at which he remained silent for ten minutes observing the reactions of the audience; and "My New Concept of General Acognitive Culture," in which the American philosopher and musician Henry Flynt presents his rejection of "Serious Culture" and proposes replacing it with a solipsistic and purely recreational "acognitive culture." Both Ligeti and Flynt had informed Vostell that Maciunas intended to publish their texts. Their responses when these came out in *dé-coll/age* were very symptomatic of Vostell's sneaky ways: Flynt found out from a third party, and Ligeti felt deceived because he had agreed to its inclusion in the bulletin provided that Maciunas granted his consent, a condition that, as demonstrated by an angry letter he subsequently received from the Lithuanian artist, proved not to have been met.<sup>34</sup>

Maciunas's reaction was immediate and represented a headlong flight towards his well-known attempt to keep the affairs of Fluxus under control: in a newsletter dated January 1, 1963, he tried to seduce his collaborators into granting him the exclusive rights to all of their respective works for life. His strategy was to promise to publish, in addition to the yearbook, special monographic collections dedicated to each of them, from which they would receive eighty percent of the proceeds. Maciunas argued that by taking shelter in this way under the umbrella of "© Fluxus," each artist would

obtain greater protection and, at the same time, would become part of a stronger "common front" capable of expanding its activities throughout the whole world.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, and this he kept to himself, Maciunas would make sure that no matter what it took, no one would ever get ahead of him in publishing unpublished material.

Such monopolistic zeal helps us understand why the Lithuanian could not appreciate the inclusion of Fluxus in the table of contents of *dé-coll/age* no. 3. For him, Fluxus was not merely a part, but the whole: it could not just be one more among the authors like in *dé-coll/age* no. 3's table of contents, but rather, the sum of all of them. In this sense, Vostell was not only competing unfairly, but also posed a real threat to Maciunas's plans: he had appropriated the name Fluxus and had reduced it to just another chapter within a larger work, which was very different from Maciunas's "common front" — namely, his own *dé-coll/age* principle.

The artists whom Maciunas wanted to represent, however, tended to see matters in a more straightforward way: "the magazine *dé-coll/age* was published and *Fluxus* was not."<sup>36</sup> How could they sign over their works to him, and only to him, if he never published what he promised? His plans were losing credibility as a result of his editorial inefficiency. In Germany, his confrontation with Vostell weakened his position, which had never been strong to begin with: Nam June Paik, his most powerful ally in the region, did not hesitate to side with Vostell,<sup>37</sup> and Jean-Pierre Wilhelm, the gallery owner and art critic whose mediation had made possible the *Neo-Dada in der Musik* concert along with the Wiesbaden festival, made sure Vostell would not be excluded from future events.<sup>38</sup> As for the United States, Vostell had received letters of appreciation and gratitude for his editorial efforts: "Thanks very much for the issue of *dé-coll/age* no. 3 and the other brochures"—wrote Allan Kaprow—"I found them extremely interesting and have shown them to friends who also had the same reaction. I think your group (and Geo-Maciunas') [sic] is the most alive in Europe."<sup>39</sup>

Kaprow's words above offer a clear answer to the question that opened this section: Vostell's bulletin had effectively become, on the strength of its first three issues, the magazine of Fluxus or, more specifically, the magazine of that "group"—to use Kaprow's own term—which today we know as the early European Fluxus. *dé-coll/age* nos. 1 to 3 had published not only the kinds of action, intermedia, and conceptual works of art that Maciunas intended to publish, but also plentiful

documentation relating to the early festivals, concerts, and other activities by Fluxus artists active in Europe. It thus served as an excellent letter of introduction to their American counterparts, not only for Vostell, but for the entire European “group.”<sup>40</sup> In this scenario, Maciunas’s prestige as an editor and a representative of the artists was put into question or, at least, in parentheses—as in Kaprow’s letter.

That being said, *dé-coll/age* no. 3 was at the same time the culmination and the end of a stage. Having burned his bridges with Maciunas, Vostell would soon pursue new alliances which would ultimately define a new trend in opposition to Fluxus, namely, that of the Happening. Before addressing how this new direction was to be reflected in *dé-coll/age* no. 4, it would be sensible to pause long enough to analyze the editorial design of the first three issues of the magazine, as it was precisely through this design that the German artist was able to make Fluxus and the other artistic developments in which he participated his own.

### Toward an Archeology of Action Art

Probably the great editorial achievement of Vostell is that, in accordance with his ambition, he created a style consistent with his particular artistic theory and practice, which at the same time allowed him to present collective content in an effective and convincing way. The premise he employed to achieve this goal was clear: “allowing things to be authentic.”<sup>41</sup> In a manner similar to what he did with torn posters, war photographs published in the press, and daily acts of destruction, he incorporated his colleagues’ pieces and compositions into his own work—in this case, the magazine—as if they were *objets trouvés*. From a design standpoint, this was easy to achieve: it was only necessary to downplay the typesetting and work with “facsimiles of the things that came directly from the artists, just as they were, blotches, corrections, things crossed out, imperfections and everything else.”<sup>42</sup> This also had the advantage of saving a lot of time in terms of transcriptions, formatting, and corrections, as has already been seen with regard to *dé-coll/age* no. 2.

The consequence of this approach is a feeling of immediacy and closeness, which makes a virtue out of the messy and even dirty appearance of some materials and their layout. “The medium is the message” wrote Marshall McLuhan in those years, and *dé-coll/age*’s raw aesthetic would set the trend for future Neo-avant-garde editorial projects such as the influential *Interfunktionen*, published from 1968 to 1975.<sup>43</sup> As its editor, Friedrich

Wolfram Heubach would later explain, “What many have seen as the marked cheaply-produced look of the journal, that ‘aesthetic of the impoverished’ that found many adherents and imitators,” was a means to keep within its limited budget, but also the result of an aesthetic agenda intimately related to that of *dé-coll/age*:

[*Interfunktionen*’s] early issues reflected an attempt to design the journal in a way compatible with the new aesthetic agenda manifested in [its] contributions. The layout was what we then used to call ‘direct’—most of the material was facsimiled, using different papers suited to the originals, and sometimes original documents were even bound into an issue.<sup>44</sup>

There is no doubt that this editorial approach stemmed directly from Vostell, who was co-editor of the first issue of *Interfunktionen* and had been the “middleman” who had brought Heubach into contact with the art scene in the first place.<sup>45</sup>

Returning to *dé-coll/age*, I would argue that Vostell’s strong editorial personality did not fully take shape until the third issue of the bulletin, when the “aesthetic of the impoverished” was complemented by a documentary approach. To the originals of his own pieces and those of his colleagues, he now added documents from festivals and other events for the first time. This inclusion was not only appropriate for the facsimile method and the editor’s desire for “authenticity,” but it also enriched the magazine from various points of view, allowing him to delve deeper in his research on the *dé-coll/age* principle.

Firstly, the fact that, alongside the pieces, documents such as photographs or press reviews were reproduced depicting how said pieces had been performed at a given concert, meant that the emphasis on their composition was transferred to their realization, that is, accentuating their performative nature. *dé-coll/age* thus became a proper action art magazine, the first where new artistic practices were presented “in the midst of the reality” in which they took place.<sup>46</sup> In this way, Vostell made it explicit that “current” artists had broken from the navel-gazing tendencies of the previous generation’s abstract art and were in dialogue with the world that surrounded them, reaching the fusion between art and life for which he advocated.

Secondly, stressing the performative aspect meant stressing the transitory element as well, a challenge that

the German artist could not have taken on better. Let us recall that the *dé-coll/age* principle responded to his desire to reveal the essence of his time through the capture and amplified mimesis of its—in his mind—most representative processes (the destructive ones). And this is precisely what the documentary photographs of the concerts, or their descriptions in the contemporary reviews did: freeze processes and capture instants of fleeting events. *dé-coll/age* no. 3 can thus be viewed as a kind of archaeological site of ephemeral art, a platform on which the continuous and chaotic flow of events left its trail as it passed.

To convey the frenetic pace of current life (*Aktualität*) layered on its pages, Vostell utilized various devices of careful carelessness: the different sections announced in the table of contents appear on its pages randomly, without numbering and in defiance of the expected order, and often they lack a title that distinguishes them from the previous section; the heterogeneity of the facsimile reproductions is enhanced by the use of paper of differing qualities and by the mixture of fold-out sheets and other simple ones; in addition, the materials are mounted indifferently face up, face down or sideways, even when they occupy the same page. The result is a messy stratigraphy where the documents are intermingled without a resulting continuity and without further explanations. Such a silent avalanche of information demands interactive reading from the receiver: folding and unfolding, turning the magazine in one direction and another and, above all, deciphering, cramming in his/her head all those torn fragments of reality in order to attempt to confer a meaningful sense of unity upon them.

In short, with *dé-coll/age* no. 3, Vostell created an editorial design that, adopting his strategy of labelling all his undertakings, I would like to call “*dé-coll/age* design.” Its two most salient features are the raw reproduction of the original materials and the chaotic appearance sought by its layout. Both are fully in tune with the *dé-coll/age* principle which guided all of his work. And that is exactly where the cunning of Vostell as an editor lies: his aesthetic theory gave him the perfect alibi to publish documents in a seemingly unintentional way, *as if* they had fallen onto the pages of the magazine at random, *as if* no one had given them any order or premeditated meaning. His fascination with the sensationalist language of mass media and their visual saturation merged in his magazine with the underground halo of dirty, fast, and cheap reproductions. His knowledge in terms of layout did the rest,

allowing him to pretend to take on the innocent stance of someone who limits himself to communicating ideas and facts. The extent to which this editorial design strategy lent itself to a biased portrayal of events became even more apparent with the next issue of *dé-coll/age*.

### **Happenings and Company**

In the spring of 1963, a few months after the publication of *dé-coll/age* no. 3, Vostell traveled to New York for the first time, where he would have the opportunity to meet Allan Kaprow personally and collaborate with him in the framework of the Yam Festival. As a consequence of their meeting, Vostell decided to adopt the term “Happening” for his actions, which until then he had termed *dé-coll/age-Demonstrationen* or *dé-coll/age-Ereignisse*.<sup>47</sup> He thus forged a new alliance with the declared intention of turning the Happening into an “international movement,” from which he emerged as the first European exponent, in tandem with his American counterpart.<sup>48</sup> This marked the beginning of the Fluxus/Happening divide, which was reinforced a year later when Vostell returned to New York and earned recognition from his American colleagues with his *dé-collage-Happening YOU*, staged in an empty swimming pool, an orchard, and a tennis court on Long Island on April 19, 1964. This success can be viewed as a second victory for Vostell over Maciunas. His first victory had consolidated his centrality *within* the Fluxus network due to his publishing activity, whereas the second consolidated his preeminence *over* Fluxus owing to his ambitious manner of understanding action art. As analyzed by Medina: “*YOU* was a complex mimicry of war, fascisms, consumerism, and mass media of considerably more political and social relevance than any of the previous Happenings done by any of the New York artists [...] and convinced people like Higgins that accumulation, collageism, and social allusion were more powerful performance modes than the raw simplicity and paradoxical character of Maciunas’s Fluxus.”<sup>49</sup>

As pointed out in the introduction to this article, this sharp contrast between the Happening, as an overwhelming immersive experience, and what Higgins called the “Fluxtiness” promoted by Maciunas had not always existed, but rather, was defined in the time span between the birth of Fluxus in the summer of 1962, when Maciunas still included “Happenings” in his programs, and the staging of *YOU* in the spring of 1964. Again, the *dé-coll/age* magazine played a key role in this process, setting the direction in which Vostell sought to go. Published in January 1964, the fourth issue was

conceived as a monograph on the Happening, something which toward the end of 1963 was surprising to people who, like the poet and artist Jackson Mac Low, did not understand the Happening as a general trend, but simply as Kaprow's particular brand of action art:

Please tell me more about the *Happenings* publication. Is this supposed to be inclusive of more than Allan Kaprow's work? I thought that "happenings" [sic] were just the works by him & maybe those by Robert Whitman. The rest of us call what we do "pieces" - "events" - "compositions" - "simultaneities" or "plays". Do you include all of these in what you call "happenings"?? Please clarify. Perhaps you shd [sic] use some term that wd [sic] include both Allan "happenings" & the related "pieces", "compositions", "events", "simultaneities", "plays". Neither La Monte, Higgins, Brecht, Patterson or me ever call our things "happening" even thus they share some characteristics with Allan's works. (Even Bob Whitman called his last thing a "theater piece"). Higgins tells me that this is a widespread confusion in Europe: that they even call things such as our plays & my simultaneities "happenings" over there. Maybe you can do something for doing away with this confusion. *Happenings* are Kaprow's.<sup>50</sup>

But Vostell had no intention of "doing away with this confusion." What he did instead was handle it with memorable skill, thanks to which he came up with a formula for presenting the different manifestations of this new art that was to crystallize shortly thereafter in a consequential book.

Between *dé-coll/age* no. 4 and his preceding work, there are two fundamental differences which illustrate Vostell's new positioning very well. On the one hand, if previously Fluxus was just another name in the table of contents, now "HAPPENINGS," written in capital letters on the cover, lends the whole volume its title. On the other hand, it is true that, as in *dé-coll/age* no. 3, the sections on the different artists follow one another without any indication of where one ends and the next begins. The artists' names are generally only noted in the captions of some photographs or in the corners of their respective pages. However, the new issue introduces three exceptions, devoting an exclusive introductory page to three of its authors: Allan Kaprow, Wolf Vostell, and Nam June Paik. This suggests a certain hierarchy of the magazine's contents, which has the

obvious consequence of emphasizing Vostell's own relevance as the first European Happening artist.

Moreover, Nam June Paik's section alerts us to the confusion noted by Mac Low, which is eye-catching even from today's perspective, when the Happening has been widely acknowledged as a performance mode not only limited to Kaprow's actions. According to the current taxonomy of the artistic categories of those years, the materials published about Paik should not be labeled as Happenings, since they document above all his pioneering video art exhibition.<sup>51</sup> There is something similar at work with some other materials included in the issue, such as the photographs that show the German artist Tomas Schmit performing two of his typical Fluxus compositions.<sup>52</sup> This mixture makes clear Vostell's desire to appropriate the artistic experimentation of the moment through whatever prism he found most suitable—in this case that of the Happening. The theoretical texts included in the volume subtly close the deal.

These are critical writings and essays by different authors who, in one way or another, take on the difficult task of defining the Happening and its relationship with other contemporary artistic practices. The main conclusion that can be drawn in retrospect is that there were two altogether different usages of the term in circulation. There was Kaprow's definition, which described the Happening as an open-ended but specific artistic genre, "one type of theater of the present," the outcome of "an assemblage of events, which also includes people as part of the whole."<sup>53</sup> Alongside this, there was also a widespread generic use of the term among authors as different as the aforementioned Tomas Schmit and the Spanish composer Ramón Barce, co-founder of the Zaj group in Madrid. For them, the word "happening" simply referred to "events that just occur"<sup>54</sup> and expressed an interest in the phenomena of the reality common in varying degrees to many of the new trends: not just to Kaprow, Vostell, and Fluxus, but even to Pop Art and Nouveau Réalisme.<sup>55</sup>

Vostell's shrewdness in dealing with this dichotomy consisted in not even considering the need to choose between one vision of the Happening and another. Quite the contrary, *dé-coll/age* no. 4 makes use of both indistinctly, presenting them both as specific forms of action art clearly distinct from other related artistic practices, and, at the same time, as relating to them all. This twofold approach obviously gave preeminence to the Happening over other related practices and was to provide the structural backbone for the artist's next

editorial work, a book conveniently entitled *HAPPENINGS: Fluxus, Pop Art, Nouveau Réalisme. Eine Dokumentation*, published in 1965 in collaboration with the German poet Jürgen Becker. The publication inherits the bulletin's documentary approach, but differs in that, among other things, it replaces the author-ordered table of contents with a thematic one in which each section corresponds to one of the four artistic currents listed in its title. In this sense, the latter must be understood as the sum of its parts: "Happenings + Fluxus + Pop Art + Nouveau Réalisme." Most intriguingly, according to Vostell and Becker's editorial note, the result of this additive operation is equivalent to only one of its parts—the Happening, needless to say.<sup>56</sup>

Acting thus as both judge and jury, Vostell was going to reap remarkable success with his gamble. As mentioned above, it was by glancing over his book that Harald Szeemann conceived the idea of holding the first major retrospective exhibition dedicated to action art. *Happening & Fluxus* took as its starting point the documentary collection that the German doctor Hanns Sohm had assembled precisely at Vostell's suggestion,<sup>57</sup> and also included both men in its curatorial team. The exhibition was accompanied by a book that can be considered the first sourcebook on action art: *Happening & Fluxus. Materialien*, edited by Szeemann and Sohm (fig. 1).<sup>58</sup> Within its contents, there is a peculiar mix of Vostellian design criteria and the minimum requirements of a reference book. On the one hand, when it comes to the reproduction of documents, the editors sacrificed legibility and clarity in favor of authenticity and immediacy, always opting for facsimiles, sometimes printed at an excessively small scale and superimposed onto a layout that highlights the abundance and variety of material. Furthermore, the anthology lacks such rudimentary tools as a table of contents or page numbers, and explicitly rejects "explanatory texts".<sup>59</sup> However, it subjects the barrage of information to two data management tools: a chronology that serves as the backbone of the first part of the volume, and a bibliography organized alphabetically by author that organizes the second part.<sup>60</sup> Halfway between an artist's book and a reference text, *Happening & Fluxus. Materialien* thus represents a first archival cataloging, laying the foundations for future research relating not only to Fluxus and the Happening, but, in general, to the diverse forms of action art developed in Europe on both sides of the so-called "Iron Curtain," as well as in the United States and Japan from 1959 to 1970.

This inclusive and unfiltered approach has the same paradoxical consequence as Vostell's editorial design strategies: in their eagerness to let the documents speak for themselves, Szeemann and Sohm inadvertently prioritize certain contents because of their indistinct presentation of data relating to such dissimilar artistic manifestations as the Viennese Actionists or the Spanish group Zaj, both encompassed under the misleading title of *Happening & Fluxus* (in this sense, Fluxus did not fare as badly as some others, which did not even receive mention in the introductory text to the book).<sup>61</sup> Obviously, the ambiguity of the *Happening & Fluxus* binomial is directly related to Vostell's positioning strategies. As in the title of his book with Becker, here the "&" sign does not represent, as it might appear, a mere joining of equivalent terms, but rather gives pre-eminence to the first over the second. In case there is any doubt, two other documents confirm this thesis. Firstly, the brochure that accompanied the exhibition includes three texts which all give clear priority to the Happening: Szeemann recognizes that his initial intention had been to document only the Happening; Friedrich Wolfram Heubach, for his part, strives to elaborate a theoretical framework for the Happening, presenting Fluxus as a radical and extreme form of it; and Michael Kirby addresses "happenings" and "events," without ever mentioning the word "Fluxus."<sup>62</sup> Secondly, when the book *Happening & Fluxus. Materialien* was reissued on the occasion of the exhibition touring to a second venue, the word "Fluxus" disappeared from its title, which was now: *Happening. Die Geschichte einer Bewegung. Materialien* [Happening. The History of a Movement. Materials].<sup>63</sup>

Fluxus's response wasn't long in coming. In 1972, celebrating the anniversary of its birth, David Mayor, Ken Friedman, and Mike Weaver organized the exhibition *FLUXshoe* in England, an artist-operated initiative, which was openly critical of the documentary approach of Szeemann's exhibit.<sup>64</sup> In connection with *FLUXshoe*, the British magazine *Art and Artists* published a monographic issue eloquently entitled *Free Fluxus Now*, in which a selection of artists were able to take stock and present their personal vision of Fluxus. It was here that Schmit published his infamous comment about the carp and the duck, and where Maciunas reissued his 1966 *Expanded Arts Diagram*, in which he made clear the distance, in his view insurmountable, between the concretism of a "monomorphic neo-haiku flux-event" and the expressionistic "mixed-media neo-baroque happening."<sup>65</sup> However, despite the opposition of the artists to the pairing "Happening &



Fluxus," this nomenclature would be repeated for years in numerous exhibitions and publications.<sup>66</sup>

Going back to the editorial seed of all this activity, the *Bulletin of Current Thinking*, it had now effectively become the *Bulletin of the Fluxus and Happening Avant-garde* (*Bulletin der fluxus und happening avant-garde*), as the modified subtitle of its sixth issue from July 1967 indicates. Here, Vostell returned to his usual documentary assemblage mode, using torn fragments from the present day. He superimposed material from the Destruction in Art Symposium (DIAS, of whose Honorary Committee he was a member); Fluxus concerts by Dick Higgins; book-installations by Alison Knowles; Happenings scores by Kaprow; along with other contributions by similar artists. In this way, he kept his readers up to date on the latest developments both in his own work and that of his contemporaries, now no longer worrying about justifying their adherence to one trend or another. In this respect we can regard *dé-coll/age* no. 6 as the issue that recapitulates the two great stages of its history (Fluxus and Happening), further rounding it off with a reminder of where it all began, at least for Vostell. In fact, the issue contains a documentary appendix relating to the pre-Fluxus scene in Cologne in 1960-1962, with information on the activities then organized by the Atelier Bauernmeister, the Galerie Haro Lauhus, and Vostell himself—including a reference to the first issue of his magazine. In this sense, it can be said that, with its sixth edition, the magazine *dé-coll/age* managed to outline how its own historical role was to be assessed.

### **Intermezzo and Coda**

Having nearly reached the end of our journey, conclusions are pressing. However, we still must listen to the *intermezzo* of *dé-coll/age* no. 5 and the coda of no. 7. Both examples adhere roughly to the editorial criteria that have already been analyzed. However, they also present certain peculiarities that isolate them slightly and differently with respect to the flow of collective events so far considered. Despite working with a publishing house, Vostell decided in both cases to reduce the print run to 500 copies, thus making them rather exclusive editions. This is accentuated by the fact that they are made with more care than previous issues: in neither case does the publisher use the staples that, hidden or not behind covers, were Vostell's customary method of joining the magazine's pages. Instead, *dé-coll/age* no. 7 is carefully bound, following the usual format of a book or magazine. *dé-coll/age* no. 5, on the other hand, simply does not pose these problems because it

adheres to the frequent practice in the alternative publishing of that era of loosely collating pages within a box.

As far as content is concerned, the fifth bulletin (February 1966) abandons the archaeological character of the issues that preceded and followed it and takes up once more the approach of the first, collecting only scores, poems, and other intermedia pieces. It is evident that this type of work also has a documentary value that can be emphasized, for example, by highlighting the *Solo – Décollage Piece [for Wolf Vostell]* (1961) by Benjamin Patterson, performed by Vostell at the Galerie Haro Lauhus in 1961. Apart from this, *dé-coll/age* no. 5 does not stress so much the performative nature of the included pieces as their conceptual qualities and even—and therein lies their particularity—their objecthood. Although it also resorts to the facsimile method, the originals reproduced are flawless and printed onto cardboard (and translucent paper when required); some of them also play with the very materiality of the cardboard for their composition, while others attach objects to it, as is the case with the chocolate bar from Joseph Beuys' contribution. In short, *dé-coll/age* no. 5 belongs to the world of multiples, one of the novelties of that experimental period, which offered an affordable alternative to the art market, and raised an interesting point of friction between editorial and artistic production.

For its part, *dé-coll/age* no. 7 (February 1969) returns to the testimonial approach and emphasis on process so present in the main line of the magazine. However, it replaces the disorganized stratigraphy of the previous issues with a clarity deriving from the very fact that it is a volume dedicated to a single work. It documents the creation of the *electronic dé-coll/age happening space* (*elektronischer dé-coll/age happening raum*, 1959-1968), an environment created by Vostell at the invitation of the Institute of Modern Art in Nuremberg and exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 1968. Although incorporating printed administrative papers such as the invoice for the insurance paid by the Biennale, the bulk of the material in this edition comprises Vostell's sketches and numerous photographs of the assembly process and the final appearance of the work. All this is complemented by an essay by Friedrich Wolfram Heubach, reproduced according to the characteristic criteria of what I have termed "dé-coll/age design," with his hand-made deletions and corrections on the typed original.

## Atterrissage

Now it is time for the landing, and to conclude this analysis of the *Bulletin of Current Thinking*. Born amid the feverish artistic experimentation that ushered in the 1960s in Germany, *dé-coll/age* spanned almost the entire decade with its seven issues, becoming both an active participant in and an irreplaceable testimony to a significant portion of the developments in the field of action art (Fluxus and the Happening) and its connections with other related practices and trends (such as concrete poetry, video art, and Nouveau Réalisme). Its history simultaneously reflects the alliances and enmities that gave shape to the various contexts of action art, along with the difficulties faced by its exponents in terms of delimiting and naming their different modes of performance. As its title, *dé-coll/age*, indicates, its editor's stake in each of the issues was absolutely personal; and its editorial design proves this as well, as it gave rise to an aesthetic all its own that spread to other initiatives and ended up becoming the editorial lingua franca of ephemeral art.

## Notes

For more images referenced in this text, please consult: <https://www.archivola Fuente.com/story/wolf-vostells-de-collage-magazine/>

- 1 Dick Higgins, "[Dick Higgins]," in *Fluxus. Aspekte eines Phänomens*, eds. Ursula Peters and George F. Schwarzbauer (Wuppertal: Kunst- und Museumsverein, 1981), 217.
- 2 See Glenn Phillips and Philip Kaiser, eds., *Harald Szeemann: Museum of Obsessions* (Los Angeles, CA: The Getty Research Institute, 2018).
- 3 Tomas Schmit, "If I remember rightly," *Art and Artists* 7, no. 7, issue 79 (October 1972): 39. This text was originally written for the catalogue of the exhibition *Happening & Fluxus*, but it was not published there.
- 4 See George Maciunas, "Expanded Arts Diagram," *Art and Artists* 7, no. 7, issue 79 (October 1972): 23.
- 5 See the program of the first Fluxus Festival (Wiesbaden, 1962), both in its final and tentative versions: George Maciunas, *Fluxus - Internationale Festspiele Neuester Musik* (prior to September, 1962) reproduced in Hanns Sohm and Harald Szeemann, eds., *Happening & Fluxus. Materialien* (Cologne, Kölnischer Kunstverein, 1970), n.p.; George Maciunas, *Tentative Programme for the Festival of New Music* (prior to January 1962) and *Tentative Programme for the Festival of Very New Music* (April 28, 1962) (both at the Getty Research Institute, Jean Brown Papers). See: Jon Hendricks, ed., *Fluxus etc. The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection: Addenda I* (New York: Ink &, 1983), 139-153.

6 Dick Higgins, *Jefferson's Birthday/Postface* (New York: Something Else Press, 1964), 70.

7 See Wolf Vostell, "dé-coll/age," in *Dufrène, Hains, Rotella, Villeglé, Vostell. Plakatabrisse aus der Sammlung Cremer*, ed. Siegfried Cremer (Stuttgart: Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, 1971), n.p.

8 This explanation by Restany is a late version, smoothed by the passage of time, of what was certainly a more bitter controversy between Vostell and the Nouveaux Réalistes regarding the meaning of the word "décollage" and who used it first. See: Pierre Restany, ["La vie est belle, n'est-ce pas, cher Vostell?"], in *Vostell*, ed. Jean-Pierre Lavignes (Paris: Editions Lavignes-Bastille, 1990), n.p.; François Dufrène: "Die Unterseiten (Flashes-back)," in *Dufrène, Hains, Rotella, Villeglé, Vostell*, n.p.; and Michael Koehler, "Anmerkungen zur frühen Karriere des Begriffs «Décollage»," in *Über Reinhold Koehler. Essays & Rezensionen. 1957-2004*, ed. Angela Koehler and Michael Koehler (Bönen, Druckverlag Kettler, 2009), 9-17.

9 See, for instance: Vostell, "dé-coll/age," n.p.; and Wolf Vostell, "Gespräch mit Wolf Vostell," interview with Jürgen Schilling, in *Wolf Vostell. dé-coll/agen, Verwischungne, Schichtenbilder, Bleibilder, Objektbilder 1955-1979*, ed. Jürgen Schilling (Braunschweig: Waisenhaus-Buchdruckerei und Verlag, 1980), 10.

10 Translation from the German my own: Vostell, "Gespräch mit Wolf Vostell," 10. This story by Vostell was contested by Dufrène, who maintained that Vostell had found the *Le Figaro* headline only in 1960. As evidence, Dufrène quoted a letter that Vostell had addressed to him in 1961, claiming that he (Vostell) had been employing the word "décollage" "for a year already," i.e., since 1960 (thus not 1954). See: Dufrène: "Die Unterseiten (Flashes-back)," n.p.

11 See, for instance, the *Plakattexte* and *Shreibmaschinentexte* by Franz Monz published in *dé-coll/age* no. 3 (December 1962): n.p.

12 The book by Cassandre (Adolphe Jean-Marie Mouron's pseudonym) was titled precisely *Le spectacle est dans la rue*. In the preface, Blaise Cendrars praised him as not only a painter, but "surtout un des plus fervents animateurs de la vie moderne: le premier metteur en scène de la rue" [emphasis in original]. Vostell interpreted this analogy of the street with a stage as a call to action. See: Blaise Cendrars, "La rue," in *Le spectacle est dans la rue* (Montrouge, 1935), n.p.; and Vostell, "dé-coll/age," n.p.

13 See: Wolf Vostell, "An Interview with Wolf Vostell," interview with Sarenco and Gino di Maggio, *Lotta Poetica* 1, no. 9 (October 1982): 9; Josefa Cortés Morillo, "Obra gráfica de Wolf Vostell (1959-1979)," *NORBA*

*Revista de Arte* 22-23 (2002-2003): 247; and Karsten Arnold, "Wolf Vostell auf Straßen und Plätzen... durch die Galerien," *sediment. Mitteilungen zur Geschichte des Kunsthandels* 14 (2007): 12.

**14** Benjamin Patterson, "I'm Glad You Asked Me That Question" (1990-1991), in *Benjamin Patterson: Born in the State of FLUX/us*, ed. Valerie Cassel Oliver (Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 2012), 111. This self-authored interview was first published in German: "Ich bin froh, daß Sie mir diese Frage gestellt haben" [trans. Elvira Christian], *Kunstforum International* 115 (September-October 1991): *Fluxus—Ein Nachruf zu Lebzeiten*, ed. Dieter Daniels: 166-177.

**15** Translation from the German my own: Mary Bauermeister as quoted in Arnold, "Wolf Vostell auf Straßen und Plätzen... durch die Galerien," 12.

**16** Mary Bauermeister highlighted this aspect in her unpublished interview with Henar Rivière, held in Rösrath-Forsbach on November 11, 2012.

**17** See: Historisches Archiv der Stadt Köln, ed., *Das Atelier Mary Bauermeister in Köln 1960-1962. Intermedial, kontrovers, experimentell* (Cologne: Emons, 1993); Wilfried Dörstel, Rainer Steinberg and Robert von Zahn, "Das Atelier Bauermeister: Proto-Fluxus in Köln 1960-1962," in *Fluxus Virus. 1962-1992*, ed. Christel Schüppenhauer (Cologne: Galerie Schüppenhauer, 1992), 48-55; and Henar Rivière, "Fluxus: The Birth of an International Artist Network or the Avant-Garde that Never took (a) Place," in *El arca de Babel. Teoría y práctica artística en el escenario transcultural / The Ark of Babel. Artistic Theory and Practice in a Transcultural Perspective*, ed. Eva Fernández del Campo and Henar Rivière (Madrid: Abada, 2013), 297-317.

**18** To my knowledge, there is no literal translation for the words "aktuell" and "Aktualität" into English. "Aktuell" means "current," "topical," and it is a word used in the German media to refer to breaking news. But there is also a somehow more abstract meaning to it, especially in the noun "Aktualität," which refers in a broader sense to the reality in which we are immersed. Thus, in line with Vostell's aesthetics, "Aktualität" could also be translated as "presentness."

**19** See: Bertrand Clavez, *Fluxus, l'histoire, la théorie, pour une histoire des événements quelconques* (PhD diss., Université de Paris X Nanterre, 2003), 61.

**20** The first was the *Kleines Sommerfest: Après John Cage* ["Little Summer Festival: Après John Cage"], co-organized by Maciunas and Benjamin Patterson thanks to Nam June Paik's mediation in the Galerie Parnass in Wuppertal. For more details on both concerts see: Henar Rivière, "Kleines Sommerfest: Après John Cage," in *The Lunatics are on the Loose...: European Fluxus*

*Festivals 1962-1977*, ed. Petra Stegmann (Potsdam: Down with Art! Verlag, 2012), 15-26; and Henar Rivière, "Neo-Dada in der Musik," in *European Fluxus Festivals*, ed. Stegmann, 27-40.

**21** George Maciunas, *Fluxus (Brochure Prospectus for Fluxus Yearboxes)* (1962), a facsimile edition can be found in *Stationen der Moderne. Katalog epochaler Kunstausstellungen in Deutschland 1910-1962*, ed. Eberhard Roters (Cologne: König, 1988), n.p. For evidence of the presence of the *Fluxus* brochure and other documents designed by Maciunas at the *Kleines Sommerfest*, see: Photographs from the *Kleines Sommerfest*, attributed to Rolf and Anneliese Jähring (Zentralarchiv für deutsche und internationale Kunstmarktforschung ZADIK, Collection Galerie Parnass).

**22** See: Henar Rivière, "Fluxus - Internationale Festspiele Neuester Musik," in *European Fluxus Festivals*, 49-92.

**23** As an example of the backdating to which Vostell was inclined, it should be mentioned that in an interview he claimed to have already presented his magazine at the *Kleines Sommerfest*, at which he was actually only present as a member of the audience. In temporal terms, this does not represent a great difference, since there was only a week between one concert and the other (they were respectively held on June 9 and 16). However, Vostell's backdating is relevant as proof of his tendency to give himself preeminence at the expense of Maciunas, whom in the same interview he did not even mention as an organizer of the event. See: Wolf Vostell, "An Interview with Wolf Vostell," 4. This passage from the interview was included in a well-known book on Maciunas edited by Emmett Williams and Ann Noël, and some scholars have followed its false trail. See: Emmett Williams and Ann Noël, eds., *Mr. Fluxus: A Collective Portrait of George Maciunas (1931-1978)* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1997), 61; and Arnold, "Wolf Vostell auf Straßen und Plätzen...", 16. As for the exhibition of the artists' printed materials in the initial Fluxus concerts, it must have been a common practice. A letter from the writer Dieter Hülsmanns confirms that *dé-coll/age* no. 1 was on public display at *Neo-Dada in der Musik*, which suggests that Maciunas's brochure was also on display, as it had already been at the *Kleines Sommerfest*. This is corroborated by the introductory conference to the *Festum Fluxorum Fluxus* held in Dusseldorf in 1963, where the gallery owner and art critic Jean-Pierre Wilhelm alluded to the "*dé-coll/age* magazine. It is very interesting textually and iconographically, and it is displayed here, like the Fluxus-documents, in a showcase" (translation from the German my own). See: Dieter Hülsmanns, letter to Wolf Vostell,

June 29, 1962 (Museo Vostell Malpartida, Archivo Happening Vostell); and Jean-Pierre Wilhelm, “[Meine sehr verehrten Damen und Herren],” January 1963, eight-page document, reproduced in Susanne Rennert, Sylvia Martin, and Erika Wilton, eds., *“Le hasard fait bien les choses”: Jean-Pierre Wilhelm, Informel, Fluxus und die Galerie 22 / Jean-Pierre Wilhelm, Informel, Fluxus und Galerie 22* (Cologne, König, 2013), 207.

**24** Dick Higgins, “Auszug aus Postface” (1963-1965) [trans. Eckart Rahn], in *HAPPENINGS: Fluxus, Pop Art, Nouveau Réalisme. Eine Dokumentation*, eds. Wolf Vostell and Jürgen Becker (Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1965), 181. This text by Higgins is not just an “excerpt” [“Auszug”] of Higgins’s essay *Postface*, but a modified and expanded version prepared for Vostell’s book. As will be seen below, Vostell employed this book to position himself strategically *vis-à-vis* Maciunas and Fluxus. In this context, the changes to Higgins’ essay are not incidental: the passage dedicated to Vostell and his bulletin is much longer and less conciliatory regarding his conflict with Maciunas than in the first version. A third version exists in English: Dick Higgins, “Postface” (1963-1965, 1970), in *The Word and Beyond: Cosmologists of the Word*, ed. Anne Conover Heller (New York: The Smith, 1982), 7-96 (quote on page 65).

**25** Many of these works belong to what we consider today as Fluxus’s typical repertoire: several *Piano Pieces* (1960) and *Compositions 1960#* (1960) by Young, a *Danger Music for Dick Higgins* from *Do it yourself (Antworten an La Monte Young)* (1962-1962) by Paik, pages from Patterson’s book *Methods & Processes* (Paris, 1962) as well as *12 Piano Compositions for Nam June Paik* (1962) and several *Solos* (*Solo for Sick Man*, *Solo for Violin*, and *Solo for Balloons*, all from 1962 by Maciunas).

