VISIBLE
SPECIAL ISSUE
PART 1
39·3

FLUXUS AND LEGACY

GUEST EDITORS Ken Friedman
Owen F. Smith

LANGUAGE

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Contents

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IN 1992, *VISIBLE LANGUAGE* PUBLISHED A DOUBLE issue on Fluxus. This was the catalogue of *Fluxus: A Conceptual Country*, an exhibition organized by Estera Milman at the University of Iowa to mark the 30th anniversary of Fluxus as an international laboratory of artists, architects, composers and designers.[1,2] The exhibition opened in New York at Emily Harvey Gallery, Franklin Furnace and Anthology Film Archives. It then traveled to the University of Iowa Art Museum, Madison Art Center, Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, Mary and Leigh Block Gallery at Northwestern University, along with other museums and galleries.

When we became interested in exploring the questions surrounding the Fluxus legacy, it seemed natural to turn to *Visible Language*. To our delight, editor Sharon Poggenpohl was inter-

1 Milman, Estera, guest editor. 1992. Fluxus: A Conceptual Country. *Visible Language*, 26.1 and 2, special issue. See: Ken Friedman with James Lewes, "Fluxus: Global Community, Human Dimensions," pp. 154-179; Owen Smith, "Proto-Fluxus in the United States, 1959-1961: The Establishment of a Like-minded Community of Artists," pp. 45-58.

2 Owen Smith is an art historian and artist who has worked with Fluxus for many years. Ken Friedman is a scholar, artist and designer active in Fluxus since the 1960s.

ested in the possibility. So we began. This issue of *Visible Language* is the result.

Any community of thought and practice that expands beyond the circle of its immediate founders is likely to face the problem of legacy and history. This problem becomes inevitable, once a community endures long enough to survive the founders. These problems are always vexed. When these problems enter the realm of history, the vexatious multiplies by the number of scholars and practitioners involved. In this case, the intermedia nature of Fluxus brings in questions and histories of art, literature, performance, music and other fields. Compounding this, the mixed feelings and motives of younger practitioners raise other questions: the desire to claim legacy, the wish to deny legacy, anxiety of influence and more. Finally, the partial location of Fluxus in the art world, together with the differing needs and demands of collectors, gallerists and museums compounds the problem. These issues have long puzzled us.

Today, Fluxus enjoys a problematic fame. Fluxus is well known—at least the name Fluxus is. At the same time, the central ideas and issues of Fluxus are overshadowed by a multiplicity of misleading or one-sided interpretations. As Bertrand Clavez notes, Fluxus itself is unknown to many of the younger artists, designers, composers and performers whose work demonstrates the clear trace of a Fluxus heritage. At the same time, many of the artists who want to claim the Fluxus legacy seek to control and use the Fluxus name as a trademark or brand name rather than understanding and entering into dialogue with a durable community of ideas and practices.

What is Fluxus? According to Fluxus co-founder Dick Higgins,

"Fluxus is not: *- a moment in history, or*
- an art movement,
Fluxus is: *- a way of doing things.*
- a tradition, and
- a way of life and death."

This concise description[3] suggests the range of the ways that Fluxus founders and participants see it—and the way that others see Fluxus, often to the dismay of those who created and developed it. For some, Fluxus is a laboratory.[4] For others, it is a conceptual country,[5] or a community.[6] These descriptions work nicely. While some refer to Fluxus as a movement, few citizens of the conceptual country have ever agreed to enough common programmatic ideas to warrant the label of a movement. Instead, one might better examine the issues or themes that typify Fluxus experience. In the late 1970s, Dick Higgins developed nine criteria to describe Fluxus.[7] Ken Friedman later expanded these to twelve criteria or ideas.

The twelve ideas are: globalism, the unity of art and life, intermedia, experimentalism, chance, playfulness, simplicity or concentration, implicativeness, exemplativism, specificity, presence in time and musicality.

As Higgins wrote, these twelve ideas are not a prescription, but rather a way to reflect on the degree to which any project or process engages the Fluxus idea. For Higgins, the degree to which a work, a process or a project represents "a way of doing things, a tradition, and a way of life" consistent with the criteria determine the degree to which it can said to be Fluxus or to represent a Fluxus ethos.

In addressing the question of a Fluxus legacy, we hope that this issue of *Visible Language* will introduce readers to the rich network of Fluxus ideas. For some, it will be a new introduction. For such readers, we hope that these articles and the references that support them will reveal a world that they may not hitherto have known. For those who already know Fluxus through the work or lives of specific artists, architects, composers, designers—or through the projects, publications and exhibitions of the group—we hope that the articles here will reveal the sometimes hidden dimensions in what may seem to be a well understood phenomenon.

We are deeply grateful to *Visible Language* editor Sharon Poggenpohl for opening these pages to us, and to designer Mark Nystrom for giving these pages the final look and feel that defines this issue.

3 Higgins, Dick. 1997. "Fluxus: Theory and Reception." *Modernism Since Postmodernism: Essays on Intermedia.* San Diego: San Diego State University Press, p. 160 and 224.

4 Saper, Craig. 1998. "Fluxus as a Laboratory." In Friedman, Ken, editor. *The Fluxus Reader.* London: Academy Editions, pp. 136-151; see also Saper's "Fluxacademy: From Intermedia to Interactive Education" in *Visible Language* 26.1 and 2, pp. 79-96.

5 Milman, Estera. 1992. "Fluxus: A Conceptual Country." In *Visible Language* 26.1 and 2, pp. 12-13; see also p. 99.

6 See articles by Smith and Friedman in *Visible Language* 26.1 and 2.

7 Dick Higgins's original nine criteria appeared in a 1981 essay, "Fluxus: Theory and Reception." This was reprinted in 1998 in *The Fluxus Reader.* London: Academy Editions, pp. 218-234, especially 224. Ken Friedman expanded Higgins's list to twelve in the title essay for the exhibition *Fluxus and Company* at Emily Harvey Gallery, reprinted in *The Fluxus Reader,* pp. 237-253, especially 244-251. Higgins's dialogue with Friedman led Higgins to revise his schema to eleven criteria in *Modernism Since Postmodernism: Essays on Intermedia.* San Diego: San Diego State University Press, pp. 160-198, especially 174-175 and 225.

We thank Ina Blom, Bertrand Clavez and Hannah Higgins for their contributions—along with Higgins's friends and fellow Fluxkids, Bibbi Hansen, Bracken and Tyche Hendricks, Jessica Higgins, Clarinda and Mordecai-Mark Mac Low and Rebecca Moore. Their research and reflection forms the core of this issue on Fluxus and legacy.

The Fluxus legacy—whatever it is, whatever it will be—is the product of Fluxus—whatever it was in the past, whatever it is today. Fluxus was a community or a laboratory of some kind. The Fluxus community was—and is—the product of many minds and hands. Our goal here is to frame the work of a large and significant group of contributors.

The achievements of any community survive in living memory because some members of the community endow it with a forum of narrative and demonstration. For the past quarter century, Emily Harvey built and maintained the central Fluxus forum. Her New York gallery began as George Maciunas's last loft space. Maciunas built it in a Fluxhouse located at what was once the site of P. T. Barnum's New York Museum. After Maciunas, Jean Dupuy transformed the loft into Grommet Gallery. Emily Harvey began her program of exhibitions and concerts in that space.

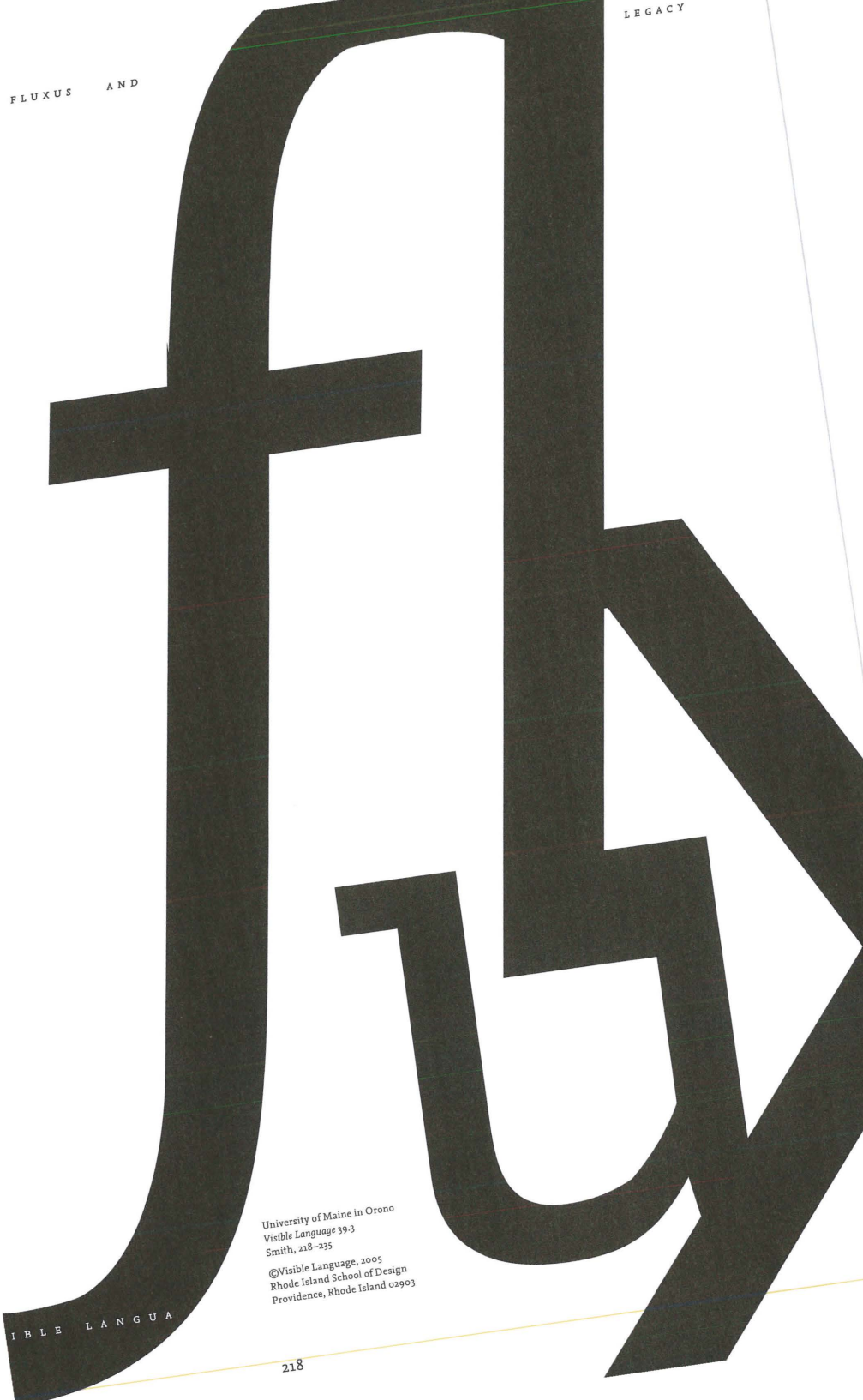
The site of P.T. Barnum's last theater was a well-chosen predecessor to the circus that George, Jean and Emily gathered around them over so many years. Barnum's theater and museum—unlike his circus—lasted only a few years. Despite his significance as a culture entrepreneur, George never made a durable go of his gallery and real estate ventures. Jean's memorable and influential Grommet Gallery lasted only a short time. In contrast, Emily Harvey Gallery had over two decades of life.

Emily expanded her activities to Vieux Pierrefeu in France, and later to the Emily Harvey Foundation in Venice. Under the guidance of Davidson Gigliotti, Henry Martin and Christian Xatrec, this foundation continues Emily's work in the community she loved and nurtured.

Emily was born in Connecticut. She exemplified the humility and virtue of New England at its best, with a spirit of kindness and generosity that embraced the Fluxus tradition. She had a keen intellect and a gentle way of speaking that revealed a personality as deep as her mind. Her work maintained and preserved the Fluxus community; her contribution is one reason that we are here today, reflecting on the question of Fluxus legacy.

We dedicate this issue of *Visible Language* to Emily Harvey, a lovely person and beloved friend. We miss her and we feel her presence still.

Ken Friedman and Owen Smith



University of Maine in Orono
Visible *Language* 39.3
Smith, 218–235

Abstract

Fluxus embraces a rich network of directions and implications. This essay suggests that it is impossible to understand some aspects of Fluxus by using traditional history as the only approach. Understanding the complex qualities of Fluxus as more than a recitation of documents and dates requires a different approach. The author states that direct participation in Fluxus activities must supplement other forms of inquiry for deep understanding. The typical Fluxus work is a conceptualization of art and artistic processes. These are rooted in direct participatory engagement. We find this argument in the writings of the Fluxus artists when they call for what Dick Higgins labels exemplativist practice. Fluxus implies — even demands — creative and playful interaction in which the viewer moves from a passive to an active role. In this shift, the viewer becomes the co-producer of works, creating new objects, manifestations and experiences.

TEACHING AND LEARNING ABOUT

OWEN F. SMITH

Thoughts, observations, and suggestions from the front lines.

Introduction

"I give you permission, but not to do anything."
JOHN CAGE

OVER THE LAST TWO DECADES, I HAVE STUDIED FLUXUS AND introduced Fluxus to students in my classes. Along the way, I have become increasingly dissatisfied with traditional scholarly or historical approaches to teaching the subject of Fluxus. We can certainly learn facts about the nature and historical activities of Fluxus just as we can — and do — for other important historical groups or movements. But something else needs to be included to learn about and understand Fluxus. That something else is the Fluxus spirit and its participatory nature.

While in much of my own work as a scholar I have tried to make good use of traditional historical methods (writing a doctoral dissertation on Fluxus, followed by an historical monograph for San Diego State University Press), scholarly approaches fail to disclose important aspects of Fluxus, perhaps the most important. One of the things that bother me the most is that historical approaches by themselves cannot communicate the nature or joy of Fluxus type work. Along with more traditional approaches, I feel that we must initiate other means of learning from and responding to the Fluxus project, using a world-view in keeping with the lessons of Fluxus itself.

To approach Fluxus in an educational environment, whether an art history classroom or a studio space, what first needs to be done is to communicate the work as a lens through which to look at the world. I have come to realize that one cannot approach Fluxus through solely traditional historical methods or models to thoroughly communicate what is interesting or significant in Fluxus. Fluxus does not bring life or meaning to a classroom from the student's awareness of its historical activities, but from its existence as a kind of permission to experiment, to have fun and to take chances.

Fluxus fully begins to resonate for students in the fullest way when we intertwine historical knowledge and living engagement, linking thought and action. The work should be seen as something to do, and doing them gives us our best sense of the future possibilities that Fluxus holds. For this reason, I would propose that you start this essay by considering these comments as part of a performance. This is a performance—or perhaps an experience of—Benjamin Patterson's piece *Seminar I*. Here is the score:

SEMINAR I

The general outline of the seminar is explained to the participants.

Models of the particular genre of activity (compositions) that will be examined are demonstrated and rehearsed by the participants.

Participants are divided into discussion-work groups.

The characteristics, problems, etc. of these models are discussed and new activities are composed within the genre.

Each work group presents its new compositions to the seminar.

General discussion, if any.

Using Patterson's *Seminar I* as a model, here is the general outline of our performance:

> **FIRST,** *I will present some ideas and issues of the genre of activity that can be loosely grouped under the name Fluxus. This is the "particular genre of activity" that we will examine today as indicated in the score. In doing this, I will present some concerns and issues I have in teaching about Fluxus and studying it as a historical subject. My aim in doing so is to present some key ideas I feel are central to Fluxus while reflecting with caution on how we approach this subject historically.*
>
> **FOLLOWING THIS SECTION,** *I will additionally present some ideas related to Fluxus as a participatory form of thinking and acting in the world. Following my comments, all who wish to continue the performance—and those who wish to participate—should form into "local" discussion-work groups to discuss these ideas and related ideas. In addition, members of these groups should compose new activities within the Fluxus genre, as Patterson instructs.*

Part of the Problem: Fluxus, history and the failure of objectivity to inspire learning

AS EVIDENCED BY THIS PUBLICATION, FLUXUS HAS BECOME THE OBJECT of increasing scholarly consideration. In recent years, there have been an ever-increasing number of exhibitions, journal publications and even books on Fluxus. In light of this growing recognition and attention, I would suggest, however odd this may seem, that we ask ourselves this question:

> *"What is the nature of the information that we are gaining? At what cost are we gaining this knowledge?"*

It may seem peculiar to suggest that acquiring knowledge about Fluxus and constructing a history of Fluxus are somehow detrimental, but I believe that this can become the case if we are not careful about how we approach teaching and learning about Fluxus. In addition, I would argue that we must consider not only the particulars through which we might develop a history of Fluxus, but what such a process does to our awareness and understanding of Fluxus — or even to Fluxus itself.

There are two principal concerns that we must consider. The first is that many of the traditional accepted practices of history, art history and cultural institutions such as museums, are directly in conflict with some of the basic attitudes that lie behind many of the specific Fluxus works, events and productions. The second, as I am inclined to argue, is that it is more valuable (in the loosest of terms) to gain a participatory knowledge of Fluxus as a means to understanding its potentials than it is to discern, decipher and determine a fixed concrete knowledge of Fluxus by studying its history.

FIGURE 1 ***Selection of Fluxus posters and publications 1968-1976.*** From the author's collection.

This essay is not, however, intended to offer some countervailing truth to current or traditional practices. It is, rather, a presentation of some of the concerns that increasingly affect my own ideas and emphases related to historical and philosophical considerations of Fluxus. This is based on the belief that it is enlightening, in the broadest sense, to pursue an understanding of Fluxus that requires participation. This is more valuable, I would argue, than knowledge of Fluxus that traditionally assumes a critical or analytical distance from the object of knowledge. My basic tack in this presentation is one of advocacy for the value of Fluxus, or for what we have to learn from Fluxus. In general, this advocacy urges a shift from the search for knowledge as an objective pursuit of historical truth, to the active subjective search for interactive understanding. Having said this I do want to qualify my point for I am not arguing in support of an anything goes approach or for quick, cheap understandings that support and allow for fake history by people who think they understand Fluxus. In fact this was my point of starting with the Cage quote about permission—for I am not calling for an anarchy of interpretation but something that is much more work, and includes a heavy dose of responsibility—a responsibility to learn about Fluxus, its history and ideologies for such a deep historical and philosophical understanding of Fluxus will I believe, as it has with me, lead to the freedom and permission to which Cage refers. This coupled with a direct understanding through participation is what will make Fluxus ultimately come alive.

The Fluxus worldview is a principal aspect of the conflict between Fluxus and most historical methods. This worldview is fundamentally connected to a rejection of the western tradition of the metaphysics of presence. This western tradition consists of two interrelated biases. The first bias privileges the object (presence) over the act (absence). The second bias involves a desire to explore and elaborate a pure, self-authenticating knowledge. This logocentric bias means that art history at the present time is principally governed by an unwritten precept that requires historians to trace the art object back to its original context of production. The operational aspects of such a paradigm are principally structured around a view that positions the object in an evolutionary chain of events. The historian must trace this chain of events back to its source—an artist. The goal is to read the intentions and conditions of the artist as the total and originary source of meaning or signification. The underlying essentialist rationale of this position further seeks to elaborate a coherent history of originality. This coherent history is an attempt to locate and determine internally consistent aspects of the object based on a general view that sees a world of conceptually and chronologically separable entities. But if one applies only these kinds of approaches and rationales to Fluxus, the results are questionable because the Fluxus "project" exists in a direct, fundamental opposition to such assumptions.

As I have argued elsewhere, Fluxus is by nature anti-essentialist. It does not seek the illumination of an end or fact. It celebrates participation in a non-hierarchal density of experience. In this way, Fluxus does not refer to a style or even a procedure, but rather to the presence of a total of social activities. Any approach to Fluxus that disregards this central social aspect cannot hope to capture what Fluxus was. Fluxus aesthetics are grounded in social connections as the product of multiple personalities, pressures, opportunities and even failures that were the product of all its participants. The attempt to place Fluxus in history falls into the positivist trap in the sense that human knowledge derives from systematic study. It also falls into the historical trap of defining the presence of something by divining the presence of a core of ideas, people or activities. Traditional methods assign limits to the nature of what is considered and consequently delimit its master codes. To define Fluxus by this means is to negate the value of such a definition. At issue, then, is the applicability of the means that historians use to describe, elaborate and determine the nature of Fluxus historically and conceptually.

What particularly disturbs me is the insidious way in which the network of commercial and scholarly art world actors have stepped in to promote Fluxus. As a result, several of the primary motivating concerns of the Fluxus project have become perverted through the very act of promotion.

Fluxus was part and parcel of a general discomfort about the commercialization of the art object, particularly the way that this "function" came

to dominate the cultural system in the 1950s and 1960s. Fluxus rejected the assumptions on which the commodification of aesthetics was based. Fluxus artists particularly rejected the two central notions of the art network: first, that the artist is someone special, a genius; second, that the artwork as an object is intrinsically valuable and that the status of art gives the artwork a value beyond the value of other objects.

Fluxus works and activities stressed non-hierarchical ways of making and knowing. Fluxus specifically emphasized the equation of art with life. Fluxus stressed the significance of process over against the importance of product through the use of new media, multimedia, intermedia and even non-media. Fluxus initiated what might be called a form of "purposeless play," to use a Cageian term. The practices of purposeless play replaced the culturally valorized exegesis of the traditional creative making processes. Fluxus generated a significantly new and often disruptive process of making and doing, learning and being. Today, the historicizing process is dissipating and tranquilizing the Fluxus search for and development of alternative systems or processes of being. I would argue that art history (and certainly art criticism) often become an unwitting or even purposeful extension of the commercial system, functioning as a kind of research and development branch for the art market. This is particularly evident in the current exploration of Fluxus' history, products (art works) and the artists associated with it. This process is objectifying and commercializing the Fluxus project in ways that are antithetical to what I feel were the aims of Fluxus.

In studying and teaching Fluxus we must break from such approaches to practice a participatory engagement that honors the intent of the work rather than worshipping the work in the embalmed and fragmented form of historical objects. In a letter to Walter Hartman, Dick Higgins commented that:

> *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 then, simply, autographs, when there market value disappears, that is when the irreversibility of our contribution will become more obvious ..."*[1]

1 **Higgins, Dick. 1969.** Letter to Walter Hartmann, dated March 31, in the collection of the Staatsgallerie, Stuttgart Germany.

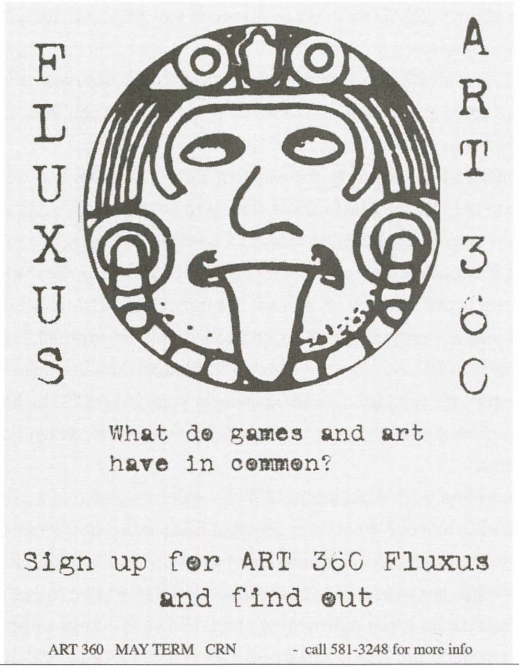


FIGURE 2 ***Poster for a studio art class, ART 360,*** on Fluxus taught by the author in the Spring of 2004, University of Maine.

