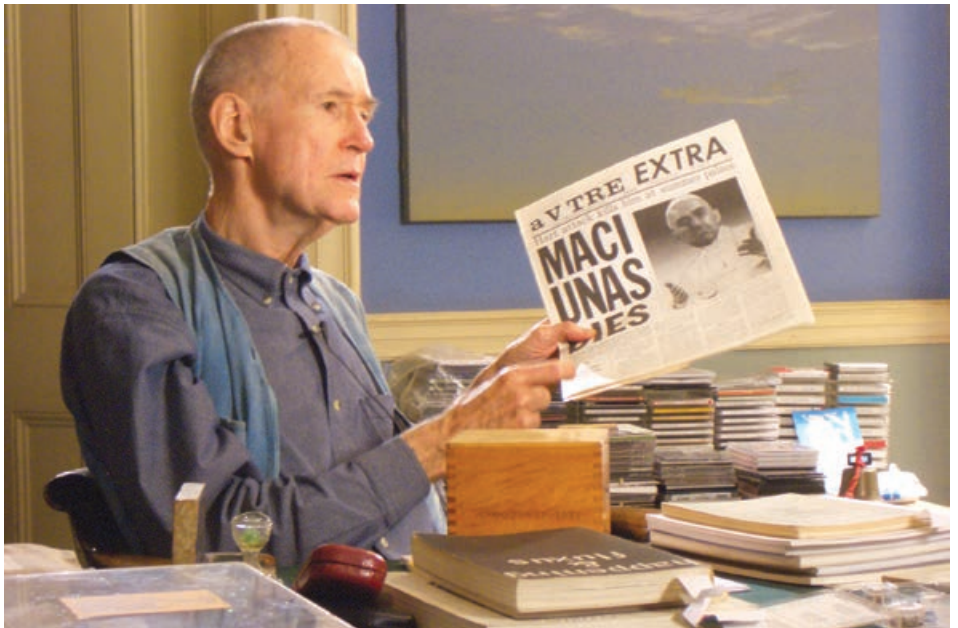


Flux Us Now
Fluxus
explored with
a camera





A research based film by Dorothee Richter und Ronald Kolb

With a large collection of recent interviews with 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

We have 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."

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 the 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 which 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 the 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)

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 tells 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 Cages’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. 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. Maciunas was employed as a designer by the US Army, and Emmett Williams likewise drew a salary from that institution. Indirectly, it was thus the US Army that paid for early 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 magnitude took place in different European cities. As an extremely dynamic phenomenon, it changed over time: to begin with, the focus was on scores and events. What is meant by scores is short sets of instructions, while events are simply structured performances—as opposed to the more complex and more 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 in 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 setting out of music in 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.

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), humour, etc. According to several contributors, this means that Fluxus consists of quite 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 action), 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.

Chapter 4: Who was Fluxus?

(16min)



For the film project, a number of the Fluxus artists have 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 what 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 are still 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 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 on the basis of brief instructions formulated by other artists. Thus here again the process was multi-authorial, but in this case the boxes were marketed under the names of specific artists and sold with the typical Maciunas design styling. A more or less 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 was another hub, a centre of production in which many Fluxus artists were involved. Some of them lived for a time at the house of Dick Higgins and Alison Knowles, where the SEP was located. Hannah Higgins, the daughter of Dick Higgins and Alison Knowles, demonstrates how extensive the overlap was between the networks of Fluxus and the SEP. Nevertheless, the two were fundamentally different types of organization.

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 which 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 with regard to definition, though this authority was repeatedly called into question by the other artists. The artists interviewed here record a confusing variety of aspects of his 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—shows his paranoid fear of the SoHo police. He also devised grand, utopian, absolutely unrealizable projects, which were often thwarted by unfavourable 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 in the course of time, both—in different ways—claimed a special status or once more identified themselves with the role of an artistic genius. Vostell adopted the traditional stance of the 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 one 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 publication of 1965, 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 stances 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 interests and standpoints.

Chapter 11: Gentrification

(8min 30 sec)

Shel Shapiro and Roslyn Bernstein carried out in-depth research on the legendary Wooster Street 80 and the change 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 meanwhile taken their place. The artists and 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. Jonas Mekas explains that Maciunas founded eighteen housing cooperatives and sold them to artists without making any money on them. By far exceeding the boundaries of art, Maciunas changed the development of SoHo and Tribeca, both districts of Manhattan.

Thanks

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Flux Us Now

A research based film by Dorothee Richter and Ronald Kolb

Research by Dorothee Richter

Art Direction by Ronald Kolb

Editing: Ronald Kolb and Dorothee Richter

Camera: Kurt Reinhard, Christoph Schreiber

Photography: Christoph Schreiber and Jurek Baumann

Music: Leo Merz, Dennis Knopf

Postproduction and mixing: Robert Kaiser

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