**26** George Maciunas, letter to Wolf Vostell, July 15, 1962 (Museo Vostell Malpartida, Archivo Happening Vostell).

**27** Wolf Vostell, “An Interview with Wolf Vostell,” 4. This passage from the interview is reproduced in Williams and Noël, eds., *Mr. Fluxus*, 61.

**28** Vostell was in fact compiling materials in the name of *Fluxus*. See: Arthur Kōpcke, typewritten letter to Wolf Vostell, July 1962 (Archivo Happening Vostell, Museo Vostell Malpartida). Also, see: Maciunas, *Fluxus (Brochure Prospectus for Fluxus Yearboxes)*, n.p.

**29** Higgins claimed that it was thanks to *dé-coll/age* that the American exponents of Action Art came into contact with Vostell (Higgins, “Auszug aus Postface,” (1963-1965), 181; and Higgins, “Postface” (1963-1965, 1970), 65). The German artist’s correspondence preserved in the Happening Archive Vostell confirms that the magazine played a fundamental role in linking him to the international art scene.

**30** See: information leaflet on *dé-coll/age* no. 1 and no. 2 printed in *dé-coll/age* no. 6 (July 1967), n.p.

**31** For the altered numbering of the second and thirds issues, see the issues themselves.

**32** The event in Amsterdam took place in an art gallery (Kunsthandel Monet) as the opening of an exhibition by Vostell. He himself was the organizer, with the collaboration of Paik. It was entitled *Parallele Aufführungen neuester Musik* [Parallel Performances of New Music]. *dé-coll/age* no. 3 also included documentation of various initiatives by Vostell, and preliminary texts and photographs of what was to be the historic pioneering video art exhibition *Exposition of Music – Electronic Television*, which Nam June Paik was preparing for the Galerie Parnass in Wuppertal (March 1963). See: Peter van der Meijden, “Parallele Aufführungen neuester Musik,” in *European Fluxus Festivals, 93-108*; and Susanne Neuburger, “Terrific Exhibit. «Zeit-Kunst» alias Musik im Ausstellungsgenre,” in *Exposition of Music – Electronic Television*, ed. Susanne Neuburger (Cologne: König, 2009), 11-23. On the Wiesbaden’s Festival see: Rivière, “Fluxus - Internationale Festspiele Neuester Musik,” 49-92.

**33** See for instance: George Maciunas, letter to Robert Watts, 1963, reproduced in *Fluxus etc. The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection: Addenda II*, 149-50; also partially published in *Mr. Fluxus*, 61-62.

**34** Flynt, on the contrary, never worried about Maciunas’s permission or anger. When he sent his essay to Vostell, he merely informed him that, “Presumably [it] is going to be published in *Fluxus*.” When he later learned of the inclusion of his work in *dé-coll/age* no. 3, rather than getting angry, he proposed publishing “the whole book, to which the essay was a preliminary.” See: Henry Flynt, letter to Wolf Vostell, ND [1962] (Museo Vostell Malpartida, Archivo Happening Vostell) and letter to Wolf Vostell, December 24, 1962 (Getty Research Institute, Jean Brown Papers, photocopy). Also see: György Ligeti, two letters to Wolf Vostell, September 4 and December 12, 1962, respectively (Museo Vostell Malpartida, Archivo Happening Vostell).

**35** See: George Maciunas, *Fluxus News Letter no. 5*, January 1, 1963, reproduced in *Fluxus etc.*, 155. One of the arguments used by Maciunas against Vostell’s editorial practices was that they did not record the artists’ copyrights, something that indeed raised some protests, for example, from Dick Higgins and the German photographer Manfred Leve, author of some of the documentary photographs published in *dé-coll/age* no. 3. Copyright issues would also recur in later issues of the bulletin, for example, with regard to the reprinting of materials originally published by La Monte Young in

*An Anthology* (New York, 1963). See: Dick Higgins, letter to Wolf Vostell, ND [late 1962/early 1963]; Manfred Leve, letter to Wolf Vostell, December 23, 1962; and Nam June Paik, letter to Wolf Vostell, ND [1964] (all at Museo Vostell Malpartida, Archivo Happening Vostell).

**36** “Vostell erkannte zuerst die beiden Punkte, in denen er sich wesentlich von Maciunas unterschied. Erstens: Maciunas liebte es, kleine Dinge zu besitzen, kleine Dinge zu tun und Besprechungen zu machen; aber es fehlte ihm jegliches Verantwortungsgefühl dem Künstler oder dem Publikum gegenüber. Zweitens erschien die *dé-coll/age*, das *Fluxus*-Magazin dagegen nicht.” Higgins, “Auszug aus Postface” (1963-1965), 181. In the last version of Higgins’ essay, this passage is slightly different: “Maciunas was satisfied to have conceived of the magazine [*Fluxus*]. For Vostell, as long as the word is with God, God is a swine for not allowing it to *décollage* [sic] itself into the earth. Vostell perceived these two differences.” Higgins, “Postface” (1963-1965, 1970), 65-66.

**37** See: Nam June Paik, letter to Wolf Vostell, January 15, 1963 (Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, Archive Sohm).

**38** Wilhelm also played an important role in the organization of the *Festum Fluxorum Fluxus* in Düsseldorf (1963). It was thanks to his mediation that Joseph Beuys, who coordinated the event with Maciunas, counted on Vostell to help with the organization and to participate, despite the confrontation between the two. See: Nam June Paik, letter to George Maciunas, January 15, 1963 (Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, Archiv Sohm); Jean-Pierre Wilhelm, letter to Wolf Vostell, January 20, 1963 (Museo Vostell Malpartida, Archivo Happening Vostell); and Joseph Beuys, two letters to Wolf Vostell, January 18 and 20, 1963, respectively (Museo Vostell Malpartida, Archivo Happening Vostell).

**39** “By the way,” Kaprow added at the end of this letter, “does George Maciunas ever expect to *really* issue his magazine *Fluxus*?” Allan Kaprow, letter to Wolf Vostell, January 4, 1963 (Museo Vostell Malpartida, Archivo Happening Vostell).

**40** Paik, for instance, used the bulletin to advertise himself to “very prominent people.” See: Nam June Paik, letter to Vostell, July 28, 1964 (Museo Vostell Malpartida, Archivo Happening Vostell).

**41** Vostell, “An Interview with Wolf Vostell,” 4.

**42** *Ibid.*, 3.

**43** The twelve issues of *Interfunktionen* were published in Cologne between 1968 and 1975. The first ten issues were edited by Heubach, the last two by Benjamin Buchloh (Archivo Lafuente, Santander).

**44** Friedrich W. Heubach, “Interfunktionen, 1968-1975,” in *Behind the Facts: Interfunktionen 1968-1975*, ed. Gloria Moure (Barcelona: Ediciones Polígrafa, 2004), 47-49.

**45** Heubach stressed Vostell’s role with the following statement: “While studying in Cologne (from 1965) I was introduced by mutual friends to Wolf Vostell, thanks to whom I soon became closely involved with what then figured as the ‘*avant-garde*.’” And further: “The fact that Vostell introduced me to artists such as Mauricio Kagel, Joseph Beuys, Nam June Paik, Jörg Immendorff, Dick Higgins, Emmett Williams, Dieter Roth and Tomas Schmit illustrates the special role he played as a middleman and organiser in the art scene of the period. No matter how one judges his art, Vostell undeniably deserves credit for his tireless initiative in bringing the most diverse artists into contact with each other, and for frequently giving their works its first public airing (e.g. as editor of the journal *dé-coll/age* and initiator of various festivals), and by so doing he contributed quite essentially to the special place which current activities in art then had in Cologne.” Heubach, “Interfunktionen, 1968-1975,” 46 and 58-59.

**46** Wolf Vostell and Jürgen Becker, [“Dieses Buch...”], in *Happenings: Fluxus, Pop Art, Nouveau Réalisme. Eine Dokumentation*, n.p. (inside of back cover). The Gutai group had published the *Gutai* journal in Japan as early as 1955. It documented the new artistic practices developed by the group through outdoor exhibitions, exhibitions on stage, and exhibitions in the sky. However, its layout was not particularly innovative and did not create a new editorial aesthetic correlated to the group’s new artistic approaches. *dé-coll/age* can thus be seen as the first proper Action Art magazine in terms of editorial design. See: Chinatsu Kuma, ed., *Gutai*. [Facsimile edition] (Tokyo : Geikashoin, 2010).

**47** “Ereignis” can be translated into English as both “event” and “happening.” In Vostell’s bibliography, it is frequent to find his actions before the encounter with Kaprow termed Happenings, but the application of this term is retroactive. See, for instance: *Das Theater ist auf der Straße. Die Happenings von Wolf Vostell / The theater is on the street. Die Happenings von Wolf Vostell*, eds. Markus Heinzemann, Fritz Emslander and José Antonio Agúndez (Bielefeld; Leipzig; Berlin: Kerber Verlag, 2010).

**48** See: Vostell, “*dé-coll/age*,” n./p.

**49** Medina, “The “Kulturbolschewiken” I”: 185. Higgins put it this way: “[*YOU*’s] success led to a realization among many of us that large work was now necessary, nay, imperative, to destroy the effect of Fluxusness, Fluxtininess and Fluxabsurdity. In Fluxus the tendency had been growing increasingly Yam-like even at the Carnegie Hall concert in June, which brought the American festival to its climax, and was its sunset. ‘Now this person does his *little thing*, now that person does his

*little thing*, now another *little thing*. That last Fluxus concert gave the effect of looking at somebody's postcard collection." Higgins, "Postface" (1963-1965, 1970), 85; passage published in German in Higgins, "Auszug aus Postface" (1963-1965), 191-192.

**50** [Emphasis in original]. Jackson Mac Low, letter to Wolf Vostell, ND [1963] (Museo Vostell Malpartida, Archivo Happening Vostell).

**51** "Exposition of Music – Electronic Televisión," Galerie Parnass, Wuppertal (March, 1963) See: Neuburger, ed., *Exposition of Music – Electronic Television*.

**52** Other artists included in the issue are: George Brecht, Bazon Brock, Stanley Brouwn, H. J. Dietrich, Al Hansen, Dick Higgins, Jean-Jacques Lebel, Claes Oldenburg, Robin Page, and Frank Trowbridge.

**53** Allan Kaprow, "An Artist's Story of a 'Happening,'" in *dé-coll/age* no. 4 (January 1964), n.p.

**54** [Translation from Spanish my own]: Ramón Barce quoting Jean-Pierre Wilhelm from a conference printed in *dé-coll/age* no. 3. See: Ramón Barce, "Hacia cero. Música 'abierta'. Del sonido al rito," *dé-coll/age* no. 4, (January 1964): *Happenings*, n.p. Barce's article was first printed in the Spanish Journal *Indice* and is a good example of the effectiveness that *dé-coll/age* had as a tool of dissemination, since it offers an interesting theoretical effort on action art and music based on the materials published in *dé-coll/age* no. 3. See: Ramón Barce, "Hacia cero. Música 'abierta'. Del sonido al rito," *Indice* 175-176 (July-August, 1963): 22-23. Vostell also reprinted it in: Vostell and Becker, *HAPPENINGS*, 142-150.

**55** Tomas Schmit, "Handel (1), Handlungen (2), Händel (3), Behandlungen (4). 4 aspekte neuer kunst" [sic], *dé-coll/age* no. 4 (January 1964): *Happenings*, n.p.

**56** "Happenings, die amerikanischer Herkunft und in Deutschland zuerst von Wolf Vostell praktiziert worden sind, werden in diesem Buch gewissermaßen thematisch begriffen. Denn sie erklären den hier ausgestellten Künsten ihre Tendenz zum Ereignis; sie bringen selber zur direkten Aktion, was im Nouveau Réalisme und in der Pop Art im Bild noch verharret, was in den Fluxus-Veranstaltungen nur bedingt aufgeführt worden ist. So stiftet der Begriff des Happenings den Zusammenhang dieses Buches." Wolf and Becker, ["Dieses Buch..."].

**57** Sohm got in touch with Vostell through the *dé-coll/age* bulletin and started to "systematically document all new forms of Action Art" per his advice. See: Thomas Kellein, "Fröhliche Wissenschaft." *Das Archiv Sohm* (Stuttgart: Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, 1986), 10.

**58** Hanns Sohm and Harald Szeemann, eds., *Happening & Fluxus. Materialien* (Cologne: Kölnischer Kunstverein, 1970).

**59** "Auf interpretierende texte wurde bewusst zugunsten der Originalarbeiten der Künstler verzichtet." Harald Szeemann and Hanns Sohm, ["dieses buch erscheint anstelle eines ausstellungskataloges"] [sic], in *Happening & Fluxus. Materialien*, n./p.

**60** Regarding the chronology, it has to be noted that Vostell's and Becker's book also included a "Zeittafel." That such a data management tool could also be used in a biased way becomes apparent in a letter from Nam June Paik to Vostell, where he mentions the criticism that "Zeittafel" was met with: "...es ist sehr 'tricky' und delikat jetzt [eine] sogenannte Datentabelle [zu] publizieren, weil alles noch im Fluss ist, und in [der] heutigen sehr politischen Situation keine objeive Zeittafel erzielt werden kann." Nam June Paik, letter to Wolf Vostell, ND [1967], printed in *dé-coll/age* no. 6 (July 1967), n.p. See: "Zeittafel," 33-60.

**61** In response to this situation, the Zaj group, for instance, sent a photograph with all its members with their backs to the camera and the text "we are not interested in this exhibition" for its section in the bibliography. See: "Zaj," in *Happening & Fluxus*, n./p.

**62** See: Harald Szeemann, "Zur Ausstellung"; Friedrich Wolfram Heubach, "Zu Happening und Fluxus"; and Michael Kirby, "The Influences of Happenings and Events," in *Klein Katalog zur Ausstellung*, n.p.

**63** Hanns Sohm and Harald Szeemann, eds., *Happening. Die Geschichte einer Bewegung. Materialien* (Stuttgart: Württembergischer Kunstverein, 1971).

**64** See: Kyosan Bajin [pseud. Felipe Ehrenberg]: "Introduction," in *Fluxshoe*, eds. David Mayor, Ken Friedman, and Mike Weaver (Cullompton, Devon: Beau Geste Press), 5.

**65** George Maciunas, "Expanded Arts Diagram" (1966): 23. Not all the contributors to the monograph shared this opinion. Significantly, Higgins stated in his text that Fluxus's works were "[e]ssentially [...] Happenings which, because of their Minimal Art quality, are usually described as Events." Dick Higgins, "Something Else about Fluxus," *Art and Artists*, 17.

**66** To cite but a few: *Flugasche. Literaturzeitschrift* 6, no. 18 (July 1986): *Mixed Media: Happening, Fluxus, Konkrete Poesie* (Stuttgart); Charles Dreyfus, ed., *Happening & Fluxus* (Paris: Galerie 1900-2000 & Galerie du Genie & Galerie de Poche, 1989); Moisés Bazán de Huerta, dir., *Happening, Fluxus y otros comportamientos artísticos de la segunda mitad del siglo XX* (Mérida, Spain: Editoria Regional de Extremadura, 2001); and Olivier Lussac, *Happening & fluxus. Polyexpressivité et pratique concrète des arts* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2004).

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# Harboring Hidden Histories: Mail Art's Reception in United States Institutional Archives

## John Held, Jr.

*Archiving the past is the art (history) of today.*

—Vittore Baroni

The incorporation and preservation of the avant-garde by cultural institutions, initiated by participants, collectors, and archivists, is a form of cultural stewardship, shepherding the visionary artist to safe refuge for future examination. Appreciation and acceptance of challenging contemporary art is uncommon among the majority of museum professionals and academics, and yet, one finds that the most adventuresome of them are found among the United States most iconic cultural venues, such as the Getty, MoMA/NY and the Archives of American Art; a recognition on their part, perhaps, that their leadership depends on continued collection nourishment, often with materials that critique the institution itself.

The acceptance of Mail Art into United States museums, university libraries, and national archives has been long and arduous. It has been hindered by the medium's private non-commercial nature, neglect by galleries, and current curatorial inattention failing to appreciate the impact of the field on contemporary art practice. Lacking the promotional resources normally serving as gateways to cultural preservation, Mail Artists place upon themselves the responsibility of personal maintenance of materials obtained through the post in cross-cultural collaborative exchange.

The collection of incoming correspondence and attendant materials (publications, catalogs, visual poetry, faux postage, etc.) is often an unintended result of active participation. Each archive is different from the next, its overall composition a reflection of the particular vision and commitment of the artist/collector. The archive is shaped much like an artwork, with unbridled passion crafted and nurtured over a sustained period of time.



Statement by Vittore Baroni, Viareggio, Italy.

Closely allied with Fluxus, Mail Art now experiences similar growing pains experienced by the previous art movement, which endured decades of neglect in acquiring an institutional home for artworks and ephemera generated by artists in the field. Examples of Fluxus's incorporation into American institutions are the acquisition of the Jean Brown Archive by the Getty Research Institute, and a collection of Fluxus materials assembled by Steven Leiber, and placed with the Walker Art Center forming the basis of the first major Fluxus exhibition, *In the Spirit of Fluxus*, generating a catalog and reviews in major art periodicals, increasing the visibility of the movement with the general public. Works contemporaneously unacknowledged as artistic may later be validated solely by their new institutional settings.



I first read about my mentor, the late public librarian and art collector Jean Brown, whose archive presently resides at the Getty Research Institute, in a 1976 *Saturday Review* article, “The Preservation of the Avant-Garde.” The article reported that:

It is always the marginal she stresses—such manifestations as concrete poetry, rubber stamp art, the vagaries of video. She is after elusive connections, the small interstices that relate the recent past to less-publicized present-day directions [...]. Other borderline movements she considers extensions of Dada, and also perhaps Fluxus, are (Mail) Art and Lettrisme.<sup>1</sup>

Jean was a financial and emotional supporter of Fluxus impresario George Maciunas, who moved from New York City in his later years to Great Barrington, Massachusetts, to be near Jean. He undertook many projects on her behalf, including the installation of her archive on the second floor of her “seed house,” moved to her property from a Shaker community.

When the Getty Research Institute negotiated with Jean to acquire her collection, they were mainly concerned with her accumulation of Dada and Surrealism ephemera, which she and her husband Leonard focused on collecting in the 1950s. Jean began interacting with Fluxus artists after her husband died, and when the Getty acquisition was first raised, Fluxus still wasn't acknowledged as art by cultural professionals. Jean fought to have it included in the transaction, and today, the Getty's Fluxus collection is one of the crown jewels of the Institute.



Bookshelf of John Held, Jr.



Jean Brown being interviewed, 1983. John Held, Jr. on right.

Marcia Reed, who acquired the Jean Brown Archive for the Getty Research Institute in 1985, relates the drift from disregard to acceptance the collection provoked: When I came to the Getty in 1983 and we began to build the collections—beginning with a small curatorial library and three rare books—even collecting early-twentieth-century rare books felt transgressive at first. Avant-garde editions with uneven lines of text (hard to imagine how they set the type) or held together with industrial quality bolts seemed really crazy. Not to mention the Russian books of Ferro-Concrete poetry, with wallpaper covers in loud colors and goofy designs, or the Italian Futurist books with metal covers. They had titles like *Tango with Cows*, *A Slap in the Face of Public Taste*, and *The Lyrical Watermelon*. In 1985, with the acquisition of the Jean Brown Archive, we acquired even more—many more—of these revolutionary twentieth-century/Dada/Surrealist books that questioned, often not politely, and basically ignored the traditions of editorial authority and book design: Marcel Duchamp's boxes, Max Ernst's proto-graphic novels, Man Ray's prescient photobooks, artists' magazines such as *291* and *391*. As we unpacked Jean Brown's notable Fluxus collections, our director just happened to swing by. He took one look at the boxes, books, and objects, and said “What is this [#%]!” I had never heard an expletive from him, and we quickly closed up the shelves. Looking back, as I became familiar with Dieter Roth's books, which reference substances best managed by toilets, he may have been right.<sup>2</sup>

Fluxus's inclusion in the Getty Research Institute collection stimulated interest with both academic and museum-related institutional libraries. However, it was a San Francisco art dealer who brought exhibit-worthy Fluxus objects to the attention of the museum world, placing them in the context of conceptual and performance art.

## Fine Arts

### Preservation of the Avant-Garde

by Katharine Kuh

**I**N STOCKBRIDGE, MASS., it was Norman Rockwell Day (Sunday, May 23, 1976), and the streets were crowded with admiring throngs. As *The New York Times* reported, "Sitting in white wicker chairs, the eighty-two-year-old illustrator, pipe in mouth, and his wife, Molly . . . reviewed the Bicentennial parade . . . in this Colonial-period town where Mr. Rockwell has lived since 1952." En route to the nearby village of Tyringham, we passed through Stockbridge that day and were thus afforded a striking contrast in the sociology of current art folklore. No greater duality can be imagined than the austere geo-



Jean Brown—"Intense and tenacious."

metric Shaker Seed House in Tyringham, with its comprehensive Dada archive, and the cozy front-porch celebration in Stockbridge for a painter whose work is so optimistic as to be a virtual negation of all that Dada stands for. Even a committed nihilist bent on devastating satire would have difficulty improving on Rockwell's healthy complacency.

One of the two most inclusive files (the other is in Germany) on Dada and such related movements as Surrealism is known as the Jean Brown Archive and is housed in what was once a Shaker seed storage, a

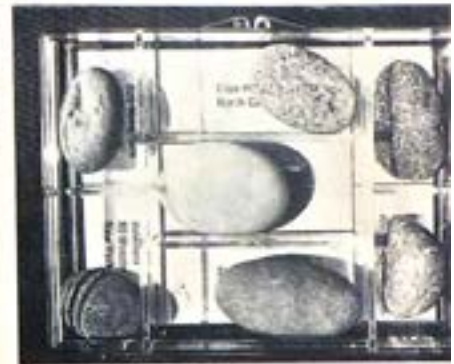
building modestly tucked away on an unlikely country road in the Berkshires. Assembled and presided over by Jean Brown, a woman of remarkable intensity and tenacity, this collection of primary material, including documents, periodicals, all manner of publications, letters, photographs, memorabilia, and occasional original works of art, is international in scope. What makes it doubly engrossing is its emphasis on present-day avant-garde outgrowths of Dada in the visual, literary, and performing arts, the last usually related to music, dance, or "Happenings."

This scholarly enterprise, which might have resulted in a file of purely historical data on the original Dadaists whose angry voices were a direct concomitant of World War I, has instead turned into an ongoing, trail-blazing record of twentieth-century thinking. It remains scholarly but transcends history to become a living, growing investigation. And, indeed, these days Jean Brown seems more interested in the present than in the past; for her the present offers unlimited and unrestricted possibilities. On the other hand, for the hide-bound there is a shock on every shelf and in every well-filled drawer. Even the most up-to-date art enthusiasts may find that Jean Brown has outguessed them and discovered incubating movements before the artists within those movements have discovered themselves.

She tells me that nearly twenty years ago she and her late husband, Leonard Brown, started collecting art. "He liked original works," she said, "but my father was a rare-book dealer, and I was originally a librarian," so eventually she amalgamated these various interests into an overlapping enterprise. Though documents are vitalized by occasional paintings, drawings, and mobiles, it is not originals that dominate the collection; it is carefully organized periphery files. The archive, available only to experts, artists, and students, sets the pace for an invaluable type of specialization. One could wish that in America similar attention were being lavished on Fauvism and Cubism, two

other seminal movements from the early twentieth century. Brown's correspondence with fellow spirits throughout the world is heartwarming; people seem able to find one another even when isolated on remote country roads. Students from France, England, Brazil, Holland, and from all over the United States have used her files while researching their specific projects.

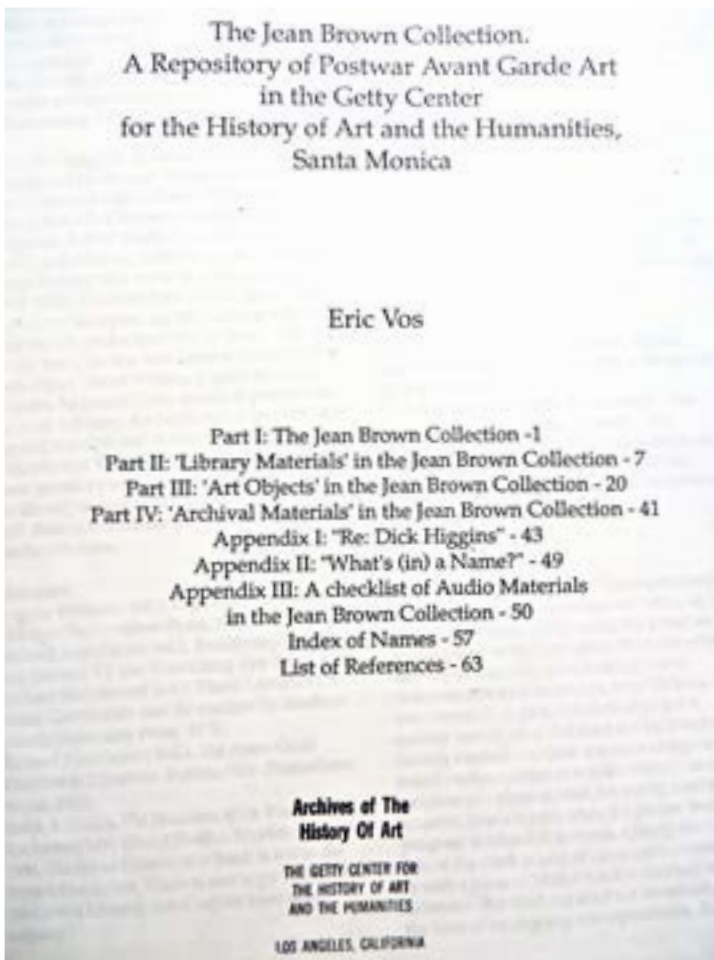
**E**MPHASE is on Dada rather than on Surrealism, for Jean Brown finds the former "zanier and freer—a protest movement agin everything." And, to be sure, Surrealism was more rigid, governed always by the inexorable rules laid down by André Breton. Random relationships, chance, the accidental, the throw of the dice—these are the lures that lead Jean Brown into the offbeat byways of contemporary culture. From the early days of Dada, her archive bulges with material on Arp, Duchamp, Breton, Tzara, Picabia, Man Ray, Schwitters, Soupault, Hugo Ball, Ernst, Hulsenbeck, and George Grosz. Less well-known personalities are



Flux Atlas by Robert Watts.

Flux Year Box 2, May, 1968.





Jean Brown Collection at the Getty Research Institute.

Steven Leiber was a fledgling art dealer when he acquired the collection of Jeff Berner, a West Coast associate of Maciunas, who had been given the West Coast “franchise” distributing fluxkits to Haight-Ashbury head shops. Leiber was able to bundle the Berner collection with further acquisitions, placing them with the Walker Art Center, which went on to stage the 1993 exhibition, *In the Spirit of Fluxus*. Widely reviewed and accompanied by an excellent catalog, the exhibition drew open the floodgates of interest and research into all things Fluxus.

Leiber relates that it was the acquisition of the Berner collection that set him on the path of collecting Fluxus and led him to ruminate upon the importance of artistic ephemera in general.

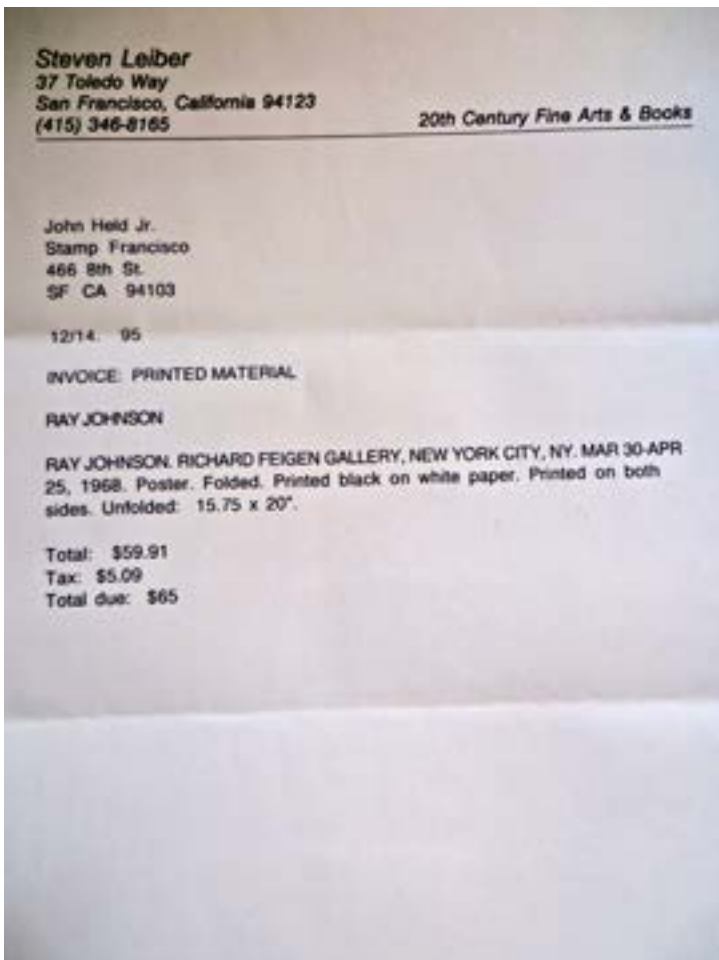
I bought a collection in the late '80s that came from an artist, Jeff Berner, who was associated with Fluxus. He had a Flux shop; I'm not sure how functional it was. What I mean is, I'm not sure it was a shop. It wasn't clear to me that he

sold very many editions. Granted, not that many Fluxus editions were sold between 1961 and 1978, so this guy had multiple copies of this or that edition. In addition, this collection also had a great deal of material concerning visual poetry, concrete poetry, and a certain amount of Beat and countercultural material from the '60s. In the process of making sense of what this collection was—I mean it's a bit of an exaggeration to call it a collection. It was twenty-one boxes of material without an index in no order, just twenty-one boxes of crap. And I think I spent approximately a year with a colleague making sense of it. In the process, it became clear to me that what was most exciting was not the most obvious material, not the things that I actually went to buy, which was primarily the Fluxus material; it was the other things. For Fluxus events or festivals, there wasn't necessarily a thing that would have come out of the exhibition. You didn't buy a painting; you showed up, saw what went on, and in time, what becomes the collectable aspect of it is the flyer, the poster, the relic, the printed material that was generated from these events. So I guess my interest in artist ephemera specifically, and art ephemera in general, grows out of that inquiry.<sup>3</sup>

Artistic ephemera are the breadcrumbs of the avant-garde. They are the scattered traces of a fragile existence, challenging us to navigate the gap between art and documentation. After years of hidden artistic activity, they are brought to light under the tutelage of art librarians and archivists at home with ephemeral items, prematurely deemed irrelevant by their curatorial counterparts.



Rubber stamp by Stamp Francisco, 1997.



Sales receipt from Steven Leiber, 1995.

Julia Feldman, the Processing Archivist for the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection at MoMA, New York, writes of the difficulty assimilating Fluxus materials into institutional context:

I attempt to wrestle the documentation of this varied, ephemeral, and frankly messy art historical phenomenon into a tractable and orderly research collection. When the Silverman collection, one of the world's largest of artwork, documentation, and published materials related to Fluxus, arrived at The Museum of Modern Art in 2009, it was not divided neatly into "artwork" and "archives." The categorical confusion derives not only from the nature of the Silvermans' collecting, but also from Fluxus itself, a movement (or network, tendency, or attitude), which intentionally defied traditional categories of art and artmaking. For this reason, works of art and historical documentation are often housed together—and it is often unclear which is which.<sup>4</sup>

Which is which? Moving past Fluxus to the next difficult art to surface, the question arises—is Mail Art a conceptual art, a network of international pen pals, or is it, as one widely circulated rubber stamp opined, "the newest, most fashionable and historically valid art"?

Mail Art arose from the artists' desire to escape the confines of the gallery and museum, which weeded out participants by juried competitions, entry fees, costly preparation of promotional materials, influential references, and padded resumes, all befitting a hierarchical prerogative. To the contrary, Mail Art is a democratic art movement, whose greatest accomplishment has been the construction of an open system in which creative people could partake without fear of rejection. Mail Art exhibitions welcome entries without fees, with all contributions displayed and all contributors receiving documentation of their participation.

Mail Art's "open system" is a source of confusion to many in cultural academic communities because of the unevenness of the work produced. This misses the point. In Mail Art, the act of participation and collaboration are more important than the products produced from engagement with the medium.

An art medium of inclusion, avoiding judgments of quality, Mail Art has eluded widespread critical attention, marketability and institutional interest. In a 1984 review of the book, *Correspondence Art: Source Book for the Network of International Postal Art Activity*, by Mike Crane and Mary Stofflet (Contemporary Arts Press, 1984), cultural historian Greil Marcus commented that, "The history of contemporary mail art is the history of an immediately quaint form that excused itself from history."<sup>5</sup> Disdaining established art hierarchies and seeking alternative paths of cultural production and dissemination, Mail Artists found themselves adrift from conventional routes of mainstream acceptance.

The inability of traditional research institutions to acquire challenging materials at the time of their issue forces individuals associated with marginal cultures to nurture primary source materials prior to their mainstream acceptance, enabling future scholarly study. This "care and feeding" of cultural alternatives at the infancy of their acceptance is both a blessing and a curse, rife with discouragement and disappointment, ultimately satisfying through perseverance and strength of purpose.

There has yet to be a comprehensive exhibition of Mail Art in a major American museum, with only scattered interest in European venues, most often in national postal museums. Despite this, the medium continues to flourish, extending theoretical and geographical boundaries of art by sustained global engagement, generating a multitude of small edition publications, producing exhibition documentation and distributing small-scale artworks.



Total Art Match-Box, by Ben Vautier, 1965.

Maturing under the tutelage of Ray Johnson and the students of his New York Correspondance (sic) School in the 1950s that many associated with Fluxus, Mail Art has developed an enviable record of creative output and documentation yet to be sufficiently examined by scholars, who are central in promoting advances in art history.

OBITUARIES

## Steven Leiber — S.F. collector, dealer of contemporary artists' ephemera

By Kenneth Baker

Steven Leiber, a noted San Francisco collector and dealer of contemporary artists' ephemera, died at home of cancer on Jan. 25. He was 84.

Mr. Leiber took a studios interest in conceptual art and Fluxus, art tendencies rooted in the 1960s, that often used strategies of scavenging, mass production and dissemination to challenge the preciousness of art.

These activities led to a greater appreciation of the peripheral matter of the art world: posters and exhibition announcements, publications or objects conceived or designed by artists in both very small and effectively unlimited editions.

As collector, dealer, scholar and publisher, Mr. Leiber did as much as anyone on the West Coast to erase the pejorative implication of the term "ephemera," effectively opening a new wing of the contemporary art market.

In 2002, California College of Arts and Crafts (now California College of the Arts) hosted his exhibition, "Extra Art: A Survey of Artists' Ephemera, 1960-1999," at the time the largest cache of such material ever presented.

The catalog to "Extra Art" — itself becoming a collector's item — offers the most detailed record and study yet of a distinct sector of late 20th century artistic production.

Mr. Leiber contributed so that domain himself by co-founding RITE Editions with collector Robin Wright, to issue artist-originated projects. The formally inventive sales catalogs that he issued as a dealer have also entered the libraries and archives of notable art institutions.

A San Francisco native, Mr. Leiber graduated from Lowell High School and went on to earn a bachelor's degree from UC Berkeley.

While working for the Simon Lowinsky Gallery after graduating, Mr. Leiber received his law degree in 1982 from Golden Gate University.

Mr. Leiber had served as adjunct faculty at California College of the Arts in curatorial studies since 2000.

He is survived by his wife, Leigh Markopoulos; his parents, Arlene and Paul Leiber; and brothers Mitchell and David.

Gifts in Mr. Leiber's memory may be made to the Steven Leiber Scholarship Fund at California College of the Arts, 5212 Broadway, Oakland, CA 94608.

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Steven Leiber's collection was exhibited as "Extra Art: A Survey of Artists' Ephemera, 1960-1999."

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**BAY AREA DIGEST**

**EAST PALO ALTO**  
**Woman held in fatal stabbing**  
 An East Palo Alto woman was arrested Tuesday for allegedly

**Natasha Anderson, 33, allegedly stabbed her child's father.**

**Perry III in the leg at her home on Castellia Drive, police Sgt. Jeff Liu said.**  
 Perry, 34, and Anderson had a son.  
 Perry was pronounced dead at Stanford Medical

**jest jewels**

Steven Leiber obituary in San Francisco Chronicle, February 8, 2012.



Enclosure by Ray Johnson, Circa 1990.

One of the obstacles facing the acceptance of Mail Art is the lack of name recognition of the artists participating in its practice. Fluxus was a difficult art for the public to accept, but the participation of Joseph Beuys, Nam June Paik, Ben Vautier, Robert Filliou, John Lennon, and Yoko Ono hastened the medium's recognition. Although earlier practitioners of Mail Art, including General Idea, Eleanor Antin, Gilbert and George, John Armleder, and Genesis P-Orridge, have gone on to gain mainstream recognition, they long ago distanced themselves from the medium.