In the process of commodifying aesthetics, it is always the generally accepted use-value—didactic or conceptual—that is discarded as an obstacle to valorization. With the subordination and control of selected use-values by institutions and individuals, by museums, collectors, dealers and scholars, the value of the object receives a qualitatively new exchange based meaning. More than this, and more dangerous to the work, the value of the object detaches itself from the dynamic signification process to be replaced by static attributes evident in the physicality of the sign. The decisive factor in this process is the way that the process concentrates the rich network of communicative possibilities of Fluxus into a limited set of historical and physical characteristics. Instead of an opportunity to participate in the multiple potentials of the Fluxus worldview as a dynamic process, we are now given artifacts as principal to Fluxus: the "original" *Egg kit* by Bob Watts, or "actual" Fluxus works such as one of the "famous" and "rare" Fluxkits made by Maciunas, or a piece of the "real" violin used by Paik in a performance of his *One for Violin Solo.*

The practices of commodification are converting the Fluxus project into a monopolistic situation through the aura of originality and the elevation of Fluxus to the status of a brand name—yet another brand name—in

the history of art, with all the prestige that such a position carries with it. The generic, expansive and open-ended nature of Fluxus is no longer available unless we are willing to pay the price. Once Fluxus becomes sited in an "original" form and "historical" location it correspondingly becomes removed from us.

This is particularly visible in the way that some collectors and scholars have come to see George Maciunas as central to determining what is and is not Fluxus. It is true that Maciunas played a key role in Fluxus, but this does not explain the fetishization of his work and activities. Far more important in this context is the fact that he is dead. For this reason, Fluxus depends upon Maciunas as permanently fixed, controlled and determined, for he will certainly never make another work. Such a limitation then becomes equivalent to a historical copyright, and the copyright is no longer in the hands of the Fluxus artists themselves, but in the hands of collectors, dealers, scholars and museums.

What does one learn from seeing a Fluxus object in a case in a museum or reproduced in a book? What does one gain from knowing the exact history of any given Fluxus project? Ultimately, this gives us more information and more knowledge, but where does this take us? Is it defendable to use means of recording and transmitting information about Fluxus that are antithetical or at least antagonistic to the Fluxus worldview? What is the validity of determining and communicating information and facts as a basis of knowledge on or about Fluxus if such processes interfere with a fundamental understanding of the significance and relevance of such information?

The referential nature of Fluxus works and performances reflects recognition of meaning as a construct of the particular framework, context or situation in which it is placed or occurs. Fluxus works can never claim to be completely original or distinct entities because their meaning and significance change in relation to the context in which they are experienced. Even though Maciunas often sought to stress originality as an aspect of Fluxus, his idea of originality had much to do with the idea of distinguishing Fluxus works as culturally original in contrast with the way that he saw art works as culturally traditional and therefore repetitive. By engaging in a network of referential practices, Fluxus sought to counter the prevailing notions of the significance of materiality in relationship to the praxis of creation and the aura of originality.

Even more specifically, Fluxus questions the historically dependent institutionalized processes that have come to stress a kind of aura that specifically depends on originality. The concern of this traditional emphasis is to separate the original meaning from subsequent interpretations to privilege the "then" of history over the "now" of experience. In Fluxus, though, there is no strong dependency on a determinable past and there is no specific invocation of an anticipated future. Fluxus practice emphasizes immediacy, the intensity of

FIGURE 3 ***Orono Fluxus Fluxbox,*** 2004 collective publication of multiples by students in ART 360, University of Maine.

experience found in the flow of the constantly changing present as a nexus between a multiplicity of potential pasts and futures.

In cognitive science, one of the principal aspects of a concept is relational definition. Any concept—every concept—always enters into relation with other concepts. A concept is partly defined by its attributes and partly by its relations to other concepts or the data structure in which it exists or is placed. If this is a given of cognition, the issue becomes a question of which part of the schema we emphasize. Traditionally, the visual arts give priority to the physical attributes as reflective of, or physical evidence for—as in a sign system—the primary communicative nature of the object under consideration. I argue that we must reverse the priority of this schema if we are to understand Fluxus. We must place greater emphasis on the significance of the concept in relation to other concepts and we must emphasize the specifically operational nature of these relationships as they develop and alter our ideas, perceptions and—ultimately—our worldview. In such an approach, what becomes important is a process of expansive interaction, rather than a product-centered notion of knowledge.

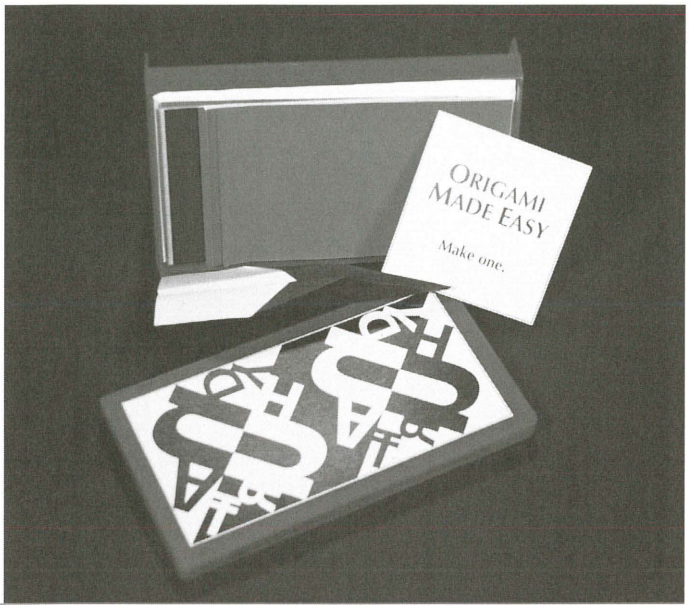


FIGURE 4 ***Origami Made Easy,*** Andy Hurtt, 2004. From the author's collection.

What, then, does this leave us with? How are we to consider Fluxus in the light of these ideas? Should we abandon all perceptual, social, semiotic and other kinds of systematic approaches to Fluxus to celebrate anarchy of interpretation? The simple answer is no. We should not reject them altogether. Rather, we should open avenues of consideration between a field of information, in this case Fluxus, and the multiple possibilities of this material as an interactive aspect of our environment.

Together with traditional approaches, we must initiate other means of learning from and responding to the Fluxus project or worldview. This is particularly important for those aspects of Fluxus that are not a resolution, but a continuance of play. This kind of approach is of particular import when teaching about Fluxus.

Some possible solutions, or at least some thoughts about where to go from here and how to get

WHEN I STUDIED ART HISTORY AND STUDIO ART AS AN UNDERGRADUATE I never heard mention of Fluxus. In fact, my first interaction with Fluxus had nothing to do with my academic work at all. It came as a matter of chance when in 1976 a friend took me to see the Fluxus Festival held at And/or Gallery in Seattle. What I saw intrigued me. There were events and performances, a

FIGURE 5 ***Scores and First Aid,*** Slou, 2002-2003. From the author's collection.

small exhibition of work, and a lot to look at, interact with and even do. At the same time, I had little or no context for this kind of work so I filed it away as an interesting event and did not think much more of it.

Some years later, in 1984, I took a class as a graduate student in art history that covered "alternative art forms" from the 1950s through the 1970s. Here, I was once again introduced to Fluxus. In this case, I met Fluxus as part of a historical record of artistic activity from Duchamp and Cage to Happenings, performance art, book art, mail art, conceptual art, earth art and much more.

Although this consideration of Fluxus was rather brief, about one and a half lectures, even this much was remarkable as part of a class on the history of art. With this reintroduction, I was excited to learn more about Fluxus, in part because it seemed to be a crucial expression of the changes in art making, and particularly because I had experienced it directly and it just "made sense" to me as something that would allow me to bring together my interests in making art as well as studying the history of art. In this context, Fluxus really began to mean something. It began to have a presence for me and it ultimately became the focus of my work that continues to this day. Why am I explaining all this? In part, because these first experiences still shape my thinking. More importantly, I am offering my experience as an example of how the

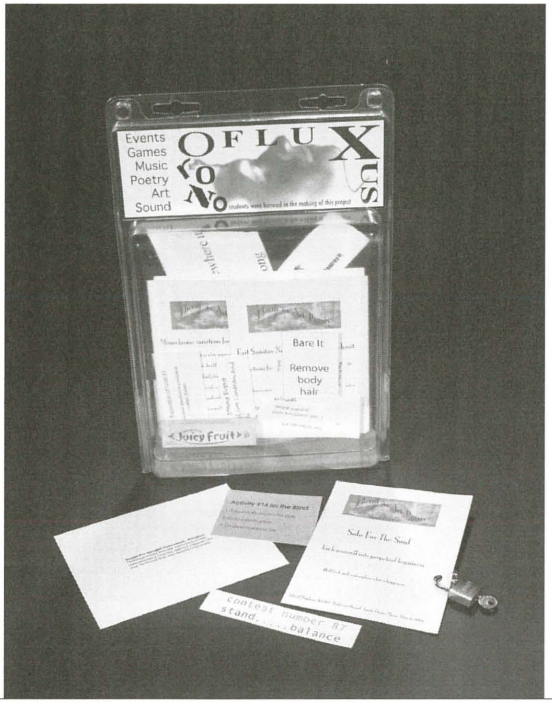


FIGURE 6 ***Orono Fluxus Events, Games, Music, Poetry, Sound,*** 2004. Collective publication of scores and event works by students in ART 360.

balanced combination of historical knowledge and direct participation are key to teaching and learning about Fluxus.

A primary aspect of all Fluxus type work is a conceptualization of art and artistic processes based in direct participatory engagement. For such an awareness to take hold, experience holds the key. Dick Higgins describes this kind of work in the following way: "[it] is always at the center of an emanation of experience . . . we offer implicativeness [sic] as a goal—the work has not only its own integrity but suggests a whole vast range of further possibilities."[2]

In this context, learning about Fluxus must entail more than historical knowledge of a score by Eric Andersen or an object by Robert Filliou. It entails a direct hands-on engagement. Fluxus "implies," even demands, a creative playful interaction in which the viewer not only moves from a passive to an active role, one in which the viewer also becomes the producer of works, creating new objects, manifestations and experiences.

Many authors have made note of Maciunas' idea of Fluxus type work leading to the disappearance of the artist—and here is the real gist of this idea. Fluxus in one form is not at all about a set of particulars, historical or other-

2 **Higgins, Dick. 1978.** "An Exemplativist Manifesto." Reproduced in *A Dialectic of Centuries: Notes towards a Theory of the New Arts.* New York: Printed Editions, p. 162.

FIGURE 7 ***Museum Educational Materials,*** developed by students to teach about Fluxus for the University of Maine Museum of Art exhibition "BETWIXT & BETWEEN The Life & Work of Fluxus Artist Dick Higgins," 2002.

wise. It is about setting in motion an awareness that can or will lead one to become part of Fluxus by taking on the conceptual and creative roles demonstrated by the historical events and activities. In this way, knowledge of Fluxus is a lens and a frame for continued thinking and acting in contemporary contexts. This involves a genuine engagement in the world as it is experienced and lived. If we understand this as well as other aspects about what might be seen as the "Fluxus agenda," then our path is clear. We must act in consort with the work to play out its implications and potentialities in what I call a praxis model of engaged productive learning. To do this, however, we must understand the aims of Fluxus type work. This is work that should generally be seen as part of what Dick Higgins labeled "Exemplativist art."

If Fluxus is more than a historical moment, to be analyzed, studied and taught, the question might be, "how are we to understand it?" more significantly, the question might be "How are we to engage with it?"

Dick Higgins offered one answer to this through his concept of exemplativism. This is a key concept in his creative practice and a central concept for understanding the continued significance of Fluxus and the Fluxus attitude.

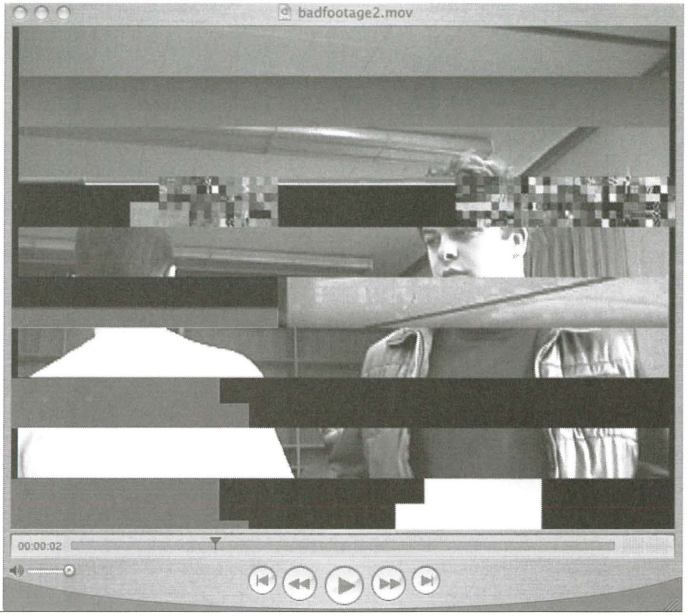


FIGURE 8 ***Fluxfilm Badfootage,*** Bud Grant, Tara Lane and Matt Rhodes, 1999. From the author's collection.

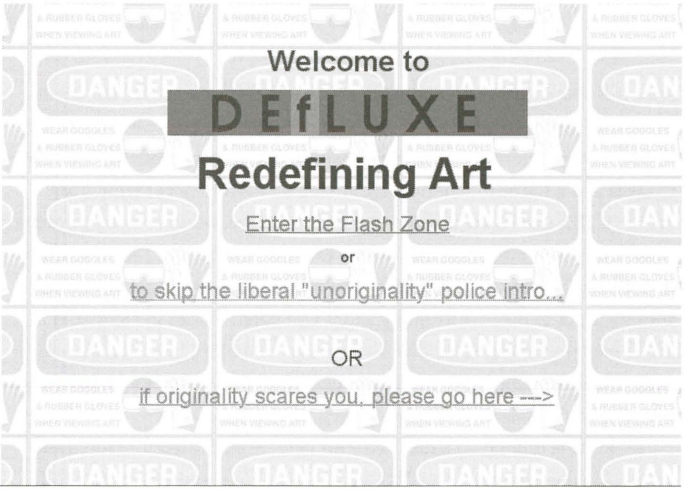


FIGURE 9 ***DEfLUXE web site,*** Braeme Thurrell, 1996. Archived at http://www.altarts.org/dfx/dfxsite1/index1.html

In a broad sense, exemplativist work is simply a form of work in which the form epitomizes at least a part of what it describes. In many cases, exemplativist work exists as a concrete manifestation of or even an example of its conceptual ground.

Fluxus and exemplativist praxis both seek to indicate possibilities without being overly proscriptive or evaluative. The aim of exemplativist work is neither to defend nor describe in detail, but rather to suggest and infer. With this notion as a base point, Fluxus then becomes significant as an educational field. Fluxus is not so much an education based in the specifics of artists, dates or particular works, but a field of learning that involves examples of how certain concerns and ideas were raised, developed and presented. Higgins describes the work and processes of exemplativist art in the following way:

> *[the] focus is the process of transferring his model to the reader or spectator. The detail is the example, not the defense of it. If the work is an essay, the process of the transfer is what is given.... An exemplative work is merely one which gets its crucial aesthetic impact from its transference of a model from the artist's mind to the spectator's.*[3]

From this point of view it is clear that Exemplativism (and Fluxus), is founded on a simple recognition of creative engagement (art) as potentiality, rather than as a fixed point in culture. Higgins again:

> *So many of the artists became unhappy about this eternal, unyielding quality in their art, that they began to wish their work were more like shoes, more temporary, more human, more able to admit of the possibility of change. The fixed-finished work began to be supplemented by the idea of a work as process, constantly becoming something else, tentative, allowing more than one interpretation.*[4]

What is at the new core is a concern for enriching the experiential world of the spectator by "... enlarging the repertoire of their over-all experience"[5] and to do so requires not only a new mentality but a new means of making art—art that presents a view even while it intentionally remains open for the spectator or viewer to extend the process as a means of creating the greatest range of usefulness.

When we return to the work itself, the most basic lesson that Fluxus gives us is that one should be attentive to the potential of the world around us. This is a freedom to be open to new things. It is ultimately a freedom born of responsibility. The conceptualization of art as part of, or connected to, perceptual experience is an established aesthetic. What is different is the way that Higgins and other Fluxus artists place this notion in a broader participatory frame. Such an engagement in art is what Higgins has called "post-cognitive." He calls upon us as participant observers (in this case as "artists" or "viewers") to consider how we create or relate to art, perhaps both. As well, he calls on us

3 Higgins, Dick. 1978. "Exemplative Works of Art." *A Dialectic of Centuries*, p. 24.

4 Higgins, Dick. 1969. "Intending." In *foewgom bwhnw*, New York: Something Else Press, p. 47, 49.

5 Higgins, Dick. 1969. "Danger and Boredom." In *foewgombwhnw*, p. 123.

to consider our expectations of art, and he asks us to reflect on what it is that comprises these expectations. Such an engagement in art is an engagement in which art becomes a matrix for suggestions and potentialities for thinking, perceiving and acting. This is part of Fluxus and part of a broader conceptualization that Higgins describes in the following way:

> *... the focus has come off of the individual and his identity ... off of the new means of perception. It came to be instead on the object qua object, the poem within the poem the word within the word—the process as process, accepting reality as a found object, enfolding it by the edges, so to speak without trying to distort it.... The work becomes a matrix any kind of matrix will do for the particular needs of the particular work. The artist gives you the structure; you may fill it in yourself.*[6]

To learn about Fluxus is to do Fluxus, but it is neither just fun and games nor silly and pointless provocations (although many students at first think one or all of these to be the case). The role for the Fluxus artist, and by extension for those of us who want to learn about Fluxus, was described by Ben Patterson when he wrote in *The Four Suits* that "I require that the central function of the artist be a duality of discoverer and educator: discoverer of the varying possibilities for selecting from environmental stimuli, specific percepts and organizing these into significant perceptions, and concurrently as an educator, training a public in the ability to perceive in newly discovered patterns."[7]

For Patterson, and I believe for us today, the lesson of Fluxus is that the artist/musician/poet is no longer a person tied to the craft of a particular medium, but is an explorer of perception and a public educator who moves between traditional intellectual disciplines and media categories in a process of detection, examination and communication. As participants in the Fluxus experience we, both students and teachers, are offered a set of conceptual frames with which to think a place to act, and a value structure that makes sense of the world for its own sake. I believe that these ideas are just as significant today as they were some forty plus years ago when Fluxus first coalesced.[8]

6 Higgins, "The Post-Cognative Era: Looking for the Sense in It All," *A Dialectic of Centuries*, p. 8.

7 Patterson, Ben. 1965. "Notes on Pets," *the Four Suits*. New York: Something Else Press, p. XX.

8 Ken Friedman has rightly pointed out to me that that Fluxus has since it inception been concerned with education and the artists associated with it have actively participated in and created a wide variety of educational ventures over the years. Ken wrote "Filliou's book, Hansen's academy, the work Jeff Berner and I did at the San Francisco State College Experimental College, the Fluxus West workshops in various places, and the different kinds of work that treat Fluxus as a learning practice outside of the traditional teaching and learning activities that some Fluxus artists practiced when employed as professors of art, music, etc." Ken additionally added that "A nice distinction might be Beuys as an artist outside the academy attempting to create a Free International University and Beuys in the academy as an ordinary—or even extraordinary—art professor."

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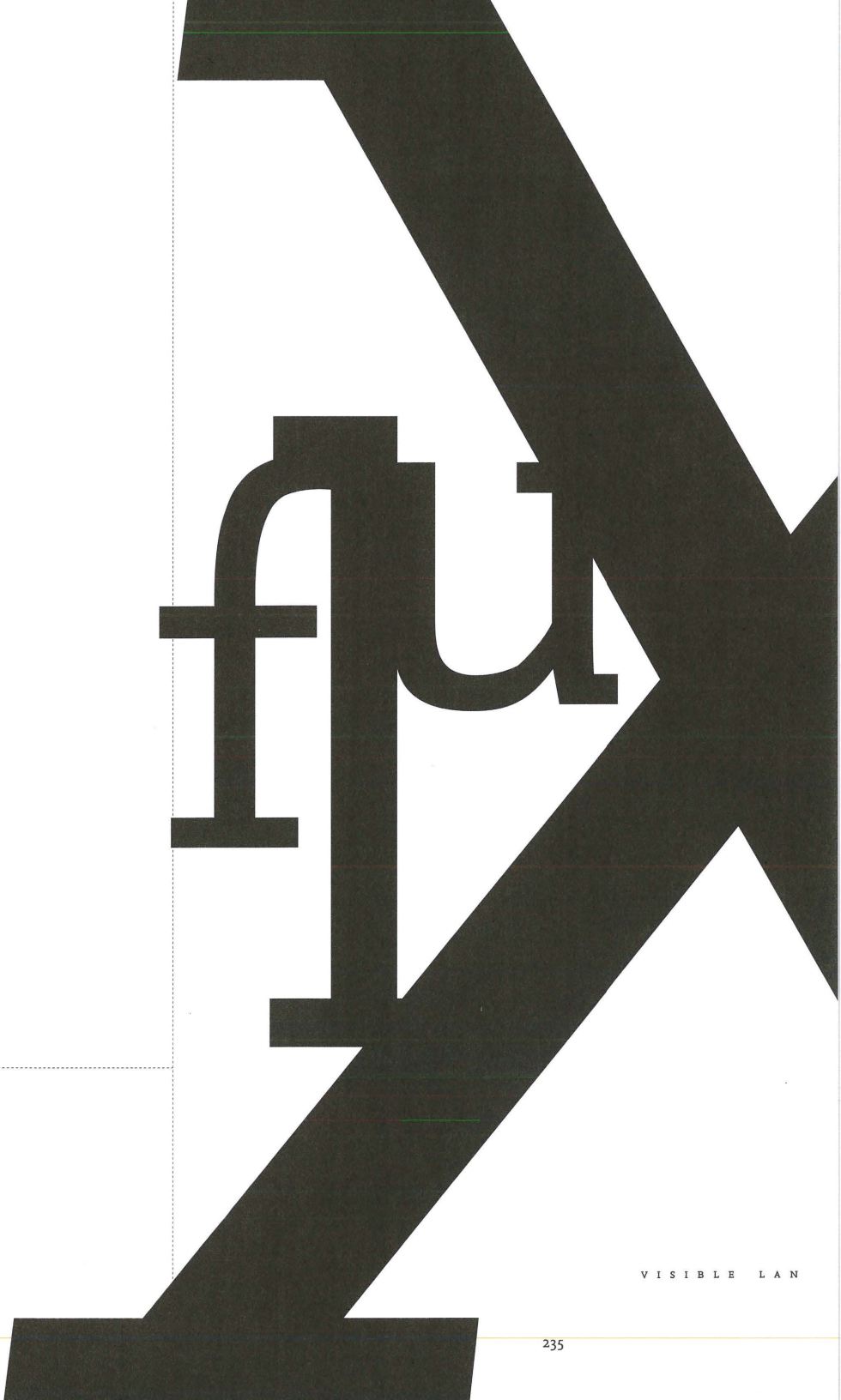

Abstract

It is often said that Fluxus exerts profound influence on contemporary artists. This essay argues that Fluxus has done much more than this. This article argues that Fluxus has, in fact, established the general frame of contemporary art. Fluxus did this by reshaping the paradigm within which art is made in Thomas Kuhn's sense of the term paradigm. Rather than exerting a visible influence on artists, Fluxus forms the invisible background to much contemporary art. As a result, young artists are generally unaware of Fluxus and its achievements even though they create works that are strongly inspired by it. This article points to similarities and differences between the era in which Fluxus was born and the current moment. It examines the relationship of art and artist to audience, the mingling of art and life, cultural institutions and economic structures as key concepts in Fluxus work.

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?S

BERTRAND CLAVEZ

"Being, acting and making are much more useful concepts. Art is a process. At the limit, everything is art... I imagine that the art of the future will always be moving, never arrived, the art of being lost without losing oneself."

ROBERT FILLIOU

"The entire subject of modes of meeting and the invention of relationships represents esthetic objects that deserve being studied as such."

NICOLAS BOURRIAUD

Reference or paradigm for young contemporary artists?

IN HIS BOOK *ESTHÉTIQUE RELATIONNELLE*, the influential french art critic Nicolas Bourriaud emphasizes the significant originality of contemporary works that question the relations between the artist and the public. Bourriaud effectively admits—even as he denies it—that these kinds of work evoke the convivial works of Fluxus. (Think, for example, about Alison Knowles's proposition: "make a salad.") But Bourriaud immediately adds "(we) must interpret those productions ... without hiding behind the history of art of the sixties."[1] While this is a

1 **Nicolas Bourriaud, 1998.** *Esthétique Relationnelle*, Les Presses du Réel, p.7.

courageous attempt to define a new art that we must accept, we must also recognize the similarities between the art works of two periods. While it is impossible to apply the ideas of one era to another as a strict analytical grid, the works of Fluxus and the works of the artists gathered by Bourriaud demonstrate more than incidental resemblance.

The first Fluxus concerts of the years 1962–1964 separated the artists and the audience in concerts that played against classic concert rituals to emphasize the artistic rejection of the boundaries implicit in traditional music. Performers wore formal concert dress, the artists performed on stage separated from their audience, many works used classic musical instruments, and so on. At the same time, another tradition was central to Fluxus practice, and the artists sought closer interaction between performers, works and audience in a more intimate practice of performances played within the "group." In these performances, artists and audience constituted two homothetic sets. This tradition has always coexisted with the tradition of the great public performances. Both traditions were central to the proto-Fluxus era of 1959–1961 in New York. The public activities of the New York Audio-Visual Group represented the classical side of the performance tradition. The private evenings of performances organized by La Monte Young in Yoko Ono's loft on Chamber Street represented the other.

Fluxus activities in the later 1960s and the early 1970s abolished this clear distinction in a flow of activities that brought artist and audience together as a homogeneous entity. In the meantime, Fluxus group members created a comprehensive body of works and theories on the practice of events and performance art in general. They transmitted their ideas in the numerous publications of Fluxus, Dé/coll-age, Something Else Press and others, spreading these ideas widely. This corpus dealt with such questions as ontology of the artwork, immaterial practices and indeterminacy. This perspective clearly reveals a comprehension of the work of art as essentially transactional, demonstrating the position of a clearly relational esthetic.

Such concepts as "concept art" (Henry Flynt, 1961), "meaningless art (Walter de Maria, 1960), "veramusement" (Henry Flynt, 1963), "intermedia" (Dick Higgins, 1966), "event" (George Brecht, 1959) and "art as organized leisure" (Robert Filliou, 1968) are fundamental concepts for the major part of Fluxus works. All these concepts deal with relational practices. Moreover, many Fluxus projects of the 1960s and 1970s share strong ties with Bourriaud's definition of "relational esthetics." These include the Fluxfests and Fluxconcerts, Flux Snow Event and others in the 1960s, together with such major projects as the Fluxdivorce, Fluxwedding, Fluxmass and Fluxmeals in the 1970s. Some projects such as the Fluxfests, Fluxconcerts or the Fluxmass involved large public audiences. Others involved smaller circles of Fluxus artists and the larger group that Maciunas labeled "Fluxfriends." From the later 1960s, these

events grew to become an important part of group activities until George Maciunas's death in 1978.

However, these works are often different from similar events produced today. Despite a similar problematic, they are different not least because of their different reception. They often took place at the fringe of the art world. Even when they had huge audiences, the fact that they took place outside art venues placed them outside the context of art. In many senses, they were provocative, and they were sometimes private to Fluxus, or at least to the small circle of people in and around Fluxus. In contrast, today's relational works are visible to a large art public, consensual and institutional within the art world. Moreover, this distinct frame can't be explained by the idea of the spectacle or the prompt acceptance and use by radical criticism. Neither can it be explained by a hypothetical acceptance of contemporary art as new academism. Recent provocative outbursts in France, or the regular criticism of art exhibitions by public authorities—for example, the Sensation show at the Brooklyn Art Museum—clearly show the contrary.

The gap between the two eras is due to two ontologically distinct conceptions of the function of the work of art. In the 1960s, the exploration of conviviality was seen as an act of possible cultural regeneration. At the time, this vision extended to a larger culture, including the culture outside of the world of art. Today, the work is the place of conviviality itself. It uses the context it questions—mostly institutional—without trying to modify, change or disturb it in any way.

This inscription within such a context denies the need for transformation. The aim is no longer to generate a new lived experience, or to modify our perception in which the artist proposed the work as an alternative project to reality. Mingling art and life in the 1960s and 1970s came down to proposing a utopian realism. In contrast, the aim of today's relational work involves opening an exchange space, within a closed artistic world "and often given by cultural institutions, a space of encounter, of leisure even, not that different from the organized leisure of spectacular capitalism."

In Guy Debord's analysis, "whereas in the primitive moment of the capitalistic accumulations 'the politic economy sees only the proletarian in the worker' ... without ever considering him in 'his leisure, his humanity,' this position ... is overturned as soon as the degree of abundance reached by the production of goods asks for an increscent collaboration of the worker. ... Immediately cleansed of the absolute contempt clearly showed by all the modalities of organization and surveillance of the production, [he] is everyday treated ... with a polite zeal under the mask of the consumer. Then the 'humanism of merchandise' takes over 'the leisure and the humanity' of the worker, simply because the political economy can and must now dominate

those spheres as political economy. Thus, the absolute denial of the human being has taken over the whole human existence."[2]

2 **Debord, Guy. 1967.** *La Société du spectacle*, Paris: Buchet-Chastel.

The work of art, in the great tradition of the Realism, is a fiction of reality. While it is quite didactic, it is strictly distinguished from the real. At last, it becomes more an art of conversation than an art of debate. It is better understood as a representation—in all the meanings of the term, even theatrical—than a critique. From the utopia of expanding the field of art that characterized the art of the 1960s, we pass to a utopia of proximity. On the scale of aleatoric and ephemeral communities, this is strongly homogeneous in sociological terms.

The question of utopia is important in this matter. It forms the point of symmetry where Fluxus encounters its mirrored reflection in today's art—or at least in the productions we consider here. Fluxus has always built the spaces where its social and esthetic utopia could exist beyond the occasional use of existing structures for festivals such as the Städtische Museum for the Wiesbaden concerts, the American Center in Paris or Carnegie Recital Hall for the New York Fluxconcerts. These spaces included Yoko Ono's loft on Chamber Street where the chamber series took place, George Maciunas's AG Gallery for the Musica Antica & Nova, and his studio after he returned to New York. These also included the Cedilla of George Brecht and Robert Filliou in Villefranche sur Mer, Ben Vautier's Shop of Ben Vautier in Nice, the Fluxus West centers in San Francisco and San Diego or Jean Dupuy's Grommet Gallery in George Maciunas's last loft space, later to be the site of the Emily Harvey Gallery. Fluxus people created all these spaces.

The will to realize the practical social settling of an artistic utopia—and the artistic settling of a social utopia—climaxed with the Fluxhouse Cooperative Inc. of George Maciunas and Bob Watts. This was a key factor in the rehabilitation of Soho, and its mutation into an artistic area of New York City.[3] One can describe this as an American pattern of free enterprise, and George Maciunas was often attacked for his real estate operations. It is more accurate to describe this pattern as a collective and individual pattern assumed and used by Fluxus and its "members." from Dick Higgins's creation of Something Else Press, to the well known multiples published under the rubric of Fluxus Editions, the business firm is one of the operative models of Fluxus activity.

3 **Williams, Emmett. 1997.** "Don Quixote in Soho." In *Mr. Fluxus: a collective portrait of George Maciunas*, London: Thames and Hudson, p. 167.

Beyond this, the model of the firm also offered Fluxus one of its main possibilities for existence. As Fluxus and Fluxus people mostly worked outside the framework of art institutions, grants, or public support, Fluxus was compelled to raise funds to remain active and independent. At the same time, one must admit that this canonical behavior was essentially predicated on the incredible energy of George Maciunas. In other terms, all this involved using, or even playing off, the capitalistic system to produce objects or actions necessary to its subversion.

The politically radical orientation seen in much Fluxus activity was mainly due to the influence of Henry Flynt on George Maciunas. It never extended to the other artists, and it reached an early limit when Maciunas attempted to involve the other artists in "direct actions," an approach to public engagement that they refused. This led to the first great crisis of the group. In Fluxus Policy Newsletter n°6 of 1963, Maciunas proposed a series of sabotage actions. Most of the artists reacted against these proposals. Their strong reactions led to a series of breaks within Fluxus and to Maciunas's proposals of expulsions from it. Similarly, Maciunas and Flynt decided to picket Karlheinz Stockhausen's Originale during Charlotte Moorman's 1965 Festival of the Avant-Garde, and Maciunas forbid any Fluxus member from performing in it. Apart from the general fiasco surrounding the event, this led to Maciunas's attempt to exclude many artists from Fluxus. Most of the artists paid no attention to the edicts of expulsion, and they continued to see themselves as active in Fluxus, working with one another as if nothing at all had happened.

The firm as a larger model for Fluxus activities goes beyond the attempt to parody capitalism, however. The Cedilla was a case in point. La Cédille Qui Sourit was a kind of shop, together with a studio, a school, a mail art publishing firm and more created by Robert Filliou and George Brecht in Villefranche sur Mer, a small town near Nice in the south-east of France. Alas, The Cedilla, didn't last long, but the artists related their experience, projects and the good time they had in a book published by Something Else Press in 1967 titled *Games at the Cedilla or the Cedilla Takes Off*.

We can easily trail the influence of the firm model on the art of the last decennia. The increasing amount of artistic firms from Fabrice Hybert to Ready Mades Belong to Everyone, and social forms of work are obvious indicators of this phenomenon. Even if the models are still operative, however, they are again significantly different today than they were in the 1960s.

Artistic firms are no longer a means, nor even a pretext, to experiment with the idea of creating alternative organizations with different kinds of goals. They are, instead, a representation of real business, and they operate under the same modes by adapting similar values: producing value, offering service and developing working tools. On the other hand, as the real firms offer more and more conviviality to their employees, the distinction has begun to vanish. It is no surprise that artistic work mirror this convivial function. They simulate the entrepreneurial functioning by its representation, offering virtual services while creating real surplus value. In this way, they disclose the nature of the entire operation as simulacra. As a representation, and as a realistic one, artistic firms establish a relation to mimesis that sets them close to genre painting, turning the object of the representation into an esthetic issue rather than into a social stake.

In terms of social ground, the actions and practices of contemporary artists are also informed by the ideas and practices of Fluxus that attempted to act in and on the world. Fluxus often attempted to act in the world. Consider, for example, Maciunas's argument that "Fluxus objectives are social (not aesthetic). They are connected to the LEF group of 1929 in the Soviet Union (ideologically) and concerned with gradual elimination of the fine art ... motivated by the desire to stop the waste of materials and human resources and divert it to socially constructive ends."[4] In other ways, not always political, but often social, so did other Fluxus artists from Joseph Beuys and Nam June Paik to Robert Filliou, Ken Friedman, Bengt af Klintberg and Milan Knizak. This is also true of many artists today.

4 **Maciunas, George. 1964.** *Letter to Thomas Schmit*, January. Detroit: Silverman Collection.

By taking account of the hopes, rules, conflicts and comprehension of those who use the places they invest with art, social based works try to involve art in a larger and real society beyond what sometimes seem to be the limits of the art world. The problem today is that attempts to restore the social tissue with artworks often appears to be a working method that answers an institutional command, rather than a spontaneous initiative by artists who are personally concerned with intervening in the world.

We cannot doubt the operational value of those works. This is all the more true when they are the consequence of serious and appreciable analytic work.[5] At the same time, it is important to realize that the origin of the work has been displaced from the individual artist to cultural, political or associative institutions. It is also important to recognize how, in this way, the arena of the work has been reduced from the universal plane to the local level.

5 **More details on those practices** in the essay of Hal Foster "L'artists comme ethnographe, ou la 'fin de l'histoire." Paris: Editions du Centre Georges Pompidou, p. 4.

Thus, a paradox emerges. On the one hand, the global village that Marshall McLuhan predicted has become a reality. On the other, the action field of artists has been reduced to the dimension of microcosm. Hal Foster summarizes this dimension under the term of "the paradigm of the ethnographer." Contemporary art now explores issues horizontally, under the mode of the cartography. This is a contrast with art that explores issues vertically, in the traditional shape of narration and historicity. Foster underlines the fact that this relation to local and everyday life is based upon a representation. "Dead as culture, the local and the daily can be resuscitated as simulacra, becoming a 'theme' for an amusement park, or a 'history' for a shopping center, and the 'in situ' process can be engrossed in this zombification of the local and the quotidian, by this Disney version of the in situ."[6]

6 **Foster Hal,** "L'artists comme ethnographe..." pp. 503-504.

For myself, I would broaden this notion of horizontality to cover all the modalities of contemporary creation. This is what makes them artworks of the era of the global village, the network, electric speed and its consequence, the electronic. The "instantaneity" that McLuhan conceptualized by electric information shapes a horizontal vision of the world and replaces temporality with spatiality.[7] Therefore, historical verticality no longer interferes with the

7 **See the analysis of feedback** in automation in Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media*, chapter 33.

concept of the artwork, aiding a generalized appropriation of images that are the eternal limbs of a continuous present. However, if the temporality of the work is abolished, its inscription into a microcosm does not affect its scope. It renounces the universal, preferring the general, as a concretion of similar spaces that bear the same method to underline their remaining particularities.

Thus, the internationalist, cosmopolitan, anti-capitalist and trans-disciplinarian utopia of Fluxus, saw its realization into a general topology of the spectacular society. I use the term "realization" here in the Hegelian, speculative tense, to say that today's artwork dialectically realizes the project of Fluxus. But it does so in a specific way, in its prophetic understanding. Fluxus contained and announced this topographical vision of the artwork. The verticality of historicity is surely present in Fluxus, as it is in every avant-garde and neo-avant-garde group, to the degree that it comes under the procedures of self-legitimation that Peter Burger describes.[8] If the references to Dada, Futurism, Satie or Russolo shown in Maciunas's various charts,[9] or the American edition of Huelsenbeck's *Dada Almanac* published by Dick Higgins,[10] are assumed to represent the Fluxus artists in some way, they do not presuppose any affiliations, nor a vassalage of the Fluxus works to those of their elders. On the contrary, the attempts of Raoul Hausmann or Ionesco to contest the Fluxus works are challenged by the fact that Fluxus artists repeatedly refused the designation of Neo-Dada. (Moreover, for many, the label "neo-Dada" defined another group of artists, the American painters gathered around Robert Rauschenberg).[11]

One basic postulate of Fluxus involved refusing professionalism in art. This supposes a horizontal function, and members of the group come from different horizons, particularly from fields outside the art world. While Fluxus included artists, musicians, poets and performers, it was also a forum for people who began as chemists, economists, record salesmen, encyclopedia salesmen, printers, industrial designers, theologians, and more. This wide attitude was reinforced by a refusal to privilege Europe, a factor[12] that allowed American, Japanese, Korean Lithuanian, Czech, Danish, French or English artists to work together on equal terms. They worked without placing value on national origin, all the more as they were strongly influenced by the teaching of John Cage, and through him, by the Buddhist spirituality that contradicts the occidental vision of a vertical conception of the transcendence. Last, these artists from around the world were profoundly curious. They explored both the tools offered by new technologies, and their consequences, particularly the new social and behavioral models they implied.[13] Well-known examples of this include Nam June Paik's very early use of video and his high level electronic research, the television works of Wolf Vostell, the use of computers in art by Joe Jones, Dick Higgins and Alison Knowles.

8 Bürger, Peter. 1974. *Theorie der Avant-Garde*. Frankfurt am Main: Surkamp Verlag.

9 ***Fluxus (its historical development and relationship to avant-garde movements)***, Fluxus editions, ca 1965, and *Diagram of historical development of Fluxus/ and other 4 dimensional aural, optic/olfactory, epithelial ad tactile art forms (incomplete)*, published by Maciunas, 1973.

10 Huelsenbeck, Richard. 1966. *Dada Almanach*, New York: Something Else Press.

11 The counter example of this assertion is of course the festival Neo-Dada in Der Musik of the 16th of June 1962, at the Kammerspiele of Düsseldorf, where almost all the future founders of the group were present.

12 See Maciunas's *Fluxus* *Manifesto* of February 1963. It should be noted, however, that none of the other artists signed the manifesto.

13 See, for example, Dick Higgins's *Computers for the Arts*, published in 1970 by Abyss Publications of Somerville, Massachusetts, or Paik's 1976 study for the Ford Foundation titled *Media Planning for the Post-Industrial Society*. More recently, see Ken Friedman's technology studies funded by the European Union, such as *Multiple Views on Multimedia and the World Wide Web: A European Perspective for the INFO2000 Project* or "Cities in the Information Age" in Magid Igbaria and Margaret Tan's 1998 book, *The Virtual Workplace* from Idea Group Publishing of Hershey, Pennsylvania.

The consequence of those founding concepts is the wide-open work that Fluxus achieved within a world-scaled networking structure. The best illustration of this achievement remains the abundant use of correspondence. One example is Mail Art, almost invented by Fluxus people, but it also included the exchange of projects, an internal newsletter, newspapers, sending materials, tracts, posters, multiple editions and, naturally, a form of private correspondence that was most often half-private since it was often circulated to the other artists.

Moreover, Fluxus artists were perfectly aware of the revolutionary character of their networking practice, and they understood it as an adaptation to the electric speed of an electronic era. As attentive readers and admirers of McLuhan, the frequent use of the term "network" in their writings and works shows that this choice doesn't simply emerge from the preceding postulates. It informs them, constituting them as a theoretical basis for Fluxus work. (McLuhan frequently received homage in the artworks of Fluxus people. He was himself a friend and correspondence of such Fluxus artists as Higgins, Paik, and others.)[14] The paradigm of the network is visible in Robert Filliou's rubric of The Eternal Network, La Monte Young's Dream Houses, Ray Johnson's New York Correspondence School, Robert Watt's Fluxus postage stamps, Nam June Paik's project of a satellite television and more.

In 1972, Ken Friedman stated in *The Aesthetics:* "The intermedialist is one who works with and through many forms in the exploration of the relationship and prophetic expression. Where is consistency? In the devotion to relationship as a basic concern of intermedial art ... The new work has the intermedial consistency of relationship, to itself, to the interlocked network of searches and parallels, to the elements of the world about.[15] This understanding of the artwork as horizontal and interdisciplinary is based on a few antithetic pairs that entitle Fluxus to function in an organic way, beyond the diversity of the individual choices and practices. Basing works upon time as Events do, emphasizing the limits of the bearable as Tomas Schmit's Zyklus does, the structure of the group is widely spread in space. Functioning in a dialectical relationship against necessary historical reference, we see a dialectic of ephemeral works operating within their performing duration of the present. Against the perspectivist hierarchy of history, stands Filliou's principle of equivalence, inscribing creation into a permanent—and therefore non historical—eternal experimentation network. Last, there is the problem of value, a problematic that could bring the return of verticality were it not refuted by Ben Vautier's understanding of Art Total. This is the other side of a coin declaring the death of art on its face. If anything is art, everything is art. Esthetic value is no longer in the work, but in the eye—and mind—of the viewer. The artist himself is an individual who acts at the same level as other human beings without pretending to a superior point of view. In this way, he

14 For example, Robert Watts multiple published by Implosion Editions *McLuhan Sweatshirt* in 1967/1968 (Silverman collection no 516, Detroit, USA), or *McLuhan's face in electronic variation* (1968) by Nam June Paik, a video representing McLuhan's face distorted by an electromagnetic field, accompanied by the following text:

Mc Snob said, "Wind is moving the flag"

Mc Butterfly said "Flag is moving the wind

Mc Luhan said, "Your Mind is moving".

(in catalogue Nam June Paik Electronic Art II, Bonino Gallery, New York 17th of April/11th of May 1968)

15 Friedman, Ken. 1972. *The Aesthetics.* Cullompton, Devon, UK:Beau Geste Press, pp. 6-7, "Some investigations, part I."

embodies esthetic value. In contrast with a vertical view, this is an attempt to reach a discerning ability, an accurate view of the present.

The Fluxus territory I sketch here may evoke one or another of the contemporary works by young artists. However, the reputation of Fluxus remains relatively invisible, certainly in France and to a great degree elsewhere. Information on Fluxus is sometimes confidential, often partial and fragmentary. This makes it difficult to locate or to learn about the works and original writings. Even worse, the cartoon version of Fluxus published by many art historians denies the real influence of Fluxus on recent art. In this caricature, Fluxus is often reduced to a neo-Dadaist movement whose goal was provocation and humor rather than a phenomenon that used humor and provocation as tools in the service of higher goals. Fluxus remains a sadly mistreated phenomenon in contemporary art history, forgotten entirely in books that vulgarize history as the flow of trends, considered elsewhere as a label for everything that doesn't fit categories. On still other occasions, it is annexed to the Pop art, and so on.

As it is, most young artists don't acknowledge their debt to Fluxus. In fact, many don't even know about it. Even though their work strongly evokes the experimentations of the 1960s, this evocation is rarely the result of appropriation or even citation. How can we explain the formal proximity of their work to Fluxus if post-modern strategies are not involved?

Fluxus appears to be an unwilling or unconscious reference point for contemporary artists. Even though Fluxus remains invisible, it remains a reference point because they are creating their work within the frame that Fluxus prophesied at the end of the 1960s. Even so, the pragmatism underlined by the notion of "artist as ethnographer" and the fiction of "artistic firms" distinguishes current practices from those of the 1960s. This attitude is also an adaptation to the world that emerged with the fall of the iron curtain, a world without dialectical negation, more speculator than speculative.

Fluxus was enacted into a strongly politicized world, ideologically bipolar, shaped by the cold war *zeitgeist*. Despite this, Fluxus always attempted to go beyond the bipolar vision of the world. George Maciunas personal history as a Lithuanian refugee whose parents escaped the arrival of the Red Army in Germany didn't prevent his engagement with a radical, even lyrical, leftist ideology through the influence of Henry Flynt. Moreover, some Fluxus artists lived behind the iron curtain. Among these were Milan Knizak, who became president of the Art Academy in Prague after the Velvet Revolution, and later director of the National Gallery. Another was Vytautas Landsbergis, the first president of the Republic of Lithuania after its liberation from Soviet rule.

Artists today live in an apparently unipolar geopolitical situation determined by the worldwide market economy. Facing this situation, local and

the small utopias can give rise to elements of response, or even of resistance. This situation is made possible by the digital revolution and by the globally networked world that ensued. This global network is the capitalist—and sometimes hegemonic—realization of what Fluxus announced on a small scale and in a utopian way.

So it appears that Fluxus works did not inspire today's artists in any direct way. Rather than serving as the tutelary ancestors of contemporary productions, Fluxus works are instead a kind of fading presence that—at their best—remind young artists of something.