Nevertheless, the sale of Mail Art created in the 1960s and 1970s has benefited from their involvement. Mail Art from this period is viewed as an offshoot of the artist's conceptual activities, with such postcard series as Eleanor Antin's "100 Boots" and On Kawara's "I Got Up" fetching high prices in the art market. Most contemporary Mail Artists do not have access to this material, having participated only since the late '70s or '80s, when Mail Art was first revealed to the general public through exhibitions and the printed word.

The march toward institutional incorporation often occurs by singling out an individual typifying the ideals of the area of interest under scrutiny, and this has begun to happen with Johnson. Mail Art has gained in stature with Johnson's increased success by association.

Before academics examine the field, they need access to the materials. George Maciunas, the pivotal force in Fluxus, once remarked that it was art museum librarians, rather than the museum's curatorial staff, who first

requested Fluxus materials. I've found this to be the case with Mail Art as well.

Surprisingly enough, the acceptance of Mail Art into American cultural institutions has occurred not from the bottom up, but from the top down. Three of the largest cultural institutions in the United States, the Archives of American Art, the Getty Research Institute, and the Museum of Modern Art, New York, have incorporated Mail Art into their collections, thereby validating a field sorely neglected elsewhere.

The Archives of American Art is part of the Smithsonian Institution, commonly known as "America's Attic" because of their wide-ranging collection of historical artifacts. The Archive describes itself as "the world's preeminent and most widely used research center dedicated to collecting, preserving and providing access to primary sources that document the history of the visual arts in America."<sup>6</sup>

Collections incorporating Mail Art into the Archives include: the John Held Papers Relating to Mail Art, 1947-2013; Mail Art by John M. and Catherine Mehrl Bennett; Edward Plunkett Papers, 1960-1990; Ray Johnson Papers, 1970-1971; John Shown Papers, 1937-1984; John Evans Papers, 1972-2012; Ken Friedman Papers, 1969-1978; Museum of Temporary Art Records, 1974-1982; Wallace Berman papers, 1907-1979; an oral history interview with Ray Johnson, 1968.<sup>7</sup>

In 2018, the Archives of American Art drew from the depository collections of the John Held, Jr. Papers, John Evans Papers, Wallace Berman Papers, and Lucy Lippard to mount the exhibition, *Pushing the Envelope: Mail Art from the Archives of American Art*, at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. As a result of the exhibition, an article appeared in the September 2018 issue of *Art & Antiques*, a widely distributed and read periodical.

The author of the article noted that Mail Artists are not always pleased with their works ending up in cultural institutions, but, "By saving these works for posterity, the recipients of mail art and the Archives of American Art themselves may have been false to one aspect of the movement, but they are true to the desire of every artist to make something that lasts and can be seen again and again. Experiencing these pieces from the '50s through '90s today is like finally receiving a long-delayed letter mailed years ago."<sup>8</sup>



Postcard by John Held, Jr. Circa 2000.

As noted previously, the Jean Brown collection entered the Getty Research Institute in 1985, and contained not only Dada and Surrealist ephemera collected by Jean and her husband Leonard, and Fluxus materials acquired after the death of Leonard, but a sizable collection of Mail Art. Since the acquisition, little has been done to display the collection, although aspects of it have been included in exhibitions of visual language and artist's books, and an exhibition and catalog on the collection is scheduled for November 2020.

In support of the forthcoming exhibition, the Getty has announced an "active project," *Fluxus Means Change: An Avant Garde Archive*, which examines "Fluxus and other alternative-genre materials: mail art, ephemeral art publications and artists' books. [...] Through these materials [...] the project explores the relationships the Browns developed among their avant-garde and postwar collections."<sup>9</sup>

In addition to the Mail Art materials included in the Jean Brown collection, the Institute has also acquired the Bern Porter Mail Art Collection, the Lon Spiegelman Collection of Mail Art and Mail Art Documentation, the Ginny Lloyd Papers and Mail Art Collection, the John Held collection of Mail Art Documentation, and the

Mail Art Network Notebook Collection of Robin Crozier (1972-1997), in addition to a number of Mail Art reference works listed on their website.<sup>10</sup>

Another outstanding American cultural institution, the earliest and foremost proponent of Modern Art in the country, New York's Museum of Modern Art, also has a strong collection of Mail Art, and has increasingly made it available through limited public display. The alternative arts have had strong advocacy because of the interests of its forward-looking librarians. In 1989, well before it caught the eye of curators, Head Librarian Clive Phillpot mounted a Fluxus exhibition in the Library, with materials obtained from the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection, which were acquired by MoMA some thirty years after the library exhibition.

The MoMA Library has been a surreptitious collector of Mail Art, having acquired the Franklin Furnace collection of artist's books in 1993, containing the works of Mail Artists throughout the world. In 2002, I placed a collection of 3,711 Mail Art periodicals, consisting of 655 titles published in thirty-four countries, with MoMA.

Perhaps the most "surreptitious" strategy of any Mail Artist in situating his work with MoMA was Ray Johnson. When his friend, Chuck Close, wanted to include a portrait by Johnson in a special exhibition and found that the museum had no such work in its collection, Johnson countered by mailing several works to Phillpot, who assigned them to the artist's file, making them available for display. The strategy only reaffirms the oft noted notion that museum libraries, rather than curatorial departments, are better suited to incorporate variant materials into their collection at a faster pace than the complicated intake of museum registration.

Johnson had been mailing to the MoMA Library since the 1950s. The MoMA Library has an exhibition space available to it at the Museum, and has used it to highlight their collection, and in 2014 they mounted the exhibition, *Ray Johnson Designs*, drawn from periodicals and books in their collection, as well as from Johnson's artist file. That same year, the Library drew heavily from my deposited collection of Mail Art periodicals for the exhibition *Analog Network: Mail Art, 1960-1999*. Curated by Jennifer Tobias, she wrote that the exhibition "traces the growth of correspondence networks, shows politically oriented works, documents discourse about the practice, and concludes with mail artists' adaption to the Internet."<sup>11</sup>

It should be noted that donations to the Archives of American Art are freely given without financial reward. On the other hand, acquisitions by major institutions like the Getty Research Institute and the Museum of Modern Art are for the most part purchased. There are other smaller cultural institutions whose interest in acquiring Mail Art is high, but financial restraints restrict their deposit. In such cases, Mail Artists, who are financially stable, may forego payment for the opportunity to place collections for posterity. Such is the case for the archival collections placed with the Poetry Collection at the University of Buffalo, New York, Oberlin College in Ohio, and the Alternative Traditions in the Contemporary Arts collection at the University of Iowa.

The Alternative Traditions in the Contemporary Arts archive at the University of Iowa "is composed of works and papers donated to the University of Iowa by contemporary artists and critics, institutes, and private collectors." Some of the artists donating to the collection include Buster Cleveland, Bill Gaglione, Ken Friedman, Alice Hutchins, Albert Fine, and Chuck Welch. The archive was founded by Estera Milman in 1982 and administered by her until her departure in

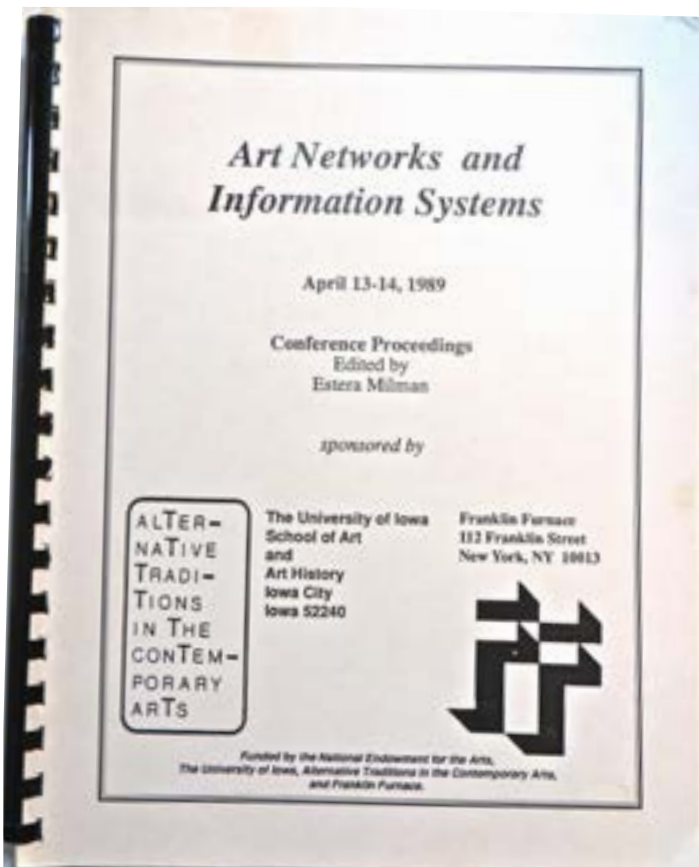
2000. They issued an excellent exhibition catalog in 1999, *Subjugated Knowledges and the Balance of Power*, with contributions by Ken Friedman, Stephen Perkins, and Owen Smith. The catalog was introduced by Estera Milman, who wrote:

Until recently, the post-World War II 'interarts' have not fared well within an art historical literature that remains agenda-bound to the custodianship of high culture. That such should be the case is not surprising, in view of the fact that, from their inception, these forms of cultural production challenged lines of demarcation among media, the visual and performing arts and literature, as well as between art and life. Consequently, because these radical works and actions were deliberately positioned outside of how normative critics and historians are organizing our cultural canons and knowledges, they were, until recently, relegated to the margins of our disciplinary discourse...They are central to ongoing reinvestigations of our cultural assumptions about the nature of the art experience itself and our concurrent attempts to re-examine the viability and expand the scope of both the museum and the academy as cultural institutions.<sup>12</sup>

The Poetry Collection at the University of Buffalo, New York, is primarily the depository library for the Mail Art collection of New York artist Joel Cohen, known affectionately as the Sticker Dude. Cohen is a printer in New York City who has produced work for many Mail Artists, including Guy Bleus of Belgium and Vittore Baroni of Italy, possessors of two of the largest privately owned Mail Art archives in Europe. Cohen writes that, "Mail Art is as much a cultural strategy for life and future society as the exchange of correspondence."<sup>13</sup>

The Oberlin College Clarence Ward Art Library has an outstanding collection of Mail Art, made possible by purchase from the late Mail Artist Harley Francis, and donation by Reid Wood, also known by his Mail Art tag, State of Being. Together, the collection totals over 25,000 works from the mid 1970s to the present from over 1,800 Mail Artists from 60 countries. In 2008, the Library mounted the exhibition, *Envelope Art, Poster Stamps and Artistamps, 1890-1990*, followed by a more general Mail Art show two years later.

The means by which these two collections entered the institution are instructional. Harley was a painter with no steady outside income, who struggled financially



*Art Networks and Information Systems*, The University of Iowa, 1989.



throughout his life. He offered his collection for sale to enable a move from Oberlin to Northern California. Shortly before his death in 2017, he was able to place more of his work with the Library to help with medical expenses. Harley's Mail Art collection, with a special emphasis on artist postage stamps, which he collected over four decades, became one of his few financial reserves available to him in his waning years.

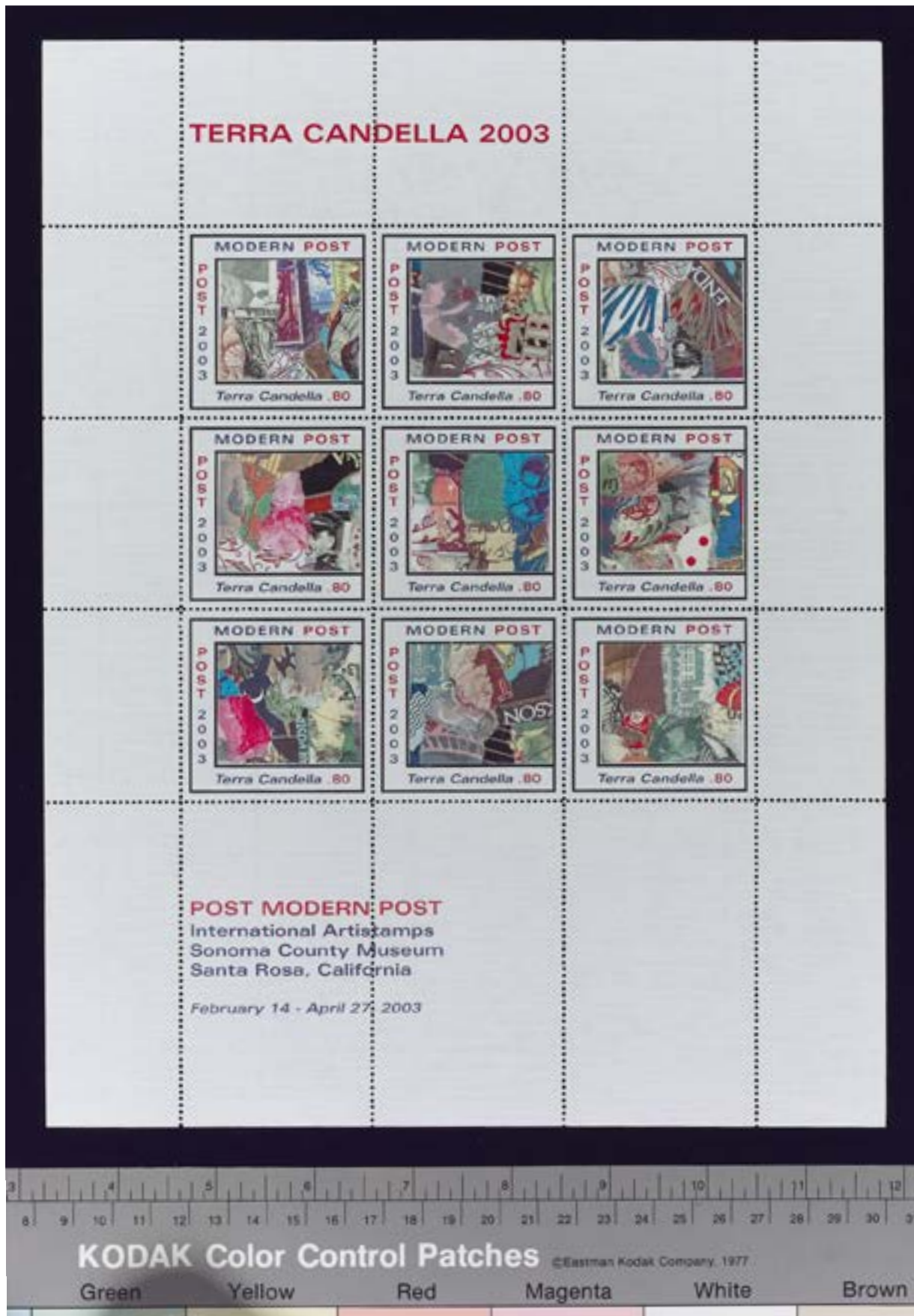
On the other hand, Reid Wood held a steady job working as an educator for many years. Upon his retirement, he received a pension, denied to Harley because of his untethered employment history. As a long-term resident of Oberlin, Wood donated his collection without financial reward. While his noble gesture enabled the Library to substantially grow their Mail Art collection, it lessened the probability of Oberlin College allotting future funding for additional acquisitions. The question of donation or sale is not unique to Mail Artists and their collections, but it does impact the shepherding of challenging collections to cultural institutions.

Due to the aging of Mail Art participants, decisions are becoming necessary to place these materials for future research. In 2016, Mail Artists convened *A Year of Archives in Motion*, to consider the following questions: How does challenging cultural material, considered marginal by establishment institutions, eventually move into the mainstream? What types of Mail Art materials do institutions favor? Where are the cultural institutions collecting Mail Art? Should Mail Art be sold or donated to cultural institutions? What has been done with prior placement of Mail Art in museums, libraries, and national archives? These considerations have led to the issue of institutional intake now under discussion.

In 2019, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art mounted the exhibition, *snap+share: transmitting photographs from mail art to social networks*, under the curatorship of Clément Chéroux, previously the curator of photography at the Pompidou Center in Paris (and recently named Chief Curator of Photography at MoMA/NY). This was the first time that the term "Mail Art" was used in the title of a major museum exhibition in the United States. Chéroux, who had been made



Archives of Harley, Circa 1998.



Artist Postage Stamp by Harley, 2003.

aware of my collection, contacted me. After pulling 1,725 photographically related Mail Art works by 454 artists from thirty-eight countries from my collection, the photography curatorial staff selected eighty-eight items for inclusion in the exhibition.

The *snap+share* exhibition serves as a good example of how institutional interest in a marginal field can greatly expand public attention. To display the Mail Art, SFMOMA constructed a special "picture window," which pressed the artworks between two panes of Plexiglas, enabling the works to be viewed front and back. This unusual display attracted great acclaim, including reproduction in the widely distributed Sunday Arts and Leisure Section of the *New York Times*. Reviews of the exhibition also appeared in the *Washington Post* and *Wall Street Journal*, and the periodicals *Art in America* and *Juxtapoz*, gaining widespread exposure for the field. A nicely produced catalog only added to increased exposure. This is somewhat comparable to the attention Fluxus received in the wake of the Walker Art Center's pioneering exhibition, *In the Spirit of Fluxus*, showing once again that institutional attention, acquisition, exhibition, and preservation plays a significant role in acclimatizing acceptance of difficult art.

I've recently learned that the Mail Art works loaned to *snap+share: transmitting photographs from mail art to social networks* will be acquired by SFMOMA, with the stipulation that the works be retained in the Library, under the direction of David Senior, an expert in artistic ephemera. Housing these works in the Library, rather than the general collection, reminds us that while Mail Art is in the process of institutional embrace, it is libraries tending to its care, while museum curatorial staff still find it difficult to fully grasp "the newest, most fashionable and historically valid art."

## Notes

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- 2 Marcia Reed, "The Never-Ending History of Artists and Books," Iris Blog, Getty Research Institute, August 14, 2018, <http://blogs.getty.edu/iris/the-never-ending-history-of-artists-and-books/>.
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- 4 Julia Pelta Feldman, "Perpetual Fluxfest: Distinguishing Artists' Records from Artworks in the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Archives," (2011),

accessed April 20, 2021, [https://www.academia.edu/3350375/Perpetual\\_Fluxfest\\_Distinguishing\\_Artists\\_Records\\_from\\_Artworks\\_in\\_the\\_Gilbert\\_and\\_Lila\\_Silverman\\_Fluxus\\_Collection\\_Archives](https://www.academia.edu/3350375/Perpetual_Fluxfest_Distinguishing_Artists_Records_from_Artworks_in_the_Gilbert_and_Lila_Silverman_Fluxus_Collection_Archives).

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- 6 Archives of American Art website, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/>.
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- 9 See: [http://www.getty.edu/research/scholars/research\\_projects/index.html](http://www.getty.edu/research/scholars/research_projects/index.html).
- 10 See: <http://www.getty.edu/research/library/using/>.
- 11 *Analog Network: Mail Art 1960-1999 exhibition website*, <https://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2014/analognetwork/>.
- 12 Estera Milman, *Alternative Traditions in the Contemporary Arts: Subjugated Knowledges and the Balance of Power* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Museum of Art, 1999), 8.
- 13 *Snap+Share Mail Art Congress at SFMOMA* (3 August 2019, Exh. Cat.), 6.

**John Held, Jr.** is a writer and visual artist living in San Francisco, California. He is the Director of Modern Realism Gallery and Archive producing, collecting, documenting, and institutionalizing relics and documents of the later 20th-century avant-garde. He has had over thirty solo exhibitions in twelve countries (Moscow, 2003; Paris, 2005; South Korea, 2006; Japan, 2015); authored *Mail Art: An Annotated Bibliography* (Scarecrow Press, 1991), *Rubber Stamp Art* (AAA Edizione, 1999) and *Small Scale Subversion Mail Art and Artistamps* (TAM Publications, 2014); lectured at the V&A Museum (London, 1991) and the Museum of Communications (Berlin, 2004); organized exhibitions at the National Palace of Fine Arts (Havana, 1995) and the Mayakovsky State Museum (Moscow, 2003); contributed to the *Dictionary of Art* (Grove, 2000), *Conversing with Cage* (Routledge, 2003) and *At a Distance: Precursors to Art and Activism on the Internet* (MIT, 2005). Held has placed collections with the Getty Research Institute (Los Angeles), SFMOMA (San Francisco) and the Museum of Modern Art (New York). His personal papers are in the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (Washington, D.C).

# Mail Art and Fluxus: An Antic Exhibition from 1982

## Simon Anderson

Fluxus arrived in the mail. It was formed and fueled by the international postal system. Even before the publication of *Fluxus 1*—with envelopes as pages packaged in a unique ready-to-mail container—delivery by mail was a necessary and vital element for those involved. The proto-Fluxus book *An Anthology* reproduced a facsimile letter, *Plans of Action*—complete with envelope—by Dennis Johnson. George Brecht and Bob Watts' *Yam Festival*—an American parallel to early Fluxus activities—was constituted largely as a series of postal events. From the organization of the European *Fluxum Festorum* to George Maciunas's erratic *Newsletters*, the mail informed and inflected the fluid ideology of the group, of which perhaps the most radical gesture was the *Fluxus Mail-order Warehouse*. And just as these elements were configured in part by the conventions of the post office, Fluxus in its turn shaped many communities of Mail Art. In their ambition to connect dimly discerned international communities within the experimental arts, the loose coalition of Fluxus artists provided models for correspondence artists. Mail Art's enthusiasm for anthology, stylistic heterogeneity, gender and geographic diversity, publishing acumen and imagination, devolved administration, and overarching sense of humor are direct repercussions of Fluxus's modalities. Fluxus was disseminated by mail and spread across Europe, Japan, and America during the 1960s, and Mail Art continued the development and circulation of these ideas across oceans and political divides through the next decades.

Since Sir Rowland Hill conceived the Uniform Penny Post in 1840, mail has been a vehicle for expression, and personal mail—whether love letters from long ago or a scribbled vacation postcard—acts as a gift which once made the arrival of the post a significant event. Mail Art is creative communication at a distance between and among individuals, and it, too, carries some elements of gift-exchange and of familial, friendly, or accordant relations.

Mail Art allowed all kinds of unorthodox ideas to travel widely. In letters and on postcards, in Xeroxes, indexes, and magazines, it acknowledged few ideological barriers and was only reluctantly constrained by the regulations of the Post Office. Determinedly international commonalities met amicably and in defiance of contemporary norms in mailboxes and assorted envelopes from Elblag or Omaha to Brno or Dubba, ignoring or gaming the controls and conditions that would have made actual meetings impossible. The official rules and practical constraints that come with the mail even provided raw material for Mail Art. Repressive cultures led to creative solutions against mail surveillance and interference, whereas more liberal regimes made easy targets for Mail Art anarchists. These challenges and responses were collaboratively explored by artists, and the interchanging influences are visible in the works they mailed.

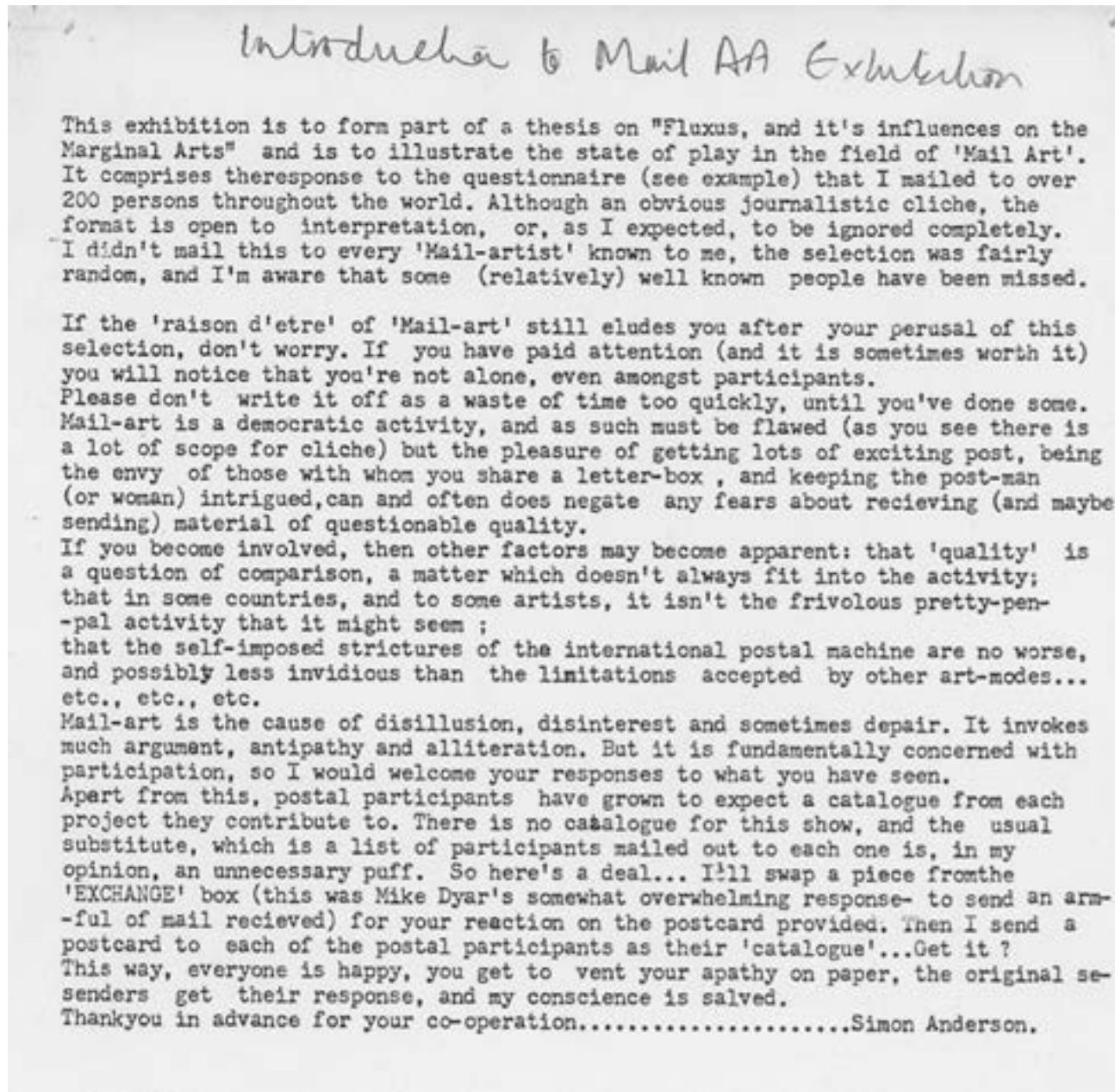
Moreover, the manifold forms and concerns of Mail Art communities often ignored conventions of exhibition, of editorial authority, and of centralized power—whether geographic, political, or stylistic—always eschewing any unified creed or dogma. Some Mail Art networks made strident calls for an art world with “*no jury, no returns and no*

*fee*,” while a few individuals addressed postcards directly to MoMA, NY. A number of Mail Artists created fake stamps to cheat the office of the post, but Ben Vautier’s double-sided *Flux Post-card* left the final destination in the hands of the mail-deliverer. Alighiero e Boetti’s year-long mail event remains secreted in sealed envelopes, while Genesis P-Orridge was prosecuted under obscenity laws for sending a surrealist-inspired postcard.

The antic collection presented here was originally exhibited in 1982 at the Royal College of Art, London. As announced in the posted introduction, it was part of my submission for an M.A. in Cultural History [a short-lived programme founded by my inspiring and generous tutor—later president of RCA—Sir Christopher Frayling]. His was a bold and interdisciplinary curriculum, and my thesis attempted to live up to the ideals I felt it embodied. Entitled *Fluxus: Early Years and Close Correspondences*, the submission was in three parts: a written element consisting of a dozen short chapters, presented loosely in a box to be read in any order, each dealing with the most vital elements of Fluxus as I saw them; a ¾ inch Umatic videotape of about twenty-five minutes, featuring selected Fluxus events composed by central characters in the group [performed by myself and two friends, Clive Howard and Helen Begley, and videotaped by fellow student, Margaret Warwick]; and the exhibition of Mail Art re-presented here.

In the early 1980s, Fluxus was not well-known, the *Eternal Network* less so, and thus the tenor of my thesis was mostly expository rather than theoretical. I had fortuitously been exposed to Fluxus, to artists’ books, and to Mail Art as an undergraduate art student in Sunderland through the seemingly effortless teaching of Robin Crozier, a genial genius as well as a considerable force in Mail Art and intermedia before the terms were widely used. Robin was not only in correspondence with Fluxus artists and Mail Artists all over the world, but happy to share ideas and addresses with any interested student. His 1975 exhibit and publication *Portrait of Robin Crozier* [Ceolfrith Press, Sunderland] was a seminal influence on my thinking about identity and representation, as well as art. It was through Crozier’s good offices that I first performed his and others’ event scores and got access to artists’ books such as those published by Dick Higgins’ Something Else Press, among others. Under Robin’s magnanimous tutelage, I wrote my undergraduate thesis on Fluxus, and it was he who prompted me to write and ask Alison Knowles, George Brecht, Robert Filliou, Wolf Vostell, Ken Friedman, and others for *Twenty Words about Fluxus*. No doubt it was the confounding success of that maneuver which led me, a few years later, to the idea of asking practicing Mail Artists to answer my blunt questions about the relationship between Correspondence Art and Fluxus.

I was a desultory correspondent and undisciplined artist, but from the mid-’70s to the mid-’80s, the mail kept me connected to a larger world of egalitarian ideology and creativity that seemed increasingly relevant. Because Mail Art required little personal commitment, less financial outlay, and no justification, it fitted my situation. One replied or not, depending on individual taste, opportunity, or ability to keep to deadlines: to me, at that time, it seemed akin to Fluxus, but without the weight of organization Maciunas had designed, or the museum-worthy reputations that artists such as Nam June Paik or Yoko Ono were then accumulating. It was intentionally affordable, addresses were easily available, and different circuits of correspondents catered to different personal styles.



By the standards of current curatorial protocol, my Mail Art exhibition was ill-considered and unprofessional. Most decisions were made pragmatically, and the casual *Introduction* characterizes my approach embarrassingly well. The addresses came from a variety of correspondence notices, photocopied then literally cut-and-pasted, and apart from some in Crozier's hand, I do not recall the other sources. Of course, not everyone responded, but I remember being anxious to include correspondents whose work I deemed interesting, for example, the inimitable Bern Porter, who began on Tuesday November 11, 1914; Pawel Petasz, founding editor of the remarkable shape-shifting periodical *Commonpress*; Vittore Baroni, prolific and thoughtful publisher of *Arte Postale*; the zany enthusiasms of Anna Banana and Bill Gaglione, et cetera, but I chose not to repeat requests to Fluxus artists, and many recipients were completely unknown to me.

I had few expectations of the exhibit, and resources were severely limited, so posterity was far from my mind in planning or execution. I produced the invitation-form in the letterpress shop at RCA using my evident paucity of design skills; before mailing, I decorated some with my own hand-made rubber-stamped slogans. The mounting boards were donated by my mother, who worked at a printing press, and each submission was, as is now obvious, attached with non-archival tape. The boards were unceremoniously stapled to the wall.

My well-intentioned scheme to spread the contents among interested visitors—which comported with a number of experiments of the period to keep the correspondence moving—was an utter failure, and with the exception of one work being mysteriously removed from its mount, apparently no one actually interacted with the exhibition.

Until this international online airing, the material has subsequently lain in a box and been seen only by students of the graduate seminar I occasionally teach in the Department of Art History, Theory, and Criticism at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago: *Opening & Unfolding: Correspondence Art*. In this electronic iteration, you will open your screen, but the unfolding may occur elsewhere. I hope it works.

Simon Anderson  
Summer 2020

*Artists originally exhibiting in 1982 (plus half-a-dozen entries from unknown or anonymous contributors): Ackerman, A.; Barber, D.; Baroni, V.; Bennett, J.M.; Brancatelli, R.; C, Richard; Calleja, J.M.; Cammer, L.; Canals, X.; Cracker Jack Kid; Craven, C.; Crozier, R.; D'Adda, B.; Dana, L.; de Araujo, A.; de Jonge, K.; Dreyfus, C.; Duch, L.F.; Eckmeyer, R.M.; Evans, J.; Farkas, S.; Fletcher, L.; Frangione, N.; Fricker, H-R; Gaglione, W.; Gnazzo, A.J.; Groh, K.; Hahn, H.; Harley; Helmes, S.; Higgins III, E.F.; Hoare, T.; Hompson, D-D; HYPE; Johnson, J.; Larter, P.; Lipman, J.; Lusignoli, G.; Mark, P.; Marx, G.G.; Minkoff/Oleson; Morgan, R.; Ockerse, T.; Olbricht, J.O.; Orworks; Pack, T.; Perfetti, M.; Petasz, P.; Porter, B.; Radio Free Dada; Radio, R.; Rousselle, N.; Schmidt-Olsen, C.; Scott, M.; Shown, J.; Siff, E.; Spiegelman, L.; Summers, R.; Tahoe, E.; Tóth, G.; Tupitsyn, V.; van Geluwe, J.; Welch, C.; and Wielgosz, A.*

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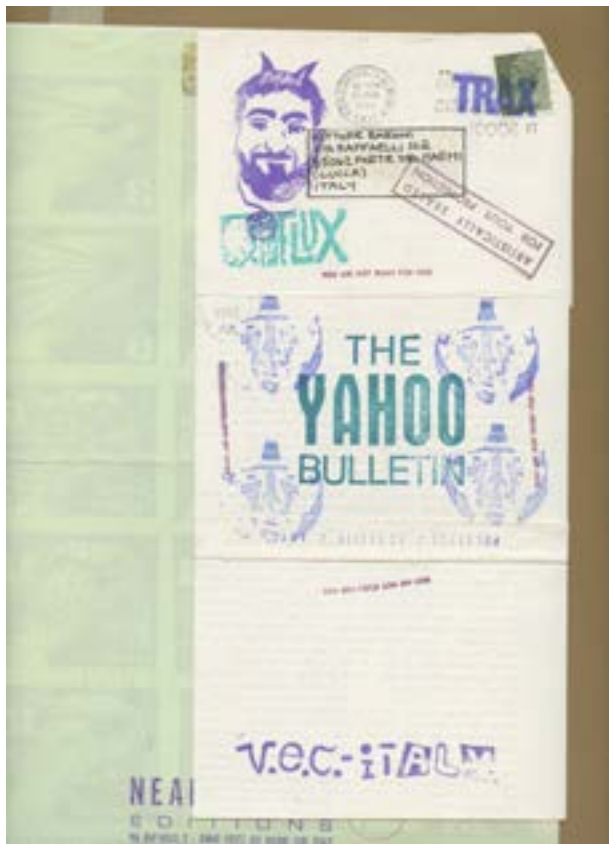
**Simon Anderson** is a British-born-and-educated cultural historian whose art-school exposure to Fluxus helped to mold his career. He has worked at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago since 1993, teaching a range of seminars and lecture classes around twentieth-century art and anti-art. In addition to organizing exhibitions, designing, and producing publications, he has written exhibition commentaries, magazine criticism, and book chapters on Fluxus, Mail Art, expanded poetry, the Situationist International, conceptual photography, and more. He has lectured widely and has acted as a gallery dealer in, private consultant on, and public speaker about the experimental arts and artifacts of the 1960s, '70s and '80s. Long an advocate of performance as a way of knowing, he continues to observe, arrange, and perform the events of his life in a Fluxus mode.