This explains the proximity of current work to Fluxus, a proximity that anyone aware of Fluxus productions can see must be explained by something other than conscious historical reference or the appropriation strategies of the post-modern mode.

What I would like to suggest is that Fluxus should be considered as the paradigm of our contemporary art. In this sense, it is a paradigmatic influence in the sense of the term introduced by Thomas Kuhn into the history of science.[16] It is a point of origin that created a new frame of action and conception within which the works are elaborated without the artists even being conscious of this general frame.

16 **Kuhn, Thomas S. 1970.** *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 10.

The influence of Fluxus process cannot be seen as a reference point in the classical sense of an historical moment endlessly interrogated by later works and artistic productions. (Of course, this type of artwork exists. after all there are also young geometrical abstractionist artists at work, along with artists of every other kind and stripe.) Nevertheless, it is better to envision Fluxus as a Copernican revolution. Fluxus helped to establish a new *weltanschauung*, reinforced by the general transformation of the world in the world created by the globalization of exchange that we live in today.

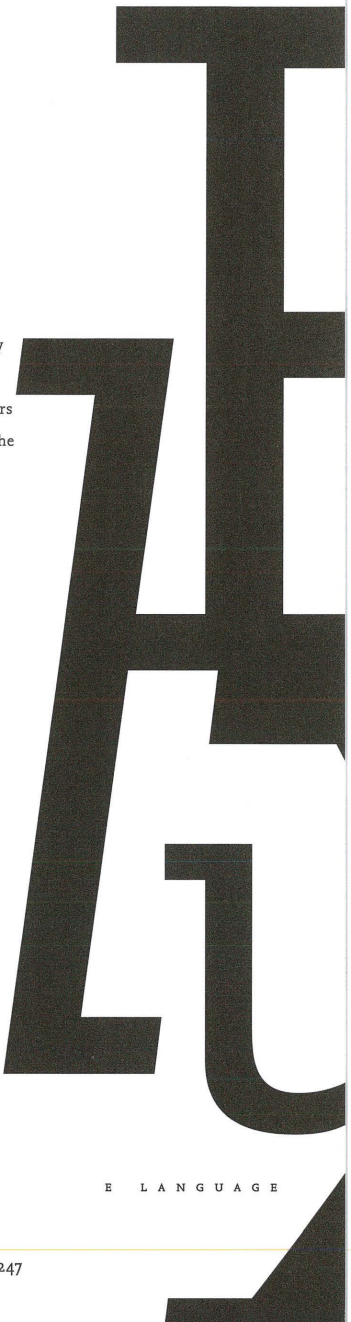
Fluxus, embedded in its time, appeared in an era of mechanical and historicist paradigms. Despite this fact, the Fluxus artists conceived a program of works to announce the unhistorical and cybernetic paradigm that is central to art and culture today.

It would be useless to comment on all the works of Fluxus artists using new media technologies. Their understanding of this changing era rests, ontologically, upon a more global—and more basic—understanding of the work of art. Beyond this, the most emblematic works of the new situation are not those that use the new technologies in a straightforward way, but those that show the best understanding of the horizontality of the network.

The organization of Fluxus itself is the image of this new paradigm. It has no single head or center. It remains transitive and undefined. It is structured as a network of nodes and tentacles. Therefore, to the question of what comes "after Fluxus," I would not answer neo-Fluxus or post-Fluxus, but simply Fluxus. While the original Fluxus artists belong to an historical neo-avant-garde,

they do not maintain patriarchal position today. While the individual careers of each artist continue to demonstrate exceptional creativity, the group as a whole remains fluid and still difficult to cast in historical terms.

Instead, the influence of Fluxus is visible as a founding experiment in a horizontal process. It is topographical. As such, it is absolutely timeless.

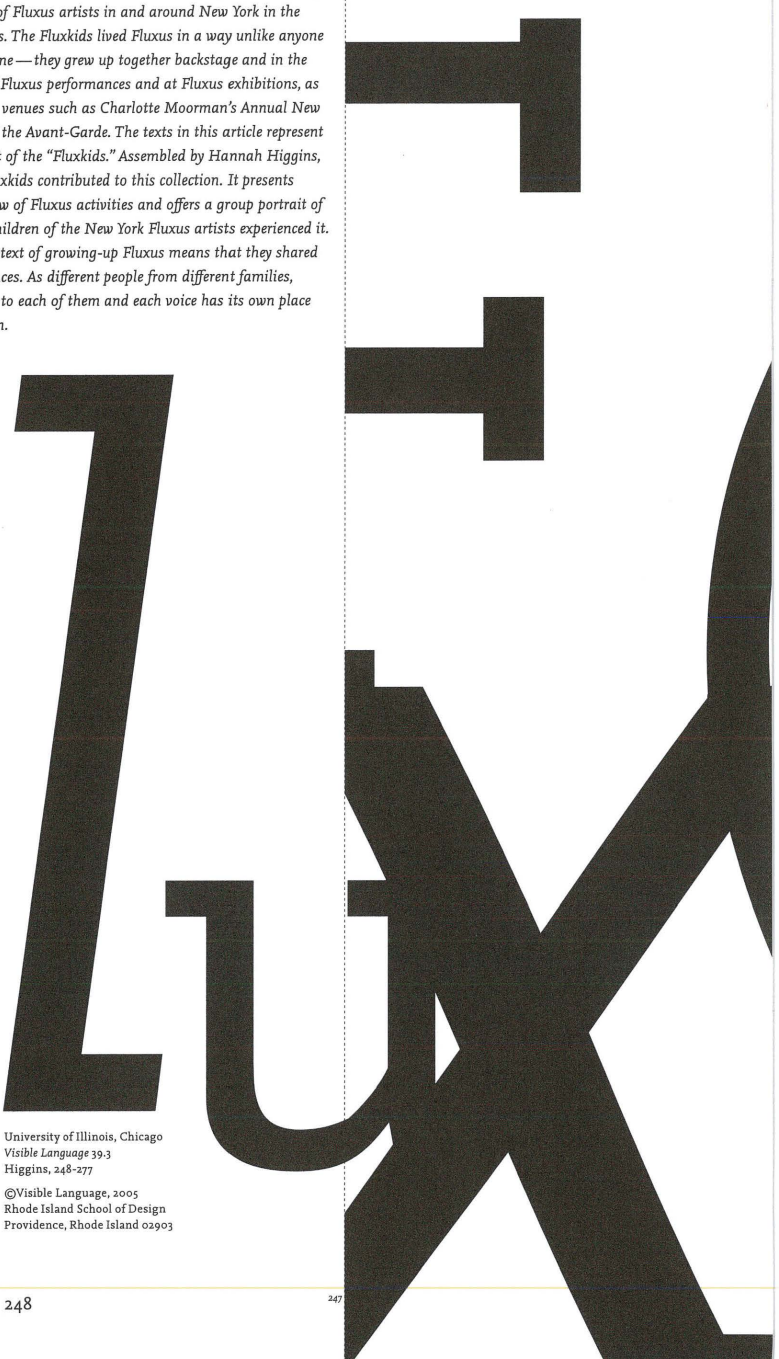


Author Note

BERTRAND CLAVEZ TRACES HIS INTEREST IN FLUXUS TO AN EARLY INTERST IN Alfred Jarry. He studied art, literature, history, philosophy, and the history of art before passing the agregation in visual arts. He earned his PhD in art history, and he now teaches the history of contemporary art at the University of Lyon II in Lyon, France. He organized a series of Fluxus festivals and exhibitions under the rubric of ¡tFluXus, working closely with Fluxus pioneers Ben Patterson, Ben Vautier, and others. This year, he received a grant from the Terra Foundation for the Arts.

Abstract

"Fluxkids" is a group name that evolved among a particular group of the children of Fluxus artists in and around New York in the 1960s and 1970s. The Fluxkids lived Fluxus in a way unlike anyone else has ever done — they grew up together backstage and in the concert halls of Fluxus performances and at Fluxus exhibitions, as well as at other venues such as Charlotte Moorman's Annual New York Festival of the Avant-Garde. The texts in this article represent a group portrait of the "Fluxkids." Assembled by Hannah Higgins, many of the Fluxkids contributed to this collection. It presents their unique view of Fluxus activities and offers a group portrait of Fluxus as the children of the New York Fluxus artists experienced it. The mutual context of growing-up Fluxus means that they shared similar experiences. As different people from different families, much is unique to each of them and each voice has its own place in this collection.



University of Illinois, Chicago
Visible Language 39.3
Higgins, 248-277

FIGURE 1A **Bracken and Tyche Hendricks** at the Bread and Puppet Theatre, Glover, Vermont, late 1970s

PHOTOGRAPHER: GEOFFREY HENDRICKS. PRINTED COURTESY OF THE GEOFFREY HENDRICKS ARCHIVE

HANNAH HIGGINS

(Overview)

THE FIRST TIME I CAME ACROSS *Fluxus in the classroom, I was at Oberlin College in Ohio. The work was described as an extremely far out version of ultra sixties' sex art and political radicalism As the daughter of Fluxus artists Dick Higgins and Alison Knowles, I was shocked—shocked because what I was learning bore virtually no resemblance to my life and because my life bore virtually no resemblance to this description. Now I am a historian of Fluxus at the University of Illinois, Chicago, so I guess you could say I have spent the next twenty years trying to make sense of that moment. I think I have in some sort of scholarly way, although there remains personal work*

to do. The following accounts of Fluxkids growing up around Fluxus in New York do far more than any academic account I can muster up. These are personal histories conjoined to, even built upon, Fluxus foundations. Perhaps I should say New York Fluxus foundations, as many, many Fluxkids from around the world could not be included... yet. This project has legs, though. I'm sure at another place and time, there will be an even fuller accounting. Thanks go to them all, included or not, for we have all shared in something rather unique (I think) in art history and personal history as well.

FIGURE 1B **Barbara and Peter Moore (Photographer)** photographing Bread and Puppet Theatre, Glover, Vermont, late 1970s

PHOTOGRAPHER: GEOFFREY HENDRICKS. PRINTED COURTESY OF THE GEOFFREY HENDRICKS ARCHIVE

Bibbi Hansen

DUE TO A LONG AND UGLY CUSTODY BATTLE BETWEEN MY MOTHER AND my father back when I was a toddler, I was rarely allowed to see Al until I was about ten years old and self-reliant enough to sneak off on my own to meet him in coffee shops and movie theaters. One of my favorite regular outings back then was with a group of Al's friends who had gathered together in a loosely-organized group called "The Anonymous Arts Recovery Society." They would meet weekend mornings throughout the year to rescue unique architectural and decorative elements from old buildings that were slated to be demolished. After the building was torn down, these pieces would then be carted off to a deserted yard behind the Brookyn Museum where the administration had agreed to store the stuff indefinitely. Without the efforts of the Anonymous Arts Recovery Society and the Brooklyn Museum, many wonderful historic pieces of building art would have been smashed and destroyed.

I remember my father and art dealer Ivan Karp going to the superintendent of a condemned building and asking about the demolition plans because they wanted the "heads" from the building. The super hadn't the foggiest what they were talking about. They coaxed him outside to look and pointed out all the precious and fantastic pieces attached to his building. Amazed, he called to his wife and kids to come look! They'd been living in the building forty-two years and had never once noticed the nightmarish man-animals, gargoyles and demons plastered all over the edifice of their home.

Wherever I went from then on, I always stopped and took time to "look" and to "see." I was soon able to easily pick out the patterns like "eggs and arrows" and delighted in the random odd fierce creatures discovered on cornices and keystones. I realized then that one could chose to live consciously.

In the early Sixties, Al was attending Pratt Institute and living on Hall Street in Brooklyn. On one weekend visit with my father, I got to be in a "Happening." It was my first. I had done quite a bit of theater work and acting as a kid, but this was definitely something new. "What'll I do?" I pleaded with him for direction. "What would you like to do?" I hadn't a clue. He took pity on me and gave me a list of activities. I would start out with a large box of bottles and jars and a hammer. I was to carefully break all the available glass one by one in the box. Wow!

After a childhood of scoldings and warnings not to "break stuff"—here was PERMISSION to DESTROY! This was liberation and freedom of the headiest kind. My eyes shone and my breath came faster; I barely heard the rest of the instructions: When the bottles were all broken, I was instructed to get a lit candle and carry it around the performance space singing. "What shall I sing," I asked. "Whatever you want," he answered.

He made a special point of telling me and all the other performers to be very quiet when the dancer began her dance—not to do anything—but we

could start again when she was finished. The performance space was the backyard of the place Al shared with his friend Steve Balkin. The audience sat with their backs to the house while most of the action went on in the rear of the yard and throughout the audience. The dancer was on the roof behind them.

I don't remember the exact sequencing of the events. Two girls made out on a chaise lounge. Larry Poons recited Tristan Tzara's ROAR poem from the Motherwell Dada book. He sat hidden behind a huge sheet of cardboard as he began to read. Someone else—Dick Higgins?—cut a large hole in the cardboard with a knife to reveal Poons to the audience. Larry read by the light of a small campfire and wore a toilet seat around his neck. I broke glass.

Neighborhood kids from adjoining lots had climbed trees surrounding our yard. There were dozens of them. I cannot imagine what the backyard Happening scene looked like to them. At first they contributed cat calls and raspberries, then they began to echo the chant of the Tzara poem in derision: "Roar, roar, ROAR!" As the evening progressed, the hecklers were transformed by the magic and night, and their cries grew earnest and gathered momentum: ROAR! ROAR! ROAR! ROAR! The effect was astonishingly beautiful.

"The Stripper" a pop tune of that time blasted from a record player and we all fell still as Cynthia Mailman began her "dance on the roof a striptease. The audience turned to watch her dance. Al had instructed her to do the strip tease in several sections taking breaks in between to switch the action back down to the yard and other activities. After a minute of dancing she looked for a place to sit and chose a raised section of the roof dead center; she thought this quite the aesthetic place to pause for the next segment.

Unfortunately, the spot she had selected was a skylight and with a loud shattering and splintering of glass, accompanied by a ghastly shriek, Cynthia fell into the back closed porch of my father"s house from the roof. Immediately Al rushed to her and upon seeing large pools of blood called for an ambulance and tried to clear the yard and usher people out of the performance. This meant we had to step over Cynthia Mailman's torn body in order to exit.

"Noooooo!" she shrieked. "I don't want any of them to SEEEEE me!" The audience was hustled back into the yard. We, in the Happening—along with the audience—were not entirely sure this was not just "part" of the Happening. We continued to perform. "Roar Roar, Roar!" shouted the kids from the trees. I had done smashing glass and was circling the yard with the candle singing this time. One person wove through the audience trying the feed them dirt, grass, and worms he'd dug from the yard.

The police arrived and we still all thought it was part of the performance. I circled them singing, the women making out tried to get them in a three-way; the dirt guy tried to feed them worms. And stll the neighbor kids intoned: "Roar, roar, ROAR!"

Cynthia Mailman wound up in the hospital with hundreds of stitches in her buttocks. Surprisingly she never became angry at my father but received him graciously in her hospital room and remained a friend all his life. I learned then, that art could be quite dangerous, but generous and forgiving as well.

For a while I lived with my father in his loft on Second Street. He was rarely there, but was living most of the time with a girlfriend on 13th Street and Second Avenue. From time to time, different homeless artist friends would stay at that loft. Bill Myers was one. Artist Brooklyn Joe Jones was another. Like Al, Bill also has girlfriends and was rarely at home except to shower and change clothes. This threw Joe Jones and me together a lot. I grew to love his sad look and quiet ways. On my thirteenth birthday, Joe gave me a giant lavishly illustrated "Complete Works of Shakespeare." It might have been the only present I received that year. I loved the Shakespeare and read it cover to cover. I adored it and Joe.

Several times Brooklyn Joe and I took turns almost burning down the loft. He'd fall asleep drunk with a lit cigarette in bed, while I, in the throes of adolescent affectation, as a bedtime ritual, fatuously placed lit cones of incense everywhere and anywhere without a thought. Each time we were woken by angry wet neighbors and our efficient building-wide sprinkler system.

I loved Joe's art. He made robot instruments that played themselves. We owned several of these, but the one I found irresistible was painted completely black—it was a guitar mounted on a small wastebasket. Behind the disposal flap were the controls for the instrument. Two small motors with short wires dangling were suspended just over the strings. The controls left and right operated these and caused each to rotate and pluck the strings. I loved this piece and played with it endlessly.

Every other week our loft would be turned upside down for a Happening. Paying audiences would be admitted and Al would conduct several friends in a time-space performance collage. During one Happening, Al had set up my favorite Joe Jones instrument and it played itself in the middle of the stage as beautiful Meredith Monk danced around it. Bill Meyers periodically shot sparks through a noisy toy raygun at people and ate Cheerios while Al intoned random advertising copy from a current newspaper. For some reason, at one point Meredith thought it a good idea to dance over to Joe's instrument and slowly lower her knee-length hair into the machine. This jammed and ruined the instrument for good and simultaneously caused her hair to suddenly become shoulder-length, as a scissors-wielding Al hacked her free from the "art." Yet another demonstration of the danger inherent in art experimentation.

In our home, art and life mingled and overlapped seamlessly. In 1964 I lived with Al in a loft on Great Jones Street above Charlie Mingus. His music

FIGURE 2 **Al Hansen surrounded by Venuses,** 1985
PHOTOGRAPHER: LARRY MILLER. PRINTED COURTESY OF LARRY MILLER AND SARA SEAGULL, NEW YORK

was the soundtrack to my time there; I stopped playing records for the duration. I was often left to fend for myself. Sometimes, I would come home to a mysterious and enigmatic sign stuck to our front door:

$ Behind Marisol

"Marisol" was a large collage Hershey-bar Venus named for artist Marisol Escobar. De-coded the note meant to look behind this particular artwork for money. Sure enough, an envelope would be taped to the back with a five dollar bill inside. This was quickly turned into a salami sandwich at the corner deli. I was never quite certain how long I might be on my own or exactly how long the money would need to be stretched. Once I squandered it on cookies and comics and buying a round of pizza slices for friends. Hungry, I rummaged around the loft and was rewarded with several cans of soup which I rationed and ate over the following days. Unfortunately, these particular cans of soup were "art": cans of Campbell's Chicken Soup that had been signed by Andy Warhol.

I remember going to rehearsals with Al for a Dick Higgins play, The Tart, that was to be performed in a boxing ring. Another friend of Al's once commanded a subway train for yet another experimental performance event. I loved the idea that you could subvert locales to other purposes. There was a series of Happenings at the Café Au Go Go; a Greenwich Village nightclub on Bleecker Street. I used to sneak into the Au Go Go regularly to see Oscar Brown Jr., Jimi Hendrix and Lenny Bruce. Now, I was performing there in one

FIGURE 3 **Hendricks, Higgins and Mac Low children in West Glover, Vermont,** Summer, 1971
PHOTOGRAPHER: GEOFFREY HENDRICKS. PRINTED COURTESY OF THE GEOFFREY HENDRICKS ARCHIVE

of my father's Happenings. On some inspiration all his own, Dick Higgins lifted me onto his shoulders and went roaring and racing around the club. I begged to be let down—he was so incredibly tall and I have always suffered from a fear of "heights"! We think of Nam June as the progenitor of all things MTV and the ideator of the high-speed splinter cut and power density barrage but I remember Nam June doing his "Pillow Piece" that same night at the Café Au Go Go. With a slow, zen-like calm, Nam June quietly destroyed a pillow. I was so impressed by the lyric and determined way he performed and how incredibly beautiful the feathers looked swirling, floating, moving, through air.

In the Sixties Al and Yoko Ono went off to London for the Destruction in Art Symposium—DIAS. I wasn't able to go, but followed the action from afar. Paintings were blown up, art set on fire, instruments were smashed and broken. Rafael Ortiz was there and destroyed a piano. Lil Picard and I watched him attack a baby grand with an ax at the Whitney Museum one day. It was quite something to see; electrifyingly powerful and direct. During one performance at Judson Church, Henry Geldzahler leapt from the audience to rescue a chicken which was about to be beaten to death with a violin.

What a strange group of people who would spend their free time pawing through rubble to rescue art from demolished old buildings, but travel halfway around the world to destroy their own artwork—then I remembered the joy with which I broke all those bottles in that Hall Street Happening so many years ago.

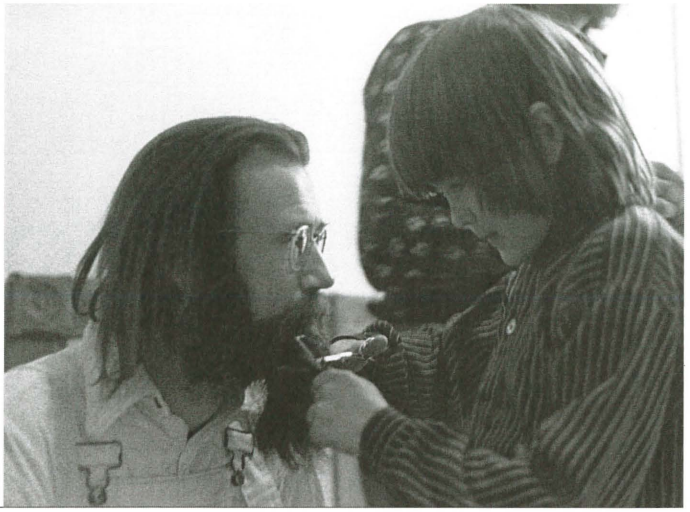


FIGURE 4 **Geoffrey Hendricks and Bracken Hendricks, Unfinished Business (Education of A Boy Child),** 3 Mercer Street, NYC December 3-4, 1976
PHOTOGRAPHER: ROBERT WICKENDEN

Bracken Hendricks

I WAS BORN ON FEBRUARY 9TH, 1967, THE DAY CHARLOTTE MOOREMAN was arrested for indecent exposure during her performance of "Topless Cello." My parents sent off announcements declaring the performance—my arrival, my life—as a happening and dubbed my birth the "New Boy Event."

New York in the late 1960s and 70s was a highly charged environment, and the eyes of a child were a magical vantage from which to watch the unfolding. I have memories of many gatherings that questioned the lines separating art, community and political action. Artwork confronting the horrors of war, artist picket lines outside museums, actions, events, happenings, the creation of environments all blurred distinctions between art and life and created fertile space for invention and exploration in the interstitial spaces of culture. This time and this work showed the commonalities running through many forms of communication, introspection and integrity of action. It was a distinct historical moment. The quality of light in these memories is somehow brighter and infused with a palpable sense of possibility, challenge and self-invention.

Often I was one of only a small group of children set loose in powerful adult environments, afforded the luxury of exploring mysterious and beautiful spaces. We had the freedom to move easily between the focused circle of performance and our own fanciful games at the periphery. Exploring sites prior ro performance was especially exciting, the Avant Garde Festival and other such gatherings brought us to Shea Stadium and Grand Central Station, Ocean

Liners and Armories. As children, we explored boarded up piers, abandoned schoolrooms and the ruins of castles, great sacred empty spaces filled with decay and potential. Always, we comprehended the importance and power of the work at hand, and took great pleasure in our child's play within the context of the whimsical dedication of these artists.

There was seriousness to the way that work went on in George Maciunas' basement apartment that had the intensity and dedication of a child at play. Fanciful endeavors like planning a labyrinth to fill an art museum, or organizing a sled race where everyone converged on the same point and crashed, became work and occasions for the exercise of a craftsman's dedication. Humor and intensity lived side by side with equal weight, in George's sharp and sudden laugh, and in the precision of his absurdities. When he was beaten nearly to death by mobsters, he took great relish in transforming his home into a bunker and installing a doorbell that triggered mocking laughter instead of just letting you inside. The desperately serious was not simply juxtaposed with irony, rather, they were inseparably linked, indistinguishable aspects of the same full experience.