Al Ackerman



Vittore Baroni



Richard C



J M Calleja



Les Cammer

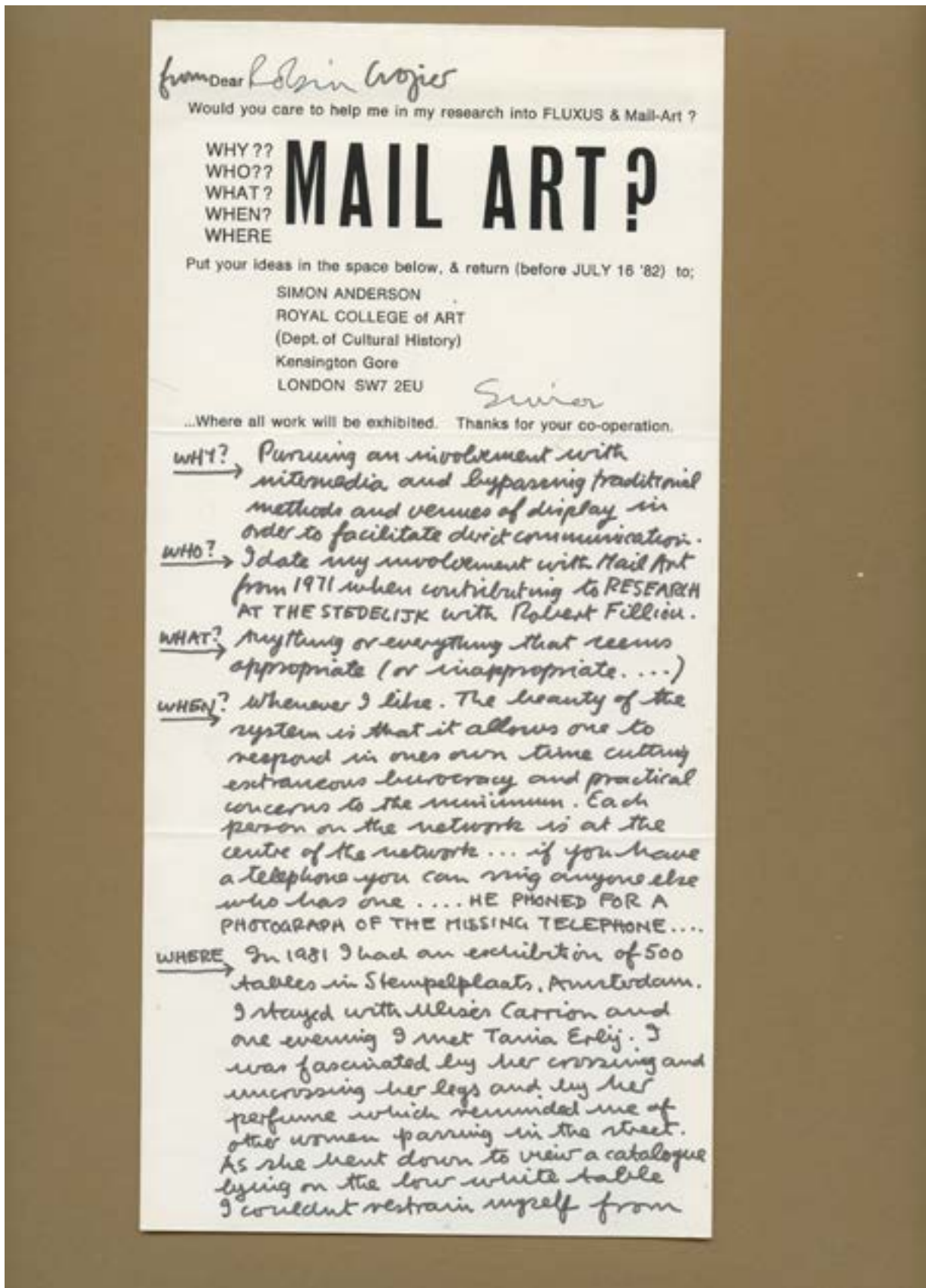
Sometimes a human being needs to communicate with others in distant places to better think and feel about some problems, like identity, culture, world, love, peace, etc. or simply to expand his joy or his emotions. The unknowledge is enormous, for example, you don't even know that, in my country, we don't say "gracias" but "merçès" since the 9th century, because it is a part of the Catalonian Countries (Països Catalans), a region of Europe, with 8 million inhabitants that French and Spanish States had hidden for a long time.



Titot: PAÏS.O.S. CATALANS  
Autor: Xavier Canals  
Data: 1980



Cracker Jack Kid (aka Chuck Welch)

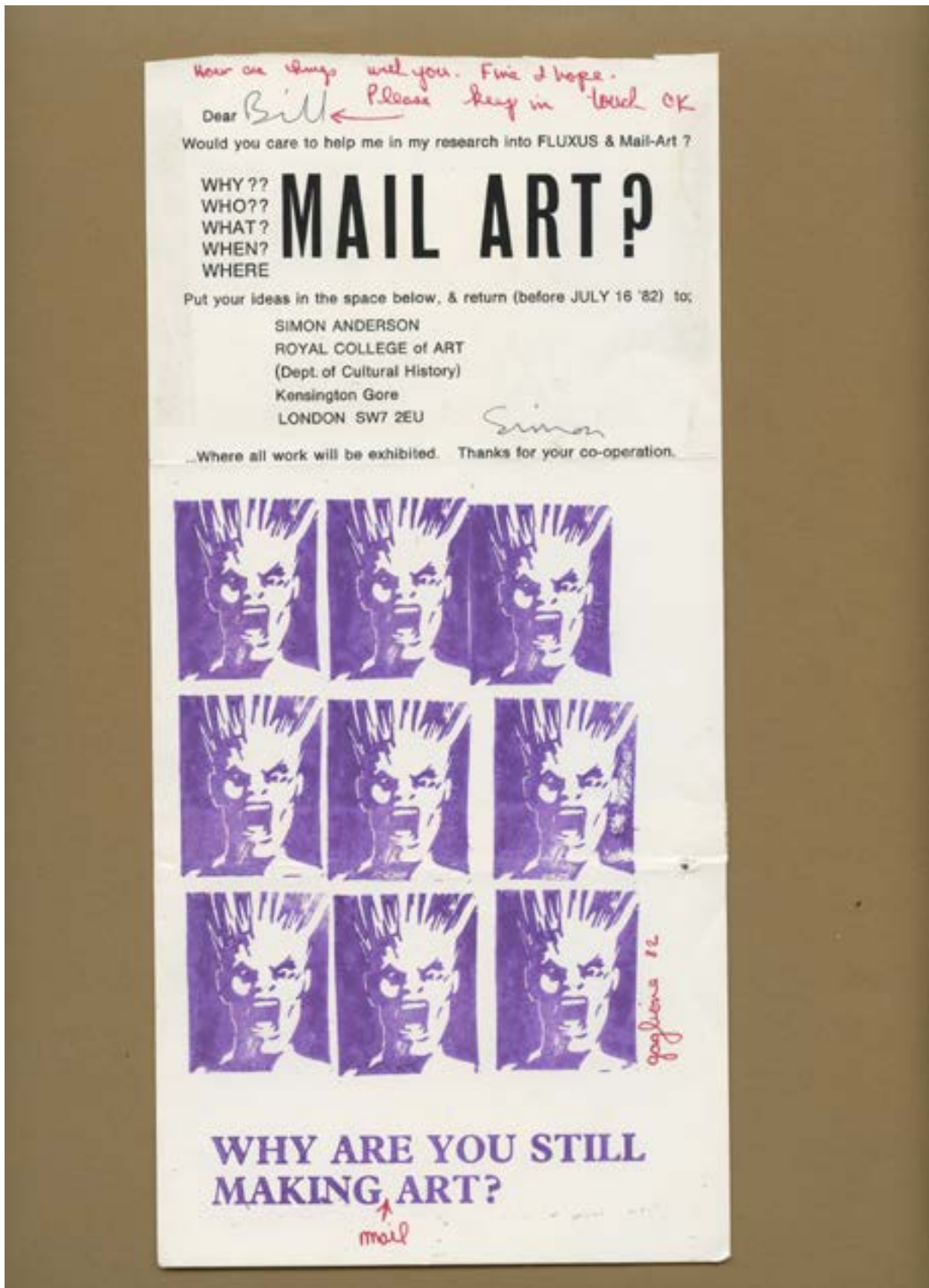


Robin Crozier





L.F. Duch



Bill Gaglione



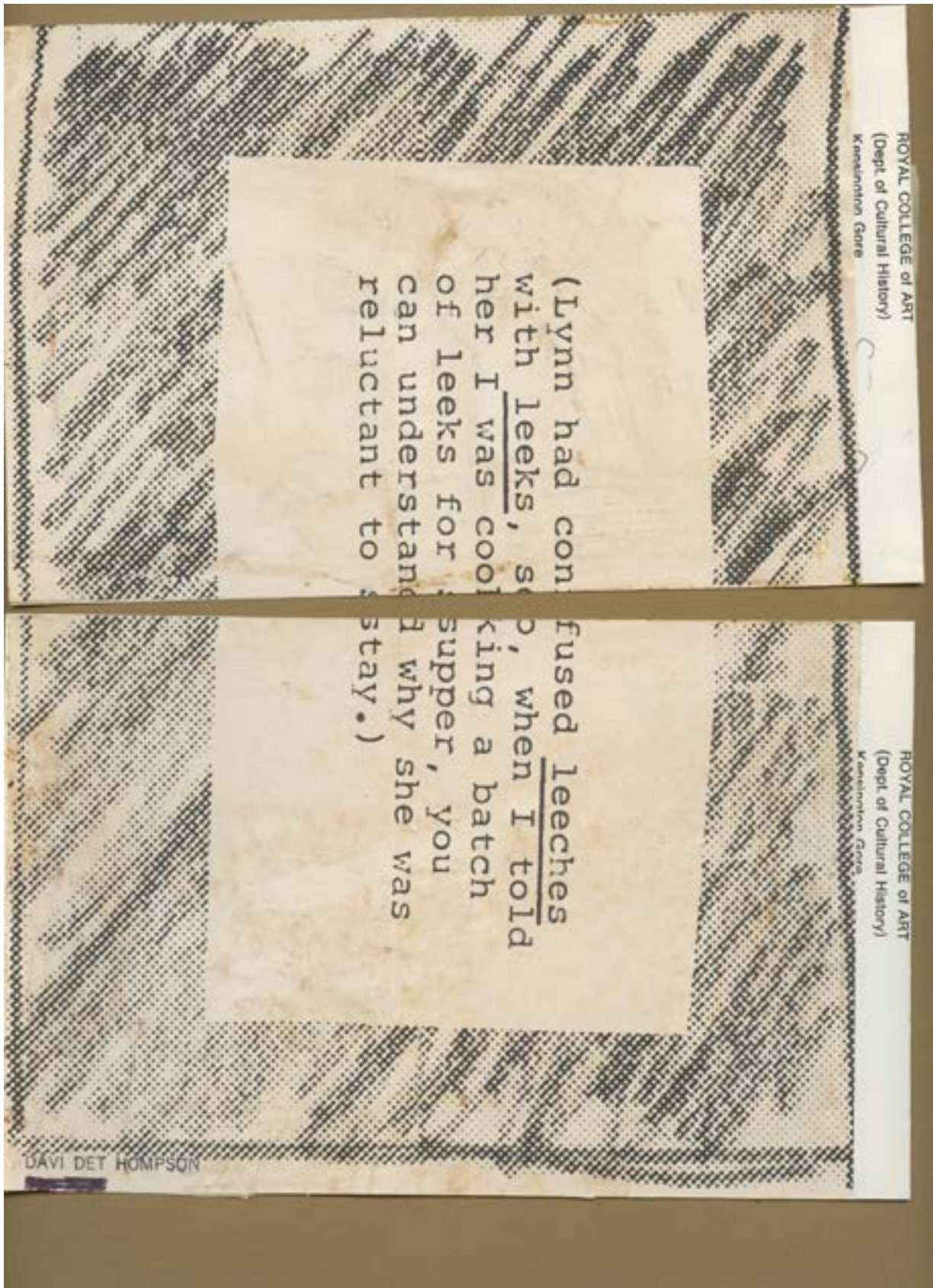
Klaus Groh



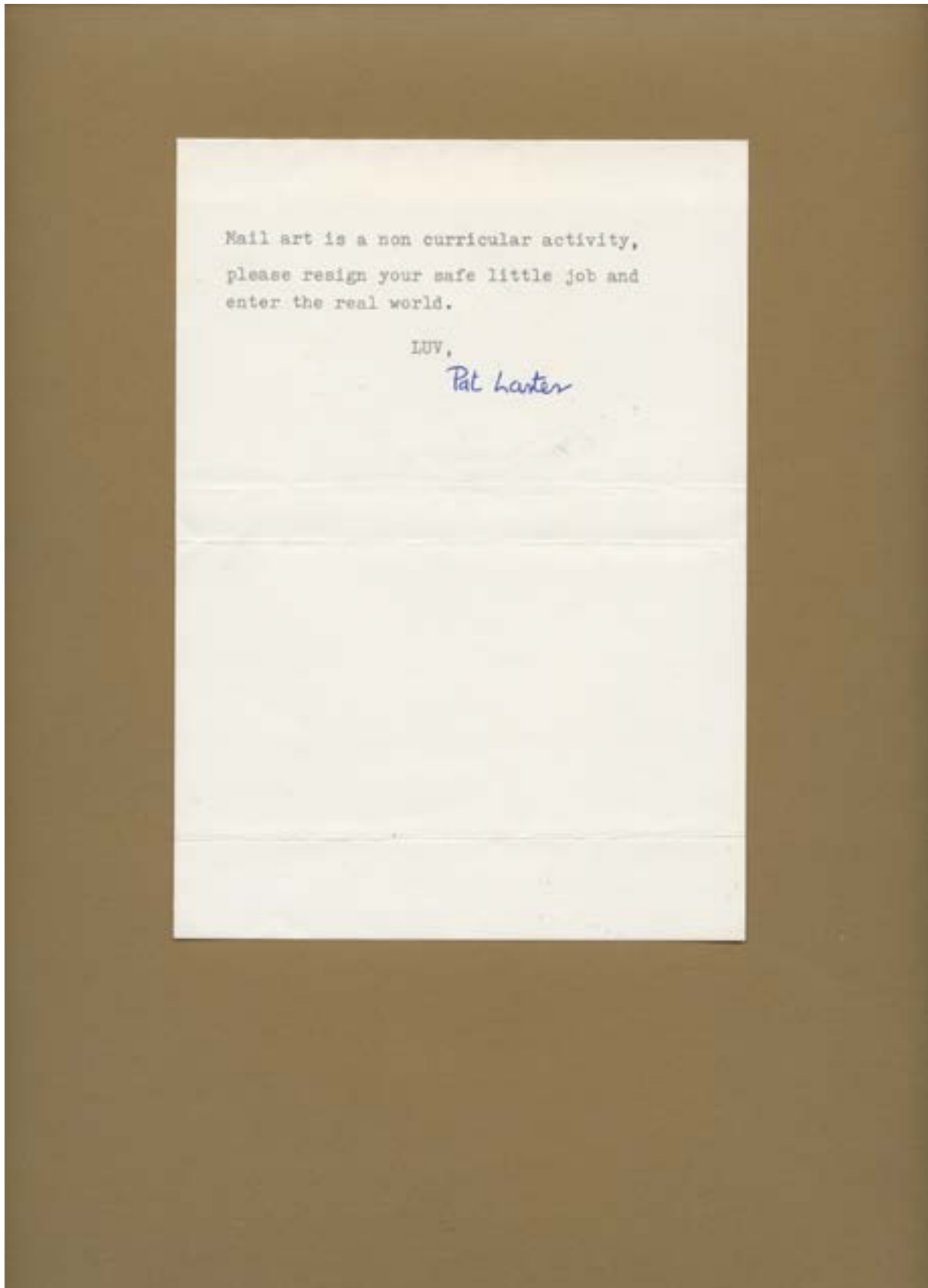
Harley (Francis)



E. F. Higgins III



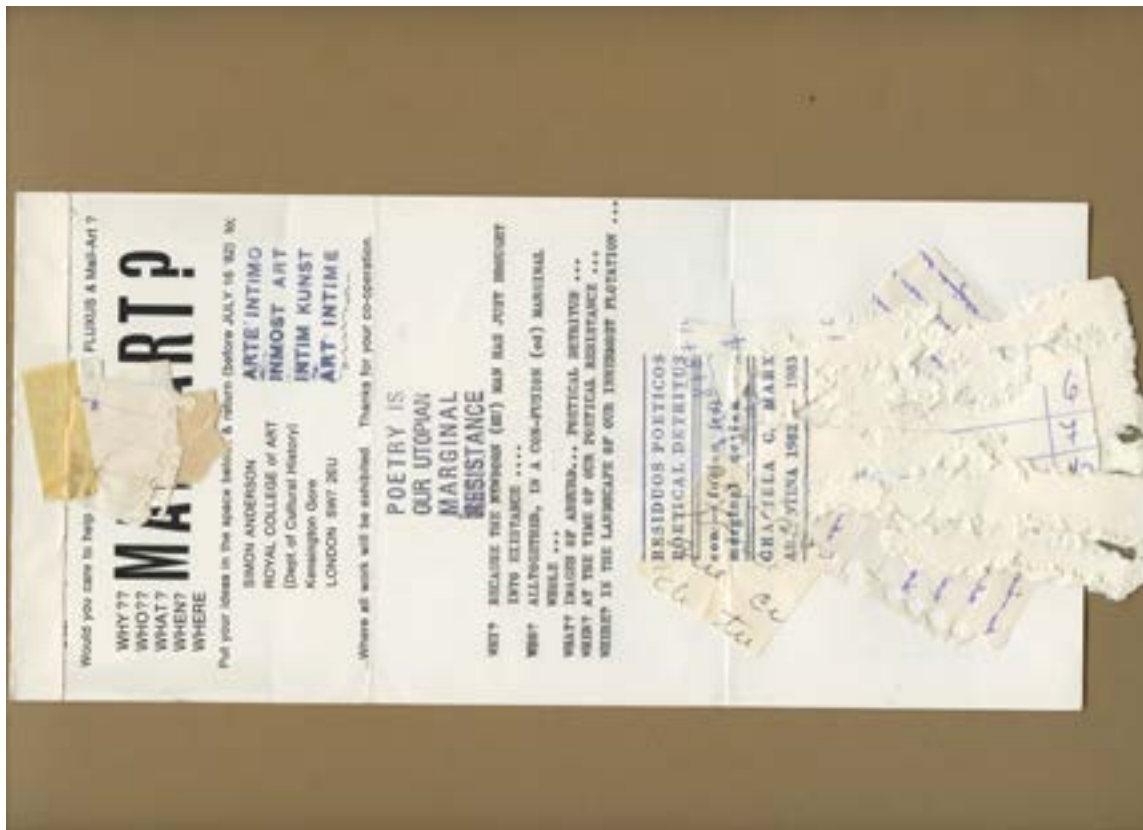
Davi Det Hompson



Mail art is a non curricular activity,  
please resign your safe little job and  
enter the real world.

LUV,

*Pat Larter*

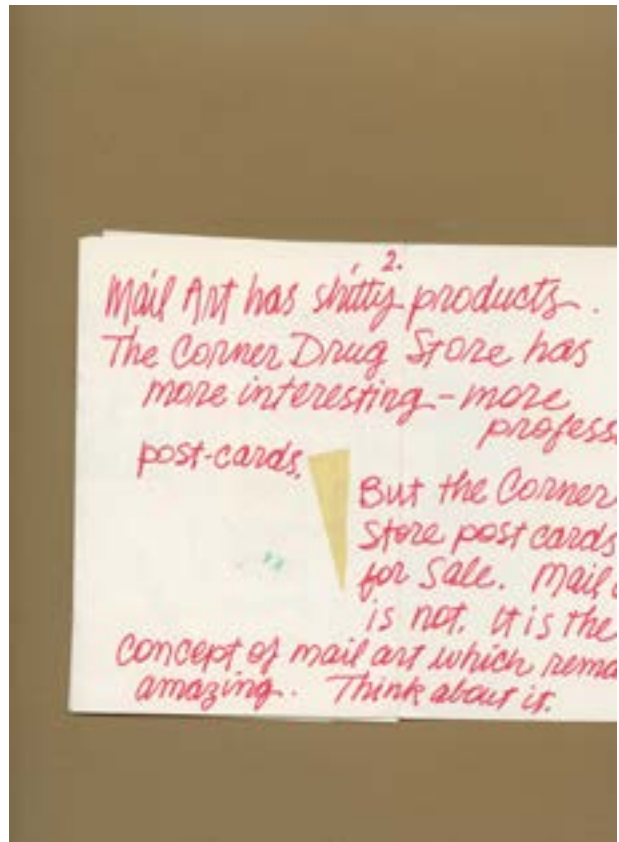
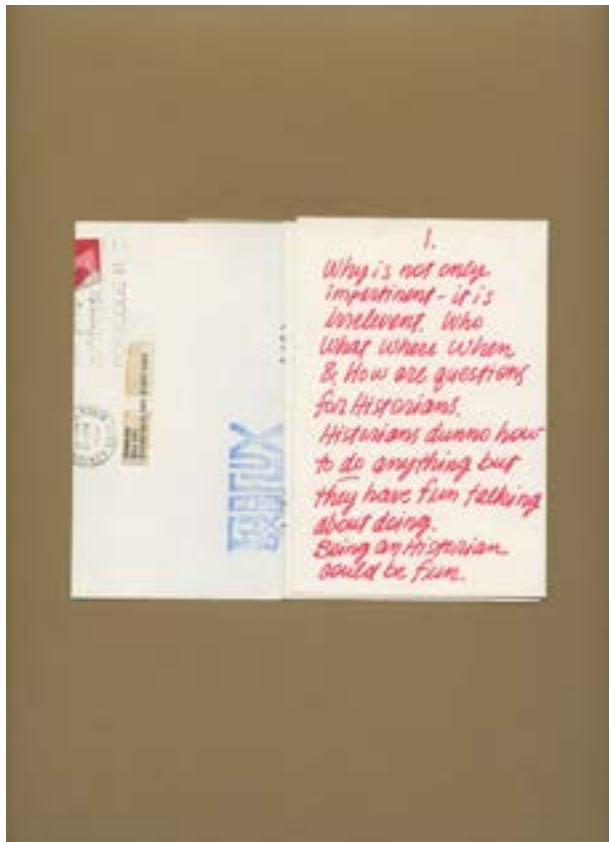


Graciela Gutiérrez-Marx

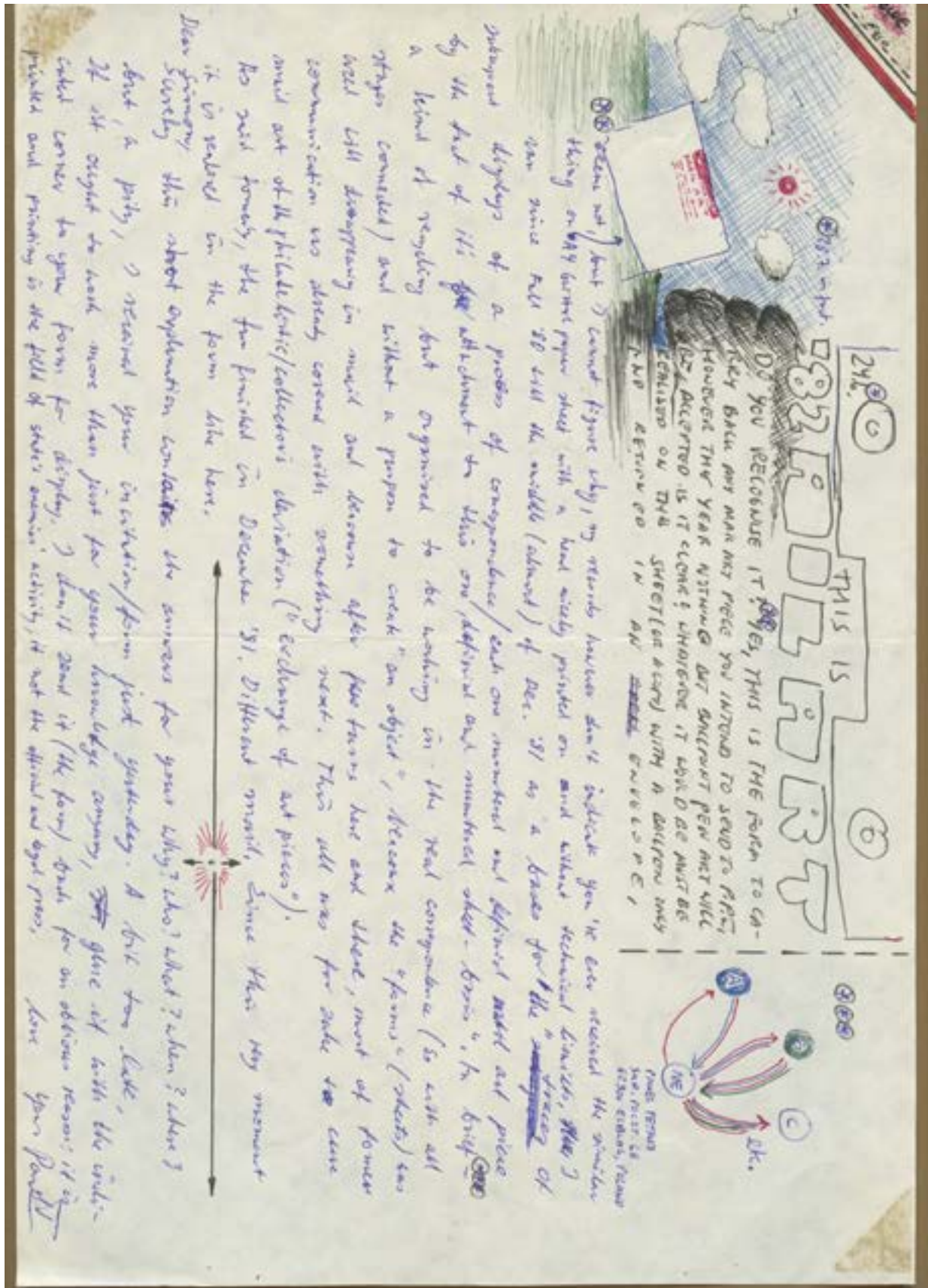




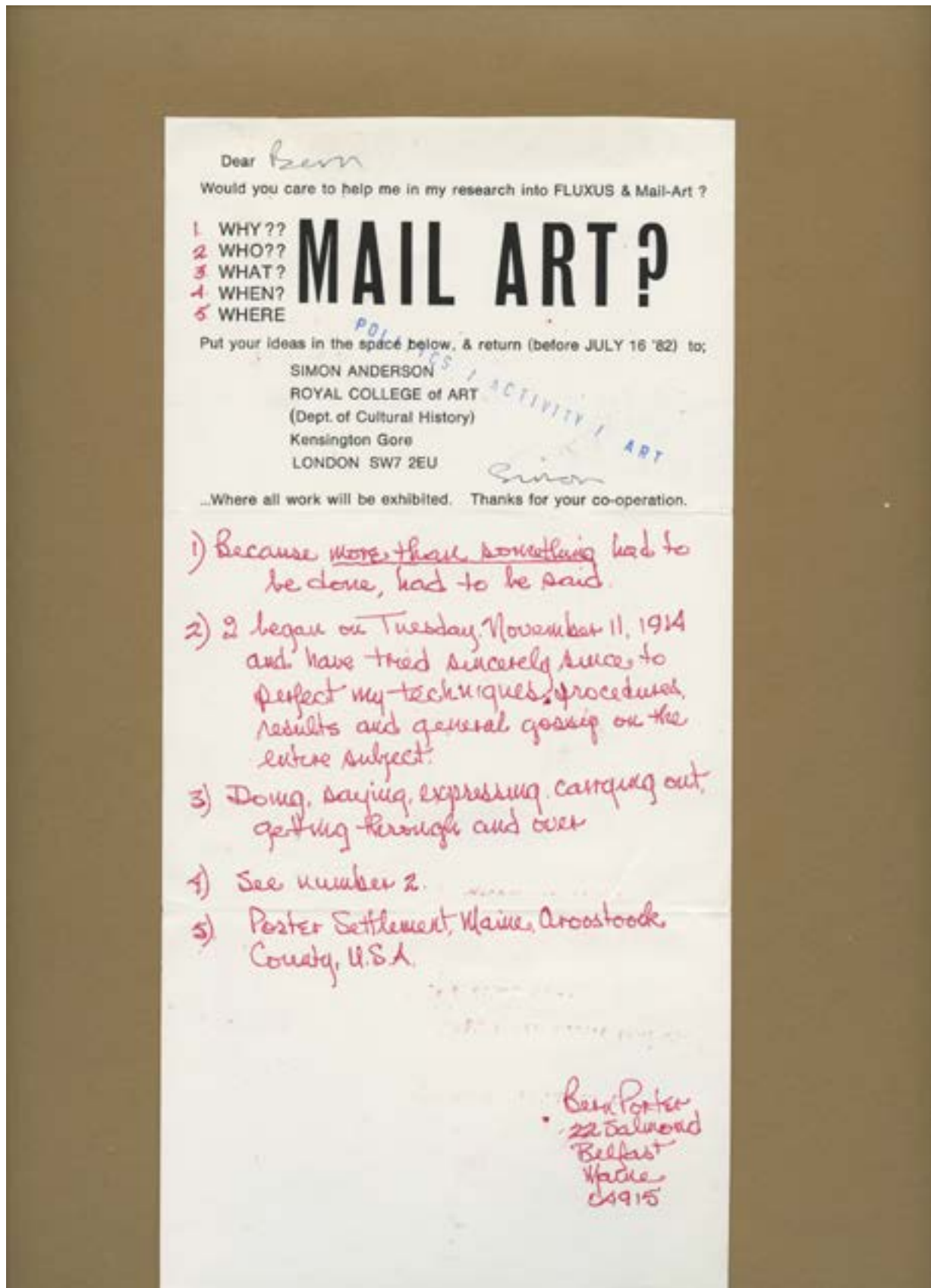
Robert C Morgan



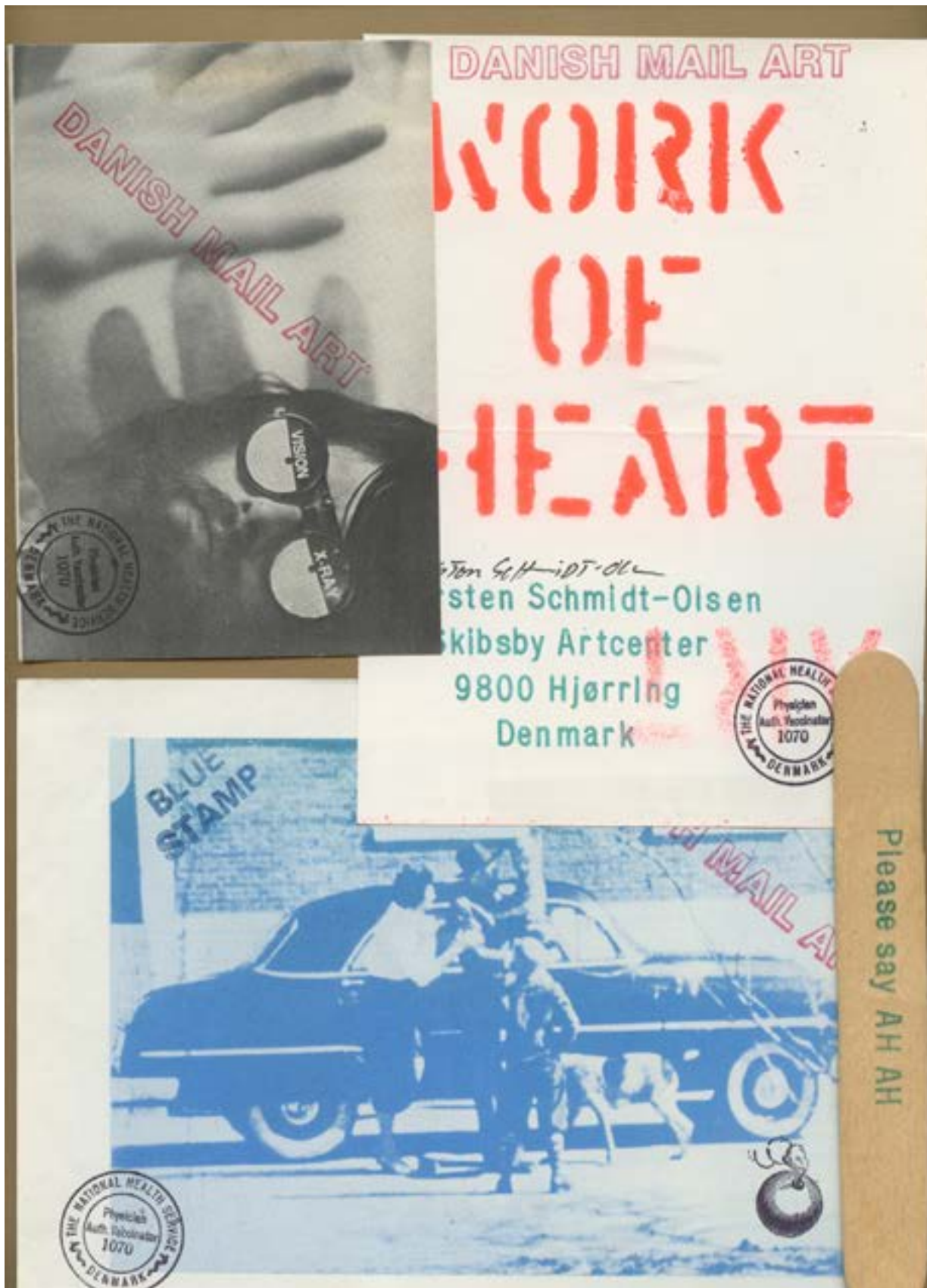
Orworks (Don Milliken)



Pawel Petasz



Bern Porter



Carsten Schmidt-Olsen



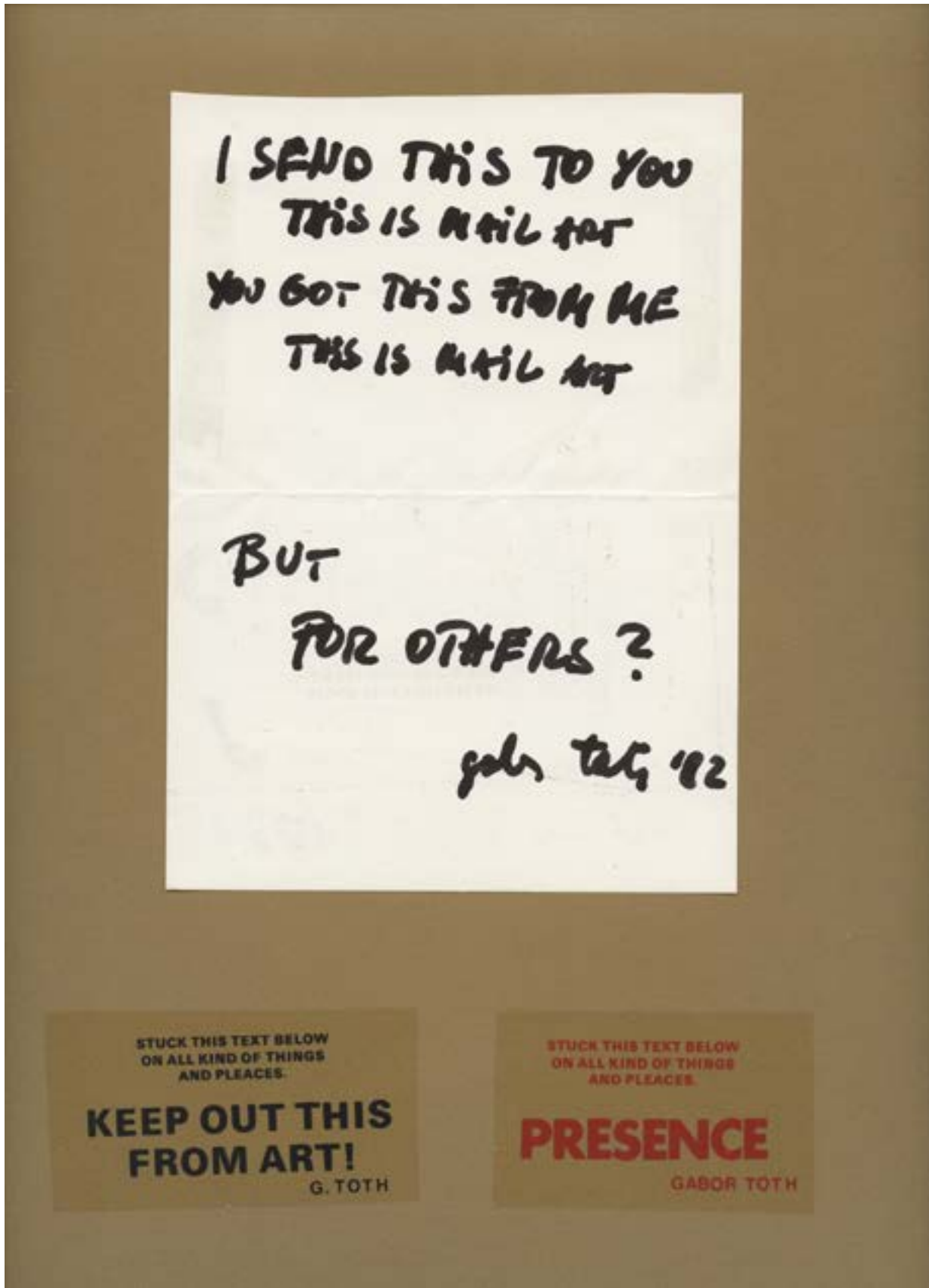
Michael Scott





Rod Summers





Gábor Tóth



John M Bennett

# Speaking Personally: Some Topics of Correspondence Between Fluxus Artists on Fluxus

## Owen F. Smith

It can no longer be said that Fluxus is part of the forgotten post-World War II avant-garde (or rear-garde as George Maciunas called Fluxus). In the last decade or more, the information available on Fluxus has grown exponentially. The relatively large number of recent shows, exhibitions, catalogs, books, and articles have significantly added to our knowledge of Fluxus. All of this new or more widely available information has helped to expand our understanding of what Fluxus was, but it might also be argued that it has also hindered the recognition of what Fluxus is. In short, I ask as a somewhat rhetorical question, as Fluxus becomes fixed in history, are we losing the most significant lessons that Fluxus has to offer?