One of the most exciting parts of being a child around the evolution of Fluxus was the acceptance of things that are downplayed, ignored or rejected in the culture at large. This theme runs throughout Fluxus: in Alison Knowles' work with beans and the soles of shoes, in Yoshi Wada's music made by orbital sanders, in my own father's cataloging of empty skies, found photographs and dreams. But it is perhaps best exemplified by George's shit collection. As a child, I devotedly saved for him the scat of all my pets; grasshoppers, mice, cats and whatever else I happened to be raising. He carefully documented and archived these fumets in glass jars and filed them away in special cabinets. The absurdity of collecting and cataloging this waste was magnificent. It was an unusual gift for a child to have adult role models for living with a profound respect for subtleties, a wry appreciation of the irony of life and the constant encouragement for questioning. As children of Fluxus, a primary experience was growing up with relics and clutter, living in the midst of an undifferentiated continuum of the sacred, the mundane, the beautiful and random objects imbued with meaning and value. Art in its native habitat is different from art in the abstracted context of galleries or museums or when seen in historical perspective. While it is being created, an artwork sits on a cluttered table with paintbrushes and glue, as unopened mail, dirty dishes and the flotsam of daily living move into and out of the creative space. Here too, life and art richly co-mingled in Fluxus. Al Hansen's collages of cigarette butts and candy wrappers, my mother Bici Hendricks' (Nye Farrabas') performances picking up garbage and thawing blocks of ice, or Jackson Mac Low's layering of multiple texts all celebrate this ambiguous overlay of context and content and seemed to welcome the blending of profession and family, art

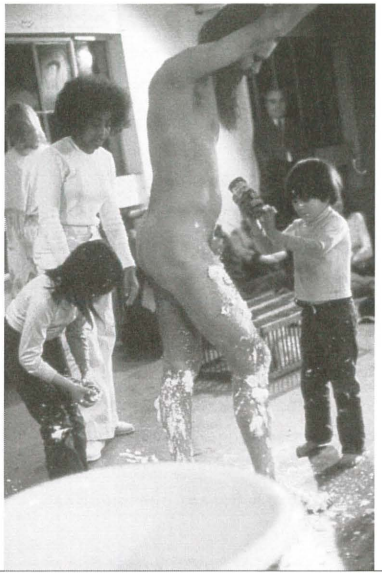


FIGURE 5 **Tyche and Bracken Hendricks painting cloud forms on Geoffrey Hendricks for his Attic Clouds,** Summit Art Center, New Jersey, February 1973,
PHOTO: ARCHIVE GEOFFREY HENDRICKS.

FIGURE 6 **Geoffrey Hendricks performs Ring Piece (1971)** A meditation on the end of his marriage, the ring is buried in the earth beneath him. Shown here at the 8th Annual New York Festival of the Avant-Garde at the 69th Regiment Armory, New York in November, 1971
PHOTOGRAPHER: VALERIE HEROUVIS. PRINTED COURTESY OF THE GEOFFREY HENDRICKS ARCHIVE

and life. Fluxus more than many forms celebrates this vital and illusive time in the artistic process while the ideas themselves are forming: where the art is embedded in its environment, where family, audience, object, artist and document are all engaged in a dialogue. Where the ultimate form of the work is itself open to question and the ultimate meaning and value still sits in a place of ambiguity. This is the realm that we as children of Fluxus had the privilege of sharing.

One of the real and lasting achievements of Fluxus has been to call attention back upstream in the creative process: through irreverence, through mass production and the destruction of commodity value, through de-emphasizing the material and posing concepts and questions and koans, through examination of scraps and relics or through the use of text. There is a constant reminder of the thought behind the action behind the object, and it is at this level that the artist is most deeply embedded in the community. It is here that ideas pollinate and cross-fertilize, and where conversations over dinner are as vital a contribution as the final art work, and more precious for their ephemerality. This was the living tradition of Fluxus that gave rise to the formal objects.

Hannah Higgins has said that Fluxus artists are realists. I am inclined to agree. This art is concrete, workmanlike, humble and intent on cutting to some constantly shifting but deeply felt notion of truth rooted in experience. Throughout this tremendously varied body of work and these radically different lives and careers, there is a common sensibility which reiterates the importance of subtleties revealed in the trivial, the extremely serious urgency of play, revulsion at the constraints of unexamined conformity and a relentless sense of immediacy. I recall a performance by Phil Corner within a larger event at Rosanna Chiesi's villa in Cavriago, Italy. In the midst of art making and chaos everywhere Phil had found an obscure corner of the space, and was quietly taping and scraping found metal objects, pressing his own ear to the rusted pipes not focusing on the people around him. It occurred to me then that this was real music—exploring the sonic qualitites of the world—the latent musical potential of trash. Rather than demonstrating his own ability to perform, he was refining his own ability to listen. In so doing, he sympathetically elicited the listening of others. Through simplifying, distilling and offering stillness he provided an opening for the perception of a preexisting beauty. It was an egoless creative process, but not a trivial one. This to me captures the most beautiful aspects of Fluxus, it was profound but not virtuosic and it was not exclusive. It was welcoming. And we who were around it circulating through it, being touched by and touching it, were a part of it.

As kids we were often included in the explicit art making as well. Jessica Higgins, my sister and I collaborated with our parents on a performance based

on a child's board game that we had found at a flea market in Naples. Called the Musical Wisdom Clock, this performance/game used aliatoric processes to guide an unfolding of dance, text and movement on a large, scaffolding at the P.S. 1 performance space. In "The Education of a Boy Child" my father, his lover Brian Buczak, myself and another man, filled a gallery with branches and rough natural objects, creating an environment and making objects in a quiet conversation about how to collaborate, how to share knowledge and how to create. With George Maciunas and Ray Johnson I cut off my father's beard, to help him complete his unfinished business begun as my parents divorced, of shaving all the hair off of his body.

I recall one morning at my father's loft, stepping on ink pads and walking the length of a long roll of paper, his footprints large and spaced far apart, my smaller feet marking out a tighter line of tracks. This piece was a variant on Paik's score, "Zen for Head" where the artist dips his own hair in calligraphic ink and makes brush paintings on the floor and was a further reference to our family's earlier participation in Yoko Ono's film of bottoms. My parents and my sister as a toddler had each walked the length of a room while Yoko filmed in slow motion, the undulating pattern of dark and light lines made by the movements of their legs and bottom.

As children, we shared in the Flux Mass, the Flux Wedding, the Flux Divorce, Flux Feasts and as adults we have shared in far too many Flux Funerals. These formal flux events blend in memory with the simpler rituals of family like the joint birthday parties which I shared each February with Clarinda Mac Low. Through all of these collaborations and relationships we were being educated, building connections, learning about creativity. Like the shoe maker's child who learns to stitch and chat and the value of work all simultaneously, there was something quite ancient and organic and casual and complex about being underfoot in performance and about the way we were incorporated into the process both out of necessity and desire.

At one Avant Garde Festival, Alison Knowles passed out found objects that she had signed and labeled. I received from her a tiny broken buckle. It was a frame for placing on the table. Whatever was seen inside the frame was to be the artwork. To me the lessons of growing up inside the circle of Fluxus artists have been foremost about creating a context for clearer perception. Creating the framework for realizing beauty or creative potential is far more important than any single object of contemplation. By continually bringing attention to the simplicity of this task, Fluxus offered a real and lasting gift to the people who participated in its games and amusements. As children of Fluxus, we shared in the context for creating that context. This beginning profoundly shaped my fundamental notions of reality, beauty, work and significance, and it gave me a method for taking the task of perception seriously. It also formed my extended family.

FIGURE 7 **Tyche Hendricks, Jessie and Hannah Higgins on Geoffrey Hendricks Sky Bus (1968),** Summer 1969, PHOTOGRAPHER: GEOFFREY HENDRICKS.

Tyche Hendricks

FLUXUS OUTINGS WERE WONDROUS OUTINGS FOR US KIDS. ONE TIME WE accompanied my mother to the Jefferson Market Library where she delivered a bunch of daffodils to a librarian (a piece she'd do each year on the first day of spring). Another time we visited George Maciunas's basement flat on Wooster Street to marvel at his multi-species shit collection. Another time, we attended the grommet art show at Jean Dupuy's Broadway loft, where every object or performance existed behind a sheet of canvas and could only be observed though a tiny peep hole. It was as if these events were designed for the benefit of children: full of silly things, gross things, surprising things.

There was fun with food, too. For the annual celebration of Beethoven's birthday, my father always baked a sky-frosted cake. And there was George Maciunas and Billy Hutching's Flux Wedding, to which all the guests brought erotic food. I remember a glass bowl filled with strawberries and red wax lips, and a bare-breasted mermaid with a fish tail, a body molded out of rice and seaweed hair. I'm sure there was plenty of chocolate. If I recall correctly, my aunt Joanne Hendricks made chicken soup.

And there were festivals. Avant Garde festivals, at which Fluxus artists and their ilk took over some New York City monument and filled it with silly, gross, surprising and often beautifully poetic images.

A couple of weeks before the festival opened, we would begin making excursions to the site: Shea Stadium, Grand Central Terminal, Ward's Island, the 69th Regiment Armory or the South Street Seaport. It was like being backstage at the circus, but the circus of everyday life. I knew there was magic

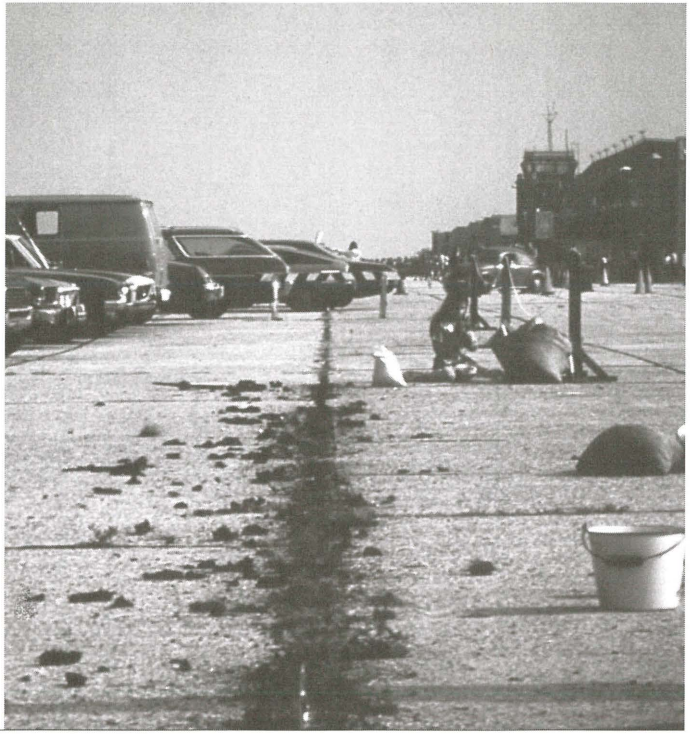


FIGURE 8 **Tyche Hendricks performs with Geoffrey Hendricks, Seeding (1975).** Shown here at The 12th Annual Festival of the Avant-Garde, Floyd Bennett Field, NY, 1975

PHOTOGRAPHER: GEOFFREY HENDRICKS. PRINTED COURTESY OF THE GEOFFREY HENDRICKS ARCHIVE

being made, but it was constructed out of ordinary things. For me, part of the magic was in exploring these cavernous, sometimes derelict, spaces. And part of it was in participating in events: helping my father plant seeds in the cracks in the asphalt at an old air strip, or selling imaginary fares from the ticket window of a ferry boat.

Once the show began, our parents were busy doing their thing and we kids (perhaps with a babysitter following in the distance, though I don't remember being supervised much) had free run of the place...wandering around, watching performances, sticking our fingers into Ayo's finger boxes (not knowing if we'd find marbles or jello or scratchy wool inside). But we'd always swing back around to where our parents were stationed: waving a greeting to Dad, say, as he sat crosslegged in a tuxedo on a pile of dirt, buried inside of which was a box containing his wedding ring (a meditation, I was only dimly aware, on my parents' dissolving marriage)

Those performances and festivals were social occasions too. Because Fluxus artists were among our parents' best friends, their children became our

best friends. Indeed, we spent so much time with Hannah and Jessie Higgins, and Mordecai and Clarinda Mac Low, that they came to feel like cousins to my brother, Bracken, and me. And unlike most of our real cousins, they shared and understood our wacky upbringing.

Now that a few art historians and museum shows have given Fluxus some legitimacy, a handful of the cultural cognoscenti have heard of it, but when we were kids, it was all but impossible to explain the things our parents did. "It's neo-dadaist," I could say, but who knew what dada was? Or "it's anti-art," but if that were so, were my parents really artists?

Looking around at all the folks I think of as Fluxus artists, I realize how diverse their work is: from my father, Geoff Hendricks's sky paintings, to my mother, Bici Forbes's word game sets, to Jackson Mac Low's poems, to Alison Knowles's silk screens, to Joe Jones's solar-powered guitars, to Nam June Paik's video installations, to Hermann Nitsch's animal slaughter pieces. Perhaps they were tied together by their common participation in these outlandish performance events. Or perhaps they were linked by the wacky, intuitive, free-associating sensibility that each took from those group projects into their own individual work.

My childhood was one in which art permeated everyday life: the night of my brother's birth has always been remembered by my parents as the night Charlotte Moorman was arrested for playing the cello topless; our family car, an old, gray Volkswagen bus, was transformed into the Sky Bus after my father painted it with clouds; and one weekend, on visiting my father and his partner Brian Buczak in New York (after we'd moved to Massachusetts with my mother) we kids were issued red cotton webbing belts like theirs, and inducted into the Red Belt Club, a group which appeared to have no other purpose than the wearing of the belts, and which seemingly consisted of only the four of us.

Everyday life permeated art, too, with themes of work and domesticity; my mother's performance at Ward's Island consisted of picking up trash all day; my father scythed grass there; my mother once hung out the laundry at our farm up in Nova Scotia so as to form a rainbow spectrum, then filmed the clothes billowing in the wind; my father hung pillowcases on a clothesline, then painted them blue with clouds.

The wide-opened, anything-goes attitude of Fluxus was very encouraging of our childhood creativity, and our artistic endeavors were taken seriously. I remember playing tunes on the recorder as a 10-year-old while Jessie Higgins danced, in a Musical Wisdom Clock piece our parents devised out at P.S. 1 in Queens.

We didn't really learn artistic discipline as children do who are required to practice the piano every day. But we learned to trust our intuition, to appreciate the fun and the funny, to see the world through non-conformist, outsider's eyes and to live life with a sense of possibility.

FIGURE 9 **Alison Knowles performing her String Piece with French Fluxus artist, Ben Vautier, 1964.** She is six months pregnant with twin girls.

PHOTOGRAPHER: GEORGE MACIUNAS. PRINTED COURTESY OF THE GILBERT AND LILA SILVERMAN FLUXUS COLLECTION, DETROIT

Hannah Higgins

DICK HIGGINS: DANGER MUSIC NUMBER SEVENTEEN *(MAY 1962)*
Event score: *Scream! Scream! Scream! Scream! Scream! Scream!*

MY FATHER IS SITTING IN THE LIVING ROOM OF OUR BROWNSTONE IN Chelsea. My twin sister, Jessica Higgins, and I are just outside the big room beside the stairs in 1968 or 1969. At the far end of the room are glass doors that lead into a small garden. In the far right corner stands a huge shade tree, which is spotlit by three upstairs windows. There is a group of office and kitchen chairs on each side of a navy-blue industrial couch, whose back faces us. People eat, drink, read and perform for each other. Out go the lights, but the light from outdoors lets us see what's going on. Pa prepares to read, switching on the small, parchment lamp that casts a warm ochre tone over the room.

Instead, he screams. The screams have no words, yet we know he can speak. And because there are no words, there is no way to tell him to stop. This is a performance, isn't it? But it doesn't end. Maybe he's in pain, but where? Everything has disappeared from the room—everything but his face, scream-

1 These memory texts were the original inspiration behind inviting Fluxus children to write about their experiences. Excerpts have been published in *The New Art Examiner* (March, 1994) and in "Notes Toward Indigo Island: A Conversation between Alison Knowles and Hannah Higgins" in *Alison Knowles: Indigo Island*, Catalogue, Stadt Gallerie Saarbrucken: Saar brucken, Germany, 1994.

ing at the end of a black tunnel. The sound weakens as he exhausts himself, giving way to intermittent hisses, squeaks and occasional rusty screams. The room returns to my field of vision, brighter than before.

The new silence is absolute, pure and free of desire, the overwhelming desire for peace being met. So no one disturbs it. The scream hangs in the air, pulling at the silence, threatening to unravel its soft, muffling fabric. Just before and after an earthquake there is this kind of silence. The animals, like the people in that room, wait and wonder when the peace will be disturbed again. No one describes it. No one reacts to it. Albeit welcome, it too has no words, like the scream. There is a soft breeze in the shade tree, its rustle rips through the room. I have seen the piece many times since then, the sublime emotion returns me to that living room, every time.

ALISON KNOWLES: *THE BEAN ROLLS (1963)*

THE BEAN ROLLS SAT IN A SMALL, SQUAT AND SQUARE CANISTER ON THE shelf in my mother's studio. To the left of them was a magnet piece with rings and cylinders by the sculptor Alice Hutchins. The shelves there were littered with carefully selected and placed found objects like flattened spoons, squashed shoe parts and a few small size art editions. With a beige label, a small size and pop-up lid like a can of Quick chocolate milk, the can was extremely appealing to hold. One day I took the can off the shelf, flipped the lid and began to finger the few beans inside. There were also a handful of small scrolls printed with tiny letters: "Never let a dog guard the bean paste. Proverb from Japan" said one. All of the scrolls had bean information on them so I read them and left them on the floor, rustling in paper snakes at my feet. Stepping carefully, I gathered them up, re-rolled them and returned them to the can. It strikes me now that the Bean Rolls (the first such artists' book on record) implied the possibility of a non-linear and potentially never ending codex. My mother has described that after filling about 200 cans with her mother, Lois Knowles, she donated the remaining scrolls to the street, where they blew away, "rolling in the wind like leaves."

JOE JONES: MECHANICAL ORCHESTRA

Self-playing, motor-operated reeds, whistles, horns, violins, bells and gongs play predetermined, dynamically variable and continuous tones for a determined length of time.

MY FATHER, MOTHER, SISTER AND I HAVE BEEN DRIVING ALL DAY, OR SO it seems, from New York City to Jean Brown's place in Tyringham, Massachusetts for lunch on our way to Vermont. It is about 1976. She lives in a beautiful gray Shaker seed house with trim. The clean, boxy house is full of very sober Shaker furniture. Pilgrims must have lived there once. On a long very narrow table in a tiny white room there is a simple buffet. I go up the very narrow stairs and into a small bright room, which I have since learned is the

archive. The sights and sounds of a late spring; the leaves, wet branches and leisure cars, filter through the small, warped windows. Solitude.

I can hardly see over the large oak and metal cabinets, but there is a lot of Fluxus stuff around. Something looks like an A-yo Fingerbox, which is a briefcase-size box full of fist-size holes in them that prick or squish or hug one's fingers. Some clear boxes with pebbles in them, maybe they are George's shit collection, or someone's rocks, or maybe a chess set. Between a lamp and a long thin window at the far end of the room is something I haven't remembered seeing before. It is a violin hanging by thin wires in mid-air from a simple metal stand with a magnet mounted over its strings. The magnet has broken rubber bands stuck in the form of a propeller. I hold one between my fingers and brush it across the strings. It sounds brushy and mysterious, like the rustling sound just before a frightening clamor in a B-movie.

ERIC ANDERSON: OPUS #10, 233 (INVITE PEOPLE TO LEAVE A PERFORMANCE, *1985*)

AN UPPER STORY OF A MUSCULAR, BRICK ADMINISTRATION BUILDING IN the medieval capital of Denmark is an unlikely site for a performance. That city, Roskilde, is about thirty miles east of Copenhagen and is the site of Eric Anderson's Festival of Fantastics. This massive reunion of Fluxus has, among others, the invitational piece mentioned above. The dark, wood-paneled room, which looks like a small court room, is oppressive with heat and air previously owned by the frustrated audience inside. The heavy wood door presses shut behind, sealing in the audience. A few people are smiling, but most simply wait on narrow, butt-cramping, high-backed benches or pews. Eric Anderson is sitting at the far end of the room behind a large, heavy table, smiling. "I would like to invite you to leave the performance," he says mischievously. Feeling a little paranoid and missing the point entirely, I look for enemies in the audience.

Protesting, I sit down and wait, joining the other uncomfortable people in the room. More victims enter and are greeted the same way. They sit down too. Beside Andersen is an enormous table full of cheese, fruit, candy, gifts, schnapps and wine. Must be for the reception, I hope this ends soon. The air is distinctly second hand and musty. Stuffy. "May I open a window?" The window stays closed and the room shrinks. The heavy wood walls are sweating as if they can't get any new air either. "Will you please leave the performance now? I can offer you anything on this table to leave." I took nothing with me, the goodies had just become another obstacle to a much-needed, rapid exit.

FIGURE 10 **Jessica Higgins and David Doris serve *A Dozen for Carmen* by Ben Patterson.** In this piece, a dozen roses are blended up and consumed to the opera Carmen. Shown here at Three Star A la Carte, The Judson Church, New York, 1992. PHOTOGRAPHER: MANUEL RODRIGUEZ. PRINTED COURTESY OF LARRY MILLER AND SARA SEAGULL, NEW YORK

Jessica Higgins

WHEN I WAS 15 YEARS OLD I FOUND MYSELF IN A CIRCUS OF AVANT-GARDE folks performing in a festival. This one was The Flux Festival at SUNY Purchase. Behind the stage the objects piled up in corners, like people places. Wild artists would be bustling here and there with shouts of who's next and where is this or that. I remember Jean Dupey's blowing pepper into the audience, the sneezes, the getting into trouble. Me lifting my bowler hat to the "clock person." I sensed a magical chaos.

When I was sixteen years old my mother asked me to be in another one of her performances. This one was the Wall to Wall John Cage & Friends at Symphony Space. I knew this was a bigger event than the other performances I'd grown accustomed to. I threw myself into her work with abandon. I brought my training in gymnastics and dance and she gave me a window in her world to place it in. To help with my nerves we would make a series of index cards that could be placed on the floor so I'd remember the next pattern. The names were like the "child's pose," "back walkover," "spider," "jellybean." As a tradition in our work we'd do a short meditation before going on. This was the way she taught me to focus and connect to the universe. The day finally came. The stage seemed huge and my little body pounded. I knew it

was important to be a part of my mother's work and it gave me the chance to dance. I remember the darkness, all of the people out there I couldn't see, the slide light beginning. The images of beans and embedded objects appeared on the screen, my shadow waxing and waning, her sounds weaving their way into my dance. The time flew by. A microphone was placed in front of me, I'd answer a few questions I remember my name appeared misspelled in the *New York Times.*

As an adult in 1992 Larry Miller had the madcap idea of doing a Fluxus evening at the same time as one in Germany. This was the Fluxus A' la Carte at the Judson Church in New York City. Some children of Fluxus and friends were in it. We were all dressed as waiters handing out menus with art events ready to order. Larry Miller had yet again taken on the tremendous job of organizing the event. Yes, I did do Carmen and blended up the roses. I also got the chance to serve unidentified food. We had a grand ol' time as the performances unfolded. Seeing the influence and fun it brought everyone was a trip in time.