Although Fluxus was mostly ignored or dismissed by historians, scholars, and critics up into the 1990s, there is nonetheless a surprising amount of material on and about Fluxus. It is in part the nature of this material and its sources that make it both interesting as well as potentially problematic. A central issue is not so much what is/was Fluxus (although it is still a debated and discussed issue), but which history is the “real history,” or even if there is one? Or, alternatively, is this even an important question at all? If history is fundamentally tied to its manufacture (construction and reconstruction), then another question needs to be asked about Fluxus. To what degree is Fluxus what the artists have told us it was, as opposed to other historical alternatives or present interpretations? This question is not just a matter of hyperbole. Nor is it reflective of a desire on my part to find “the truth” of what actually happened so much as a factor that shapes our understanding of Fluxus and that we should be aware of. This situation is primarily connected to two interrelated factors. First, Fluxus is, and in some ways has always been, a construct which is a direct result of the artists’ own awareness of themselves and their actions in relation to history. Fluxus as a name has always been both a way of creating and maintaining a public face for the Fluxus attitude and a methodology aimed at interrupting the processes of identification and delimitation upon which history writing has been so dependent. Second, many of the histories of Fluxus, particularly early descriptions, have been either written by the artists involved with Fluxus or have been principally shaped by what these artists have later said about Fluxus and its history. It should be noted that I am not making these comments as a preface for arguing that “only by the impartial and objective analysis of trained historians will be able to finally sort out what Fluxus truly was and did,” but as an observation about how our awareness and understanding of Fluxus are shaped, particularly in relation to “primary sources.” These comments are also intended as a background to the ways in which I have chosen to develop and present this essay. Rather than construct a linear argument that is supported by the inclusion of quoted materials, which I have to admit has been my past approach as a historian, I have chosen to stress the primary sources in and of themselves suggesting their existence as part of a rhizomatic matrix. I have left the “intellectual and historical gaps” between the quoted materials in an attempt to offer a sense of Fluxus, its situational and shifting nature, without rigidly confining it in an historical straitjacket. This essay is

intended as a *Text* on Fluxus in that it is a methodological field that aims to subvert classification, act as a process of demonstration, and ultimately exist only as a temporary assemblage, or as part of a Deleuzian hodgepodge. It is my hope that in choosing such an approach it will encourage you, the reader, to actively participate in seeking your own situational awareness of Fluxus and what it might offer you and the present moment.

I selected the excerpts from artists' correspondence on or about Fluxus that make up the bulk of this essay as reference points to issues of potential importance for or about Fluxus. Their presentation has been organized around a series of six themes which I feel were both motivational and operational issues as Fluxus developed "in" history, as well as those which still concern us "outside" of Fluxus history. Among the many possible themes that might have been included, the following were selected because of what I believe to be their centrality for Fluxus as both developmental factors and historical frames. They are as follows: 1. Fluxus Aesthetics; 2. The Formation of Fluxus; 3. Fluxus Activism; 4. Fluxus, Collectivism and Group Dynamics; and 5. Fluxus and George Maciunas. These themes should not be thought of as the only possibilities, or even the most significant ones, but they do reflect some of the most repeated topics of consideration that emerge from the available correspondence by Fluxus artists about Fluxus. One other topic has also been included in addition to those already mentioned: 6. The Institutionalization of Fluxus. I included this theme for a slightly different reason than the others. The Institutionalization of Fluxus was included as a sixth topic because the comments of the artists in this context are intended to function as not necessarily as a counterpoint to this essay, but as a reminder of the potential issues we face with Fluxus if we cease to continue to see it as a continuing and even growing set of concerns and modes of operation.

As partial response to Fluxus artists' self-awareness, I have chosen to limit the materials included in this essay to artists' correspondence from the early 1960s up through the 1990s. This distinction was purposefully maintained, even though there are many other statements, writings, and comments that also pertain to these issues, but have not been included here (although many are included elsewhere in this collection). The chosen materials were restricted to correspondence because by limiting the materials included to one particular form, that of personal correspondence, the significance of that form as the central means of communication, discussion, debate and even argument on and about the nature of Fluxus becomes more evident. I would also like to note that the selection and subsequent presentation of these letters here is not only shaped by the thematic concerns mentioned above but also by the practical issue of the availability of correspondence; specifically, there are many more letters currently available from or to Dick Higgins and George Maciunas than any of the other artists associated with Fluxus. The individual letters in each thematic section are organized chronologically. This structure should not be considered important as a reflection of history as chronology, but as a means to reflect the interrelated nature of each of these themes as they developed over time. Lastly, although I have personalized my comments in this essay, this was done not to exert any individual authorial control but to indicate that I am ultimately not an objective, distanced voice; I am a participant, not in what Fluxus was so much as in what Fluxus is or can continue to be.

## 1. The Formation of Fluxus

There is no date on which Fluxus can be said to have begun. There are, of course, dates for the first public use of the name, for the first public performance, for the first Fluxus festival, for the first Fluxus publication, and so on. To ascribe any of these dates as the beginning of Fluxus would, however, be misleading at best. Fluxus began before the name was ever used, and what is now thought to be Fluxus did not fully appear until after several of the “firsts” mentioned above. Fluxus evolved out of associations of like-minded artists in the late 1950s and early 1960s who came to recognize that there was a need for a vehicle through which their works and ideas could be publicly presented. For this reason, Fluxus was initially conceptualized not as a specific group of artists who shared a unified ideological view, but as a magazine to present a wide range of “interesting” work. It was from this general notion of a magazine titled Fluxus that a more specific group of artists with overlapping ideologies emerged by the early 1960s. Central in this evolutionary process was an expanding awareness of the nature and direction of the work being created on an international scale. In addition, a number of artists associated with Fluxus in this period felt an increasing desire to focus on particular types of works, what was called action music or events.

One of the more significant records of the evolutionary process which Fluxus went through between 1961 and 1962 is a series of letters sent between the general editor of the proposed Fluxus magazine, George Maciunas, who was then living in Germany, and one of the “area” editors, Dick Higgins who was then living in New York. Although this series of letters is somewhat incomplete, for not all the letters directly correspond and there seem to be some missing letters, they do offer a significant sense of the dialogue between Maciunas, Higgins, and other artists about the direction, focus, and evolution of Fluxus. This discussion was concerned with the development of Fluxus as both a publication and as a sponsor for a series of concerts that Maciunas and Nam June Paik had begun to plan in late 1961 as an extension of the magazine (what were to become the European Fluxus Festivals of 1962 and 1963).

### **Postcard from George Maciunas to Dick Higgins,**

*November 28, 1961. [mailed from NY on Dec. 1, 61], Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart.*

I must have your essay (extension), Dick, in 3 weeks also tape of your last piece - I may possibly play it here in a series I am organizing also in a grandiose “caravan” concert tour Paik is organizing. We will also perform your other things (I mean musical things) if I get my trunk with your sheets. ...Dick - send your essays and the index - categories, people, their addresses - works etc.etc. also to Stan Buetens . . . he will collect them all bulk and mail by parcel - air post - will be cheaper this way. that index is very important - don't forget to send it. Other editors are working on it also so, they may get in touch with you on account of it. I was de-activated for almost a month for lack of cortesonones (in a hosp.) but now have them, so FLUXUS got delayed and other things also. . . . Fluxus is growing very well + seems like will have enough subscribers and materials.

**Letter from Dick Higgins to George Maciunas,**

*nd [but prior to January 18, 1962], Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart.*

I just received a lovely letter from Paik. . . . Next time you write me a note, please tell me what he looks like.

About the diagram in your Fluxus scroll. Seven Points: 1.) I don't think you know Al Hansen's work, but I think you did very well to place him where you did, by Kaprow in the Concretist area. 2.) I see my box is big enough, so please call me "Dick" not "D." . . . 3.) Has Jackson written theatrical music? I think your theatrical box should be longer to clarify what he does. 4.) Is D. Johnson Dave or Dennis? If Dave, he belongs in note music, since that 's what he likes best and is most interested in. . . . 6.) At each end of Cage's box you should put a small Isidore Iseu [sic] box. 7.) I strongly question your mention of Varese up on top for anyone but Earle Brown (who has never written a tape piece on his own, just collaborated with Cage and Feldman, while Feldman has written one on his own, so that category is all balled up) and David Johnson. Varese conceived of tape music back around 1918 but never made any of it till about 1952. He invented one notation for musical diagrams, but it did not work very well, so he abandoned it. And he did no theatrical music. You must know, though, from *Musica ex Machina*, that Charles Ives had a colossal influence on all the composers in your "Note Music" and "Theatrical Music" categories, since he was, to my knowledge, the first to go heavily for indeterminacy, anyway, that's what all of us were told and how we think of him, whether or not we care about his music.

About Fluxus Magazine: I see you have many musical things.

. . . for #4, I think you should do Kirchner, because there is nothing on him at New York or Colombia or Yale. . . . In #5, a paper should be done on abstract writing, but for goodness sakes, why not ask Isou to do it? He's articulate but a bit shattered.

#1. My essay was intended primarily for continental Europe, and I'm certainly annoyed not to say what I want to say to the people I intended to say it to. . . . I intended to explain my feeling about commitment in avant-garde art here and abroad, particularly in direct contradiction of points Adamov makes in *L'Aveu* and Sartre in some essay I have. . . . Furthermore, you have assembled such an interesting collection of peoples work, most of whom are too poor or disinclined to get to Europe, a German or French edition is virtually the only way this work could be made available to anyone on the continent.

. . .

In your concerts, almost any of my pieces could be used in #10. If you want to use me in #9, I have one piece- you know it- *To Everything Its Season*, in *The Musical Wig*- that could be appropriate. In #12 I suggest you invite Al Hansen to contribute. . . . In #14 I am sending you the second making of my long tape piece with a formal analysis of it. You may rearrange the piece according to some formal criteria, or play it on various machines, or copy it systematically, or blend any number of tracks on to two tracks of a small piece tape . . . and attach these end to end. When all these movements are played in sequence I call it "*Requiem for Wagner the Criminal Mayor*", and any structure you put together out of that should have a similar name, preferably limited to local politics. . . . If you can pun so much the better.

There is said to be a group of electronic composers in Rotterdam doing work unlike the prominent Dutch bigwigs. I suggest you might be able to turn them up, perhaps for #22. . . .

My own going projects . . . a series of music-happenings called *Mus(i)cula Politica*, a big orchestral ooze, and a movie-lens-happening. *Fishy's Quadrilateral* is almost wired, and it may be done at the benefit for *La Monte's Anthology* . . .

**Letter from George Maciunas to Dick Higgins,**

*postmarked Jan. 18, 1962, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart.*

He [Paik] is very modest and unpretentious which is in great contrast to many people here and in NY. In fact he is not eager to perform or have his work performed at all, which is even more unusual. I also met Bussotti and Metzger . . . also unpretentious. They all will be of tremendous help for the magazine and festival. Also met Maderna who looks like a fat butcher, and Helms who (very much like Flynt) is absurdly arrogant and with pretensions toward world shattering originality and genius bordering on megalomania.

I met also people like Mary Bauermeister . . . Kagel, Boemer + others whose names I now forget. They showed me some diagrams + perform. instructions of new composers which seem very good (especially a group of Sicilians doing good work) Also quite a few doing concrete compositions.

## 2. Fluxus Diagram

a) I was thinking of Jackson's piece for audience which tends to depend considerably on theatrical or on eye rather than ear. then he has of course straight theater pieces too.

b) I thought of Dennis Johnson. Is David Johnson really any good? I just heard one electronic piece (at Cooper concert) which I thought was quite mediocre, but then I would rely on your judgment for the diagram, since you are more familiar with his + others works.

c) Isidore Isou will be in European diagram.

d) By Varese I only meant as transmitter of Futurist + Dada bruitisme from Paris to US like John Cage. No direct influences meant. (this only concerns noises, nothing else) Theatre, theatrical music, I would have attributed to some Dada theatre - Happenings' influence. I did not attribute indeterminism to anyone in particular, but your idea of placing Charles Ives is good. Your suggestions were most constructive. Maybe now the diagram begins to look a little better.

3. I will include in Fluxus - your Inroads Rebuff'd and at least 2 events etc. But The \_\_\_\_\_ I did not understand all this grammar you were throwing at me. You will notice from revised contents, that Metzger undertook to do Kirchner, which will be excellent - much better than if I did it.

4. I will ask French editor, (possibly Alvard) to request Isou to write about letterism. By abstract chirography [sic] I was thinking of the very speedy handwriting (like signatures) more closer to Japanese "grass style" (Morita, Equchi etc.) or in France people like Degottex, few things of Viseaux, Mathieu, and some scribbles of Hidai (not his paintings).

I changed name of "distant past" to just "past" so 19th and early 20th cent. can be included.

I will appease you and we will have German edition of 1st issue, that will appear 2 months later. OK?

Will you send me programs etc. of your performances. Also keep me posted on your new work. When you so come to Europe next fall, you could participate in the Festival, no? By that time it may be held in Paris, Florence, or Warsaw. I think Wiesb[aden], Berlin, Koln and Stockholm may pass by then.

**Postcard from George Maciunas to Dick Higgins,***Postmarked 21.2.62 [February 21, 1962], Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart.*

. . . Met there [London] Michael von Biel who is doing very nice things, better than Cornelius Cardew anyway, and much better than those New Departure people, who are only departing backwards. Got M. von Biel to edit English nothings for European issue II (FLUXUS). also arranged festival in London for Oct. (that's definite) June is fixed for Koln. . . . As editor of happenings can you obtain some materials for Fluxus from Hansen, Oldenburg etc. I got some things from Kaprow. Also - I hear nothing from Walter De Maria - nothing at all . . . (I sent him three letters.) . . . If he wants to drop off he should at least tell me or you. Would you take over plastic arts ??? As it is now the whole issue consists of music & poetry only. (nothing from Simone Morris either).

P.S. With next mail I will send 1st. proofs of first issue, translations, revised festival program and final proof for fluxus prospectus. I got very nice cartons from small disposable enema units, (with all instructions written over). I want to mail out the Fluxus prospectus in them, nice?

**Letter from George Maciunas to Dick Higgins,***nd [February 1962], Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart.*

Are any of these good?  
( for FLUXUS) & Fluxus diagram?

Thomas Bladen	NYC	Ralph Iwamoto	NYC
Jack Bonsal	Balt.	Alfred Jensen	"
Lee Bontecou	NYC	Jasper Johns	"
Harry Bouras	Chicago	Frederic Karoly	"
Dorthea Baer	NYC	Ellsworth Kelly	"
Gordon Brown	NYC	Joseph Konzal	"
Wallace Berman	Calf.	Bernard Langlais,	Me.
John Chamberlain	NYC	Landes Lewitin	NYC.
David Chapin	NYC	Iris Lezak	"
Chryssa	NYC	John Little	"
Bruce Conner	San Fr.	Hubert Long,	E. Hampt.
Jay De Feo	"	Anthony Magar	NYC.
Roy De Forrest	"	Agnes Martin	"
Sari Dines	NYC	Renee Miller	"
Jim Dine	"	Salvatore Meo	"
Enrico Donati	"	Ruben Nakian	"
Rosalind Drexler	"	Manuel Neri	"
Tom Doyle	NYC	C. Oldenburg	"
John Dunlop	"	George Ortman	"
Martha Edelheidt	"	Harold Paris	"
Marco Doservo	"	Lil Picard	"
C. Falkenstein	"	Leo Rabkin	"
Dan Flavin	"	Jeanne Reynal	"
Jean Follet	"	Irwin Rubin	"
Peter Forakis	"	Joseph Stella	"



William Giles	“	Alice Terry	“
Chuck Ginnever	“	Peter Voulkas	“
Joseph Goto,	Mich.	Ralph White	“
Red Grooms	NYC.	Robert Whitman	“
Wally Hendrik	San Fr.	H.C. Westermann	“
Ed Higgins	NY.	Mary Wilson	Balt.
William Hadaway,	Balt.	W. Zogbaum	NYC.
Robert Indian	NYC.		

This list is from James Goldsworthy, I don't know how trustworthy it is. Can you weed names out. Reduce it to just good ones? (if there are any)

### Letter from Dick Higgins to George Maciunas,

*nd [prior to March 19, 1962], Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart.*

I have been looking over your list from Goldsworthy, and I see that the entire list consists of visual artists. Therefore they should not be diagrammed unless you want to diagram the visual arts more extensively than you have . . . But the ones I mention below might be listed in your index to the American avant-garde at the end of fluxus along with a couple of others that I'd add on.

John Chamberlin, does terrible sculptures strictly for Martha Jackson. Is avant-gardist by association. Very Posh gent.

Bruce Conner, likes to collage . . . all kinds of fetishable objects into highly erotic twist-pieces. [He] is surpassed only by Helms and Isou in self-importance.

Sari Dienes, is very social, like Yoko, to the point of getting very little done. The quality of the work she does makes me wish nobody would speak to her - there's just not enough of it. . . .

Jim Dine - very faddy gent, made junk art when that was the thing, did happenings when Alan came along (though his own were very vaudevillian psychological entertainments more than happenings), now has gotten very neat, and is painting neckties. . .

..

Rosalind Drexler - paints obscenities for her children, plus neo-neo-mystical crucifixions that cannot be carried in processions. ...

Martha Edelheit - see R. Drexler. Not the same, but equally undistinguished. . . .

Jean Follet - makes junk sculpture rather well. . . .

Peter Forakis - has a very original style of sculpture. . . .

Red Grooms - makes comic strip cut-outs very large ( so does Steve Vasey - why include the one without the other?)

Ed Higgins - makes cryptic sculptures - elegantizes junk a la Johns and Rauschenberg.

Alfred Jensen - makes Compulsive geometric paintings. . . .

Jasper Johns - is about the best of the junk artists. His work is very evocative of something that goes well beyond what it is. . . .

Ellsworth Kelly - is a good commercial interior decorator, who has an original geometric style because geometric artists are generally not good interior decorators. . . .

.

Iris Lezak - . . . nobody but ray Johnson that I know of has ever seen her work. . . .

C. Oldenburg - he is a realist of a wholly original cast. For example when he wanted to do work on a store, he went out and rented a store. . . . Again, his paintings are based on wholly improbable and literary situations, generally for moral and sociological

purposes. . . . His happenings were vaudevilles, like Dine's, but they never represented situations, they were much more concrete, and they had a very patient bear-like power that nobody's but Alan Kaprow's had. . . . I really admire his work, totally different though it may be from my own, aesthetically and structurally. I have the notion that Claes and myself are the only two realists in theater, and, except for Jackson and perhaps Dick Maxfield, the only realists on the American scene. I think it is really to bad you never asked him for something for Fluxus . . . if it is not too late). . . .

Joseph Stella is Castelli's fair-haired boy (except that his hair is dark). . . .

Robert Whitman . . . Whitman has various odd ideas about there being something uniquely American in American art. He is the ultimate in fanatics about the old American originality bit. He also thinks that progress in art consists in outdoing, so he always thinks about somebody else's work and settles down to outdo them . . . but whether or not one likes his work seems to depend mostly on how much one wants to see Kaprow first simplified and then pushed to absurdity.

H.C. Westerman, of Chicago, is an old warrior-dada-futurist type, now about 55, who has done very little work, because of his habit of enlisting in anti-anything wars. [goes on to describe his involvement in a number of wars] . . . Nobody really Knows very much about him - George Brecht once spent a very talky evening with him - but he is a legend. . . .

To be added to your index:

Phyllis Yampolski started something called the "Hall of Issues" where visual art that was in some way committed definitely to a stand or point of view towards life could be exhibited in the context of political pamphlets, arguments, and all that sort of thing also was committed. . . . Of course, it only worked for the first month, and has since petered out. But that is the kind of thing she's interested in

Dick Tyler and Dorothea Baer are out and out anarchists. . . . Dick is actually convinced that he has the makings of a mass movement coming along- and it is not anarchic pacifism like Jackson's artist-ridden crowd of moaners. Dick and Dorothea are really involved in real Marxist-Bakunin anarchism . . . From an academic point of view, their work could be taken as junk art but with occult or anarchic-social materials instead of art.

### **Letter from George Maciunas to Dick Higgins,**

*Postmarked 15.3.62 [March 15, 1962], Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart.*

It seems like Walter de Maria is dead or a primadonna or unwilling to go to a wedding so I must be bothering you to save the situation. . . . Why not edit for Fluxus happenings, theater together with all other visual-plastic arts (minus cinema)... For happenings - it would be very nice of you to collect a nice box with nice essays, instructions from nice people you know like Hansen, Dine, Oldenburg, Whitman etc. and send them to me nicely like a nice person. Same for visual-plastic arts-environments etc. - a nice box of items, things, objects, scraps (1000 of each), essays, photographs (one of each) of what you like or think is worthwhile. Do you agree? OK? I still think (in spite of it being outdated) it may be worthwhile to do some anti-action painting - essaying - I mean a scholarly review-study of origins and imitational nature of this type of painting (abstract expressionistic, action informal - what you like) especially since this whole crowd of beatniks is still active - giving a fraudulent impression about their originality, doings etc.etc. (Floating Bear, Scrap, It is etc, etc.). It would be best if you could write something on this subject considering your familiarity with it. . . . I will delay Fluxus a whole month to get these nice things from you. OK? . . . Horowitz may write about the reactionism of English new Writers (like himself) and Michael von Biel

against concrete music (like his own). Dugoszewsky wrote against all new music - indeterminacy, concreteism [sic], neo-dada, happenings - all of it. So we still need something on painting. Let me know about the things you will send me. . . .

**Letter from Dick Higgins to George Maciunas,**

*nd [Spring 1962], Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart.*

This note is to say that yes we will come to Europe in the fall and will participate in Fluxus.

I think you can do without a visual editor for Fluxus in NYC since better no visual editor than a reluctant one. I will not get you a contribution from Dine of Whitman since I think they are Floating Bear Mannerists and unrealistic. I will get in touch with Claes and I will see if I can contact Hansen . . . to do something for you. Yes I will collect for and serve as visual editor if none other suitable can be found, but do not name me as any sort of visual editor for this country. Theater and politics are quite enough. . . .

Yes, Alison and I will come to Europe, possibly for a while with two of my performers. We want to do something of my theater pieces, perhaps Inroads would be appropriate. We want to be there from October to December. . . .

**Postcard from George Maciunas to Dick Higgins,**

*Postmarked 19.3.62 [March 19, 1962], Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie.*

[I] received your nice review of N.Y. plastic artists. . . . I want to print it in Fluxus the way it is - OK? (maybe minus the reference to Jackson, not to antagonize him) OK? Will you add comments on : Lichtenstein ? (Castelli) + Rosenburg or rosenfield ? (Green) also Chryssa, Jay de Feo, Wally Hendrick, Robert Indiana if you think they are any good. . . . Would you also ask Oldenburg to write something within a whole month? Also maybe for special issue on the past? . . . I hear Larry Poons is writing too, so with Oldenburg + Kaprow things have + your writings there should be enough for plastic arts. I also think your films should be incorporated in the cinema section, so why don't you call up Jonas Mekas. . . . I may get a graphic freelance job with an Air Force (U.S.) printing section, I could then use APO + send more bulk like translation of your essay for your approval + other things. I will have Fluxus printed in Japan, because those Germans know nothing about offset. . . .

**Letter from George Maciunas to Dick Higgins,**

*nd [Summer 1962], Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart.*

It looks like I may hold on to this job for some time more and make some \$ meantime. When you come mid. Sept. - you will be just in time for the "happenings" part of the festival in Wiesbaden. You should stay for a year, because in 1963 we may pull off a grand tour through Siberia. . . . We also made final arrangements in Paris for festival there in Dec. 1962. They have a good man there in Filliou - who does some messy happenings and has a gallery besides, in his hat, selling all kinds of small junk to

passers (I mean from his hat). Ben Patterson is rather good also (in Paris) Spoerri & Bayle agreed to collaborate both for Fluxus & festivals. . . .

SEND ME: your first Danger Music pieces, like no.1,2,3, etc. Can we print the whole series of Danger Music? Can we make a continuous record from your requiem to Wagner ?? Also of your Constellation no. 2 ???? Constellation should sound nice on a record. Long period of silence - just surface sound - then Bang & over. So you give permission to make record? (to be included in Fluxus I) Caspari's theater in Koln want's to perform some of your plays OK with you ?

**Letter from Dick Higgins to Claes Oldenburg,**

*June 26, 1962, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart.*

Maciunas, who lived here the last ten years, asked me incredulously were there any interesting visual artists in this country. I said yes four, David Smith, Larry Poons, Alan and you. Maciunas did not like David Smith, but he liked what photos I had and asked me to keep in touch. Next he went to Europe to live, to avoid paying debts. When I heard from him again he was in the money, had a stable in the little air-force city of Wiesbaden in southern Germany, had bought a printing press, and had decided (wisely) that the only any of the stuff he wanted to see in print would be to print it and distribute appropriately. He knows how, since he spent the last seven years in graphics offices in publishing and magazine houses. The format, he decided, would be to make a periodical to exist in boxes, the periodical to be called "fluxus" to be issued quarterly in runs of 1000, with another 200 "luxus fluxusses"- tentative name for the special issue- to contain originals, unprintable matter, unmanufacturables, film strips, photos, newspapers, etc. Each issue will be broken up arbitrarily into nations and geographical regions. The first issue is to be American and is to be published in English, French and German. Then comes French, then German, then eastern European, etc. The material he likes is the experimental and "lively." He collected most of his material while you were in Texas. It may be too late for you to be in the first American issue (there will be another in two years). I hope not. You can send him anything that might be folded or boxed or sent through the mails or some such. He has contributions from George Brecht, Joe Byrd, Phil Corner, Lucia Dlugoszewski, Henry Flynt, myself, himself, Dick Maxfield, Simone Morris, Jerry Bloedow, Diane Wakoski, Richard Boldt, Walter de Maria, Al Hansen, Larry Eigner, Spencer Holst, Terry Jennings, Dennis Johnson, Allan, Alison, Jackson, Ben Patterson, Larry, Griffith W. Rose, Stan Vanderbeek, Emmett Williams, La Monte, I guess that's all. He will print four letter words, as many of each as you like, but you should not get his mag banned from the mails.."

**Letter from George Maciunas to Dick Higgins,**

*nd [Summer 1962], Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart.*

. . .great thanks for your efforts in fishing up Al Hansen & Claes. Fluxus will be more complete now. I got stuff from Kaprow (but no essay) from Larry Poons (diagram & few words) I hope Claes will send an essay in addition to other things. Walter de M. sent a portrait of Cage & his followers. Also got things from Dennis Johnson & a thick batch of poetry etc. from JML & his friends. We will issue Fluxus in a box form - with bound pages & loose inside all neatly packed. Box will be very nice so it can substitute covers. dimension will be 8"x8"x1" or 2" if some loose things get bulky.

Your pieces (graphis 82 & handshake) must have been very good to see. We should include them in the European festivals. Handshaking piece could be for audience, include in the program as first composition - but never announced so who-ever shook hands meeting friends performed it. OK?

... I'll keep this shitty APO job till June 15th. ...

The festival has been arranged in Paris for Dec. 1962. Ben Patterson, Bayle & Schaeffer (from above) are all collaborating. So when you come in Oct. you will have to go directly to London. November is still unsettled but we hope maybe Florence may come off. then Dec. in Paris & I hope 63 - Winter & spring in E. Europe & Siberia. ... We are joined now by some good people like Daniel Spoerri, Robert Filliou, Vostell, Ben Patterson - all happenings people. Ben Patterson has a good piece for double-base which he will perform. Nam June Paik finally agreed to include an evening of his own pieces in each series.

## 2. Fluxus Aesthetics

Much has been written by the artists associated with Fluxus, emphasizing that there is no unified philosophical platform or aesthetic motivation that they all equally share or believe in. As many Fluxus artists have indicated in their statements, even if Fluxus might contain some conceptual coherency, there are no static visual or conceptual qualities, complete in themselves, upon which one might construct an aesthetic of Fluxus. Accepting this, however, does not preclude the existence of points of congruence on artistic and cultural matters that motivated the artists and shaped the development of the Fluxus group. As several of the artists associated with Fluxus have stated, most directly Dick Higgins in "Theory and Reception" and Ken Friedman in "Fluxus and Company," even though it might be problematic to formulate a single Fluxus aesthetic, one can find some similarities or shared concerns in most Fluxus work. Beyond a discussion of what these conceptual nodes of Fluxus might be, one can gain a general sense of an attitude in most Fluxus work. This attitude is based on an unpretentious directness that brings into question the elitist aspects of high art or, as some of the Fluxus artists referred to it, "serious culture." In this way, Fluxus was and is part of a much larger development in the twentieth century that seeks not to change art so much as to change the manner in which people understand the world and perceive culturally dependent differentiations.

My intention in selecting the following letters is not to give a whole sense of a Fluxus aesthetic, or even all the potential conceptual nodes, but to reflect on some of these points of congruence. The letters that were selected for inclusion in this section were part of the ongoing dialogue, discussion, and argument as to what Fluxus meant, what it contained, and what might be done with it. The points of view that they offer are contradictory and even self-contradictory. This is, however, not the result of some failing. It is instead a reflection of the very nature of Fluxus as an assemblage and its sensibilities, attitudes, and/or aesthetic concerns. They in part evidence that aspect of Fluxus that revels in a carnivalesque participation of open-ended principals, such as de-centering, fragmentation, and a kind of Barthian textuality. In this way, these letters are part of the Fluxus attitude that seeks to establish meaning principally within a shifting code of situational references, and it is in such a context that they can be seen as containing some congruence.

**Letter from Dick Higgins to Don McAree, nd [ca. 1960],***Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

Assumption One: reality and our experience or apprehension of reality both give the illusion of being totally disorganized.

Assumption Two: this is true because, since most things are explainable in terms so simple that we can hardly notice them or, more accurately, in terms of an overlay of identical principles of which matter is only one concretion, we do not accept the rationale, since we prefer to think of ourselves and our world as highly complex.

Conclusion: complex and irrational art is unrealistic.

Corollary: the only realistic art is concretion, i.e., the art which is a concretization of the processes of reality in its operation, internal and external, subjective and objective.

Corollary: non-realistic art must be based on illusion, assuming that it is made in good faith, and the illusions are most easily explained as psychology, i.e., as the interposition of deluded will or bad faith between the object or process experienced and the mind, or as a sort of mental feedback. Granted that such feedback may have pleasurable value, for a realistic attitude to be adopted it must be recognized as feedback, as distortion.

Let us leave psychology to Rilke and Jack Tworikov and Artaud and Franz Liszt. Realism remains something of value as long as there is any value in reality. concretion is necessary in order to avoid psychology. Concretion might be taken as an aesthetic process of being right without telling THE TRUTH. Concretions are all realistic.

**Letter from La Monte Young to Dick Higgins,***nd [ca. 1961/62], Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

... naturally I expect that once a piece gets in someone else's hands the someone else will probably do it his way - so - If you want to perform poem that is very nice but I am sending you four newer pieces - Poem is getting old fashioned & besides, it is often altogether too entertaining for the audience. But its up to you - if you want to do poem or one of the new ones I'd be delighted either way - If you do a poem I have only one remark - NO Acting - each event is simply to be enacted but not acted - when the performance is put on it should not be smooth like a piece but it should be as though the performers just happened to wander into the performance area (we never tell the audience when the piece is beginning) if you do the piece do you want me to send you a list of events to choose from (at random or as is convenient) or would you prefer to choose your own? Which ever is the most fun for you. ...

**Postcard from George Maciunas to Nam June Paik,***nd [before August 15, 1962], Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

Note on Stockhausen piece: I accepted your ultimatum & included him in the program [all underlined from included] ( his Klavierstück IV), But I think eventually Fluxus festivals & book must lean more towards Neo Dada - action music - concrete music at least [dashes in this sentence are arrows]. Otherwise we will slide backwards to Darmstadt. No? Therefore, in future, I think we should eliminate all non-action, non neo-dada, non-concrete pieces even if they are very beautiful. I do not say Stockhausen is not beautiful NO! His pieces may be very beautiful, but so are pieces of Webern, Schonberg, Stravinsky, J.C. Bach, Monteverdi...etc.etc. We can not include them all - so we must draw the borderline somewhere. If we include Stockhausen we should include 100 others like him, but you will agree that Fluxus is not interested in all that is produced today. Stockhausen may be as famous as Cage, but Cage has originality while St. has not. Fluxus is interested in originality, fresh thinking not imitations or overworked forms.

**Letter from George Maciunas to Nam June Paik,***nd [late 1962 or early 1963], Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

About FESTUM FLUXORUM. Will you have time to perform? & prepare some of your pieces? I did not know what pieces you would want to perform so in the program I sent to Beuys & Wilhelm I have written: Nam June Paik - to be determined. . . .Beuys asked whether I should not include Vostell, Hulsmans, & Trowbridge. So I included Vostell and Hulsmans. I do not know what composition of Trowbridge could be performed so I could not include them. Poetry or prose readings really do not go well in Fluxus concerts unless they border on music - so action music like Mac Lows letters, but maybe Hulsmans can read a short piece, no longer than 5 minutes. Each composition in this festival will be SHORT & FAST.

. . .

Furthermore I think it is immoral to destroy food. That is one reason we never performed (after Wiesbaden) Dick Higgins danger music with eggs & butter. That is also the reason that I am hesitant about Vostells - decollage Kleenex cake throwing, unless he comes up with variation - it's about time he did come with variation of Kleenex. One cant just perform the same single thing over & over & over & over. We try to vary every piece in each performance. Some of course vary by there indeterminate structure (like Mac Lows letters, or Ichiyanagi, etc.) Some are varied by substituting different actions (Emmetts Alphabet or my Olivetti, Higgins Constellations).

**Letter from George Maciunas to George Brecht,***postmarked January 9, 1963, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

I do not particularly desire distinctions between "optical" & "acoustical." This is one reason I envision a graphic presentation of such a topology as a cylinder so that the area between pure optic & pure acoustic is between maxima & minima. Same applies to "artificial" to "concrete" definitions. Transition is very gradual. So one's life would belong in the category of "readymade" or non-art event, which is between optic & acoustic. By non-art I mean anything not created by the artist with intent to promote "art" experience. So your events are non-art since you did not create the events- they

exist all the time. You call attention to them. I did not mind at all that many of your events were “lost” in our festivals. The more lost or unnoticeable the more truly non-artificial they were. Very few ever thought the vase of flowers over the piano was meant to be a piece & they all waited for a “piece” to follow.

I agree to the term art, science, etc. as mind-forms of mind-conceptions. Yet I can not see mind-form or conception (active) being imposed over non-art, non-science, etc. It would seem one could instead impose on them mind perception (private), since a non-art has already been formed or conceived, before mind contacts it, so a contact can not form it, furthermore but instead can perceive it and possibly form itself (mind) or reform itself. As soon as you form or reform it, then you create art. So I think art & non-art can be defined just as well as mind-form & non-mind form, even though non-mind-form depends on mind-form for its existence it does not eliminate its distinction of being non-mind-form. (+ -) Your calling attention to respond correctly & in need to any “Exit” for instance would be mind-perception or non-mind-form, since you do not form either the “Exits” nor the responses of all taught to respond correctly. But if you create an exit (or exit sign like we did in festivals) or create a situation for the “audience” to exit, then it is mind-form, or art, even though it may use readymade sign, exit etc. But situation is not ready made. (or event is not readymade). . . .

### **QUIBB-Art questionnaire by Gaul & Alvermann**

*Dusseldorf, Jan. 30, 1963, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

[This questionnaire was filled out by George Maciunas (GM) and Dick Higgins (DH) in 1963. Only specific questions have been selected for presentation here]

1. Do you believe that the object is dead in modern art? If yes, which object?

DH-yes because it doesn't say yes or no. None do.

GM-what is “modern art”?

4. Do you love art? If yes, in which color?

DH-Blue, Green, Magenta, and Gray

GM-no. I like “no art.”

5. Do you love culture or the German culture? If yes, how many times a year?

DH-Yes - I love all nations, but hate many tendencies-  
398 times a day.

GM-no, I don't like culture or “kultur”

10. What do you think of the plan to paint the Sahara desert silverbronze?

If yes, with what pattern? (please include sketch)

DH-Wasteful.

GM-This would be art. Up to now art only spoils what is not art. Leave Sahara alone.

15. Do we have your opinion of a valid society?

If not, do you believe that modern art is to blame?

DH-Art expresses society and its directions - it does not make it.

GM-culture is to blame.



16. Do you see in art:

[from the list of nine possibilities the selected:]

DH-a) phenomenon which exists.

GM-i) an urgent necessity [draws arrow to section in his own handwriting] an unnecessary urgency, waste of man power, waste of human & material resources.

18. do you think that QUIBB-Art would give your life a new meaning? if so, which?

DH-Art doesn't give anything, it helps teach. QUIBB has the same message as SQUIB toothpaste.

GM-I don't think any art can give life new meaning.

### **Letter from George Brecht to George Maciunas,**

*nd [early 1963], Maciunas' personal microfilms #1/108, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

You are right in thinking that the event scores were not intended for performance in the traditional sense. I hadn't thought of them as temporal readymades, but that description certainly fits. Using the first of the THREE YELLOW EVENTS as an example: at a certain point (imperceptibly beginning) it became evident that an event like Yellow Yellow Yellow could occur, and the score was written down. Some time later, possibly days or weeks, I was walking one very foggy evening and saw three dandelions growing from a single point. Later, on another evening, about midnight, I saw three yellow traffic lights blinking in unison. So- not only was the score unintended, but so were the realizations. I am not against injecting intention into the situation, and so realizing these works in a theater (which their sparseness certainly permits), but I think they may often be lost there unless surrounded with enough emptiness or formality. (Alison Knowles has said some performances were "lost" that way, which of course is also fine in its own way. The same thing happened to a realization of the table and chair events I did in a recent show in Philadelphia. . . . A table, tablecloth, and two chairs were provided ( all white ), and the table set, at various times during the show, with either a place-setting, newspaper, solitaire game arrangement, etc. What happened was - many people used the furniture to put their coats on, to rest, etc., and the piece was effectively lost in ordinary life! nothing special! Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha - I am very happy about that. (Watching people sitting in the furniture was very much like watching a "performance", except "ordinary" people were acting naturally, without self-consciousness, and without the special training actors and dancers say is necessary to overcome that self-consciousness.)

...

As far as your article: I think it successfully applies a conceptual scheme to the present state of affairs, so for totally ignorant people used to a conceptual approach it may have clarified things for them. Of course if you could get them to give up all their mental furniture you would be even better off! Anyway, I think looking "under" Duchamp's work, and "under" Cage's ( for example) is a more likely way to find what it is presently nourishing to think about, then sticking to the Neo-Dada label, which is very inaccurate, (I know you are aware of this: what I am probably getting at is, bad labels don't even do label-lovers any good.) . . . Concerning the last Paragraph: since anti-art is opposed to art, it depends on art for its existence. Hence anti-art is an aspect of art. Since art (like science, religion in the organized sense, language, myth, etc.) are mind-forms, rainfall may not be art according to whether or not a mind-form

is imposed upon it. Beyond these mind-forms, art and anti-art, and non-art, are not involved, since no distinctions are imposed. Then, finally, the subject-object distinction is dissolved, concepts and methods disappear (since no-one acts), and everything becomes exactly itself.

**Letter from Dick Higgins to Jackson Mac Low,**

*nd [Prior to March 18, 63 - date of response], Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

One very small thing you mentioned in the course of your last letter: you said that I was “less cool” than others of the post-Cage thing. Actually since around the time of Saint Joan at Beaurevoir and the most of the Graphis series I don’t think I’ve really been in the post-Cage thing. Except for very small pieces, most of my work is moral, social, or political analysis and testament. I’m always awfully conscious of the social implications of my activities. Except on a very remotely spiritual plane, I don’t think La Monte’s circle or George Brecht’s is particularly conscious of this. I think of my work as falling into two categories: social activities and sermons. I like the function of parlor games in that they have accidental qualities and they tie people together that would otherwise just drift around in the same room. I love sermons. I think you and I have made many fine sermons, and Alan Kaprow too (on a purely moral plane) . . . Al Hansen perhaps similarly.

Others, Phil Corner for example, may be very concerned about social matters but it never seems to affect more the title of his works. As a result, I feel increasingly less affinity with George and La Monte, and after FLUXUS I may not work with them anymore. It is a question of affinity and changes in my own concerns more than any disrespect. Somehow I become a little impatient when one is above mundane considerations.

**Letter from Henry Flynt to Dick Higgins,**

*nd [1963?], Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

There is a relation of From “Culture” to Brend to politics, but the core of problems I am concerned with in the book is apolitical. Your thinking about “culture” cuts across mine. You are like the traditional revolutionary, + intellectuals of the ‘30’s, not really caring about “culture” one way or the other. Your arguments + Maciunas’ against “culture” are utilitarian, that is wasteful. But since my doctrine in FCTB is apolitical at the core, I don’t care who it catches on with first; I would just as soon have it catch on through the existing bourgeois channels + then be picked up by the Reds if that is easier - which ever way is easier. Thus my plans for picketing, and it is to be decided as much on experiential as on theoretical class grounds whether the picketing will have accomplished anything. FCTB is apolitical just a physics is. And I think you are wrong about pure math, that it is as independent as anything from the class struggle - although I argue against pure math; of course, econometrics is not class-independent, but that it is a different matter. You will find that when you hear FCTB that I discuss problems that you simply haven’t thought about. I consider art, amusement, a.s.f. on their own terms. You and Maciunas may not care about “culture”, + evaluate it only in utilitarian terms; but what happens is that after a revolution has failed to take place, or after it has taken place + and the pressing material needs are met, then the “culture”

which you did not actively combat because you were indifferent rises again and becomes autonomous and important.

As for your political activities - your shocks - sure - why not - I'll go along with them - they can't do any harm. Now I didn't realize that your "show" is political-didactic; I thought it was a music concert or something to comment on slogans and show - first, some generalities. When we intellectuals come up with something we think is good for the workers and present it to them, they are flattered by our attention, + are trusting, and will give it a try. Thus I think we have a great responsibility not to get them involved in something which, while not harmful, ultimately brings them no nearer the solutions of their problems, + eventually disappoints them.

**Letter from Eric Anderson to Dick Higgins,**

*September 9, 1963, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

. . . You wrote about art. I want to postulate that totalart today is just the same as antiart, because both totalart and antiart at this moment is: the basic artistic engagement without medie [media]. I think Christian Wolf mixed up two things, when he said that all things got melodically. 1.: of all artistic mediums are music the nearest to antiart. 2.: our attention is crescendo.

I am sure that the only way to definite "the basic artistic" is to deal only with the relationship between ideas we construct for that purpose and not deal with the considering. then we get a new conception, and then I think the word totalart will be relevant.

I want to say that I don't accept any kind of neo-dada and polemic antiart, because the both directions end in the present conception of totalart and stop there (perhaps the work is necessary pedagogically and historically, but I can't calculate with these things.). I think that I am on the way to the new conception.

**Letter from Jackson Mac Low to Dick Higgins,**

*April 22, 1963, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

. . . I have no sympathy for Henry's kind of attacks on serious culture, even though I'm disgusted by its corruption & commercialization, & I agree that certain kinds of art, music & literature have acquired completely wrong kinds of prestige, & that far too many people have been bullied & bulldozed into trying to "succeed in the arts." . . . I am not, however, against all concerts & exhibits, either of older works or ones recently composed &c. . . . I doubt, however, that my sole criteria wd ever be ones of political, moral, or generally, social 'usefulness' & it seems questionable to say that some 'useless' or 'purposeless' works are 'useful' just because of their 'uselessness' or 'purposelessness.' That is, such usages of words strike me as language games of questionable validity. Some works of art, &c, may be socially useful, that is, of use to most people or to 'society in general'(if that phrase has any content beyond "the welfare of most people"); other works may have a much more limited 'use' . . . I am not willing to rule out the later kinds of works . . .

**Letter from George Brecht to George Maciunas,**

*nd [early 1963?], Maciunas' personal microfilms # 1/109, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

Received FLUXUS newsletter #5, George, which answered some questions of mine and engendered others. It has been evident to me for some time now that, even beyond the value of individual works right now, there is a more important change taking place in the nature of the actions we find it nourishing to undertake. . . . (or say: "the nature of the acts we find being taken.") So I am very pleased to see FLUXUS taking form (as in your newsletter) as a sort of (center of activity) or (focus of action). In this sense, FLUXUS is like YAM Festival, another (somewhat less focused) center of action. Here are some thoughts and questions on the focusing of FLUXUS: 1) AUTHORS: Somehow I have the feeling that I would like to see little less emphasis on "authorship" (since the "person" is such an approximate, one might say "inaccurate", and overworked construction.) Thus I would rather see my complete works called YAM FESTIVAL, Aqueous Aspect (and in small letters: arranged by G. Brecht), than "Complete Works of George Brecht", or similar. This encourages connecting the box with other aspects of YAM Festival, rather than with other aspects of George Brecht. 2) GLOBAL ASPECT: FLUXUS seems to be an anational, rather than an international, phenomenon, a network of active points all equidistant from the center. These points can proliferate, new points arise, at any place on earth where there is life. . . . I think we should stop thinking that only "cultured" individuals lie within our reach. . . . I would be interested in knowing generally, how large the FLUXUS system is, and how you envision its makeup. For Example, would it be like (magazine) subscriber [sic] services, also include stores and galleries? or? NEWSPAPER: If you like the newspaper idea, YAM & FLUXUS festivals might somehow work together on it. These festivals overlap already . . . . Could you sound out others' interest in this idea? We need an anational editorial group. . . . 3) FINANCES/COPYRIGHT, ETC.: . . . As in my letter, I am against copyright unless absolutely necessary. If you were sent any works exclusively, couldn't you publish . . . before others could copy? also, you mention "unauthorized performances". Do you envision giving permission for performances? Won't this lead to the crappy situation of German tape music. . . . Especially with my work, "permission to perform" becomes rather meaningless. 4) GENERAL: What is FLUXUS "propaganda"? what kind of "demonstrations"? "infiltration"? co-ordination with useful people in what kind of activities?

**Letter from Thomas Schmit to George Maciunas,**

*nd [Spring 1963], copy of original, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

dear george (as well Brecht as Maciunas since i am not sure who is responsible for the V TRE . . . i am deeply disappointed and angry about that "V TRE" !!!!! . . . maybe somebody can give me the right version of what "V TRE" means at all ??? - then, first page: this photo of the new editorial council is really too much true: this page, and the whole paper, looks exactly like what comes out if bourgeoisie gets drunk - maybe you know the german "kegelklubs" (sort of bowling clubs . . . , which is a very typical institution of german bourgeoisie: if those people make a feast, they print newspapers - "bierzeitungen" - that look really to mush like your V TRE: nicely mixed up and nicely silly ---- and we ( and all german students) used to make such papers . . . just to enjoy ourselves ---- BUT FLUXUS people should keep away from just only enjoying them-

selves!!!! . . . the other junk . . . and the mixing up . . . i say its terrific silly!!! [referring to all the materials on the first page] -----(george M: you said that i were turning into a beatnik: well, i never did and will never do such a beatnik-like thing as the V TRE is!!!!. . . second page: same story - like the Brecht things, especially the new ones - BUT: in that surrounding they actually look like feuilleton (: nobody will get the intention to read them carefully and concentratedly, -which is nothing more than a real pity), since everything else is more or less sort of junk!! . . . the third page same story: some good things - BUT: the ben-attestation and the ape are simply do not fit together (make misunderstandings) - and no surrealism, please!!! -- and the krumm-list only as a "line" concerned mainly with the layout ??? things like this are too important to even have something else on the same page!!!! . . . fourth page . . . worst thing: this paik essay - it is an essay written by paik, isn't it?! - anyway: to keep this in the japanese language is (or surely looks like) bare snobism - since not more than 3% of the readers will be able to understand japanese (or is it koreanese? i dont know --anyway) --- and many other worst things: why those comic strips? - why this christo-fotomontage??(i like people doing good things not having good ideas !!!) -----oh no, all those fingers, comics, nice photos, silly stories...no no no NO!!!! ----: you simply cant expect me distributing that in germany!! dont send me any more - please look for another fellow doing the distribution! . . . george: i hope you regard this letter as part of my constructive way of FLUXUS collaborating - i do so - its really a bad thing the V TRE. . .

**Letter from Dick Higgins to Eric Anderson,**

*nd [ca. July 6, 1963], Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

I have so much enjoyed your and Henning Christiansen's pieces. I like his idealism. I like your sense of community. There are political implications in your work which may not be very interesting to you, but which I love. And how!  
 . . .[you] refer to Cage. Remember that once, when Schoenberg was asked to name his most interesting pupil, he named Cage. Remember that Cage is the Wagner of our time and that it is our joy and duty to destroy him. Remember that he is much too influential and that this has badly damaged many young composers.  
 Art is as art does: that is the nail on which we will impale John Cage. Art is not an existential situation in the 19th century phase of the idea. When I became tired of John's music I went into the woods and looked for mushrooms with him. Therefore he is my uncle and I love that man while I fight the artist. Oil on a orange salad: that is my relationship to John Cage.

**Letter from Robert Filliou to the editor of the newspaper  
 Berlinske Tidende, Copenhagen,**

*December 21, 1963, copy of the original, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

It is not true that I refused to participate in the Fluxus Festival in Copenhagen (November 1962). On the contrary, it is my Fluxus friends who decided, for technical reasons, not to put up anything of mine, although my name was on the program. . . . Of course, the Fluxus group is composed of individuals who differ much in their personality and their work. The general human approach of all, however, is sensibly the same, I think, namely to fight hard against the bottomless stupidity, sadness and meanness that keep plaguing our lives; and for a world in which spontaneity, joy, humor, and

-why not?- some sort of higher wisdom (many of us have been influenced by Zen Buddhism), and true social justice and welfare (most of us are politically of the left) would become as green are my woman's eyes.

Some program! I know. Still, we're busy at it. Our main problems are, as I see it, to avoid: - falling into mere slapstick, or into the trap of anti-art (neo-dadaism); -being slack in the choice of works, by fear that the bad (the imitations) should drive out the good (the original contributions); -becoming prisoners of a 'system'.

**Letter from Wolf Vostell to Dick Higgins,**

*November 13, 1964, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

In Berlin was a Gag festival and I am sorry so say you that Spoerri sold his Fallenbilder like Gags/everybody can tell you know that so hole avantgarde may be seen like a big GAG/

So perhaps we can work out together a new kind of group/people which have the same moral, and publish under this Leitidee/(rays idea of opening eye children's book very good) this from the beginning I Aspected from fluxus really to create a new moral and art/and it became the opposite a reactionary, perfumed decorativ stuff/ George couldn't understand what I had in mind in the discussions/so I was the first man to leave Fluxus/

**Letter from Mieko (Chieko) Shiomi to George Maciunas,**

*nd [ca. 1964-1965?], Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

How many shall I make? [referring to her work "Endless Box"] It is impossible to mass produce by machine. If possible, it is not practical for 10 or 20 set. I prefer to do all process by my self. . . . I found it is very silly to exchange with object. because very few people do it with sincerity. Partly I had been feeling some resistance to that whole commercialism in New York. Always sell, sell, sell -- But maybe it is the only way to spread our work and continue to do work, since we live in this mechanism of the world. And after finished my work - not during being involved to that - I could become indifferent whether it is on sale or not. I have no objection, if people want to buy and our work could spread little by little in this way.

**Letter from Eric Anderson to Dick Higgins,**

*nd [1966], Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

. . . the point is : what he [Vostell] has done is that he took advantage of everybody possible and forgot about the rest - muddle-headed person. - He destroy an opportunity for honest information. what did he give us instead : a book built on easy lay-out ideas

an dishonest information about phenomenons mentioned in the book  
an impression that vostell is something and that everybody seems by their activity to confirm his own activity (which is definitely not true )

THE BOOK IS A LIE !!!!!!! -(isn't that enough)

it is a monument over the german happening - but the german happening does not exist ! - it is a book which tells us that vostell most of all is inventive - but vostell is NOT inventive! - vostell has NEVER created anything (doesn't he know of piscator, kaprow, and raymond haines) . . .

. . . does he react against human and social structure ? NO he confirms it as stupid artists always have done by relations to single attributes of the society. - to day we react against, spain, tomorrow vietnam, the day after to-morrow portugal, then the negro problem etc.\* [\* "such activity is founded on the lie : to demonstrate is to ask or present an alternative.] - by his activity and viewpoint himself he confirms the sources of the same problems, - can't you see the line he is on establishing : national-masturbation as 1. - the banal political influences (that is what in fact confirms the sources which gave us the vietnam, spain, etc.) as 2. and the personal reputation and myth around his person as 3. ( I can understand that you haven't read german magazines [sic] as der stern for a long time).

tell me dick : is the problem:

who made the NY happening

who made the french happening

who made the german happening

who made the danish happening

who made the norwegian happening

who made the tibet happening

etc. etc. etc. etc. etc. etc. ?????????????????????? "

### **Letter from Ben Vautier to George Maciunas,**

*August 28, 1966, The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, New York, NY.*

But what does Fluxus mean to me. When I think of Fluxus I think of a general spirit in art consecrating the notion of Everything in: Detail, Life, simple gestures, non professionalism, divertissement etc. I think of George Brecht's pieces, La Monte Young's compositions, Ray Johnson's letters etc. I also think of a concert composed of small non artificial pieces ranging from Paik's violin solo to Georges simple piano pieces, of items from Watts, A-Yo [sic], Fine, Shiomi, Kosugi, Schmit, Joe Jones, Eric Anderson, etc. Yes all these people mean fluxus to me Even if they are not Fluxus, or have quit, or have been expelled [sic], or have never been Fluxus. Yet everyone of them taken separately has his personality some very important. So calling them Fluxus or not will never transform their originality but on the other hand it helps to strengthen and link. Together the same spirit.

I personally call all pieces that join the Fluxus spirit Fluxus. I don't call my complete works Fluxus because in my complete works are such things as poems, more like Ginsburg's poems than Fluxus. Another important reason to continue calling fluxus concerts Fluxus, is that too many people are giving nowadays bad Fluxus influenced concerts with lots of spectacular scenes, which could lead to an unnecessary confusion in the publics mind.

I think that Dick Higgins is Fluxus and it would have been fine if his press was called Fluxus too. I dont think that Dick and Maciunas compete and event if they do. Didn't the Dadaist's and Surrealist's fight like dogs, I personally believe in ego, even when its to promote collective art. Higgins and Maciunas are collectif [sic] individualists both concerned with promoting the same-spirit in art. And instead of fighting should come to an arrangement dividing the work to be done. (There is lots to do) for instance: (Books) Higgins (Items) Maciunas etc. It seems to me silly and a necessary that

because someone is on Higgins' list Maciunas could have nothing to do with [h]im, or vice versa.

... Of course maybe I'm in no position to know what's really happening, maybe this letter is useless but it gets a weight off my mind.

**Letter from Ben Vautier to George Maciunas,**

*April, 1967, The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, New York, NY.*

I am working hard on a theoretical work on: (All is Art)(Non Art)(Anti Art) for it I am using extracts of ---

- 1 Dada
- 2 Cage
- 3 Maciunas (Manifesto)
- 4 Flynt
- 5 Moo tse toug
- 6 Int Situationiste
- 7 Provo
- 8 Ben
- 9 Brecht (maybe)
- etc

... I enjoyed your diagram - of course lots think it false what is interesting is that in the red diagram you finished up with Fluxus in the latest diagram you finish up with Brend and Red Guards - you seem also to forget my personal opinion on AntiArt I have since 1965 ... I feel strongly since a very long time and Flynt knows it that Art is Useless because it must change and that one of the only ways it can change is through AntiArt which is in fact very close to political reality too AntiArt for Newness sake and AntiArt for Human and political sake. ...

**Letter from George Maciunas to Ben Vautier,**

*March 25, 1967, The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, New York, NY.*

... your program sounds fine! you are getting very efficient & proficient. The fact that Koppcke & Anderson called you a great entertainer confirms my view that FLUXUS is amusement, entertainment like gags & Vaudeville. THAT'S WHAT IT SHOULD BE. Fluxus is not serious culture

... About Paik pieces. If you read my diagram and notes carefully you will see why I would be reluctant to include them. 1st they are mainly "sensational" and Swedish newspapers confirmed it by showing photos mainly of Paik pieces. Well, they were composed mainly for the purpose of causing sensation, in other words, they were done for newspapers & publicity sake. I think a piece can be strong, and not be sensational, in the sense of being either involved with sex, masochism, sadism, etc, I think, for instance your audience pieces are very strong but not sensational in the sense of using sex of masochism as a device. Pouring water or cream on oneself or sticking head into black paint is definitely masochistic. I think that to rely on these perverse devices for success indicates lack of imagination. It's too easy to cause an interest in audience by disrobing in public or the like, much more difficult to cause an interest by some ordinary act.



**Letter from Dick Higgins to Nam June Paik,***August 2, 1969, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

It's beautiful thinking about the ugliness of the sixties from a distance isn't it. Remember my old horror at the glut of Wiesbaden? Well, these were the Wiesbaden years for America, except, of course, for artists like us. We didn't participate in their boom, and so we won't participate in Their Bust. Every night I pray for Dow Jones 400. I really admire ugliness from a distance, and the only difference between beautiful things and ugly things is how close one wants to look into them, no?

**Letter from George Brecht to Jan Van der Mark,***September 8, 1974, copy of original in Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

It seems to me that each observer can find or decide for himself when the work is finished (for him at that moment). Why should it ever be finished once and for all? (it could never be anyway.)

The event, for me, has always been a more individual focusing than a performance. With a few exceptions (like the "Motor Vehicle Sundown (Event)", which was barely out of musicdom into eventdom, or the "Three Telephone Events") the event-scores could always be "performed", or, better-said, "realized" by anyone, anywhere, coincidentally. It was really later, through Maciunas and Ben, that Events became known as pieces for public performance (which of course was alright with me).

"Duchamp held the choice..." I don't think it's so much a matter of aesthetics as of transcension (if that word didn't exist it does now, that is, neither ascension (toward good taste) or descension (toward bad) but a crossing into a state in which "taste" does not exist, is meaningless, in which state one can readily admit to good or bad taste on anyone's part (including one's own).

**Letter from Dick Higgins to George Maciunas,***November 19, 1974, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

I do not believe in amateurishness: that isn't what it is all about. But in amateurism, in simplicity. In art (by which I also mean non-art, if you prefer, so long as it is aesthetic in some way) on which one cannot hang a cycle of professional crafts and dependence. An art which by its very nature denies its perpetrators their daily bread, which must therefore come from somewhere else. Such an art must be given, in the sense that experience is shared: it cannot be placed in the market place. and in this way it differs profoundly from the Fluxus-derived "movements" of earth-works or media-hype forms of concept art. Much of that work I enjoy - I even love: especially Acconci, Smithson, Beuys. But finally I must reject it, not because it isn't officially Fluxus, but because it isn't free. It's just so many hat racks for careers to be hung onto. When the name of the artist determined the market value of a work and not its meaning is our lives - beware!

**Draft of letter a from George Maciunas to DAAD,***nd [ca. 1976], copy of original, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

. . . in present art great emphasis is given to idea or contents rather than form & craftsmanship. In concept art particularly there is practically no Form. In such case the idea beg [sic] the important must be inventive - an original and sor [sic] give the work any value. if it is a copy of some one's else's idea as the great many present conceptualists work then it has nothing left. no form and no idea. In the work of Takaho S. [Takako Saito] one can find a rare quality of both Original idea & expert form and craftsmanship. The idea of game as an art form is typically Takaho S. there are very few practitioners of it and she excels in the inventiveness and craftsmanship of this genre.

**Letter from Dick Higgins to Hans Sohm,***June 23, 1978, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

I was noticing just yesterday how subtle Maciunas's views were. I was moving my big graphic chart history of Fluxus into my house from my studio, and I noticed how at the heading he described Fluxus not as a one-track, narrow art-historical "movement" but as a form-- and groups it with other sensual forms. Very cool and shrewd on his part, because it explains how the group doing that for behaves, rather than splitting up as art movements inevitably do.

**Letter from Ken Friedman to Owen Smith,***July 23, 1991, Collection of the author.*

There are two forms of existentialism that must be discussed. . . . One, mid-20th-century existentialism, is seen in America and perhaps to some degree France. It seems to place a stress on the individual over against or in opposition to the universe. The other existentialism is in many ways close to Zen. It lays stress on the individual as a responsible actor in the universe. This seems to be the existentialism of Kierkegaard and of the deeper Nietzsche. This existentialism is related to Fluxus. Even though existentialism can seem to be antithetical to Fluxus -- especially the misinterpretation of existentialism reflected in the pompous, self-important rhetoric of Abstract Expressionism -- Fluxus has had much to do with the ethical existentialism, certainly that range of existential issues that are also touched by Zen. Put another way, not all existentialism emphasized the individual over against society. Rather, there is an existential understanding that stresses the value of the individual without opposing society unless opposition is necessary. The misinterpreted existentialism is rather like Brecht's monstrous, self-willed hero Baal, opposing for the sake of opposition. That suggests that to be, one must be against, and this is not the point. To be is to be. If one can genuinely understand that, one can be in many ways. This is very much the existentialism seen in existential psychotherapy, in the work and writing of Viktor Frankl and Fritz Perls. This is where Zen and existentialism touch. You'll find, again and again, that Fluxus artists have much to do with this sort of existentialism.

### 3. Fluxus Activism

One of the aspects of Fluxus that has often been seen as a central concern, especially between the years of 1962 and 1965, revolves around the question of the nature and function of art and culture to effect social and political change, or what I am calling activism. A number of the artists involved with Fluxus were interested not just in changing art, but also in changing the world. Fluxus was, or at least numerous associated artists thought that it should be, not a new style or form of art, music or poetry but a means of revolutionary change. It is this aspect of early Fluxus that has led many to describe it as a post-World War II extension of the early twentieth century politicized avant-garde and some to even single out this period as the “heroic” period of Fluxus. Although most Fluxus artists were concerned with change beyond the limitations of the cultural sphere, the nature of these changes and specifically the means to create them was by no means clear or even shared. In fact the differences of opinion on this matter were so strong that it led to the first major confrontation within Fluxus between Fluxus artists about what Fluxus was or should be.

A large majority of the letters that I have included in this section revolve around the discussions and arguments that resulted from Maciunas’s proposed plans for cultural actions in New York City. These proposed actions, which were distributed to various people associated with Fluxus in Fluxus News-Policy Letter #6 April 6, 1963, “PROPOSED PROPAGANDA ACTION FOR NOV. FLUXUS IN N.Y.C.,” were intended by Maciunas to have potential social or political results. The proposals, developed by Maciunas probably in conjunction with Tomas Schmit and Nam June Paik, called for Fluxus propaganda through the sabotage and disruption of transportation systems, communication systems, museums, theaters, and galleries, as well as through street compositions. Fluxus News-Policy Letter #6 generated numerous responses, most of which were opposed to the proposals, but for a variety of differing reasons. These various response letters are significant not only as a reaction to the specific proposals but as one of the principal records of some of the Fluxus artists’ points of view related to Fluxus, politics, and activism in the early 1960s.

#### **Letter from Dick Higgins to John Cage,**

*nd [Spring 1962], Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

Five years ago, when I first met you and spoke with you you said that in Europe more was happening musically and here more was happening visually. Lots of the time for a while I thought about this, and I began to wonder, if so much was happening where was it all? I mean, if music was happening in Europe, really happening, when we heard it why did it not seem to be happening. And what has become of it? Boulez and Cardew and Stockhausen and Busotti and Nono? and what happened here? Perle Fine and Sam Francis and Al Leslie? Perhaps the reason that nothing was achieved, and that the situation was perhaps the opposite of what you used to be saying at the time (I think that in Europe Yves Klein and the Swedes were doing something, and that here others of us were doing something) about disorder and social matters, was that those of us who had any motive, not just a noble one, were able to do something strong. . . . I am going to Europe, I am going to lecture, and my lectures are going to be destructive of Stockhausen and Cardew because they have to be seen without their own false and glamorous light if ever we are going to achieve the social order implied by our work, yours and mine. I am going to do my damndest to establish a relationship between

political and artistic radicalism, this has to be done somewhere along the line, and it may hurt all of us one way or another, but it is necessary and I want your blessing. May I have it?

**Draft letter from George Maciunas, addressee unknown**

*[someone in Sweden], nd [ca. 1962], copy of original, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

We would like to request for your esteemed collaboration with Fluxus. Fluxus is an international militant action with intent to:

flux 1. PURGE the world of bourgeois sickness, "intellectuals" professional & commercial culture, purge the world of dead art, imitation, artificial art, abstract art, illusionistic art, purge the world of Europeanism.

flux 2. FUSE the cadres of cultural, social & political revolutionaries into united front and action.

flux 3. promote imagination, change, movement, growth - FLUX in art. Promote living art or anti-art or non-art reality to be fully grasped by all peoples not critics, dilettantes and professionals.

Presently FLUXUS action manifests itself through world wide publications and demonstrations ( festivals, concerts, anti-art demonstrations etc.)

**Letter from Jackson Mac Low to Dick Higgins,**

*March 23, 1963, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

. . . anyway, -I don't know why you ever thought your economics column wd fit into George + Bob's paper - It's just not what there're up to. (did Geo. say OK & Bob say no?) Theirs is (so far) mostly fun & games & gossip & ads & more fun & games & ads for all us &c. Its OK but not what you want at all & won't reach the audience you'd want to reach. The only economics most of the readers of the Brecht-Watts paper are interested in is the economics of Pop art, 'avant-garde' art, & the like. Again -OK, I guess, but not enough to be useful for political ends such as you are interested in (& I). I mean , probably no use for such ends. ...to do anything significant one has to reach and really influence the workers. The intellectuals feel they know it all already ( all except a small segment of them -). . . .

**Letter From George Brecht to George Maciunas and Henry Flint.**

*April 18, [1963], Maciunas' personal microfilms #1/111, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

. . . though there may be points of agreement between your work, Henry, and mine (George feels there is), there is a fundamental disagreement in attitude in respect to ( shall I call it ) "actionism". You both seem to feel it necessary to oppose very actively institutions you feel are obsolete or pernicious, or both ( Art, Serious Culture, etc.) whereas I see anti-art as an aspect of art, for example, and am indifferent to them both. I have publicly said (in a panel at Hunter) that my work is not art ( for me), though, of

course, I have no control over what others think it is, or choose to consider it. In the future, I can begin to see, it will be less and less easy for people to (mistake)(take) my work for art. This is one of the qualities I very much admire in Bob Morris' and Walter DeMaria's work: not easily being able to put it into some existent category. So, regarding the actions outlined in the last newsletter, I can't see myself taking part in the tunnel Tie-ups. I am interested in neutral actions, or in watering the ground to see what sprouts. (This was the spirit of my original offer to support you, Henry, in giving your lecture.)

**Letter from Alison Knowles to George Maciunas and Thomas Schmit,**

*April 16 [1963], Maciunas' personal microfilms #1/114, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

I am rereading now Fluxus news policy letter n.6. We read and discussed same with Al Hansen and Henry Flynt last night. The propaganda activities are very exciting, and not too ambitious if those planning to come do get here. Yam is working out because we each have our own individual jobs and activities, and some of the people can be used for Fluxus festival too. . . . Flynt talks about "Creep", the C.P., and how he really has little to do with any of us, but his conversation is much more coherent to me, and you may be able to use him for picketing. . . . As for Hansen, he will help however possible. . . . The June through Sept. Fluxus that you suggest using Yam organizers would be hard to put through. why not wait until you arrive? and before that, propaganda, organizing, etc. The two festivals, Yam and Fluxus are quite different as you will see when you get Yam calendar next week. . . . and although many of the same people participating, Yam does not have the direct revolutionary flavor of Fluxus. Yam Performances go on at Siegel farm for audiences who got calendar mailing and Smolin Gallery mailing list. As far as I know George is planning no street disturbances, or publicity involving N. Yorkers in general.

**Letter from Jackson Mac Low to Dick Higgins,**

*April 22, 1963, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

. . . Henry came up Sunday, mainly to ascertain my reactions to George's "Fluxus news-Policy letter No. 6." I told him that the only part I wd be willing to participate in wd be, possibly, performances of La Monte's straight line piece, & the like. However, I wd also be interested in part I 1 (sale of fluxus publications) as well as parts 1, 2, & 4 of section II (concerts & exhibits). I agree with Henry that the gratuitous disruptions, sabotage, &c wd be "unprincipled." Really, its hard enough for people to make a living & get around in this city. It goes very much against my grain to do things that wd make life more of a drag for the "ordinary person". The only excuse for picketing, even, is some clear & urgent social purpose.

**Letter from Jackson Mac Low to George Maciunas**

*[copy of this letter was also sent to D. Spoerri, E. Williams, R. Filliou and given to B. Vautier], April 25, 1963, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

I'M SORRY TO SAY THAT I'M NOT IN FAVOR OF MOST OF THE PROPOSALS CONTAINED IN FLUXUS NEWS-POLICY LETTER NO.6 APRIL, 6, 1963, I. I'M NOT OPPOSED TO SERIOUS CULTURE -- QUITE THE CONTRARY. I'M ALL FOR IT & HOPE & CONSIDER THAT MY OWN WORK IS A GENUINE CONTRIBUTION TO IT. OF COURSE I AM OPPOSED TO CERTAIN ASPECTS OF WHAT IS CALLED SERIOUS CULTURE & ESPECIALLY TO THE WRONG KINDS OF PRESTIGE ATTACHED TO SOME REAL & SOME BOGUS KINDS OF SERIOUS CULTURE & AND MOST ESPECIALLY I'M OPPOSED TO ITS COMMERCIALIZATION & USE (BY PEOPLE WHO ARE AT HEART MUCH MORE OPPOSED TO IT THEN ARE YOU OR HENRY) FOR VARIOUS ANTI-SOCIAL & EVEN ANTI-CULTURAL PURPOSES. THIS IS A COMPLEX AND COMPLICATED PROBLEM & NO BLUNDERBUSS ATTACK AGAINST CULTURE (SERIOUS OR OTHERWISE) AS A WHOLE (SUCH AS HENRY'S 'DESTROY ART' CAMPAIGN OR MOST OF YOUR PROPOSALS) WILL DO ANYTHING TO REMEDY WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE PRESENT SITUATION. I AM NOT AT ALL AGAINST ART OR MUSIC OR DRAMA OR LITERATURE, OLD OR NEW. I'M AGAINST THE OVERBALANCE OF MUSEUM CULTURE . . . AS AGAINST PRESENT-MINDED & PRESENTLY 'USEFUL' CULTURAL ACTIVITIES & WD CERTAINLY LIKE TO SEE THE BALANCE TIPPED THE OTHER WAY, BUT I WOULD NOT WANT TO ELIMINATE MUSEUMS (I LIKE MUSEUMS) OR CONCERTS OF OLD MUSIC OR PRODUCTIONS OF OLD DRAMAS. . . . YOUR FESTIVALS & ACTIVITIES SUCH AS YAMDAY ARE STEPS IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION. SO WD REAL PERFORMANCES IN PUBLIC PLACES -- IF DONE THE RIGHT WAY. I AM, HOWEVER, AGAINST ALL SABOTAGE & NEEDLESS DISRUPTION. I CONSIDER THEM UNPRINCIPLED, UNETHICAL & IMMORAL IN THE BASIC SENSE OF BEING ANTISOCIAL & HURTFUL TO THE VERY PEOPLE WHOM MY CULTURAL ACTIVITIES ARE MEANT TO HELP. IT SEEMS ALL SILLY SADISM. & AS SUCH IT SMACKS MORE OF FASCISM THAN ANY KIND OF SOCIALISM WORTHY OF THAT NAME . . . I WOULD NOT, EXCEPT IN CERTAIN EXCEPTIONAL CIRCUMSTANCES, BOTHER TO ATTACK & OR DEFILE WRONG TYPES OF CULTURAL ACTIVITY. . . . THUS I FAVOR ALL PROPOSALS FOR PUBLIC & PRIVATE EXHIBITS, CONCERTS, &C., WHICH HAVE A BENEVOLENT & HELPFUL AURA ABOUT THEM . . . THE OTHER STUFF IS OLD TIME MIDDLE-CLASS (TO SHOCK THE MIDDLE-CLASS IS A FAVORITE MIDDLE-CLASS ACTIVITY) SADISTIC DADA & SADLY OUT OF PLACE IN OUR PRESENT WORLD. I HAVE NO IDEA WHY YOU THOUGHT I WD WANT TO ENGAGE IN SUCH ACTIVITIES OR WHY YOU THOUGHT GEORGE BRECHT OR LA MONTE YOUNG OR BOB MORRIS OR RICHARD MAXFIELD OR ANY OF THE OTHERS EXCEPT MAYBE HENRY (WHO ALSO THINKS THEY ARE, FOR THE MOST PART, UNPRINCIPLED & NOT AT ALL USEFUL. . . . I HOPE YOU WILL COME UP WITH A WHOLE DIFFERENT MODERN NON-DADA APPROACH TO "FLUXUS PROPAGANDA" & OTHER FLUXUS ACTIVITIES. . . .

**Letter from Dick Higgins to Jackson Mac Low,***nd [Spring 1963]*

... about NYC Fluxus, I thought you were mad at Paik too (he made most of the suggestions in the newsletter mostly (except the truck breakdown which sounds awfully Maciunasy)). . . .

**Letter from Tomas Schmit to Dick Higgins,***nd [spring 1963], Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

... I don't know why you all dislike fluxus letter 6 so much, surely, the things proposed there are a bit unprincipled, I don't like them to much, too, but things like this should be done, too. - Jackson Mac Low sent me what he wrote to george about letter 6, wrote him a loooong story, he seems to be what we call here "sentimental socialist", a kind of thinking which i don't agree with at all. . . .