I heard this operatic voice, a blender, other pieces being performed and the table was whispering. Watching. My tux covered with an apron, all the black and white contrasted against this red rose. A line of us held one rose each. This may have been my version of 'Carmen.' The pungent smell of rose water and musty crushed stems waited in the air. They were all being mashed into a shake. The thorns ... something bittersweet and wacky hung in the air. I had the urge to taste this rose shake—the thought it might be good if you were dieting crossed my mind. The events going on around me faded into the distance. As I moved closer to the blender and the end, I handed it over, into the whirlpool ... the green stem twirling. Then Miller did the drinking of the potion. We were concerned about indigestion; many smiles appeared.

Clarinda and Mordecai-Mark Mac Low (a.k.a. M-M)

AN EXCHANGE OF LETTERS: JANUARY/FEBRUARY, 1999

Dear Clarinda,[2]

So, what is Fluxus?

From my perspective, Fluxus appeared to be an attempt by Maciunas to give a brand name to a particular approach to art, one being pursued by many people at the time. That it was basically successful is attested to by this article. That it was good for his reputation was brought home to me when I was in Mannheim Kunsthalle last month. They have a large atrium with names of maybe 50 famous artists around the top—Cranach, Da Vinci, Mondrian, Heartfield—and Maciunas was up there.

Now advertising will no doubt be considered the religious art of the twentieth century, but was the act of advertising (and organizing newsletters and festivals and such) an artwork and specifically a Fluxus artwork? Insofar as Fluxus-linked artists were questioning the nature of art and the role of the artists in its creation, I guess you could argue that it was. Anything goes: In so far as Fluxus was about art in the moment and about opposing the dead hand of the academy and museums (my employers, of course), creating a brand that fixed a label on a particular moment of artistic creativity seems directly counter to the idea of Fluxus.

To a child there was a great deal of the circus in Fluxus and Fluxus-related events. You've mentioned the annual Avant–Garde Festivals that Charlotte Moorman organized during the sixties and seventies in the most amazing locations in NYC (a train in Grand Central Station, Shea Stadium, the Cruise Ship terminal, etc.) These were accessible to a child: When Geoff Hendricks filled a steamship room with leaves, or someone set up a full-size Ferris wheel with white and yellow neon in an armory, that was fun! I looked forward to those festivals far more each year than to the over-billed spangles and elephants of the Ringling Bros.

However, it wasn't clear to me that using Maciunas' Fluxus label for this broad stream of creative activity really makes that much sense. At the time, I guess I perceived Maciunas (whom I don't remember ever actually meeting) as some manic guy, who made grand pronouncements that were vaguely related to what my parents were doing. That he would be later picked as central would not have particularly crossed my mind. After all, there were plenty of maniacs running around making grand pronouncements in 1969!

love,

Mordecai[3]

2 **Clarinda Mac Low is a performance artist, choreographer and dancer, as well as a freelance medical writer, living and working in New York City.**

3 **Mordecai-Mark Mac Low** is an astrophysicist working at the Max Planck Institute for Astronomy in Heidelberg, moving to the American Museum of Natural History in New York City in Spring, 1999.

Hey M-M,

It's hard to wrap my head around the Fluxus art phenomenon, especially right now, while I am so busy trying to be an artist. I have only the vaguest idea even what that means, which is kind of embarrassing, considering I'm a "Fluxkid" and even participated in performing in a Fluxus revival several years ago in New York *(figure 3)*. I remember being at Larry Miller and Sara Seagull's loft, talking about it with several people, then performing at the Anthology Film Archives building on Second Avenue...I don't remember the name of the event, but I did two old scores, I can't remember whose; beautiful, simple instructions that left room for all kinds of interpretation.

I felt the same way that I feel now. At the time of making those performances I felt, "all this is new to me"—I don't retain my theory or sense of fixed history from any of my experiences as a kid in what becomes known as the Fluxus world. I retain myriad sensory impressions and a deep love for certain people I knew. Maybe I was just a spaced-out kid, but I was much more involved in the deliciousness of the experiences or the way people looked at me, than I was involved in the historical implications of it. Later, in adolescence, I was just embarrassed because everything was weird and I felt like I wanted order, structure, tradition and security—not this fun-house life. I remember specifically one Avant-Garde Festival in the lobby of the World Trade Center. I must have been around eleven or twelve. All the stuff around just seemed silly. I didn't enjoy its fantasy and fun-ness anymore. I was embarrassed that *that* was my father out there in the courtyard making strange noises into the microphone. Of course, when I came out into the courtyard and looked at the people watching him in various states of horror, amusement, fascination and curiosity, I had a flash of pride that he would dare do such a thing in such a place (I wasn't yet so conservative that I didn't despise capitalism and its trappings, after all). It wasn't until I was in college that I suddenly did a flip in my thinking, and realized that my values had a lot more in common with what I had experienced growing up than with other traditions.

Because, yes, I feel squarely within a tradition of making art, one which I trace not just back to Dada and the early 20th century, wealthy, wacky artists that were "experimental," but back far far into the history of the European (and others; I am from the hybrid U.S. of A. after all, and influenced by the many cultures that came here to clash) performance forms. I also remember thinking during the planning of that Fluxus recreation (see above) that if these scores for performances are Fluxus, then, in fact, there's a lot I do retain, as an artist, from Fluxus—a sense of the importance of play in performance, a desire to interact directly with an audience, a desire to find simple innovative ways of communicating...I was interested to find evidence of all of these.

Grand pronouncements, categories, advertising...Gee, I dunno. I'm trying to go on what resonated for me as a child during those times, and its sub-

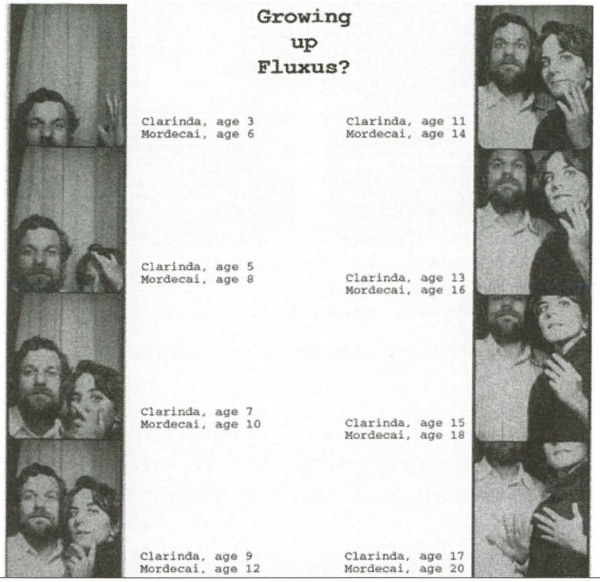


FIGURE 11 **Clarinda and Mordecai Mac Low *Growing Up Fluxus?*, 1998**

PRINTED COURTESY OF CLARINDA AND MORDECAI MAC LOW

sequent impact on my life, and what's impacted me are the pieces I saw and the people I interacted with. This is not to say that I haven't gained some odd currency in the NY "downtown" theater world by being "second-generation avant-garde." That has certainly influenced my trajectory somehow and probably mostly as an advantage. However, I feel woefully lacking in a historical perspective on my own life.

During Dick Higgins' memorial in NYC recently a lot of us "Fluxkids" met for dinner afterwards. I was moved not so much by what was defined about our experience, but by our experience of sharing something undefinable. And maybe that's what Fluxus was purporting to be, and maybe, with all the documentation and cataloguing and pronouncements and everything it is still that. Which is, for me at least, both traumatic and a source of tremendous internal freedom (or perhaps traumatic because a source of freedom?).

Dear Clarinda,

I agree with much of your feeling for what Fluxus was for a kid, but that also says something about how peripheral Fluxus was to Jackson's work. I certainly feel that I have a reasonable theoretical grasp of what he was trying to do in his poetic work, but its association with Fluxus seemed rather peripheral

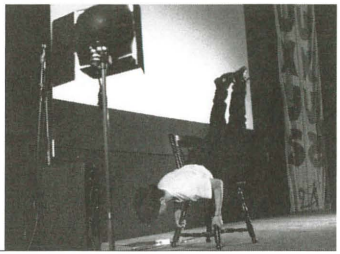


FIGURE 12 **Jackson Mac Low and Anne Tardos performing their *Four Language Word Event in Memoriam John Cage.*** Shown here at Flux Concert, Anthology Film Archives, New York, 1992

PHOTOGRAPHER: ANNIE WANN. PRINTED COURTESY OF LARRY MILLER AND SARA SEAGULL, NEW YORK

FIGURE 13 **Clarinda Mac Low performing a *Suite of Fluxus Works.*** Shown here at Flux Concert: Anthology Film Archives, New York, 1992

(and I don't think I'm revealing any deep, dark family secrets), if I note that he often claims not to be a Fluxus artist/poet, even though he clearly did participate in Fluxus.

OK, perhaps I'm getting too hung up on the label. Truth to tell, I am also puzzled about how particular ideas get credited to particular people in my field of astronomy. As often as not, multiple people are fumbling around with the same ideas, and it seems the one who gets credit often isn't the one who publishes first, but the one who goes around to the most conferences talking about it the loudest. I guess that's maybe as reasonable a description of Maciunas's success as any.

It's interesting—in some way I went through the inverse of the evolution you described. In my teenage years I continued performing with Jackson as both of us had done as kids without the embarrassment you felt during that period, but then never went through the second transition that you did at Wesleyan, where it became clear to you that you had your own artistic work to do. I think it was clear to both of us from the experience of our parents that having a means to earn one's living was important, and to both of us it seemed obvious that scientific training would give that, possibly because that was Jackson's perception as well. However, that turned out to be my primary creative work, while despite your success in molecular biology, dance and performance grabbed you. I'm the older sibling, so I went for the stability?

Certainly growing up in that environment has affected my science, but mostly in pretty indirect ways. For example, giving talks came pretty naturally to me, as I had been performing since about the age of three: the nice thing about the sort of performance art that was being done is that there was space for us kids to play too, whether in Jackson's simultaneities or Meredith Monk's epic dances or whatever other things we did. Certainly, I had Jackson's example in front of me as a careful writer who tried to write expository prose

as clearly as possible. But clearly these are somewhat peripheral to the core of trying to make sense of the bits and pieces of observations and theories about the births and deaths of stars and how they fit into the galactic ecology.

Was there something special about growing up in that artistic scene? On the one hand, yes, of course. On the other hand I guess I wonder if any group of children who grew up together wouldn't be likely to feel that they shared something special, even if it was just the pond on the other side of the tracks or the subways of NYC.

Love,
Mordecai

Hey-

Yes, I know there's that thing of oh, well everyone feels special, but I do feel like what we kids shared has a certain kind of uniqueness in that it's not part of a mass culture's view of experience. Let's face it, there aren't a whole lot of movies about kids growing up in the avant-garde art world—there's no TV-movie-of-the-week about those serious and dedicated performance artists. The closest we get is Darryl Hannah in "Legal Eagles," as a self-indulgent pyromaniac, or laughing at embarrassingly bad LA performance art in "She's All That." (I know, pop culture illiterate that you are, even worse than I, you probably haven't heard of either of those movies and it's not just 'cause you're in Germany, which proves my point even more).

Anyway, that's dangerous ground that I'm treading, and I'm not trying to say we're so special, just that being part of a sub-culture that created culture, and yet was so far out of a larger culture, yet engaged in examining/opposing that culture and participating in or benefiting from it (trust funds and such) is a very particular space. This always becomes clear to me when I meet other people (besides our particular childhood friends) who have similar backgrounds. Admittedly, there are very few, but we've tended to fall in love, in one way or another, partly because of the relief of not having to explain is so intense. Perhaps that's been my experience; I do a lot of explaining and I am an exotic in some way. Telling people about my past is often like having a certain kind of rare ethnicity and explaining the customs and traditions of my tribe to a curious, but slightly mystified, anthropologist.

So much for my fluxus archaeology. Meanwhile, people just keep making and making, informed by history, in spite of history, with or without categories or identities. In my up moments, this is entirely inspiring.

luv cml

FIGURE 14 **Rebecca Moore with Jeff Buckley perform *Choice 1* by Robert Bozzi (1966).** Shown here at Flux Concert, Anthology Film Archives, New York, 1992

PHOTOGRAPHER: ANNIE WANN. PRINTED COURTESY OF LARRY MILLER AND SARA SEAGULL, NEW YORK

Rebecca Moore

IT IS HARD TO GET SPECIFIC ABOUT MY CHILDHOOD. BECAUSE DAD'S PHOtos hung all over the house, or were scattered on the table we once ate dinner at (but eventually became too covered by ephemera). I often am confused about what performances/art/installations I actually saw or which ones I just kind of stepped into the photographs of.

Also, I had a recurring nightmare as a child (well, one of many) about a monster in a tuxedo covered with arms and hands—only to realize later as an adult, it was one of Pat Olezsko's wearable sculpture creations from a performance at the Kitchen (I believe, when it was still in SoHo).

I think of childhood as exhausting, confusing, exciting... As a kid, how could I understand the rows of razor blades that covered every inch of George Maciunas' door? It was scary, but my parents laughed about it as they called him from the corner payphone (as they could not knock on the door, which is why he put them there). He looked menacing, especially in those glasses... and after he lost his eye. Anyway, my mom informed us he didn't really like kids, but thought we were okay—which I ignored anyway.

My sister and I became very good at keeping ourselves busy. Sometimes we got involved in the Art. Sometimes the shows were boring to us and we would spend the hours in the back making towers of those gray foam floor cushions they had at every performance and happening. We would pile them

as high as possible and then—take a running jump from way back—and fling ourselves over/into them.

Fluxus was a world unto itself. I am grateful to have been brought up among its many sweet, exhilarating and creative people, but mostly I am grateful for the works with a sense of humor. Well guess that means the most of it. I don't know why I can often remember only the long, long, LONG silent, serious moments in the galleries and lofts, when I felt afraid to move and possibly disrupt a piece; even though I had to pee or was cold or hungry.

I am sorry to dwell on such moments here but it is honest. I have just hit thirty and am a struggling artist myself, though not a Fluxus artist—but at the same time I am simultaneously A) finally able to appreciate and notice and understand how deeply Fluxus and the other avant-garde art I was raised around has influenced me, and B) come to terms with understanding what a completely ODD and unique—and sometimes difficult—way it was to grow up. Not all of my examples are Fluxus ones. Mom and Dad went to just about everything. It has all somewhat blended together, though I do understand the differences intellectually.

There are only a few Fluxus kids around. Recently some of us gathered together one evening at Geoff Hendricks' place. It was a few days after Dick Higgins' memorial service. I hadn't seen some of them in a long time. It was amazing to talk and to finally start grasping that we were the sole heirs to witnessing the Fluxus movement in NYC as it was. I think most of us agreed that some of our favorite Fluxus events were Maciunas' big theme dinners: one of them was color. The tablecloth that covered the long table was striped in all the colors of the rainbow and George told each artist to bring food in a certain color. Then it was placed on that part of the table. My mom's color was purple so she brought a stew of purple cabbage with some purple meatballs. One artist took black and white, and brought just huge gigantic blocks of dark and white chocolate. (There were chisels and a hammer to knock bits off to eat.) Miralda did his famous rainbow whirled breads (my mom to this day has saved slices in 'ziplock' bags).

George took it upon himself to do "clear." He spent, I was told, weeks distilling beef and orange juice and fish of some kind. So the clear liquid you were drinking was O.J., and the mounds of clear jello were beef and fish. It was great.

Another one was at Halloween, at a huge place he got in New Marlborough, Massachusetts (he hoped to make an artists' hotel). The theme was apples and potatoes, because that was all they had on hand. (Later a few enterprising Japanese artists on the prowl of the estate found mushrooms so that was added to the menu.) Somehow all the artists managed to make a huge feast out of those items. The dining room still had a suit of armor and was very regal—with Maciunas' immaculately catalogued "Shit Collection" in a

FIGURE 15 **Mieko Shiomi, *Disappearing Music for Face (1964).*** Shown here at Fluxus A la Carte, Judson Church, New York, 1992. Left to Right: Hanako Iijima (daughter of Ay-O), Yoshi Wada, Clarinda Mac Low, Rebecca Moore, Jeff Buckley.
PHOTOGRAPHER: ANNIE WANN. PRINTED COURTESY OF LARRY MILLER AND SARA SEAGULL, NEW YORK

huge file cabinet on the other side. (Don't worry—it was dried out and didn't smell). Afterwards, in our Halloween costumes, we all went down to the local garbage dump in a caravan and sort of had a Happening, parading across the mounds of garbage in our costumes.

Apparently, George went there a lot to collect materials and found objects for his art. The Halloween weekend stands out in my memory because the children were consciously allowed to contribute as opposed to incidentally. All the artists were doing installations and performances in each room, and some of us kids wanted a room also. George said yes, and our piece was sort of that classic Halloween game, where you pass around things in the dark (wet grapes are a dead person's eyeballs; cold string, their veins, etc.)

Things stand out to me in my thoughts about Fluxus; it is not always just the art itself, but the people. Geoff Hendricks' big smile, Alison Knowles' presence, Larry Miller (the one and only), George, Dick Higgins...really cool personalities and of course my Dad clicking away at each show; my mom, the art historian on the phone trying to correct an author about to list Charlotte Moorman incorrectly as a Fluxus artist in their book. Childhood was all about the art and its people.

I remember one thing, and I'll end with this thought though it is fuzzy, because it sums up my feelings. I was very little, at some gallery or loft. The show was a series of holes drilled in the wall—some high, some low.[4] The

4 **The holes were actually grommets** sewn into cloth. The event was Jean Dupuy's Grommet Theatre in what is now the Emily Harvey Gallery.

audience had to look through the holes. Through each we saw something different by a different artist.

One hole involved climbing up a ladder to look through…inside you saw train tracks. A little train came around on the tracks pulling one car that had a giant milkshake. When it got to the hole the train stopped and a hand pushed a straw through the hole. Another hole I looked through was very different. I looked through and saw a naked young girl crying. (Was it you Jessica? Forgive me for bringing this up if it was.) She was taking part in an enactment of that famous painting by Sandro Botticelli of Venus standing in the shell. She seemed cold and clearly didn't want to do it, standing still in that position as her braided hair got tied up with strings and filled with found objects to look frozen in the wind.[5] There were fans on her. An adult male artist moved around her completing the set-up while she cried without stopping.

It was not until recently that I fully understood that as kids our needs often came second, after art. She seemed cold and clearly didn't want to do it, standing still in that position as her hair got tied up with strings to look frozen on the wind. There were fans on her. An adult male artist moved around her completing the set-up while she cried without stopping.

So my vote stands: milkshakes, YES; Sad girl, NO.

5 She was dressed in a single, floorlength yarn braid. The artist was Alison Knowles.

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Abstract

This essay reads Ben Vautier's signature work of the 1960s as a historiographic performance that questions the notion of the avant-garde as a tradition. Vautier challenges the notion that a continuous stream of new artists finds their place in relation to an historical progression established by avant-garde practices. Vautier puts the personal signature to uses that are both ridiculous and revolting, conjuring up a world of violent personal affects. At the same time, his uses of the signature transcend the realm of individual psychology. These signatures repeat the many signature acts of the avant-garde in an obsessive and abject way. Ultimately, they produce a notion of the avant-garde itself as one grand territorializing signature gesture that can equally be seen to sign nothing at all. Vautier's repetitions are representative of a series of early 1960s event works that open the very notion of an historical avant-garde to new determinations. This type of work also has ramifications for any discussion of "Fluxus after Fluxus."

FIGURE 1 ***Moi Ben je me suis assis 1 heure sur cette chaise.*** Mixed media, 1972

INA BLOM

Ben Vautier's signature acts and the historiography of the avant-garde

TO RESPOND TO THE THEME "FLUXUS after Fluxus" is to confront, head on, the anxious historiography of the avant-garde. It is, in fact, to engage with the difficult issue of "afterlife" that have haunted the avant-gardes since the very beginning—an issue that only became more acute with the so-called neo-avant-gardes of the 1960s. Two contradictory questions, both profoundly mired in the habitual concerns of art history, reflect this anxiety: 1) Who are the proper inheritors of the avant-garde tradition? And 2) Can there be

such a thing as an avant-garde tradition? How can you claim a position within a tradition that was never meant to be, on the basis of work that undermines the very sense of the what tradition is all about?

Nothing could be easier than to discuss contemporary artistic practices that take up aspects of ideas and concerns developed within the context of Fluxus. And yet, to do so—to assume influences and continuities on the basis of various kinds of evidence—would be to put aside the way in which such art historical concerns were actually displaced by Fluxus artists as they struggled to find a space in between the two questions. In fact, the very terms for responding to the theme of "Fluxus after Fluxus" can be found by taking a second look at certain aspects of Fluxus practices devoted to the idea of the work of art as an indeterminate, and uncontainable, event.

This is nowhere more evident—or more explicit—than in the work of Ben Vautier. His obsessive and egomaniac signature writings confront the painful question whether there is a place for his own artistic signature (his own "avant-garde future") after the series of famous signature events that make up the history of the avant-garde—from Duchamp signing ordinary objects to Yves Klein's signing emptiness. But a close reading of the movements of Ben's signature shows us how his apparently personal and idiosyncratic writing consistently repeats the very signature of the avant-garde tradition itself. The effect of this repetition is to open up spaces that point beyond the historical determination of this tradition and its particular artistic identities. And it is precisely in these openings one should look for Fluxus after Fluxus.

The reversed signature

THE STORY OF BEN VAUTIER'S SIGNATURE ACTS STARTS WITH A REPETITION. Exhibit A is an image in the Berlin Dada journal *Der Dada # 1, 1919* of an ordinary black chair, followed by the text *"Diese drückte Stirners Hintern"* (Stirner's behind pressed against this chair). Exhibit B is an ordinary black chair. On the seat of the chair is written, in white paint, *"moi Ben je me suis assis 1 heure sur cette chaise."* (I, Ben, sat on this chair for one hour). *(See figure 1)*

Two chairs then, two notions of behinds having been pressed against them, as if leaving a visible trace on the chairs, some sort of signature imprint. In Ben's case the imprint is literally formulated as a signature on the chair itself, as if his behind had actually done the writing. But what kind of signature could we be talking about here, if it is not a conscious writing produced by a hand that is an extension of a thinking head, but a far less controllable trace left by a behind? This is, in fact, the question that was raised with the pun in *Der Dada. Stirner,* here, is the anarcho-individualist philosopher Max Stirner, author of the 1844 work *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum (The Ego and Its Own).*[1] For Stirner, the self-enclosed ego of the individual could only be defined in terms of the ownership one has over one's own body, because this body-property remains the individual's only secure point of reference in the world. But the pun in the Dada journal undermines precisely this notion of the body as a secure and controllable point of reference: it points out that bodily processes may subvert the experience of self-possession and self-presence. Some parts of the body are always unseen or "other," and may leave traces or imprints that we do not control or possess. There can be no concept of property or the ego without taking into account the heterogeneous moments of the proper body. And since the name "Stirner" was a pseudonym — originally a nickname — that indicated the philosopher's big forehead, the anagrammatical wordplay in the construction *Stirner's Hintern* (the head's behind) even performs a scatological reversal of the writing of Stirner's artistic signature.

1 **Stirner, Max. 1995.** *The Ego and Its Own.* David Leopold, translator. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

It is from this scatological point of reversal that Ben Vautier, usually known only as "Ben," starts to work with his own artistic signature: Right from the outset it is identified with uncontrollable bodily imprints or traces. As his work gradually seems to develop into one obsessive and megalomaniac signature gesture, no other avant-garde signature would seem to have been as jealously protective of the "unique one" that it signs. Yet, at the same time, this signature does not simply come across as "Ben's own." It seems to repeat, over and over again, the many signature acts of the avant-garde, so that in the last instance Ben's personal signature somehow seems to sign the uniqueness and specificity of the avant-garde tradition itself. The question is only to what extent the uniqueness and specificity of this tradition will actually be kept intact by means of Ben's bloated, obsessive signature. As it seems to draw all

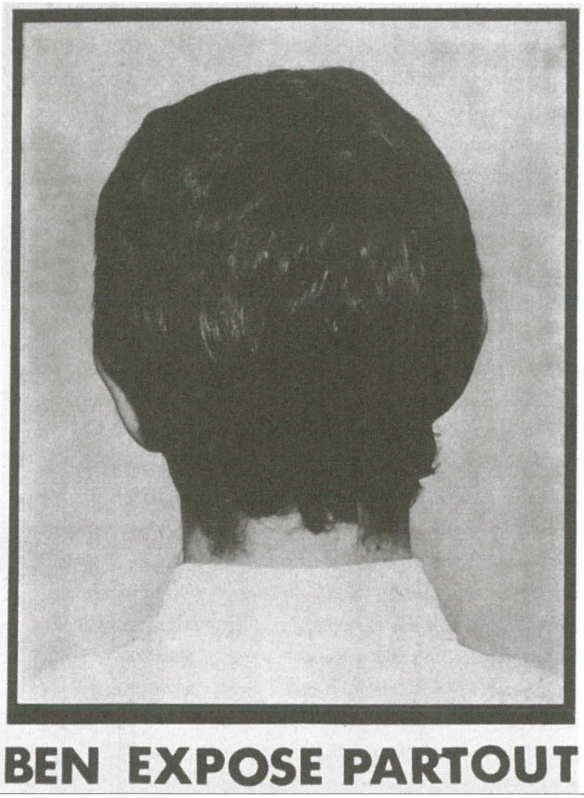


FIGURE 2 ***Ben expose partout.*** Poster, 1965

attention in the direction of the graphic movements, the lines and dots of the signature writing itself, the question of *what* exactly it is that this writing signs (except for itself) is somehow displaced. And yet, for all its explicitly graphological emphasis, this handwriting is not even necessarily very personal. To the contrary, it seems quite generic and formal. It seems to reference the kind of handwriting that is taught as a school *norm*—a clear rounded writing with circular shapes and contours. This handwriting, whose single white or black line can be followed in its almost childishly loose and loopy swings and turns, seems to give a mutely material form to the signature's performance of *encircling* an object, creating a frame or a limit around it. It repeats, in a concretely material form, the signature's necessarily *conceptual* function of encircling and delimitating a unique object.[2] And as the materiality of this signature turns scatological—associated with the uncontrollable, the abject and even the traumatic—it becomes abundantly clear that it cuts into the containment and

2 In "Parergon," Jacques Derrida describes the ambiguity of the signature's simultaneous "encircling," "circulation," "framing," "cutting" and "cutting-off" *(La Vérité en Peinture.* 1978. Paris: Flammarion, pp. 21-135).

self-control of the subject that signs, *as well as* the containment of that unique historical thing named "the avant-garde tradition." Through Ben's signature, the fundamental question of what this tradition constitutes in the here and now is opened up as if for the first time.

A 1965 poster by Ben works as an even more explicit emblem of this process of reversal, of placing the unseen and unsightly back at the place of the front. Over the headline *Ben expose partout (Ben exhibits everywhere),* the poster shows a large passport-style black and white photograph of the back of Ben's head and shoulders *(figure 2).* The "Ben" referred to by the headline is in other words not exactly identified by the photograph, although his photographic imprint and physical outline is clearly marked off against the white background. From the back, one person is easily confused with another: the photo-imprint could have been of "anyone." At the place of the face and its morphological composition of singular traits, we get an undifferentiated or "unsightly" mass of dark hair (all the more unsightly in contrast to the prim school-boyish white shirt that belongs to this genre of portrait). Hair is a scatological object par excellence—*in Parmenides,* Plato mentions hair alongside mud and dirt as examples of that which is ridiculous and which has no form and no idea.[3] In this reversal, "Ben" and Ben's "exposition" is not only what he himself can see, what he knows himself to be or to show. His exposition exposes only how self-representation exceeds its frame of reference: Ben shows more than he knows. The effect of self-exposure is inevitably indecent: beyond the reach of his own self-possession, it cannot be controlled—i.e., aimed at the right place. The indecency of exposure is that it is *partout,* i.e., all over the place. The indecent exposure is an effect of the frame itself: The *passe-partout* (the white frame that encloses Ben's photograph) collapses into the—*pose partout.* It breaks the protective screen of the image-display, the unified and contained cover in which the subject is both inscribed and hidden. In the first instance, Ben's hairy signature exposure means that the subject's cover is blown, along with the historicist cover-function in which the art of exhibition is inscribed only as if within display.

3 Plato. 1966.
Parmenides. Ideene, det Ene og det Andre. Egil A.Wyller, translator. Oslo: Aschehoug, p. 27.

A series of works from the late fifties onwards puts such a scatological perspective squarely in the foreground. In these works Ben's signature is concretely engaged in an appropriation of diverse bodily excretions (he signs piss, vomit, pimples, running noses, dirty water, etc.) or of the bodily holes through which excretions pass. An image of the asshole famously served as an illustration for Ben's signing of holes in general.[4] It is clear from Ben's development of these themes that the scatological is fundamentally identified with the signature and vice versa. And so, Ben's total identification of the space of art with the working of the signature would initially seem to set up an association between the personal emotional investments in the avant-garde work of art and the psychological processes of abjection.

4 Ben Vautier. 1964.
Flux Holes (plastic box with photographs of holes and samples of actual holes). New York: Fluxus edition.

However, there is no straightforward thematic connection between art and the processes of abjection here: Ben's signature strategies are operations that continually displace any concept of artwork that might serve to designate him as the unique source of both its "form" and its "content." This means that his signature operations can not be accounted for by recent art theories that describe how art manages to give symbolic form to the difficult individual or social processes of separation or abjection. Abjection—the rejection of all that seems heterogeneous to the proper body—is arguably an indispensable process for the constitution of a separate I as well as for the constitution of society. What the ego rejects in this process is no other than itself—abjection both points out and separates the ego's own heterogeneous body. In a similar fashion, the stability of any society depends on a ritually enacted separating off of something that is termed "off-limits," unclean or improper.[5] In Julia Kristeva's view, art performs or repeats such ambivalent experiences of abjection, both on the level of subject and society. This is a generalist perspective in that it sees all art as in some way or another involved in processes of abjection, and none more so than an art that takes the ritual place of religion in a thoroughly secularized society.[6] Both art and religion are described as processes of sublimation—not in the Freudian sense of a displacement of a desire, but in the sense of an exchange in which dirty is separated from clean, improper from proper, etc. In this perspective, abjection is the most "archaic" kind of sublimation, since it sets up the first, ambivalent limit between the subject and what is not yet its objects, not yet completely separated out as something alien. Art, not quite so archaic, gives language to this abjection by repeating these ambivalent bodily experiences in symbolical form.

In Kristeva's thinking, this process involves an all-important moment of catharsis: A "cleansing" of body and soul takes place through a complicated process in which the bodily affects are translated into sound and meaning—i.e., into *effects*.[7] But it is precisely such cathartic and emotive functions that are so hard to find in Ben's signature work: In many ways he seems determined to avoid them. His writing is vested in a flatly transparent informational language with no poetic accent or ambition. Seen as visual art, his graphic traces seem to indicate the laborious work of painting only in the most distanced or even parodic manner. His affects (which are everywhere present as the affects *of* Ben) appear not in a formalized, symbolical form, as effects, but as if in a dumb and unprocessed state where they remain on the level of affects only. The lack of catharsis, or formal translation from affect to effect, ultimately indicates how his signature strategies exceed the reference to the individual subject that expresses its emotional states *within* the frames of the "work." Kristeva's account of art and abjection tends towards a stabilizing and a-historical mode of description, which can be tracked in the way gender is mapped onto a process of negativity. Despite her warnings against seeing the pre-oedipal state as

5 **Kristeva, Julia. 1982.** *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection.* New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 1-10.

6 **Kristeva** (*Powers of Horror*, p. 18) describes this secularized world as "the world in which the Other has collapsed." Here, "the aesthetic task—a descent into the foundations of the symbolic construct—amounts to retracing the fragile limits of the speaking being, closest to its dawn, to the bottomless 'primacy' constituted by primal repression."

7 **Kristeva** *Powers of Horror*, 5-12 and 26-29.

essentially prior to the Symbolic, ambivalence arises because of the identification she makes between poetry and pulsating pre-oedipal and pre-syntactic connection to the maternal body. She seems to see the Symbolic as fully subsumed under "the Law of the Father": poetry may repeat the ambivalent process of abjection that also involves the all-important moment of the rejection of this law, but will not displace it. Abjection may evoke the revolting and the heterogeneous, but the repetition of this negation is ultimately contained within the positive stability of the symbolic in that it is allocated to the exceptional cases of poetry or psychotic discourse, which rejects thought itself.[8]

This *process* of negativity is of a different order than the *event* of the reversal instigated by Ben's scatological signature, which systematically opens up a void under all of the terms and categories which it itself seems to both produce and support. The event of this reversal is the mechanism through which Ben's signature cuts itself off from the link with his own "personal" history. Because of this, its performance is not a repetition of primary affects that return as artistic effects. It does not reenact traces of a more primary process of rejection within the free space of the art work: instead it opens up onto the whole operation of framing through which such affects will inevitably have to be projected back on to someone who supposedly "owns" them. Ben's reversal opens questions about the proper belonging of affects and their different registers of containment, notably the private space of personal emotions, the public space in which affects may be interpreted as "madness" and works of art where private emotions are understood to have found a communicable public form. Because of this, his work does not provide a cathartic cleansing, but rather a short-circuiting of the process in which bodily affects re-inscribe themselves as—for instance—the fragmented wording or imagery of certain types of avant-garde art. The emotion, pain, embarrassment and seduction of his work is not identified with the *formations* of a work of art through which the subject redistributes the historically given elements of the signifying system. It is, rather, identified with the signature operation that encircles the concept of such work and guarantees the presence of affects.

8 **Kristeva, Julia. 1984.** *Revolution in Poetic Language.* Margaret Waller, translator. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 117-126, and Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.* London: Routledge, pp. 79-93. Butler launches a critique of Kristeva's particular mapping of gender onto this process of negativity. Despite her continual emphasis on the ambiguity of the abject, Kristeva still seems to keep the conflicting terms in their right places. Abjection is on the one hand a revulsion against the maternal, but also a perversion or *père-version*—a reversal of the Law of the Father.

How to sign affects

THE QUESTION THEN IS HOW TO INTERPRET BEN'S PRESENTATION OF affects when they cannot be immediately explained in terms of a cathartic, or poetic perspective. For his scatological work with the signature is all about affects. Few artists could be said to externalize their private affects to the same degree as Ben, to present them so to speak in their "raw" state. Yet, in this raw state, they are also emphatically public. Ben advertises his affects in the same way as he advertised his "exhibition" in the *Ben expose partout* poster. Again, he uses posters to announce affects that will "take place" both in public and private. A 1962 poster, printed in bold black on red invites you to take part in a

Crise et Depression Nerveuse le ... a ... heures, Galerie d'Art Total, 32, Rue Tondutti de L'Escarène, Nice, France. (Crisis and Nervous Depression on ..... at .....) Another poster from the same year announces a *Crise et Depression chez Ben et Annie le ... a ... heures.*[9] He announces shame, *J'ai honte d'être ici pour me faire voir (I'm ashamed to be here just to be seen),* as well as jealousy:

> *Je peins par jalousie (...) C'est souvent après avoir vu une exposition de groupe que je rentre chez moi et, jaloux comme un tigre, je me dis: « Tiens, je vais leur montrer ce dont je suis capable, à ces petits cons. » (I paint out of jealousy (...) After seeing a group exhibition, I often return home in a jealous rage, telling myself, "I am going to show these idiots what I am capable of.")* [10]

This description of jealousy, which is one of the entries under the letter J in Ben's dictionary, *Ben de A à Z,* refers to one of his most frequent affects—the "theme" of numerous works.[11] Other affects that are announced over and over again are ambivalence, anxiety and ambition: *L'angoisse ca existe. Peint pour la gloire. Je doute. Je suis paresseux est jaloux. Je reste inquiet et dans la doute. (Fear is real. Painted for fame. I doubt. I am lazy and jealous. I am anxious and filled with doubt).* All of these statements appear as signature writings on canvas: the explicit public exhibition of jealousy, doubt, ambition and anxiety is at once painful and embarrassing, titillating and repulsive. As Ben exposes his affects, he generally evokes a sort of embarrassed laughter. This laughter may indicate the extent to which his affects are perceived to be "real"—one is unwillingly and embarrassingly confronted with raw pain. But a comic effect may also arise due to the painfully mechanical operations of self-reference to which the emotion is subjected when it is not transformed into artistic form. For Ben's signature and its self-referential operation work precisely in terms of the "raw" affect: It both titillates and repulses. It is both an invitation to look and a prohibition to look no further. With this mechanism and its comedy, Ben's signature affects cuts through the habitual image of the artwork as made up of sublimated pain. And what takes place here is, essentially a complete reversal of the usual notions of cause and effect in the historical field of modern art. Pain and trauma is not the cause of the artwork. On the contrary, *it is the avant-garde work of art—or rather, the notion of a work in which "the subjective" is radically inscribed—which appears to cause pain, to produce the signature affects of doubt, anxiety and jealousy.* For all of Ben's affects are in one way or another linked to the question of avant-garde art. His affects produce the comedy of someone who is always aware of somehow having missed out on its redemptive potential for self-expression and self-production. With this missed encounter the circle of abjection/becoming (of Kristeva's subject-in-process) is cut apart.

The point is that there seems to be a missing link in Ben's art, and this missing link cuts into the exchange between affect and effect implied by

9 **Vautier, Ben. 1962.** *Crise et Depression,* poster.

10 **Vautier, Ben. 1987.** *Ben. La Vérité de A à Z.* Toulouse: Èditions ARPAP, p. 104.

11 **Under the letter B (for Daniel** Buren), the theme of jealousy reappears in crude terms: *Buren. 1) Je suis jalox de Buren. On parle trop de lui. Ceci dit, il est malin comme un singe. Il a réussi a gonfler un baudruche. 2) Je me demande s'il est aussi important que ca. J'envie sa rigeur, mais il n'est pas riche en imagination. Personellement, il m'ennuie.* (Vautier, *Ben,* p. 40.)

Kristeva. It is this halt or cut in the subject's process that the embarrassed laughter comes to fill in or cover up. Here, one could perhaps say that Ben's work takes on the structure of a joke: in its apparent joining of incongruous registers, it appears more or less as some kind of fallacy. As several of Ben's commentators have noted, it is difficult to take him "seriously."[12] Ben seems to posit several figures of simultaneous unity and disconnection. He posits the work of art as a marker of subjective inscription, but a subjective inscription that is now strangely detached from the exchange mechanisms through which the private body marks its adaptation to the social order. The private bodily affects that should have "ignited" these exchanges seem curiously detached, out of place: They are, from the outset, too public.

To take the example of jealousy: In the work of Ben, it figures as something, as it is both too private and too signified to be part of some higher poetic construct. But if it appears like an out of place affect, it is because it works obsessively on the missed encounter with the work of the avant-garde. Hyperconscious of dates, of timing, Ben never ceases to present himself as being *too late* in relation to modern art history. Right from the start of his career, he is continually making lists of the achievements of the avant-garde, and the point of these lists is to evoke all the things that have already been done, and which it is therefore now too late to do. But here the strategic or operative dimension of Ben's affects come into play. Jealousy is an affect that could be seen to appear primarily in relation to experiences such as lateness. And it is precisely because of its apparently absurd and unreasonable relation to an irrevocable past that jealousy usually seems abject or excessive. Derrida puts it this way: one is never jealous of a present scene. Jealousy is excessive because it occupies itself in an obsessive way with a past that has never been present and that will never present itself or hope for presentation.[13] It is because of the experience of having been cut-off by this absolute past that the obsessive jealousy in Ben's work appears as a detached affect—as if administered by its own uncanny logic. On the other hand—and this is the important point—Ben's signature jealousy then also works to produce the avant-garde itself as precisely such an excessive non-present—a present that has never been. As a detached affect, his jealousy also cuts him off from the avant-garde tradition.

12 **Blistène, Bernard, in Ben** Vautier. 1995. *Ben. Pour ou contre.* Marseille: Musées de Marseille, pp. 8-11.

13 **Derrida. 1981. *Glas.* Paris:** Éditions Denoël/Gonthier, pp. 187-188.

WHEN AFFECTS APPEAR SO CLEARLY IN TERMS OF SUCH A RADICAL DE-tachment, it becomes hard to tell the difference between primal affect and artistic effect. The problem of distinguishing affect from effect becomes apparent in Ben's quite explicit fusion of jealousy and the signature. This fusion seems to activate the question, posed by Derrida: *how to sign an affect?* It is a rhetorical question, but it may work as a commentary to the suggestion that works of art *are* effects that return to the subject in the sense that they

FIGURE 3 Ben's store in Nice, 1958

constitute it through a repetition of its affects. This return to the interiority of the psychic domain seems to place art forever within the closed circulation of abjection/becoming. And it is this circulation that the question about "signing affects" serves to break into.[14]

The rhetorical question of how to sign affects first of all highlights the fact that affects will necessarily have been "affected" by the signature, before eventually making imprints as "pure signifiers" which pulls everyday language apart and turns it into art.[15] Secondly it points out that if this is the case, then the excess of the affect simply derives from the fact that it takes part in the duplicity of the signature. For the signature underwrites the personal singularity of the affects *at the same time* as it gives them a social significance that already undercuts this purely personal realm of signification. Here is the point of crisis, elaborated over and over again by Ben. Nothing would seem to be more personal than affects, but since they must then

14 Kristeva describes the temporal discontinuities of the abject in a way that might indicate radical cuts and breaks in this circularity, but in the end she posits both art and the subject in terms of the internality of the psychic domain.

15 In Kristeva's interpretation, abjection of self is the signified, to which the work of art is the signifier. The affect makes its imprint in language in terms of the "pure signifier" which operates at the point of desemantization (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 49).

necessarily be associated with the signature, they also cut into the domain of proper ownership: the private collapses into the public. Derrida has his own set of metaphors for what happens here, and these metaphors strike up some startling analogies with some of Ben's most well-known and risky actions. They appear in terms of further rhetorical questions: *Comment donner le seing a des affects? Comment le faire sans simulacre ou s'afficher de tout? par postiches, fétiches, pastiches?* (How does one give the *seing* to an affect? How does one do it without a simulacrum to attract the attention of all ? By postiches, fetishes, pastiches ?)[16] In this not quite grammatical sentence, the neologism *s'afficher de tout* plays on both the notion of "not giving a damn' *(il se fiche de tout)* and "putting up posters" *(afficher)*. What is astonishing here is the link that this sentence sets up between the affects of the signature and the two elements that converge in *Ben expose partout:* notably that of posters and fake hairpieces. For one can safely say that Ben *s'affiche de tout*—particularly in the early sixties he puts up posters everywhere, posters announcing or advertising his own affects or his own signature.[17] At this point Ben would appear to be less an artist than an *afficheur,* less a creator and more of a businessman or an advertising agency.[18] He never stops talking about art, but by putting up posters rather than painting he also appears not to give a damn about it. His signature and his posters are truly "all over the place," but particularly inside and outside the small record shop that he ran from 1958 onwards—a business/work of art through which ordinary merchandise was actually sold *(figure 3)*.

Likewise, the big head of hair in *Ben expose partout* evokes the notion of the *postiche*. As the hair is seen from the back, it also appears as if cut-off: since it has no connection to a face there's a kind of a massive wig-like quality to it. In any case the connection between hair and fakery is overdetermined. The word *postiche* translates as fake hairpiece, but it can also just mean fakery in general. While Kristeva primarily focuses on the abject in terms of bodily substances such as shit, vomit, hair etc, she also mentions that the abject can be evoked by the experience of injustice, crime, fakery and corruption, like "the artist who practices his art as a business."[19] The link between the signature, the poster and the fake hairpiece evokes the notion of the public or symbolical reversal of the self as a fake or a copy. Through the various affects of the signature, Ben's artistic self appears to be already a pastiche.

THE QUESTION ABOUT SIGNING AFFECTS THEN SIMPLY SERVES TO POINT OUT that the inevitable and self-referential identification of affects "as mine" is already an inscription in a system of meaning—an inscription that already opens up the question of the proper place of affects. Affects can not be thought apart from the operations of a signature—and vice versa. Ben's affects are nothing but signatures—alternatively one could say that his signatures are nothing if not affected. This point can be made with reference

16 **Derrida,** *Glas,* p.59. John P. Leavey Jr. and Richard Rand, translators, in *Glas,* Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, p. 42.

17 ***"Il m'est arrivé, dans les** années 63, de faire des affiches sans faire d'exposition, juste pour le plaisir de coller des affiches dans la rue.* » Ben Vautier, *Ben,* p. 12.

18 ***1) « Une oeuvre d'art est** une publicité pour son créateur car derrière chaque toile se cache le message publicitaire: « Regardez-moi, c'est moi qui a peint ca. » 2) « Ben vend ses idées pour réussir, Discrétion assurée, » (publicité passée en 1964).* Ben Vautier, *Ben,* p. 148.

19 **Kristeva,** *Powers of Horror,* p. 15-16.

to the association between the abjection and the signature in Ben's work. It is not enough to say that Ben simply evokes the abject by continually creating homologies between his signature and various (other) kinds of bodily discharges and excrements. What is crucial is the performative force given to this abject signature. Here, one can distinguish, as Hal Foster suggests in a different context, between the desire to abject, to separate in order to enter the Symbolic order, and the desire to *be* abject—that is the desire to *operate* in terms of the essential ambiguity of the abject.[20] To *be* the abject then means to continually perform the abject's act of separation. As Dennis Hollier puts it, the question of the abject is not only an epistemological question. It is not primarily a question of identifying abject substances. There is also a pragmatics of abjection, which links it to the force of the performative. For if abjection becomes only a classificatory problem, then the subjective element—the position of the subject in a pragmatic reaction—disappears.[21]

What Hollier seems to imply is that any abject operation (or act of reversal) in the terms of a given culture can only come about by *passing through* the "subjective" position. This seems to be an insight intuitively shared by Ben. The fact that the personal signature is a typical case of a performative doing by naming, points to the pragmatic operation in Ben's work and suggests precisely such a desire to *be* abject rather than to abject. When he advertises his affects all over town, his signature short-circuits the negotiations through which two fields (private and public) are kept separate.[22] There is no longer the image of a *relation* between these separate registers, presented in a terms of a work of art which negotiates their varying degree of closeness and distance: the relation is simply cut across as the one is folded into the other. The negotiable limit of separation between the two registers is in fact opened up, like a wound. As Mark Seltzer has suggested, the collapsing of the separation between the private and public is the very sign of trauma or what he chooses to call "wound culture." The impure and abject character of the psychic mechanism called trauma—which is foundational to psychoanalysis—is also what makes it break out of the domain of individual psychology. The impurity of trauma is not the mark of this domain's autonomy but of its displacement–in the sense that what the trauma demarcates is precisely the breakdown between the psychic and social register, the private and the public.[23]

The predominant notion of the work of art in modernist aesthetics provides a model for maintaining the distance between these registers by separating private affect from formal effect. The affects are understood to have somehow *generated* the works—forms are relegated to its limits, to the space of the signature and biography. Ben collapses this distance by positing what is felt as a continual failure of distance with respect to the representation of the self. With this failure of distance, it is precisely the status of the pain as cause—an "internal" cause that would have "external" effects (either art or destructive

20 Foster, Hal. 1996. *The Return of the Real.* Cambridge: The MIT Press, p. 100.

21 Hollier, Dennis. 1994. "The politics of the signifier II: A Conversation on the Informe and the Abject." in *October 67*, p. 7.