**Postcard from George Maciunas to Dick Higgins,***nd [ca. April 1963], Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

George Brecht blew his top off, & thinking the Fluxus Fall plan much too aggressive wrote me he want's to dissociate himself from Fluxus - which was a big shock to me. I wrote a smooth letter to him trying to repair the breach, writing that newsletter 6 was NOT a "diktat" but a suggestion to start a discussion among recipients, to obtain constructive proposals from collaborators - from fluxus people & not impose a set program. It seems George feels that Fluxus is me & Flynt which is not true. Tomorrow Emmett of Paik or you may be chairman, especially if I decide or cannot show up in New York. I also wrote George that without him in Fluxus festival I would not participate either (or come to New York). I stressed his indispensability within Fluxus. etc. etc. - (now my request, Alison) You possess abilities towards diplomacy so I trust you could cool George down & bring him back into the "fold". Stress the fact that Fluxus is a "collective" (and not anyone in particular like me, Flynt or Paik). So that the newsletter was intended primarily to gauge the feeling of this collective. If the feeling is against the aggressive feeling of the proposal, then we can revise the program. Nobody is trying to impose anything on anyone. OK? In a few days I will mail out newsletter 7 which will contain suggestions for N.Y. Fluxus from Thomas & Paik. Again it will be presented as suggestions of stimulate for collective discussion. Except for Vanderbeck & Flynt I received no replies from N.Y. people, so I can not judge what the general desires are (up there). Paik's & Thomas suggestions are even more aggressive (so George must be "prepared" for it) . . . My arrival absolutely conditional to George Brechts participation. It is much too premature to start splitting-up. If George thinks Fluxus is getting to competitive with yam, we can eliminate Fluxus and concentrate on yam. Names don't matter at all. How does Ben think ?

**Letter from Dick Higgins to George Maciunas,***nd [Spring 1963], Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

Flynt's been bothering everybody, he doesn't like Newsletter 6 any more than Jackson and me. . . . Your quite mistaken about Flynt's being at all sympathetic to East Europe these days, he's ostensibly a Maoist but really an ultra. . . . As for his picketing, he says he does it to inflict severe financial loss on museums, never realizing that this only lends an aura of daring to a safe thing, which the burgesses just love. . . . keep a very hard eye on him, because it is just not consistent with his point of view not to want to sabotage your east European issue, since he so loves attacks, fusses, and big cracks at cultural activity. . . . Now your newsletter. I just don't approve isolated acts of terrorism, cultural or otherwise. There's no point in antagonizing the very people and classes that we are most interested in converting. Our point of view is strong and insidious, and is best established by meetings, lectures, and shrewd publicity. The publicity of our activities so long as it is not completely a fabrication, cannot help but interest people, no matter how hostile.

...

I wouldn't worry about George Brecht, he'll cool off before long when he sees Flynt and Mac Low and me are unhappy too. As for Tomas, you say he has lots of violent suggestions, but why and what about them, that's the thing. Is he going literary? Again, if he personally wants to do lots of terroristic things, fine, let him get it out of himself, so long as he doesn't associate the movement with it. I think he is a good man and will become disturbed about his own terrorism after a while. As for Paik, he's for the New York Times. If he had come here, he would have learned a lot from the multitude of people who have been through his scene. But he's big in Germany by default I think, he concentrates on impressing, he is much more interesting than his work, I think. That's another world, his, free from racism and unemployment and war threats with nothing going on but the desire to epater-les-bourgeois and organize our personal lives on a more anarchic and sexually libertine basis (that I take to be the moral of his work). I find him profoundly escapist and negatively noble.

**Letter from Dick Higgins to Tomas Schmit,***May 5, 1963, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

Yam [Festival] is becoming very watered down, because Watts, Brecht, and Smolins really anarchists and very very disorganized. . . . Fluxus needed especially Maciunas, for his organizational ability. None of us like Newsletter #6 suggestions. I think it alienates us from our best potential people, and that what is need is very ambitious propaganda and public performances. Others have different objections. Main lack here now is clearly defined responsibilities. Nobody accepts any responsibilities because all are afraid they will be swamped.

Also, the differences within old Fluxus people becoming much clearer, as more people appear. Whole younger group comes along. Actually, I support (of those here) only Hansen, Kaprow, and (subject to limitation) Brecht and Mac Low. Watts is egomaniac, Flynt is totally ineffectual, many who were with us are becoming rather suburban in out look.

. . . Brian O'Doherty of The New York Times gives naive support to us, criticizing as "superfluous" all political aspects of, for example Kaprow, which strips the whole thing of meaning but also reinforces right wing of Yam Festival (Watts, Brecht, Young, and Pop Artists).





4. Robert Watts & Geo. Brecht in charge of all exhibits, environments, etc. if they cannot undertake this because of their being in New Jersey, I suggest that they find someone to assist them, like Bob Morris. . . .
5. Jackson Mac Low - in charge of peripheral "social action" etc.etc. but not integration of fluxus, with his group of anarchists. Instead - broadening the fluxus festivals into "alliances" (you understand what I mean).
6. Yourself - in charge of "formal concerts" & a sort of co-chairman, keeping meetings in order.
7. Ben Patterson - in charge of "street compositions" (He has done a few in Paris). & informal or "illegal concerts". he would have to work closely with Paik & Tomas, that's why I would not ask George or even yourself to collaborate with them. You seem to have quite a few reservations about Paik & Brecht seems to be violently opposed to any aggressive pieces or anything tending towards pornography of Paik's sort. Question: how on earth does brecht get along with Watts ???? Watts is both: pornographic & quite destructive (I mean his pieces).

**Letter from Jackson Mac Low to Dick Higgins,**

*May 22, 1963, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

. . . I wd like to do something against that odious "Civil War Parlor Game in which chance operations make it possible for the confederacy to win this time." (May 28 at 113 Greene st. by someone named Mike Kirby sponsored (god save the mark) as part of the Yam festival! by 'those Smolins.' At least to picket it as an insult to every afro-american, every person concerned with civil rights (in any sense) & every composer, poet, dramatist &c who has ever seriously used chance operations in his work. - I wrote to George Brecht about it but got no answer. Then I let it drop because I got depressed in general. But maybe you & Alison wd want to do something about it.

**Letter from George Maciunas to Emmett Williams,**

*nd [Spring/Summer 1963], copy of original in the Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

We must postpone East Europe Fluxus for 1965 maybe. Chruschov [sic] is not hot on Fluxus at this very moment, although he agrees with us in being against abstract art !!! So he is closer to Fluxus than say New York "Abstract expressionists" or the French "Tachistes". Yes? So I believe Fluxus has best breeding ground in Soviet Union which was not spoiled yet by abstractionists (or at least Stalin corrected that !) So we must all work towards eventual Fluxus in S.U. OK? Through officials and nonofficials (but not Evtushchenko's kind - he is degenerate and already under the evil spell of Western art. Best to work through political agitators and present Fluxus as what they have been looking all along to have against the art revolt brewing there. We can help them to impose a political supremacy over all art-activities. You agree?? I know Flynt agrees for sure (Higgins, Ben Patterson, Thomas & few others on way of agreeing).

. . . this explosion in N.Y. and disagreements in N.Y. Total disagreement to do any political agitation, join Flynt, or do any art-terroristic activities, meant we have to arrive at an entirely different platform that we can all agree-to. . . . Then after . . . New York we can have a thorough discussion & see how political fluxus can be, then we can make Fluxus penetration or is it entry ? or return eastwards. OK?

Emmitt ! I must know how you feel about involving Fluxus politically with the party ( you know which one). Our activities loose all significance if divorced from socio-political struggle going-on now. we must coordinate our activities or we shall become another “new wave” another dada club, coming & going. There is resistance from Brecht [Brecht’s name has been crossed out], Watts, La Monte & Mac Low, who are either a-political or naive anarchists, or becoming sort of indistinct pseudo socialists - all this is just crap, now Flynt is politically oriented. Dick, Thomas, I think Vautier, also Joe Byrd, Mekas, Ben Patterson, also Metzger & Bussotti seem to be becoming politically oriented. I never discussed this with you and was sort of in the dark about you orientation or rather under an assumption that it was oriented “correctly”. Now, Robert I hear, tends to be politically oriented (is it correct?) while Daniel is not. The whole “editorial board” structure has been sort of “constructed” with decoys like La Monte & Mac Low, Ichyanagi & Nam June Paik - all non-political - that’s good to draw support from non-political sources, but there just can’t be too many decoys, then whole fluxus becomes decoy & looses significance. Therefore it becomes more and more important to determine the political pattern or orientation of the “committee” before we start activities on a grander, expanded scale. . . . Keep this away from Daniel - I think he is strongly non-political. OK ?

**Letter from Dick Higgins to Emmett Williams,**

*nd [Spring/Summer 1963], Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

. . . As for Maciunas’s #6 and #7, I am not interested in alienating our best men. I think it was very poor judgment to send out both - we may have lost Brecht to Fluxus, for example, not just Mac Low. It’s one thing to slug a Zen novice to knock the concepts out of his noggin, it’s another to isolate our selves from our potential audience by alienating them in the subways and on the sidewalks. I wrote a fairly involved scheme to George suggesting other possibilities. Not one of the people here, except for Flynt, who’s got dementia precox, approves of the letter, and none of us intend to participate if this stuff if carried out. That in spite of our own split, between the people who are interested in the special aspects of what we do (me, Kaprow, Hansen, perhaps Young), those who care mostly about the technical aspects (Byrd, Maxfield?, Jones, Mac Low (in spite of his political activism), Maciunas?), those who deny the whole thing but think they can use it as a rostrum (Flynt, Smith, etc.), and those who like mostly the philosophical implications of things (Watts, Knowles, Lezak, Patterson?). Brecht and Patterson are half in our team, half in the other. Before too much longer, the whole thing will split four ways. You always say you’re so pro-red, what tendency do you prefer?

**Letter from George Maciunas to Emmitt Williams,**

*nd [Summer of 1963], copy of original in Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

Fluxus crisis is over & resolved. Brecht is available & reachable again, just got his letter. JML has been calmed down by newsletter 7 and so were you three. . . . Anyway, newsletter 6 stirred up some dust and made some adventurous readings. Street activities will be in the hands of, and carried out primarily by Paik, Thomas, John Cale (& to some degree myself, maybe Ben Patterson, Mekas brothers, Kaprow). JML will concentrate on activities he himself suggested & Flynt on his own.

. . .

Small item (to return to “fluxus crisis”) I notice in your letter your reluctance to alienate the “snob circuit”. But that’s the very thing we should do with Fluxus festivals! One point of disagreement I have with Mac Low is that our street events WOULD NOT ALIENATE “the masses” since they don’t go to concerts, museum, gallery premieres etc. & would not therefore be affected in the least by sand piles at gallery entrances, blocked traffic, etc.etc.etc. I think we should try to reach totally unsophisticated people (like that superintendent in Paris student center - I forget his name but he was the one who enjoyed our events most thoroughly).

Also my motive for street disturbances would largely “commercial” - the more disturbances - the more press notice, the more audience, etc.etc. If for two months we keep associating Fluxus with all kinds of disturbances or “street compositions” like Paik’s “Zen for street” or “dragging suite” then people will begin to get curious as to what will Fluxus do in a theater, etc. I had very bad experiences as regards audiences in N.Y.C. Just can’t get any. Halls always half filled or less. To La Monte’s concert only 5 came. Imagine 8 performers & 5 audience !!! We will run into the same difficulty if we don’t promote Fluxus. And we must promote without expenditures - that’s the trick, since I won’t have a job in N.Y. & will have no \$\$\$\$. So my scheme was to promote at no cost to us through various methods described in newsletter 6,7 - maybe others will come with constructive & realistic proposals on promotional activities rather than criticisms. If we can’t promote we can’t give Fluxus in N.Y. It will draw fewer people than Paris did. that’s a problem that must be resolved really before I go to N.Y. because I would still be able to cancel the trip & save some \$\$.

**Post card from George Maciunas to George Brecht,**

*Postmarked October 17, 1963, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

1. FLUXUS newspaper is entirely your creation! You should not try to achieve any revolutionary nor any other aspect that would make your point diffuse. Fluxus is no “proletarian dictatorship”, with inflexible “party program”. It is a collective in the true sense of the word. So when I wrote ad I naturally tended to infuse my point of view (even if unconsciously). When you edit newspaper you should infuse your point. . . . The fact that majority of people within Fluxus are [strongly - which has been crossed out] politically oriented does not in the least prevent others to be a-political. (Nam June Paik, Bob Watts, & yourself, for instance). So please ignore this political flavor if it does not suit you or would adversely affect your own point of view. Even though your views may be a-political I think that they are more politically than or rather applicable potent than Henry Flints for instance. (parallel with Zen in this respect I think).

**Letter from Dick Higgins to Tomas Schmit,**

*November 30, 1963, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

. . . Thomas, that is what my work is about. [referring to social injustice and some to some black activists he saw attacked by the police in a New York City demonstration That is it. It is. Nothing else matters. You can complain to George that he is more interested in books than people, but more people see books than our performances. He is not, after all, a professional anti-artist like Henning. Henning should just show his balls and have his cock sucked by some lady and call it quits. Sex is not anti-art, and

calling a thing dialectic does not mean that it is scientific materialism. I like Eric's things, but Henning's things are very opportunistic as I see it. They may think they are the same, but unless they try to be, they aren't.

Don't you think the best art appears spontaneously in a social setting? Like the songs on Broadway [referring to "we shall overcome" which was sung by the black activists marchers], when the police beat the black man? I will never hear that song without feeling something very sad, and will always sing that song as if it were I who had been slugged. Thomas, I have seen it happen, and that, not the gesture of bourgeois futility is, I feel certain, what art is about. . . .

Fluxus is that. And I am sad to hear Vostell tell me that you say you do not know what fluxus stands for, because if you say that I think you are telling a very diplomatic story, which is not up to your level, there are enough Kennedys but not enough Maciunases or Schmits (or mes, maybe). Reminding workers that art exists is not your job, improving working conditions . . . is. Sure Fluxus is a collective. But it is primarily a united front. There are few Maciunases. After all the work, for example, Maciunas finally decided not to issue at American "Fluxus Yearbox" because it tended too much to nationalism. . . .

**Letter from Dick Higgins to Raoul Hausmann,**

*November 11, 1964, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

. . . Listen Hausmann, you identified me with the very nihilistic happening movement. It's true, I did help found it. But look, let me reiterate once and for all, I am not a happeningist or a neo-anything. I am a popular artist, as far as I am concerned. My interest in your best-known phase of activity is that I regard you and Heartfield as the more sincere activists of a group (the last in history till myself) that managed to combine political fervence with experiment in the means of expression. . . .

If you understood the situation in my country, you would understand why we are constantly attacked on the very stupid basis that there is no basis for an avant-garde art of any kind which is avant-garde in both subject matter and form- this criticism comes to us from partisans of both subject matter and form. I say, there are precedents in Berlin dada in the work of certain people there, and in the work of El Lissitski and his associates at Moscow in the period 1921-24.

**Letter from George Brecht to Dick Higgins,**

*February 17, 1967, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

One of the big gaps in my knowledge is in politics. I have never been able to see why anyone would take an interest in politics, why men devote their lives to such a field; and this is annoying me, for politics is obviously a huge chunk of what humans spend their lives doing. One way for me to start would be to read a concise, humanistic, knowledgeable discussion of politics . . . to try to sense what need politics fulfills for humans. . . . Is there a field of "comparative politics" . . . ?

Second point - if possible, I would like to "take sides". I've spent many years, as you know, widening my view by investigating science, philosophy, and various intangibles. It is time to do something else . . . I have never been in a position where I could decide to be a communist, or capitalist, or socialist . . . [i]f I wont join a church, organized religion, why should I join an organized political party?

**Letter from Dick Higgins to Robert Filliou,***July 7, 1967, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

John Cage is really upset these days about social things, and he's becoming intensely political! After all these years and at this age! . . . his thoughts along these lines are just as brilliant and incisive as you'd expect them to be. Guess he's following a similar evolution to George's [George Brecht].

**4. Fluxus, Collectivism, and Group Dynamics**

The nature of Fluxus as a collective, or at least as a group that had certain collective concerns, is another one of the issues that has continued to hold a significance in numerous debates about Fluxus. The issue of Fluxus and collectivism really contains three separate questions. First, if Fluxus was not a movement that had a specific form and ideological platform, what is the basis for the collective works and performances that were presented under the name of Fluxus? Second, as Fluxus sought to counter traditional notions of art as the product of an individual with special talents, was collectivism a means that Fluxus offered as an alternative? Third, and this is really the primary issue of continuing debate about Fluxus and collectivism, how and in what ways did Maciunas's notion of Fluxus as a culturally based socio-political collective align with the ideas and concerns of the other artists associated with Fluxus? To begin to address these and other related questions about Fluxus and collectivism, one must move beyond the sense of Fluxus as a "united front" that Maciunas worked so hard to propagate. It is more relevant to look at Fluxus as a rhizomatic association of individuals who sometimes had markedly differing opinions and as an assemblage/group that was shaped by personal conflicts and the dynamics that resulted from these conflicts.

The letters that I have selected for this section speak both for and against the general nature of Fluxus as a collective in the sense that Maciunas used the term. More specifically, these letters evidence the conflicting dynamics of Fluxus as a group. In this form, it was often shaped and directed by individual concerns and constantly shifting disagreements and arguments as to the nature and function of Fluxus. What is in some ways indicated by these letters is that, contrary to the assumption of a collective Fluxus, Fluxus was as fragmented and de-centered in practice as its attitudinal view was in theory, thus the idea of it as an assemblage is useful as a means of recognizing the shifting associative relationships that were central to the nature of Fluxus.

**Letter from Dick Higgins to Alan Kaprow,***nd [ca. late 1962 early 1963], Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

At Wiesbaden a popular German beat poet by the name of Bazon Brock, who is a friend of Emmett Williams, performed in Emmett's "Four Directional Song of Doubt," a permutation piece rather like his "In the Cellar" which is in the Anthology & which was done at the Living Theater. He was there for the one performance, & since he was shrewd enough to realize that Fluxus is a marriage of convenience on the part of a large number of artists who do not agree with each other, but who find it an effective rostrum for setting their ideas before a rather large audience that is expecting something a little out of the ordinary at least, he wrote an article for the second largest newspaper in Germany, condemning the whole series of 17 concerts as having

essentially no position except a common derivation from dada. As if a concert series was supposed to “have a position” or represent a “group.”

**Letter from George Maciunas to Dick Higgins,**

*Postmarked February 26, 1963, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

Wolf Vostell would be a waste of money, since his piece is expensive (buying again that confounded plastic and cake) and he is against FLUXUS not for - he wrote so to me himself. - So I see no reason to include him in a group against which he is set. Besides he is a saboteur & I think Dusseldorf 1st. evening demonstrated that again. He uses Fluxus festivals to promote his anti-fluxus. - Let him then organize Decollage evenings if he wants to fight fluxus, So if Vostell comes to Stockholm I will boycott & refuse cooperation (I think Tomas & Emmett feels the same way).

**Letter from George Maciunas to Dick Higgins,**

*nd [early 1963], Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

Why Dick you get so angry in your last letter - I could read between the line your anger. I think our suggestion (or instructions) was very obvious one - A whole list of reasons: To perform complete fluxus festival you would need to give total program, otherwise it would not be “the best foot forward” causing people to think that fluxus has expended itself. Therefore fluxus must be complete or not be complete fluxus but pre-fluxus or some such thing. Secondly if you do 1/2 or 3/4 of fluxus now we may just as well not do the other 1/2 or 1/4 later - people won't know its the “other” half - they will think the 1/4 or make one concert “festival” or 1/2 concert? Or repeat some pieces over ??? . . . fluxus is a “collective” & should not be associated with any particular fluxus individual. In other words flux tends to de-individualize individuals and a single performer tends to individualize individuals rather than emphasize the “collective”. Therefore I think more composers must participate in such festivals. Your interview & newspaper articles plainly speaks for what I am trying to say. It differs considerably from newspaper releases we got when fluxus was presented collectively. In New York you can easily do without us, because there are so many fluxus people there. . . . Same is true in Montreal - where Pierre Mercure, said he would organize [a festival]. . . .

**Letter from Dick Higgins to George Maciunas,**

*nd [early 1963], Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

*[This letter is a response to the above letter from Maciunas.]*

The last thing I want to do is damage. Fluxus is useful to me - it is a good rostrum for my ideas, and I am sympathetic to most of the people in it. . . . Since you said nothing about stopping the plan if you did not come, I assumed you wanted me to put the show together on my own, which I began to do. I ordered fluxus type posters, basing my program on a tentative 3-day plan you made for Dusseldorf in December. . . . Then Wednesday I received your letter with its injunction not to have a fluxus without you... If not, I was to alter the basis of the performances to an informal preview. . . .using pre-fluxus for the Stockholm affair, dropped “festival” completely. . . . I received a new

telegram, saying “deviation from letter prohibited cancel second letter program.” The second letter program was canceled already. But I can't do all the first program since the HAUSMEISTER prohibits the Paik piece. . . . Since I cannot do your program exactly, I am going to announce to the audience that the first program is in some respects a preview of the festum fluxorum to take place in the autumn, but that it is by no means a literal preview, that the other programs are not at all a pre-fluxus but are a pair of purely independent programs put together on my own... “

**Letter from Wolf Vostell to Dick Higgins,**

*July 5, 1963, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

It was very nice to see your and Alison's name on a poster that came from Amsterdam Fluxus Festival! Also very much new names I never heard (?)Also. Thomas send I small lousy publikation [sic] (copy of kalenderrolle) out with photos and small compositions of many Fluxus people on it. So that is there problem ! Since I'm here I didn't see T. Schmidt, I think he is very influenced by Maciunas - so that they didn't invite me anymore - so I'm out of this boat called “Fluxus.” It was for me a strange experiment (psychological) to hear Spoerri say “I have nothing to do with Fluxus- It's bad - and now he appears in all posters and publications. this is prostitution!

**Letter from Dick Higgins to Wolf Vostell,**

*September 19, 1963, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

Patterson, as with everything, did not want to come, just to do his own pieces. Personally I am very close to Ben. I see him often. But he does not have any concept at all of collectivity. This is understandable in situations like your own: most of your pieces are philosophical manifestations that require only yourself. But why should I perform Patterson who won't perform me? Hansen and Brecht seem to feel the same way. It is a sad truth, but there are not enough experienced performers of these simple things we do. At the moment, we cannot afford to do everything ourselves, so we must work with people with whom we do not entirely agree. This is the difference between today and thirty years ago, when Artaud or Gillestie could work alone, but, on the other hand, our break with the past is more radical. However, as I pointed out, I have taken measures to insure that collectivity does not lead to weakness, the way it did with the Yam Festival.

**Letter from Dick Higgins to Wolf Vostell,**

*November 18, 1963, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

This Paris thing was most definitely not organized by Spoerri. In fact, his jealousy nearly destroyed it. . . . Spoerri drove Emmett from Ravel, and suddenly on the outskirts of Paris he became very agitated and said he thought this concert would be another Fluxus amateur night, and he set Emmett out of the car and drove away. If good old Filliou hadn't come to the rescue, I do not know what would have happened. . . . When Maciunas, who knows more about it, heard, he was so angry that he has ordered all copies of the Spoerri-Dufrene book destroyed. He may regret that, but who knows?



**Letter from Dick Higgins to Tomas Schmit,***December 7, 1963, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

Emmett is in trouble with everybody over a concert he did in paris- have you heard? . . . A program was printed which included an extract from Wilhelm's speech at Adam, only such passages as mentioned people in the Paris performance. This was done without Wilhelm's authorization, which was very poor judgment on Emmett's part. Naturally Vostell- who accuses Fluxus of being too nationalistic (? national what, Turkish? Japanese? Korean?),-mostly because of his own sensitivity- Vostell set up a huge cry the length of Europe. In the mean time George became very angry because Emmett just did what he liked and included a lot of fluxers without ever mentioning fluxus. Daniel became bitter, left Emmett on the out skirts of Paris. . . . So now Maciunas, Wilhelm, Vostell, Spoerri and his circle, everybody except goo Filliou is angry at him, and now he is living in a shed eating only sugar beets and spaghetti through the French winter.

**Letter from Willem de Ridder to George Maciunas,***April 3, 1964, The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, New York, NY.*

Vostell and Thomas came too and were like angry schoolboys because they found there was too short fluxus, Vostell and Thomas in the television program [this was a program that de Ridder had done about "all the things in art and anti-art" the footage was taken partially from a performance he organized in Amsterdam with Emmett and Thomas]. They wouldn't listen to my arguments. They went to R. Perenboom on Amstel 47 and organized a kind of beatnik-happening in a cinema in Amsterdam. Like real Europeans they take themselves as serious as possible. I hope that they will become well known in a short time because I think that's their greatest wish. I am so angry (forgive me) because I read the last decollage with the article of Thomas.

**Letter from Dick Higgins to Wolf Vostell,***August 16, 1964, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

Maciunas told Charlotte Moorman that Brecht, Ay-o, and I could not be in an interesting festival she was making, because she was [not] part of fluxus. This was outrageous. I had already told george that I was not interested in fluxus, that I would live up to my commitments and after that, nothing. So he doesn't yet know it, but I am going to have to get him out of the way. I am less diplomatic then you, and much less political. But now I have to be either a bastard or be cut off from my friends. George has been trying to cut me off from Alan Kaprow- which is impossible, since I am a fighter for Alan and vice versa, since years. But since he is trying to blackmail me into sticking with him, I will use the same procedure. I am going to join Alan Kaprow in Originale, which Brecht and Jones and Ay-o were prevented from working-in by Maciunas's blackmail (naturally the result was that Brecht, Jones, and Ay-o are now completely against Fluxus). Maciunas is picketing the performance (with Flynt). He expects me to join him. I am 1. not going to join him, thus depriving him of expected support, 2. I will perform my vocal sonata and expel him from Fluxus, 3. I have already sent Flynt's work to my friend Mme. Joudina, who is asst. director of the Ministry of Culture in Moscow, and is my main contact there . . . explaining that Maciunas published it, and that he (she knows

that already, and has known him for years) wants to emigrate there: since Flynt is an out-and-out Trotskyite, though he doesn't admit it, Maciunas will not be allowed into Russia again, 4. I am sending Flynt's papers to Japan to the key people there- Ay-o has already written them- to discourage the people there from doing the fluxus festival they plan for march, and 5. I am sending around a mimeo pamphlet comparing Flynt cum Maciunas with Goebbels cum Streicher to the political groups through whom both work. This goes against the grain, but there are things which must be done. Maciunas has progressively antagonized all the best people, who started out to work with him, from you, Hansen, Spoerri, Kaprow, etc. through (very recent) Paik, Brecht, and myself. His presence is not just embarrassing, it is damaging and intolerable.

**Letter from Dick Higgins to Tomas Schmit,**

*December 19, 1964, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

Poor Paik: his situation is really not good. I think he should return to Germany at once. A great deal of what he does depends on his being unique and idolized. In both Tokyo and New York, he is neither. In Tokyo, almost nobody attended his concert. . . . I understand that they were embarrassed by his violence and expressionism. And in New York, he seems so out of context, so naively romantic. Where the artists one likes best are the popular rock and roll singer (Walter de Maria), the cotton technician (Brecht), the teacher (Kaprow), and so on, this kind of wild romanticism of the artist seems very peculiar and student like. It is easy for him to work here, and he likes the city very much, but in performance he becomes completely confused and hysterical. Really hysterical. I had to ask him to leave my Ones, the piece I described, because he became so wild. The thing is, he knew he was going out of control, but he was completely powerless to stop himself. This city is so close to his way of thinking, that it is an excess, he is like an automobile without brakes, and he knows it. Of course, Paik and I had no argument. I asked him very quietly to leave, and he went well. I have seen him several times since then. But it is too much for [him]. The city will simply devour him unless we find a smaller city for him or a quiet place in the country for him to develop his secrets in peace.

**Letter from Mieko (Chieko) Shiomi to George Maciunas,**

*nd [after September 8, 1964/65], Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

I felt sorry about your situation around Kosugi. But to be honest with you, I remember I knew the plan of charolette's concert series and that Kosugi was included in it. I think I herd it from Shigeiko around spring. I can not understand why you feel Paik and Charlotte are trying to destroy FLUXUS. Can't they have a freedom to do what they want to do? It doesn't mean to destroy other things. Even if they performed all Kosugi's piece, is it impossible to do it with a different realization? It must be interesting too, I think our pieces contain almost endless possibilities of performance. . . . I think most important thing is what is actually performed, contents of the concert, not who belongs to what organization nor who is the first.

I am afraid in a way it might be your side to build a conception of competition I don't think they have such consciousness. They just liked Kosugi's pieces and wanted to include.

**Letter from Dick Higgins to Chalupecky,***September 9, 1965, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

...and Maciunas, who, as you know, is Fluxus, since the rest of us quit. ... Fluxus wasn't always what it has become, you know. It started out to be a collective, because there were so few ways open to us to present our work. The various festival which I commended in Postface were really pretty good, especially at first, at Wiesbaden. The pissing contest was an early sign of the decline of Fluxus, there's no question, and the newspapers were really moronic. ... Schmit you will like, I suspect. He was the first to leave Fluxus, in the Fall of 1963. You know him as the man who held the pissing contest: he has grown up, now. ...

I think I'm a little more sympathetic than you to the kinds of violence per se that Paik stands for: I think Jackson is correct in attacking the tendency, but perhaps wrong to attack it so strongly in Paik. Because Paik's specific strength is the way that he seems uncannily to reflect the general tendencies which he finds around himself. In a more passive nation Paik would be harmful. I think your country doesn't need a Paik. But this country is, frankly, engaged in criminal acts, which people will not recognize because they don't see it in front of themselves. The outrage, which Paik at his best produces, seems to force people to accept the fact of violence as a part of their lives. ... Naturally I do not mean really to defend him: his complete negativism and superficiality would make him at best undeserving. ... Patterson and Hansen are marvelous. We're doing a book that includes some very serious games by Patterson. To play them forces the player to become conscious of ways of thinking that imply a whole new set of psychological principles. That one is certainly full of the "great moral force" you mention which prevents our being "buried by our facile traps."

**Letter from Dick Higgins to Daniel Spoerri,***April 22, 1966, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

... You wouldn't hardly recognize Wolf Vostell, he's become so gentle and modest, no longer defensive. He and Maciunas are friends again.

**Letter from Dick Higgins to Jeff Berner,***August 22, 1966, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

I received a letter from Maciunas forbidding me on my tour (with my wife, Alison Knowles) to perform certain of her own works, or those of my dear friends (whose work I have been performing since 1958 or 1959) George Brecht, Bob Watts, even some of Alison's and Emmett's own, without calling the concert "Fluxus." Of course he has no legal basis (publication right does not imply performance right), but it is frustrating to have to deal with a person on this basis. And Maciunas does this every Fall: he has since 1963.

**Letter from Dick Higgins to George Maciunas,***August 17, 1966, copy of original, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

Yesterday I sent you a very capable and interesting guy, Ken Friedman, because I wanted him to know about what you do and perhaps help get Fluxus better known in San Diego area of California. You gave him a copy of the enclosed mis-information sheet, and, frankly, I object. Your remark in [paragraph] 4-C, that I left Fluxus because of a competitive attitude, to form a “rival organization” just isn’t fair. If I were your rival, I wouldn’t try to promote Fluxus, Would I? . . .

The purpose of my Press is, after all, quite different, completely different from the purpose of Fluxus. We are essentially trying to diffuse and disseminate information about a body of work. Our publications are designed to be sold in book stores because book stores are there. . . . It is cheap and efficient to stick with in the confines of the book form. On the other hand, Fluxus is an information center more than a disseminator. The Fluxus objects are works of art or non-art. They are not intended to be sold in all bookstores. They are typically at least partly hand made. You do not make 2000 copies of everything the way we do, because for your purposes there would be no point in it. So where is the rivalry of our organizations? . . . Even if the Press were a rival organization, it as founded by me. Why blame Alison Knowles?

**Letter from George Maciunas to Dick Higgins,***nd [Fall 1966], Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.**[This is a response to the above letter from Higgins.]*

The red “mis-information” sheet was based on your supplement to your Postface for the Rowohlt book the date of Summer 1964 was set by yourself not me when you said (in that supplement)(not me), that you quit Fluxus, not only you, but in your own words “everybody”. So, all I did was take your word for a fact and assumed everybody quit, except that is people who later denied this assumption. That is how Phil Corner, Alison, Ben Patterson & Paik got themselves in company with yourself (& for a while Bob Watts), because as you said you were all shocked by Henry’s & mine action, (which incidentally had nothing to do with Fluxus.) A stronger reason, of my breaking all relation with Paik, was his threat to blackmail me (to obstruct my getting US passport) if we did not stop the Stockhausen picket. Kosugi did a classic double cross a year ago. Tomas quit himself. Henry Flynt quit himself, Jackson quit himself, before the Film Culture job. . . . By anticollectivism & individualism I mean - absence of any effort or desire to promote Fluxus as a group. This applies to Emmett when he did his Paris fest. I just assumed that he was no interested in promoting Fluxus as a collective why should Fluxus promote him? Fluxus is not an individual impresario & if each does not help another collectively by promoting each other, the collective would lose its identity as a collective and become individuals again, each needing to be promoted individually. . . . Ben Vautier and Jeff Berner I think illustrate very well what I mean by a collective attitude. Whenever they organize events or publish material (and Ben does a lot of it) he does it as part of a Fluxus activity. In other words he promotes Fluxus group (meaning some dozen other people) at the expense of his own name. He has done this at his own free will, just because he feels he is just as much a part of this as I am. In fact he spends as much money on fluxus as I do. I think - that is indication of Collectivism. But when people expect me to be the spender and themselves the beneficiaries only, then I assume they consider me to be Fluxus & not a Collective - thus anticollectivism. My consideration of your “Something Else” activities as being

rival is based on facts: Sponsoring concerts, events ("AvantGarde" fest, your own happening, that of Vostell), Opening up a gallery or shop, publishing small scale periodicals (Great Bear series) which I consider to be rival to V TRE (in contents if not in format), Postcards in boxes, offering to do Barbara's cook book knowing that Fluxus was doing it. Planning to do a Magazine? Why, the next thing will be producing games, objects and furniture, these are the only things we have left that have not been rivaled yet (up till now).

I have nothing against people dissociating themselves with Fluxus, nor does that get me mad. In fact I think that by changing its composition the collective is more in flux. I like Alison and the things she does. . . . By rival operation (in regards to Alison) I meant her cafe Au Go Go series. Her quitting Fluxus was based on your "everybody" statement in Rowohlt. . . . Regarding my delay in publishing your book, you should know better about my delays, shortages, shortages of money & time to accuse me of disinterest. . . .

You say Fluxus is not disseminator - very incorrect, 1000 VTRE copies x 8 numbers were mailed free as a form of dissemination & promotion. You say fluxus is typically hand made -I would eliminate a third only & of the printed matter, only fluxus I was hand made. You say that you did not drain people away - from Fluxus. I agree, that you did not drain people away - but only their works, which is the same thing (Ben Patterson, Ayo, Watts - Manifesto, Brecht essay, Dieter Rot who had promised collaboration 2 years ago, but has changed his mind since, etc,etc. -). . . . Incidentally, the red "mis-information" sheet was done about 8 months ago for a Checkoslovak [sic] magazine & had very limited dissemination elsewhere. It should be revised however, since many people should be added and some subtracted, like Tony Cox & Yoko Ono - who fall under the category of having no interest to promote Fluxus (but great interest in being promoted by Fluxus) - what I call anti-collectivism & primadonna complex etc.

**Letter from Dick Higgins to Alan Kaprow,**

*August 23, [1966], Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

. . .after you left, I found the enclosed madness from Maciunas, so I decided to twit this twot-twatcher and wrote to Berner and him. of course, he doesn't know I did NOT write to the complete eastern block press and to all past and present fluxists. I'm curious to see what kind of rise this gets. . . .

**Letter from Dick Higgins to Jeff Berner,**

*September 13, 1966, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

Lets us say no more of Fluxus than you have said: you are right. Doing the thing counts. I regard myself as a Fluxus person, and Fluxus as a movement which serves as a good handle for a lot of things to be dealt with. Anything that helps the movement helps anyone in it. Anything that only helps the organization or that hurts any of the people involved, that's what we have to be aware of. . . . As I said in my letter to GM, I would continue to send him the best people I could find because the movement and, ultimately, the general collective spirit transcend the importance anything that an individual might do, for or against the objective interests of the movement. The more the organization becomes egocentric, the harder it is to separate the movement from the organization, and the less likely the more critical or independent (I do not mean

competitive or prima donna) of us became able to use the concept (or, ultimately, the word). . . . Dada's a spirit, sure, but not a subject for critical rhetoric: why jabber about it when you can do it?

**Letter from George Maciunas to Milan Knizak,**

*September 21, 1966, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

Chalupecky wrote to me recently that he was going to organize Dick Higgins solo-concert and a Fluxus concert. . . . I immediately replied that YOU are a Fluxus member and representative and that YOU were organizing and coordinating all Fluxus plans in Prague. . . . I wrote him that we, fluxus members never "double cross" each other. . . . I dont know how Chalupecky found out about fluxus plans, but I suspect Dick Higgins has something to do with it, since upon hearing about Fluxus plans, dick Higgins has used obstructionist tactics, either by arranging his own concert just a few days before Fluxus (as in Prague) or calling his own concert Fluxus before actual FLUXUS (as in Berlin). Since Dick Higgins has started his own rival press, he has shown strong hostility to Fluxus. I am not surprised therefore to see him trying to sabotage efforts of Fluxus members in various cities. I doubt however that his silly tactics can affect Fluxus collective. . . .

**Letter from George Maciunas to Ben Vautier,**

*nd [ca. October 1966], The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, New York, NY.*

. . . Here is a list of Fluxpeople - in USA. all active, most of them organize Fluxfests, some even print like you on own expense. Very loyal crowd: [I have listed only the names, but in original addresses were also listed]

Paul Sharits

David E Thompson

Bob Grimes

Greg Sharits

Lee Heflin

Lawrence Baldwin

Michael Agnello

Jeff Berner

Sparky Brown

Cookingham

Albert M. Fine

Ely Raman

Branko Vucicevic [Yugoslavia]

Ken Friedman

VERY IMPORTANT !!! Don't - do not show this list to Dick Higgins on any account, I don't want him to screw up more then he already did.

. . .

Dick Higgins is getting more obstructionist by the day. He nearly sabotaged the Prague Fluxfest by taking the hall from Knizak (through an official - Chalupecky). Knizak may not have a hall left, though he still has a permit for street. Now I read in your press release, Dick is in Nice too, trying to confuse everyone by doing another Fluxfest in same month. I can't figure out Dick's intentions at all. In the Rohwolt- Vostell book he

wrote that FLUXUS WAS DEAD and that he and “others” have quit it or lost interest in it on account of Flynt-Maciunas picket I suppose. Well, I took that statement for a fact, and in an essay I wrote for a Czech magazine I wrote that Dick & his friends quit or left fluxus - motivated by a desire to start a rival operation (Something Else Press)- & Prima dona complex - this I deduced - reasoned out, (not invented) from same critical month - Fall 64. Dick was first very enthusiastic about Anti-Stockhausen demonstration planned by Flynt & myself. (he seems to have a flair for sabotaging concerts). (Flynt, however was not interested in any sabotage.). Dick was going to participate in the picketing also. Then, Charlotte Moorman very shrewdly offered a major role in her festival, and Dick joined in, turning against Flynt’s anti-Stockhausen picket. I did not get angry at all. But this switch of his (and his exit from Fluxus) was not motivated by Charlottes offer of greater glory for him, then I don’t know what else could have motivated. Seeking greater personal glory is a prima dona complex. So, you see my terminology was not arbitrary but well reasoned out. Incidentally the same happened with Nam June Paik and T. Koshugi. Charlotte is an “Intrigant” as Spoerri would say. You can show this part of the letter to George Brecht if he is interested in following the petty & senseless arguments between Dick & myself. The next development of course was Dick’s explosion about being left out from fluxus in my essay. But after all, how could I know he wanted to be in, when he writes that he was out. I know only what people write. I am not a mind reader. the second explosion came when Dick objected to call Fluxus any piece from fluxus group. Now, this is diametrically opposed to his 1st explosion, since if he felt he was still part of Fluxus, why should he object to publicize Fluxus ??? his explosions don’t make any sense at all. That’s enough about Dick.

...

Few comments on your “position paper”, which I enjoyed reading and felt to be very complementary. Your definition of fluxus is excellent. I agree with your position fully. I do not agree however that Dick is not competing with fluxus. There are too many incidents where he offered to publish some piece that was intended for fluxus (like Barbara’s cook book, Bob Watts book of Photos, etc. etc). Furthermore Fluxus still published newspaper, supplements to the works of Brecht, Watts Shiomi & yourself eventually, Started compl. works of A Fine, Knizak, did Hi Red Center, also Flynt-Maciunas essay, doing series of Shiomi Spatial poems, series of playing cards - Brecht, Berner, Watts, printed paper events- Sharits etc. - Still a lot of printing, and I don’t know how dick could take over all Fluxus printed matter without ruining its format and graphics. Dick only publishes works in a very conventional format with absence of any graphic design. (I do not speak of mine opinion but of people who are allied to Dick - like Vostell - so that such an opinion should not have been adversely affected by personal conflicts). Ask Brecht for instance. (or yourself). That would be the end of V TRE and CARDS.

### **Letter from Ben Vautier to George Maciunas,**

*nd [April 1967], The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, New York, NY.*

Something else disturbed me Eric And and Koepke were in the hall and they were jealous or either really impolite but they left for a beer - and said I was a good entertainer but that entertaining was not important. . . .

**Letter from Robert Filliou to George Maciunas,***nd [1970], Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

Today it's [a letter of his from 1963] interest lies in my early reading of fluxus. On the whole, I stick to it. As you know, I have never joined any group. I dislike -isms. In art, in life, I reject theories. Manifestoes bore me. the spirit in which things are done is what interests me. So, in so far as what I read in fluxus did exist in fluxus, fluxus is the sort of non-group I've felt the closest to, while keeping my own council and independence.

**Letter from George Maciunas to David Mayor,***nd [ca. 1972], copy of original, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

The one person whom you should invite is Ben Vautier, he is 100% fluxman. . . . [regarding] your list of people who have indicated that they would participate in some way 90% of the names have no connection with fluxus whatsoever, in fact many like Carollee Schneemann is doing very neo-baroque style happenings which are the exact opposite of flux-haiku style events. Of the people I would think the following were connected with flux-activities: Alocco, anderson [sic], Brecht, Friedman, Higgins, Hompson, Hutchins, Kirkeby, Knizak, Yoko Ono, Carla Liss, Mathews, Moineau, Reynolds, Sharits, Shiomi, Spoerri. You should try to include: Ayo, Joe Jones, Nanni (?), Daniela Palazzoli, Ben Patterson, Takako Saito, Ben Vautier, Bob Watts, Wada.

**Letter from Dick Higgins to George Maciunas,***November 19, 1974, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

And there again we come to Fluxus. In the early sixties, when the first generation of Fluxus artists were doing and giving away their experiences, it mattered little which of us had done which piece. The spirit was: you've seen it, now- very well, it's yours. Now you are free to make your own variation on it if you like, and the piece and the world will be a little richer for all that.

In the late sixties I was not, I think, the only one who lost sight of this aspect, which was the most profound and unique one in fluxus . . . to make an art through and of the experience of ordinary men and women, without reference to marketplaces, self-aggrandizing histories and, above all, media hype.

...

We are now in the second generation of Fluxus. Some of us are still aboard, from the first generation: Vautier, Brecht, names such as these come to mind, and there are many more- Shiomi, Kosugi, Ayo. Others came along when Fluxus seemed to have become hidden for a time, because of the illusion of having been absorbed in other ways: Hendricks, Forbes, Wada, Friedman, etc. But now with all this new interest in Fluxus, we have a second chance to make a pure Fluxus, amateur and whole.



**Letter from George Maciunas to Henry Ruhe,**

*nd [before January 11, 1975], copy of original, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

Please note that the inclusion of Moorman will automatically exclude myself - in fact I would not permit any of my objects to be shown on my name mentioned.

[on the back of this letter is a list of names of which George Maciunas has indicated that the following are "flux-people":]

Ben, Brecht, Friedman, G. Hendricks, Higgins, Jones, Knowles, Liss, Maciunas, Paik, Saito, Shiomi, Watts, Wada, Larry Miller; [Maciunas also indicated the following names as "not doing anything anymore, dead or?" ] Flynt - economics + bluegrass, Hi Red Center - disappeared, riddle - religion [and a last group of names are marked as "had nothing to do with fluxus - ever"] Beuys, B. Hendricks, Hansen, Ichiyanagi, Kaprow, Mac Low, Page, Riley, Schmit, Vostell. [with Moorman's name Maciunas put the following note] "Moorman is on a Flux-blacklist which means that I boycott and do not co-operate with any exhibit, gallery, concert hall or individual that ever included her in any program of show, past or future.

**Letter from Ken Friedman to Owen Smith,**

*June 23, 1991, collection of the author.*

The term collectivism must be used carefully so as not to be misleading. Collectivism in the sense of group activity, yes. Collectivism in the sense of a collegial enterprise, yes, an open forum, absolutely. But some aspects of the idea of a collective or of collectivism were very much George's. It was only in George's publications and multiples that the imaginary "Fluxus Collective" ever took shape. It never happened in the lives and the works of the artists. Community and collaborative enterprise are terms far more suited to Fluxus than collectivism. Even where some of the artists also used the terms collective or collectivism, that's what they meant, with a strong emphasis on democracy in the group rather than a collective body subject to the directives of a central authority, which is what George meant by the term.

**Letter from Ken Friedman to Owen Smith,**

*July 20, 1991, collection of the author.*

There is a core that you can see moving through the history of Fluxus. Some people stayed in that core the whole time, even though there were also changes in the core. There is also the fact that there were artists whom everyone else, everyone other than George, considers to have been part of the core during the entire history of Fluxus. Even though they were out of favor with George for a brief time, Dick Higgins and Alison Knowles, for example, they were always active in Fluxus from pre-Fluxus to after George's death. They always represented themselves as part of Fluxus, Even when George said that they weren't, and by every objective definition, they'd have to be considered part of the core.

The fact that multiple issues appear in the work of some core members, that is, doing Fluxus and non-Fluxus work at the same time, this doesn't make them less Fluxus or less part of the core. Even George produced things that were said to be non-Fluxus work, such as some of the Implosion things. And everyone, George, too, did different things in life that were either non-Fluxus or even perhaps contrary in some ways to Fluxus of the Fluxus spirit.

## 5. Fluxus and George Maciunas

The role and function of George Maciunas in the Fluxus group is still a hotly debated issue, particularly as his relationship to the group as a whole has been utilized in a variety of attempts to define what Fluxus was (or is). For the most part, everyone will agree, including Maciunas himself, that he was not Fluxus and Fluxus was not him. The recognition of this, however, still does not address a more general question: Even if Maciunas was not Fluxus, what was Maciunas's relation to the group as a whole? It is a "historical fact" that most of the work, particularly object-based work, produced between 1962 and 1978 by the group under the rubric Fluxus was primarily organized, designed, or directed by Maciunas. Although this congruence is significant, I feel that to use this to imply that Maciunas was the central factor in all of Fluxus is fallacious. A partial answer to the reason that such an equation is false is that ultimately Fluxus is more than the sum of its products and activities. Fluxus was, and still is, a worldview that Maciunas certainly participated in, but one that is not tied specifically to Maciunas. All of this having been said about Maciunas and Fluxus, it is also important to point out the somewhat conflicting factor that Fluxus and its named manifestations were indebted to Maciunas and, as some have suggested, would not have been what it was, or have been at all, without his participation and organization. So, which is the more correct recognition of the significance of Maciunas to the Fluxus group? Neither and both, for as with all of Fluxus there is no static, constant relationship that creates a general sense of "a" Fluxus.

I selected the following letters because they indicate some of the roles and functions of Maciunas in the activities of the Fluxus group as well as the conflicts that he in part caused and perpetuated (although certainly not by himself). These letters in no way offer a specific answer to the questions as to the relationship of the Fluxus group and Maciunas, but they do contain some interesting observations about the interactions between Maciunas, other Fluxus artists, and the group as a whole as impacted on or by Maciunas's ideas, activities, and concerns. Because of Maciunas's role in the Fluxus group, many of the issues and concerns mentioned in this section also dovetail with previous section on Fluxus, collectivism, and group dynamics.

### **Letter from George Maciunas to Nam June Paik,**

*nd [January 1963], Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

About "Gigantism" of mine. What I am planning with Fluxus may seem gigantic only in relation to time. To do it all in one month would be as you say demanding to much. To do it in one, two & more years is quite possible. I do not wish to do something half way, sloppy, or in complete. It must be either comprehensive, carefully collected & prepared series or none at all. One thing I would like to learn from Zen is not "Not to demand too much" but "to demand-aim much" and then concentrate all life on that one

demand or aim until it is achieved. . . just about everything is possible if one concentrates one self enough on it. I would therefore do Fluxus right and more perfect than do it fast. If I did Fluxus fast like Decollage I would harm the authors more than myself. (for instance Flynt & Higgins always demand copy-rights to protect their works & compositions from abuse).

I plan to do the same with fluxus festivals. Except where in Fluxus I can select material by myself before printing it. in festivals --- selection of materials and especially performers must be achieved during festivals. Since pieces must be performed & performers tested before judgment can be made on audience impact etc. etc. So in Wiesbaden we started with 14 concerts which I was able to cut to 7 & 6 in Copenhagen & Paris & which we are cutting to 2 or 3 for Dusseldorf and future cities (Poland, Yugoslavia, Italy, NY. etc.) But these 2 or 3 will be very concentrated and comprehensive. We will have the best events, action music, etc. etc. from USA Japan, Skandinavia [sic], Germany etc.etc. I do same thing with Fluxus. By collecting more than necessary and then selecting I can hope to put together a meaningful anthology not a hastily thrown together magazine.

**Letter from Dick Higgins to Wolf Vostell,**

*September 16, [1963], Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

Maciunas's temperament and style is changing. He is restless, more given to work that is more social and more declamatory. He is coming to like only Brecht's anti-art aspects, and more to like the social involvements of things. This means he is more open to the kind of universal politics that is in Hansen, Higgins, and Decollage. I think he has never been so open.

This first thing that happened was that he began to divide the New York Fluxus in two parts, a performance-in-a-theater and a street fluxus. Secondly, he put Al Hansen in charge of a street fluxus. Now this is something one would not expect from knowing Maciunas's activities in Ehlhalten. That, 1. he would actually trust anybody at all with anything, and 2., he would devote his attention and his energies to what anybody did. This is what happened: it was Saturday morning. He asked me (Monday) to phone Mac Low, Hansen, Brecht, Watts, Patterson, and Hansen. He had never met Watts or Hansen. He met Watts. He talked with him a whole evening and crossed him off his favorite list. He met Hansen, wrote him in big, and now here we go! After talking with Hansen he knew who he was. That takes great insight.

**Letter from Dick Higgins to Tomas Schmit,**

*December 7, 1963, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

George is very sick. He takes so much medicine it ruins his nerves, but he refuses to stop- maybe he can't. You have to tell him every thing three times, and even then he forgets. But worst of all, he doesn't believe he is half-incapacitated. He thinks he has done things he hasn't, he forgets he has already done things. He is always angry- or seems angry, when he is not. DON'T TAKE HIS SCOLDING SERIOUSLY, not now. Until he recovers his health, he is not able to do much effectively, and there will be no NYC Fluxus.

**Letter from Dick Higgins to J.P. Wilhelm,***December 15th, 1963, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

Maciunas has also made a big mistake in this senseless fighting with Wolf, who should be his ally, not his enemy. Maciunas is a wonderful man and one of my best friends, but it is necessary for all of us to work with him to stop being such a purist. Since his return to this country, he has very nearly alienated every one of the artists whose work he did in Europe- and, except for the publications I mentioned, he has really produced very little. He should be kept away from dogmatists of the Flynt variety.

**Letter from Dick Higgins to Wolf Vostell,***January 30, 1964, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

My relations with Maciunas are a little strained. He is alienating people whom I like very much- you, Thomas, and now Emmett. Patterson is seriously considering withdrawing from all future Fluxus publications and events after the New York Festival (March through May) for which he is committed, because Maciunas keeps postponing his (Patterson's) book. Similarly, I am committed to do my book with George, but afterwards I prefer to withdraw. . . . This is, of course, very confidential.

**Letter from George Maciunas to Emmitt Williams,***Postmarked February 4, 1964, copy of original, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

I have to work 8 hours, then 8 hours FLUXUS (newspaper, other publications, festival preparations, fixing loft for FLUXSHOP & FLUX HALL). and all ENTIRELY ALONE. Even Dick & Alison does not help anymore. They are all very involved with their own individual compositions & have no time ( or desire) for "THE COLLECTIVE", Made big fuss just to put 1 hours work during Saturday for FLUXUS. I think FLUXUS is doomed. First you doomed it in France by not promoting it at all. (Sold any Brecht boxes? or newspapers?) (mailed any newspapers? or at least given them away?). (also referring to that Paris concert - old arguments).

Thomas Schmit sold himself to Vostell.

Willem de Ridder is promoting only himself.

Ben Vautier ---- " " " "

All New York "Fluxus crowd" " themselves.

Japan is still holding out, but there is this European tradition of egocentrism & promoting of one's ego never took deep roots. So I have been very disappointed with Fluxus people and am contemplating of "Fazing-out" by this summer & maybe going to Japan. . . . At this time we have sold in N.Y. 4 Brecht complete works, (Water Yams) 996 still on our hands, or \$600 loss, so there is a limit to my expenditures, especially when there is no workable distribution of these works. Newspaper is costing me \$120 each month without one single sale. I must be out of my mind to flush my money down the drain this way, especially not succeeding, even of holding fluxus people together. Everyone has the mistaken idea that Fluxus is Maciunas the way Decollage = Vostell, instead of Fluxus = collective.

**Letter from Dick Higgins to Wolf Vostell,***September 7, 1964, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

I am very busy . . . with Alan's version (more Kaprow than Stockhausen) of Originale, in which I am performing. This is my way of telling the world that I was very wrong in supporting Maciunas.

Naturally I feel a little sad, with Maciunas going to Russia so soon after the publication of (three weeks from now) of my "Open Letter to Maria Joudina," in which I attack Maciunas and Flynt as the fascists they are, and point out the terrible damage they are doing both to the political left and to art by pretending to set them in opposition. . . . It is sad to do this to one's old friend, but this is my job to do this, more than anyone else, since I was once so closely associated with him.

**Letter from Jackson Mac Low to Dick Higgins,***October 20, 1964, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

Thank you for the book & the pictures on transparent paper. Our old friend GM does take good pictures at times, doesn't he? Too bad he's gotten into that nutty anti-art groove! (I miss talking to him once in a while but don't really have time for the trip, besides which he'd probably be unpleasant. O well.)

**Letter from Dick Higgins to Tomas Schmit,***September 13, 1964, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

We have expelled Maciunas from Fluxus. It made him very sad and he almost died as a result. He was in the hospital. Please understand, I always talked of expelling George, but I never did. We all did. Paik said he would work in Originale. Maciunas immediately expelled him. Ayo said he would be in Originale. Maciunas said he would have Ayo expelled from the country. Ayo became afraid and left: Paik became angry. Alan Kaprow is an old and very loyal friend, because there is a lot of water under our bridge, we began the whole happening thing at the same time, though I had reservations about him at the time. But Kaprow is like me, moral an against pure elegance. I love and trust him unlike the others, he does not try to take advantage of me. . . . That makes it very basic, and it would take lots more than brainy George to come between us. But there came a time when it was either Maciunas or my conscience. So to Hell with Maciunas. He will die soon, I think. The attack was so bitter that I told Maria Joudina about it. She will [block] his entry into the USSR and that will make George very sad. I'm afraid the poor man is finished. We all hate him, even Brecht and Watts who are almost beyond hating.

**Letter from Dick Higgins to Tomas Schmit,***October 10, 1964, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

Maciunas is gone. Joe Jones, George Brecht, and Ay-o kicked him out of Fluxus. I was already out, so I couldn't help. Paik too. Maciunas and Flynt made the stupidest picket of Kaprow's "Stockhausen Originale"- very good Kaprow and more Kaprow than Stockhausen.

**Letter from Dick Higgins to Tomas Schmit,***December 19, 1964, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

I saw Maciunas on the street today, and he walked past me without saying any answer to my hello. Which is alright, but a childish way of acting. But what else can we expect from a 36-year-old child?

I understand he is going to do another newspaper, which will attack you, me, Vostell, Kaprow, and Williams. But so What? Who is going to see it?

He walked out of my concert for which he had committed me at the Washington Square Gallery. It was a sort of aesthetic quaker meeting. We sat, and passed the bottle. There were thirty of us, in a circle, in a very large room. The bottle went around. I had made a big pile of beautiful objects in the middle of the circle. From time to time, people stood up and did simple things. The atmosphere was too serious to be foolish. We blew whistles and we rang bells, and everything was transformed and set away. Some people said serious things, while they were standing up, too. That was marvelous. Maciunas did not like it because there was no separation between the fragments, it was too personal and informal, and the wine seemed to him (I hear from Ayo) an antisocial aspect.

**Letter from George Maciunas to Ben Vautier,***nd [Summer 1965], The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, New York, NY.*

The story about Dick Higgins, is that he is trying to fight me not I - him. Since he started his publishing venture he has tried as hard as he could to duplicate my efforts by asking Fluxus people whom Fluxus publishes to publish with him not me. Now that is not very ethical. He has so pirated Ben Patterson, Filliou, tried unsuccessfully to pirate Barbara More, who is collecting a Flux-cook-book. I don't mind at all when he publishes people like Tomas Schmit, Al Hansen, Ray Johnson, Mac Low, who are not planned for Fluxus publications. there are enough unpublished people around he could use. There is no need for piracy. It is the technique of Wolf Vostell all over again. Now, your sending the 50 different ways to read a page disturbs me just as much as if George Brecht had sent him something. After all I do not ask on the sly people like Ray Johnson or Al Hansen to send me things, because I know how dick Higgins would feel and I have no reason to fight him, or aggravate of sabotage him.

**Letter from Dick Higgins to George Maciunas,***August 23, 1966, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

These letters include the definition of Fluxus as a movement rather than a company. you must therefore not assume that it is possible for you to elect yourself exclusive dictator with the exclusive right to the term.

...

But while you invented the term "Fluxus" (and nobody will deny you that) you have consistently destroyed its utility, antagonized your real friends, and mis-used the whole situation for your personal cultism and aggrandizement, if not as an artist, then as critic. . . . But Fluxus means too much (and I insist on that) to allow any individual person to reduce it to a means of confinement of peoples' work on the basis of your own personal taste, the Breton has done with Surrealism for example. I made a grievous error in 1963 not to perform the Stockholm Fluxus without you, and in so doing, for the first time, I established a precedent on the basis of which you have been able systematically to reduce the most important artistic tendency of the last half century (with Dada, of the last century) to a personal fief.

**Letter from Mieko (Chieko) Shiomi to George Maciunas,***nd [ca. 1965], Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

Thanks for sending me the program and FLUXUS history. But some part of it frightened me - desire for personal glory, prima donna complex, opportunism, etc.... to Paik, Kosugi, Dick Alison. Isn't this classification too emotional and slanderous?

. . . You seem to think and plan in your closed castle of ideal and seem not to look at your attitude from people's side, since you seldom talk and discuss about FLUXUS activities with other FLUXUS people. You are always one-sided. I think this is fatal to continue the activities of one groupe. As I have much anxiety about you and the future of FLUXUS. . . . I know you want to spread and emphasize the name of FLUXUS. But your way seems to me too rough and autocratic. The most dangerous result of pushing the name of FLUXUS is that everybody's (people in general and artists around FLUXUS) reaction ending up to disgust and hate the name of FLUXUS. Don't you think this means committing social suicide for FLUXUS?

If you want FLUXUS to become famous, the only way is to do a lot of good and influential activities continuously, instead of pushing it only by your pamphlet. And to be able to do this, many artists have to be spontaneously co-operative having the same aim and desire.

But now what is the reality of FLUXUS?

I think it is rather the groupe organized or classified from outside than the groupe composed by the will of the artists. Artists are independent and free. Have you ever thought about the reason some of them walked out the FLUXUS? I think it because they were not the type of FLUXUS and they were too energish to stay in the scale of FLUXUS. I, personally, can't blame them. Their attitude were natural. But the only thing I feel sad, was you might have abandoned the possibilities to have them being co-operative to FLUXUS activities by renewing the character of FLUXUS instead of being desperate to holding them (or even pieces) down. I can understand how difficult it is to continue these kind of activities. But here is Tristan Zala's [Tzara] words to Breton "The mistake of Breton was that he didn't recognize the time to put period of the activities of Surrealism and as a result Breton made it soiled and decadent. Nobody can revive the once dead activity by artificial means." (summarized). . . .

I don't want to see you making more enemies and being more and more isolated.

**Letter from Dick Higgins to Tjeena Deelstra,***March 13, 1967, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

I was a co-founder of fluxus, and still consider myself a Fluxist, although I have been (partially) repudiated by one of the other founders, George Maciunas (who says I'm a prima donna- I hope not!). And frankly you could do a lot worse than contact Maciunas direct. . . . He is brilliant and articulate, and I do wish he weren't so darn cantankerous. . . . The reason that my press has been founded is that I originally wanted to do what Fluxus had been founded to do, namely to propagandize and provide a rostrum for a certain body of material that was 1., experimenting with form (which has been unfashionable for the most part since the 1920's) and 2., exploring the boundaries between arts and other fields, such as politics, psychology, philosophy, etc. In the early 1960's there were few performance possibilities and even fewer publications open to this very world wide interest. . . . For me the arts depend upon, for their liveliness, the interaction between the digestion of the past and the digestion of the present. Terrible, the connotations of the gastric word, but I mean it metaphysically. You cannot abstract or separate formal and semantic meanings or experiments. Fluxus began as a rostrum to be used for the new arts. Maciunas, Mac Low, Corner and I began by publishing even work which we did not like (or trying to publish them), so long as they seemed to related to this interaction. The "flux" of the name "fluxus" refers to this interaction. But when the publication began to not appear, when we waited three years for even the first magazine called "fluxus" many of us became discouraged (there has been no second). Fluxus became a performance series, alternating with street events, but completely unlike the Adam Provos. Some of the founder became cross and dropped out (Corner was one). Maciunas moved from Europe to America. Shortly after his arrival, we held a meeting at Alison Knowles' studio, to decide what was to be done first. Who was there? Alison Knowles, Alan Kaprow, myself, Claes Oldenburg, Al Hansen, Jackson Mac Low, Ray Johnson- in short, many of the names of the real avant-garde. And what happened? Nothing. One day I dropped by, downstairs in the studio I had found for Maciunas. I asked him when he actually planned to print some of the books he had said he meant to. He said "Maybe next year." I became quite cross, and went out and had quite a bit to drink. I came back. I picked up some of the manuscripts I had gotten for him and took them upstairs to my studio. Then I went home to Alison Knowles... I told her that we had founded a press. She asked what its name was. I said it was "original Fluxus." She said that was too aggressive, and why didn't I call it "something else." So I did.

. . . Since I left Fluxus there have been very few fluxus performances and manifestations. Those usually happened through my efforts. But Maciunas, who is a great designer, has produced a large number of objects, and these are very fine. He has occasionally been involved in the usual anti-art demonstrations, but his work is exhibitable and gallery-oriented, rather than mass-based. No work has been manufactured by Fluxus which is not also a Maciunas work. But he is an honorable man.



**Letter from Dick Higgins to Wolf Vostell,***April 6, 1967, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

...Maciunas never tells me anything. He is polite if I telephone, but very cold. He has lately been very savage about me, and feels that I am undercutting Fluxus by competing with him. Bob Watts has a new project, to compete with Mass Art and make things such as Multiples, Inc. sells. Bob wanted to invite Allison and myself to make things, but Maciunas, who is also involved in the project, said that if bob did that, he, George, would quit. He was also furious with Filliou for allowing us to do the Filliou/Brecht CEDILLE book. Generally speaking, he is caring on like an ass, and building a lot of resentment against him which is sure to hurt him someday. So please do not send me the FLUXFILM information.

**Letter from Ken Friedman to Owen Smith,***June 23, 1991, collection of the author.*

It is true that without Maciunas that Fluxus would never have coalesced in the way it did. Nevertheless, Fluxus -- under another name -- would have coalesced. The different groups like New York Audio-Visual and the series like Chambers Street came before, and existed without George. Dick Higgins's work with the Something Else Press showed an energy, a program, a vitality that outlined a form of Fluxus (of Fluxism) that took place without George, and, in some ways, spread Fluxus and Fluxism far more successfully than George himself was able to do. The shape of Fluxus, George's vision and vitality gave rise to a certain kind of Fluxus. His influence and enthusiasm spurred many people to do what they did. But George's own inability to work with others also limited Fluxus, and his specific insistence on this or that made a Fluxus that was potentially unworkable. The combination of many central figures, each with an individual energy and way of working made Fluxus.

Without George, it would have been a different Fluxus. But: The time was ripe. The people knew each other. Many of the people were forceful personalities with a will to this form of international gathering and experimentation. In short, there was a forum ready to emerge with or without George.

**6. The Institutionalization of Fluxus**

With the exponential growth of an interest in and a consideration of Fluxus by museums, collectors, and galleries, the products of Fluxus's activities are in some ways becoming that which they sought to combat: precious objects owned and controlled by wealthy collectors and museums. The institutionalization of Fluxus is not a new concern, however, for as early as 1963 several artists began to become concerned with what they felt was a rigidification of Fluxus into specific identifiable patterns or forms. There are at least two interrelated concerns that I feel are part of this issue. First, Fluxus is primarily a recognition of change, or flux, as a formative aspect of all human activity. Second, any static delimitation of the nature of Fluxus (by museums, galleries, historians, or the artists themselves) is problematic in that it is counter to an aspect of the Fluxus attitude that seeks a continuance not stasis. As I mentioned in the introduction, this section is intended as a substitution for a conclusion. These excerpts from letters should not, however, be seen as a conclusion in the sense of a summation or of an indication of key concerns/issues, but as a reference to, and reinforcement of,

the problems that endeavors such as this pose to *understanding* Fluxus. What is of particular note in these letters is their opposition to the potential delimitation of what “THE” nature of Fluxus might be. The issues addressed in these letters are to be stressed in the ways in which they offer a critique of this chapter. These concerns are also significant in general, as they relate to all explicit or implicit assumptions whether they be mine, as the editor and compiler, yours, as the reader and interpreter, or the artists themselves as the authors of the correspondence.

The letters that I selected for inclusion under this heading are only those that relate more specifically to the institutionalization/historicization of Fluxus. Many of the letters that have been included under other themes in this essay, particularly those that speak to the nature of Fluxus as indeterminate and fluid, could have also been included here in whole or in part.

**Letter from George Maciunas to Dick Higgins,**

*nd [1963], Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

I do not understand your statement (& Jackson’s) that “There is no point in antagonizing the very people and classes that we are most interested in converting”. Terrorism is very clearly directed against galleries, museums, concert halls, professional artists, etc. - are we desiring to convert them ??? I had no idea of this! (?) My idea of fluxus is it is to be intended for the masses (like Wiesbaden or Paris housemeisters who enjoyed every concert of ours) but not the pseudo-intellectuals, gallery & museum directors & other decadent dilettantes. Those people will not lead to conversion so easily and I think the easiest method to overcome them is to destroy them. If we can reduce the attendance of masses to these decadent institutions we will increase the chance that they will turn their interests to Fluxus.

**Letter from Dick Higgins to Tomas Schmit,**

*nd [June 1963], Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

. . .there are too many people who see Fluxus as an institution now part of history, whereas for me I am mostly interested in what is going to happen, and I do not like this institutional aspect of Fluxus. Perhaps the next Festum Fluxorum in Europe ought to feature only the key board music of baroque composers who’s names begin with F (which stands for fucking) . . . That in itself would not be of any interest, but it would indicate our intention to be Free no matter what. It is always the next fluxus that must be the best. And that will always require new material, which takes time. . .

**Letter from Dick Higgins to Nam June Paik,***nd [1963/64], Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

...I am not a living organism, I am nothing at all. Therefore I do not want to be institutionalized. You do not have to be a mental patient to be in an institution. I want to be free. Therefore it does not interest me to publicize fluxus or yam as an institution. It does interest me to criticize and extend either of them, but to say what fluxus was is not so interesting as to say what it may become next.

**Letter from Daniel Spoerri to Dick Higgins,***nd [ca February 1966], Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

About Illena [Sonnabend] You are right she is dangerous. I told her to that she is mixing everything with her Happening exhibition and that I will not participate. My point of view was that we here in Europe did similar things but in a complete different perspective. We called it manifestations. I am thinking about Tinguely, Ives Klein, myself, Arman, Niki de St. Phalle, etc. But instead of showing the differences she will bring everything in a big soup.

**Letter from Dick Higgins to Walter Hartmann,***March 31, 1969, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

They want our artifacts, which they treat as those of a bygone race of beings. But not the evidence of our existence or even of those activities which produced the artifacts. . . . What is so spooky is the veneration in which the accidental commodities we have produced are held. It is surely the ultimate reduction of a commodity-oriented society well past the point of absurdity. ...the ideas are ignored, and the hammers [used in the Wiesbaden Fluxus Festival] are on exhibit. If only somebody . . . would smash a piano, steal my hammers, and replace them with their own! There we would enter the real content, the real subject and imagery structure, of Fluxus. . . . It is this tendency to ignore the real subject matter, of the enactment and carrying through things, which has subverted our contribution so far. But when this subversion is no longer possible, when the artifacts are really perceived as having no more value than, simply, autographs, when their market value disappears, that is when the irreversibility of our contribution will become more obvious. . . .

**Letter from Dick Higgins to George Maciunas,***November 19, 1974, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

...this constant questioning "what is blazes really was Fluxus." There have been many false answers, mostly in Museums - deadly documentations of what went on in Wiesbaden or Nice or New York. Photographs by professional photographers of simple acts, - very good photographs yes, and interesting as examples of the photographers art. But such documentary shows simply cannot catch the feel of the simple act. It was not important that, for instance, it was Bob Watts who proposed the now classic Fluxus piece "Two Inches," where one stretches a two inch ribbon, perhaps of paper,

across an area (a stage? a street ?) and then cuts or breaks it. You have to do it to experience it. And so such shows as the gargantuan Cologne Kunstverein retrospective of 1971 were deadening and besides the point.

... the ever-so-many museum and gallery shows that are being organized today seem to entirely miss the point. It seems so irrelevant, somehow, that "this" broken bit of wood is, in fact, one of the very pieces of wood which was a result of the 1962 demolition of a grand piano in the course of a performance of a Philip Corner piece at the first big Festum Fluxorum at Wiesbaden. Good Heavens, we might as well be praying on the piece of the true cross, the way we celebrate such holy relics and souvenirs!

**Letter from Jed Curtis to Thomas Kellein,**

*August 13, 1983, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.*

Now that so many superficial aspects of The Movement have permeated general society (usually unbeknownst to general society), the core (Nam June Paik used to call it 'the secret') of The Movement is essentially forgotten. The point of doing all these absurd things on a stage (the world's a stage) was to present the observer with an enigma. The method is very is very similar to that of a Zen koan. the message which the performer wishes to convey cannot be expressed in words or actions. The 'observer' in the audience will never understand the message if he remains passive, waiting to be told what the message is. It is only when the observer, who has been placed in an absurd or enigmatic environment, becomes active that he can discover what the message is.

In the context of this clearly mystical attitude of the originators of The Movement, publishing or committing anything to the permanency of paper, was irrelevant and at most incidental. As has been the case in many other artistic, scientific, or religious movements, the really creative originators are forgotten, while some of the second string people come to be thought of as the originators of The Movement, even though these second stringers really only repeated or imitated the activities of the true originators. The 'fame' these second stringers gain is really only due to their chronicling or commercially exploiting the ideas of others

**Letter from Ken Friedman to Owen Smith,**

*June 23, 1991, collection of the author.*

I've had a lot of the same trouble with the consortium of museums. Many Fluxfolk simply seem to believe that if anyone does anything, if it isn't done their way, on their terms, it means that someone has to be taking advantage of them or Fluxus.

The behavior of Fluxus artists has been responsible for many of the difficulties of Fluxus and for its continual disappearance. Only the strength of their work and their genuine importance as artists have prevented them from disappearing totally, nurtured and abetted by the continued work on their behalf of the handful of us who have struggled to keep the ideas of Fluxism and the reputation of Fluxus alive during some very unpromising decades. In this, Maciunas, Higgins, Knizak, Vautier, Mayor and a few others have been real heroes. Even some of the artists that Fluxus people

complain about, like Christo and Joseph Beuys, have exerted real, if subtle influence on Fluxus behalf. In this, too, some Fluxfriends like Sohm, Brown, Block, Harry Ruhe, Emily Harvey and a few more have played a great part.

What I have in part attempted to do in this collection of materials is to not only curate an assemblage, but to also offer access to a body of primary source materials, the artists' own words, that a reader can engage with in this form but can also continue to make use of and access these documents for other future projects, works, and writings. As an assemblage, the materials presented above offer a variety of complex configurations, emphasizing fluidity, multiplicity, interconnectedness, simultaneity, and even convolution and contradiction. The materials presented here should be seen as elements to be recognized as part of Fluxus's, and life's, very nature. By approaching the materials gathered here as an assemblage and not an essay, I have attempted to recognize the nature of this material as fluid, suggestive, and even elusive. I feel that we can best give consideration to these ideas, authors, and their moment in time by seeing them not as bound in place or time but as contingent parts that are part of the color and complexity of what Fluxus was and continues to be.

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Some of his net artworks can be seen online at:

<http://www.altarts.org/owensmith/index.html>

<http://www.altarts.org/ofsproof/enrty1.html>

<http://www.altarts.org/tstcn/index.html>

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