22 As Hal Foster points out, in Kristeva's writing the distinction between the desire to abject and the desire to be the abject is notoriously ambiguous. However, Carin Franzen's description of the different conceptions of the Platonic notion of *chora* in the work of Kristeva and Derrida respectively, points more concretely to the different directions in which such a distinction would lead. In the platonic tradition, the notion of chora indicates a spatial and temporal origin of ideas and feelings. Kristeva emphasizes this spatio-temporal notion of the chora by seeing it as a maternal receptacle of sound, rhythm and light which allows the infant the negativity of the first impulses towards rejection. For Derrida, on the contrary, it is essentially a figure for the undecided and undecidable, and for this reason its particular substance should not be decided upon. Its spatial and temporal character is identified with the materiality of the written sign and its differentiating operations. (Franzén, Carin. 1995. *Att översätta känslan.* Stockholm: Brutus Östlings Bokforlag, pp. 96-99.) Kristeva's ambiguous and unresolved slippage between these two alternatives may in any case point to the urgency of a problematic which turns away from her own emphasis on sublimation and catharsis.

23 Seltzer, Mark. 1997. "Wound Culture: Trauma in the Pathological Public Sphere." *October 80*, pp.10-11. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

behavior)—that is being questioned. With psychoanalysis, the traumatic collapse of the boundaries between self and other—i.e., the violence that is the "other" side of the social bond—is made internal. But this internalizing hides the very breakdown between internal and external that trauma or its affects serve to mark in impure and ambiguous ways. And for this reason trauma poses a radical breakdown in the determination of the subject, both from within and from without. The attribution of trauma bends event-reference to self-reference, transferring interest from the (real or posited) event to the subject's self-representation.[24]

24 **Seltzer,** "Wound Culture," pp. 8-11.

BEN'S AFFECTS DO IN OTHER WORDS NOT SIMPLY DEPART FROM THE sphere of his own subjective realm. Aligned with the signature event, they open up the whole problematic of determination with respect to the boundaries between the subject and its immediate sociality. However, this is not yet a very precise description of the particular operation of Ben's signature. The violent sociality that is marked out by Ben's trauma-signature has a more specific function. "Ben" is not simply a body broken up by the social in general: despite his apparent obsessions with all kinds of terrors, from war and famine to illnesses and excretions. The big themes of threatening sociality, such as violence, war and the judgment of others are evidently present in his work, but these themes have themselves been curiously amputated and particularized: stuffed, as it were, within the limits of the signature. From 1960 onwards, Ben starts a series of signature acts through which he seems to appropriate specific parts of the totality of the world, and some of the things he signs are the phenomena that are recurring themes of art itself, such as pain, illnesses and violence. He signs all of these; in a gesture to the (then fashionable) existentialist philosophy, he even signs *others*.[25] In this way, these subjects of violent sociality no longer appear as *themes* or instant markers of trauma in themselves, but only as effects of Ben's signature!

25 **Vautier, Ben. 1975.** *Textes Theoriques Tractes 1960-75*. Milano: Editore Giancarlo Politi, p. 20.

This particular signature strategy has one important consequence. With its "publication" of affects it is not only Ben's subjective determination that is made to seem uncertain. The determination of the specific sociality that relates to his trauma is equally ambiguous. From this point onwards it seems that the sociality of this trauma can only be approached through *another* name that keeps circulating through Ben's signature—a name that is repeated over and over again, as if in affect. This double naming act confuses the proper name of Ben with the name of avant-garde art. As Ben's wound demarcates the painful folding into one another of avant-garde art and personal artistic destiny, we can start to see the historiographic implications of this particular turn from event-reference to self-reference. Ben's affective signature interrupts the "normal" historiography of the avant-garde precisely as it interrupts the imagined continuity between the singular presence of the artistic self and the

generalized presence of a *history of* the avant-garde. Ben seems to realize that any continued presentation of the avant-garde is only possible if one manages to cut into the event-reference of avant-garde history *precisely as it reserves a place for him.* He will in other words have to *miss out* on the process of identification through which he would find a place in that particular history. This, then, is the abject performance of Ben's signature. By repeating the avant-garde signature, by pursuing its endless circulation around itself, it becomes increasingly apparent that what his signature encircles is simply this *missing out*—i.e., the artist's missing out on the historical time and place at which he is expected.

AS A PRELIMINARY, THEN, ONE COULD SAY THAT BEN'S "OWN" SOCIALITY is that of art. In an interview Ben externalizes his artistic identity in terms of simple sociological facts: Born of artistically inclined parents in a pétit-bourgeois milieu, he sees himself as more or less destined to ask the kind of questions on art that he does.[26] More specifically even, "his" sociality is that of an avant-garde art whose signature strategies have already marked out the collapse between subject and society, the private and the public. This is important, for it shows that Ben's collapsing of the separation between private and public is not hands-on revolutionary, but mimetic or repetitive.

The signature-strategies of the avant-garde appear, in other words, as both unbounded and overdetermined. And this complex sets up some peculiar problems. The signature acts of the *historical* avant-garde may in part have served to reformulate art in utopian terms. By displacing more traditional notions of subjectivity, avant-garde signature operations served to open up an imaginary space that could romanticize notions of new modes of collective being. But from the vantage of a neo-avant-garde working through the historical traces of these signature acts, the romance of this perspective gets distorted. Now the significance of Dada's signature appears as if reversed. What was, initially, formulated as a boundary-displacing opening is inverted to the terms of appropriation. The limitless scope of the avant-garde signature now appears in its terrifyingly totalizing dimension. The drive to appropriate appears as the dark side of the signature, exposing itself as if for the first time. For appropriation essentially means taking on "the world" by means of the artistic signature—reserving it "for art," so to speak. The signature becomes a gluttonous instance that swallows everything, up to and including the limits of the world that it signs.[27]

Ben's signature act could be read as a paranoid response to this gluttony — a demarcation of the trauma that is produced as this all-consuming signature engulfs the singularity of his own signature or the possibility of his "own" difference. And his demarcation of the trauma of this scenario serves to displace the perceived internality of appropriation. For appropriation is

26 ***"Dans ma famille, il y avait deux ou trois peintres du côté de mon père. Du côté de ma mère, c'étaient des commercants, mais ils parlaient culture. Quand j'ai été mis dans une librairie d'art, je me suis intéresse à l'art. J'avais le sentiment que c'était naturel parce que mon père et ma mère parlaient d'art.»*** (Vautier, *Ben*, p. 56.)

27 Both Derrida and Kristeva seems to correspond on one point concerning the function of either the signature or the abject: they indicate the limits of the world. "A la limite, du texte, du monde, il ne resterair plus qu'une énorme signature, grosse de tout ce qu'elle aurait d'avance englouti, mais d'elle seule enceinte. (Derrida, *Glas*, p. 55) "... a phobic, obsessional, psychotic guise (...), more generally and in more imaginary fashion in the shape of abjection, notifies us of the limits of the human universe. (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 11.)

fundamentally an act of identification—the closure around a self. When the avant-garde signature returns as pure internality and pure appropriation, it is as if it were the return of a monster—the monster of an art movement all wrapped up in its own identity—its own historical certainties.[28] With this colossal abstraction, the identity of the avant-garde signature seems to be the limit of the world. This is Ben's concern, and his own strategy both mimics and undermines the presence of this historical monster. By repeating this monstrous signature, Ben ensures that the difference between appropriation and expropriation *in the name of art* may be as undecidable as the distinction between private and public.

28 Bataille points out how appropriation is a process of identification and homogenization—appropriation establishes identity between the possessor and the object possessed. (Bataille, Georges. 1993. *Visions of Excess. Selected Writings 1927-1939*. Translated by Alan Stoekl, translator. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, p. 95.)

Fear of the hungry signature

THE AVANT-GARDE HURTS. THIS IS ONE OF THE FIRST THINGS YOU LEARN from Ben, and he is probably the first (avant-garde) artist who is willingly parting with this information. The avant-garde does not hurt because it is revolutionary or radical, but because its signature strategies eat up space. From the perspective of the late 50's artist looking back at the history of the avant-garde, it might have appeared as if this history, with its emphasis on infinite possibilities, could be imagined in the figure of an open space. Donald Preziosi has described the way in which the discipline of art history is founded precisely on a series of tacitly spatial assumptions, through which time and place converge into a harmonious whole. This approach has several sources. On the one hand it has its origins in a spatial geometry in which relations between object and context, art and its ground are articulated as linear or multi-linear connections. On the other hand, the effect of a tacit space is also produced by the Cartesian notion of the neutral zero-point of the analyst-historian: This point of looking implies a perspective in which the apex coincides with the historian's position.[29] But from the position of Ben's paranoid look at this history, it could easily appear as if the promised "open space" of the new had in fact been "taken," so that now there was "no space left" for the present.

29 Preziosi, Donald. 1989. *Rethinking Art History. Meditations on a Coy Science*. New Haven: Yale University Press, pp. 36-39, 43.

It is the gluttonous avant-garde signature that has eaten up the space; Ben is quite clear on this point. The history of the avant-garde appears to him as a terrible determination taking the form of a simple game of appropriation. The point of departure of this game is conquest and acquisition—a conquest of the *new*, which a paranoid Ben constructs as a territory. *"L'histoire de l'art est une histoire d'appropriations. A partir de Dada, on peut même s'approprier la réalité." (The history of art is a history of appropriations. After Dada, one can even appropriate reality.)* [30] These conquests started with Duchamp's signing of ordinary objects in a way that "revealed" art to be a question of externalizing intentionality through use of the personal signature. For Ben, the importance of Dada resides in this possible capture of all through the signature, and he makes long lists of things captured in this way: Everyday objects, environ-

30 Vautier, *Ben*, p. 17.

ments, even intentionality itself. The next important conquest happens as John Cage uses the principle of chance operations in order to identify any object of the world with the concept of music. This principle gets even more pervasive with Allan Kaprow's all-inclusive Happenings and La Monte Young's positing a single sound only as a whole musical "universe."[31] The history of the avant-garde is in other words understood as an accelerating conquest under the signature. Not surprisingly, the paranoid dimensions of this perspective gets more pointed as Ben approaches his own closest environment: notably the signature actions of Yves Klein, Isidore Isou and the French New Realist-movement. This is where the violence of the signature-conquests is most pointedly felt. While Isou sees the personal signature as the only valid guarantee for the continual production of the new, Klein's signature conquers the absolute. Having taken on the territories of the monochrome, the theater of emptiness, and the "acceptation of everything possible," Klein's most significant conquest is the ultimate act of appropriation:

> *Le monde entier est à prendre et à transformer en oeuvre d'art. Ce qui n'est pas art doit le devenir. En prenant possession de l'air, du feu, du vide, de l'immaterialité et du monochrome, il a rejoint l'esprit total de Dada et de Duchamp.*
> *(The whole world may be seized and made into a work of art. What is not already art should become so. By appropriating air, fire, emptiness, the immaterial and the monochrome, he has joined the totalizing spirit of Dada and Duchamp.)*[32]

What comes after this is only a matter of specialization. The New Realists see the world as a picture, a big fundamental *work* in which each artist appropriates his own specific part. Arman has accumulations of trash, César has compressed cars, Hains, Villeglé, Rotella et Dufrêne has torn posters, Manzoni has excrements, Spoerri has old table settings, and so on: "Everyone has something that is physically different from the others, but they are all doing the same thing."[33] The signature has moved into every available corner of the world.

From this perspective, Ben's choice to work with the signature itself is at once extremely curious and mercilessly logical. For Ben suffers loudly from the double bind across which the huge, overblown, signature of the avant-garde history is stretched: through the duplicity of the signature, the limits of the subject are at once affirmed and imploded. But in Ben's work, the duplicity of the signature seems to return as two separate, homogenizing terms. Ben's description of the strategies of appropriation obviously reduces the signature to one such homogenizing and totalizing term. But the other aspect of the avant-garde signature's double moment—the dispersion or "killing" off of the subject—also appears in an equally totalizing guise. In the late 50's, the explicit actions of appropriation are followed by an equally explicit quest for anonym-

31 Vautier, *Textes Theoriques Tractes*, pp. 28-31. On this matter, La Monte Young compositional strategies are often interpreted as both the opposite of Cage's and as the logical continuation of his ideas.

32 Vautier, *Textes Theoriques Tractes*, p. 30.

33 Ben continues his list with the American pop artists as well: Warhol has mechanical reproduction, Johns has the American Flag, Lichtenstein has cartoons etc. (Vautier, *Textes Theoriques Tractes*, p. 30.)

FIGURE 4 ***To Change Art Destroy Ego,*** photograph, 1969

ity: as in the Zen-inspired aesthetics of John Cage, the "death of the author" has become ideology. Ben suffers from the violence of the signature that leaves him no space: between appropriation and anonymity all ground is covered (even the possibility of a silent anonymous no-space). Having identified the quest for the new with the appropriation of the signature, he jokes: "I could be the first to not make something new."[34] Ben's trauma is mired in the following contradiction. On the one hand the signature-appropriations of the New Realists effectively prohibits the presence of the new by designing the world as a total work of art. On the other hand, Cage's suppression of the personal signature as an instance of a "dirty" self-interest is equally totalizing, since it posits the appearance of a world only in the disciplined withdrawal of a self.[35]

A strange 1969 photograph plays up this contradiction. The photograph shows a sort of messy terrain-vague across which a huge banner bearing the words *To Change Art Destroy Ego* is suspended *(figure 4)*. In front of this banner, however, Ben's own young daughter is portrayed, standing with her doll's baby carriage. Juxtaposed with this image of the growing child (which obviously appeals to our experiences of the precarious processes of ego-formation), Ben's sloganized formulation of what could be called a quintessential 1960s "avant-gardist" stance is made out to appear at once dogmatic, cruel and plainly absurd. Its totalizing terms are in other words fully displayed in their traumatic dimension. However, the absurdity of the slogan is not only produced in its encounter with the image of Ben's child, but also in its encounter with the terrain-vague—a quite strange choice of a ground across which to stretch a banner. Banners and placards are usually affixed to walls, or suspended

34 Vautier, *Textes Theoriques Tractes*, p. 33.

35 Vautier, *Textes Theoriques Tractes*, p. 33. Ben invariably describes the quest for anonymity as hypo-critical.

above opinionated masses, which provide the appearance of a firm support, a ground or a background for their claims and demands. The terrain-vague, across which this banner is (quite limply) hanging, provides no such support. It simply undercuts the experience of the tacit space to which the historical representation of the avant-garde itself will be affixed. For, since 1961, the terrain-vague has been identified as another one of those abject or ambivalent phenomena that Ben identifies with his own signature. Bounded precisely as an unbounded, pointless, insignificant—and, for this reason, *rare* phenomenon, the terrain-vague ultimately performs the signature's paradox of the singular existence which is singular only in its continually signifying of vagueness, that is, of nothing in particular.[36] In the very ambiguity of its performance it quite literally neglects to provide a firm backup or a continuous ground.

The limp projection of the avantgardist slogan onto the disappearing background of the terrain-vague becomes an allegory of the signature event through which Ben enacts his distancing of the avant-garde ideals. He does not, as he says, "believe in Zen."[37] With appropriation, the power of the signature (or the ego) appears to be unlimited, with anonymity the signature (or ego) is said not to exist. Between these positions, Ben describes himself as suffering from "the illness of the ego"—an illness in which the double moment of appropriation and rejection is kept dangerously active. His "illness" evokes either the nausea of overeating, or the rejection of food: "I want to eat myself but I am not able to do it."[38] The continually repeated signature is here explicitly linked to the traumatic experience of the double bind. His signatures become obsessive, because there is no way he can *stop* signing the identity of the avant-garde that has produced him. The only possibility left is to continue to repeat the signature.

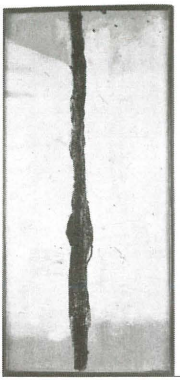
THIS PERTINENCE OF THIS REALIZATION, AND ITS DIFFERENCE FROM THE profusion of New Realist appropriations can be illustrated by juxtaposing two signature acts that appear to be the same. Yves Klein's most important and notorious act was to sign *all (Tout)*—the *all* which he formulated as the unlimited blue air. Klein in fact sets up a contract for an exchange in which his signature will function as a guarantee. A piece of the all—specified here as the absolute nothingness of blue air—was to be bought in solid gold against a receipt of Klein's signature. In order to realize this absolute all/nothing, however, the gold would be thrown in the river and the signed receipt would be burned, equal for equal. Klein's appropriations does in other words work within an economy of exchange in which the signature will guarantee the way in which value may pass from one object to another, from all to nothing, from the substantial to the insubstantial, from the material to the immaterial.

One of Ben's earliest gestures was to sign *all*, as well *(Je signe tout)*, as a matter of taking part in what he called "the avant-garde of the absolute." But here a shift in emphasis takes place. Ben's signing of all does not appropriate more

36 Ben signs terrains-vagues in 1961. In *Ben. La Verité de A à Z* he claims their artistic significance for the following reasons: 1) the atmosphere of *intense tactile pleasure* that they provide; 2) their *rarity;* 3) their *horisontality:* thanks to terrains-vagues the concept of sculpture will be released from the demand to verticality. What emerges from his arguments is the paradoxical image of a scattered or vague sensual experience, the pleasurable or seductive qualities of a non-form which places itself outside the boundaries of form, but which, because of these qualities, *also* designates something rare, exceptional or singular. (1987, p. 171) His arguments have certain significant points in common with Derrida's use of the notion of the terrain-vague as a metaphor for what he calls the *vague beauty* of the signature (a depletion of the pure beauty which Kant ascribes only to the inside of the work itself). (Derrida. 1978. *La Vérité en Peinture.* Paris: Flammarion, p. 105.)

37 Vautier, *Textes Theoriques Tractes*, p. 71.

38 Vautier, *Textes Theoriques Tractes*, p. 69.



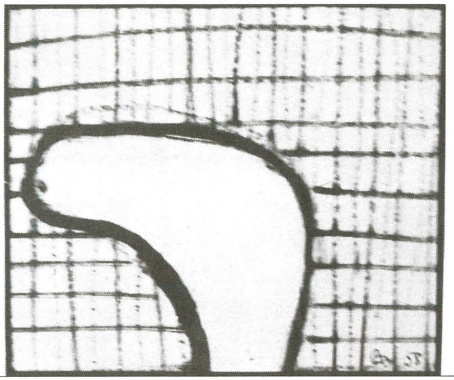
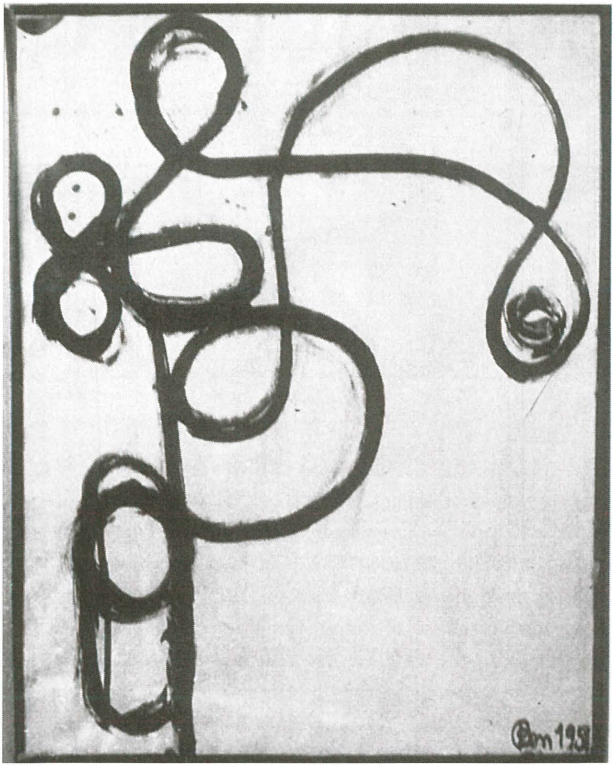


FIGURE 5 ***Ligne,*** Oil on canvas, 1955
FIGURE 6 ***Forme de la banane.*** Oil on canvas, 1958

substances or territories for art, and neither does it exchange art for "nothing" or (as in Klein's case) "the immaterial." Whereas Klein signs *all,* Ben *signs* all, and this subtle difference is crucial. In Ben's dictionary, the definition of the word *all (tout)* immediately references another dictionary entry—notably that of the *signature.* In the case of Klein, the emphasis is on the substances that have been signed—the color blue, the immaterial etc. In the case of Ben, however, there is no such emphasis on substances. Rather than any particular notion of an *all,* we get only the signature itself: written in white on black or black on white. Unlike Klein, whose totality remains firmly outside the signature that guarantees and demarcates its existence, Ben recognizes that only the signature itself will supply a "total" totality. Totality cannot be thought from outside the signature. By positing the signature as the outside guarantee of totality, Klein was able to imagine an exchange or bargain through which the material value of the world would be transformed to one immense substance of blue air or nothing. Ben's identification of the *all* with the writing of the signature itself makes such exchanges impossible. Totality evokes nothing but the tracing of the circle, yet can never be circled around. For this reason it can not be produced through the kind of circulation where one thing is exchanged for another. With view to this complication, the question of Ben's strategy of continuing to sign totalities can be reopened: *what* is it that he is signing?

The birth of Ben's signature

TO ANSWER, ONE CAN START BY PAYING ATTENTION TO THE TRACES LEFT by this signature—where it first appeared, how it developed. It may even be necessary to invoke a graphological reading of its loops and circles, the movements of the hand. For it is possible to follow the traces of this signature backwards, like a trail, to a series of abstract paintings made in the years between



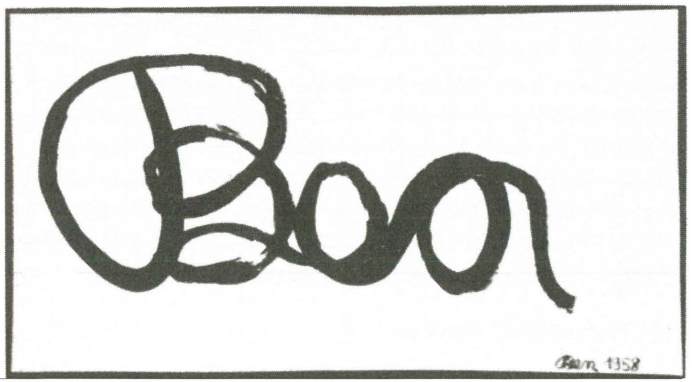


FIGURE 7 ***Recherche de formes.*** Oil on canvas, 1958
FIGURE 8 ***Signature.*** Oil on canvas, 1958

1950 and 1957. In these works, Ben could be said to search out his signature, to look for its proper forms. At this point in his career (the very beginning), his concern is above all with formal innovation, and he subjects himself to it systematically, even perversely so.

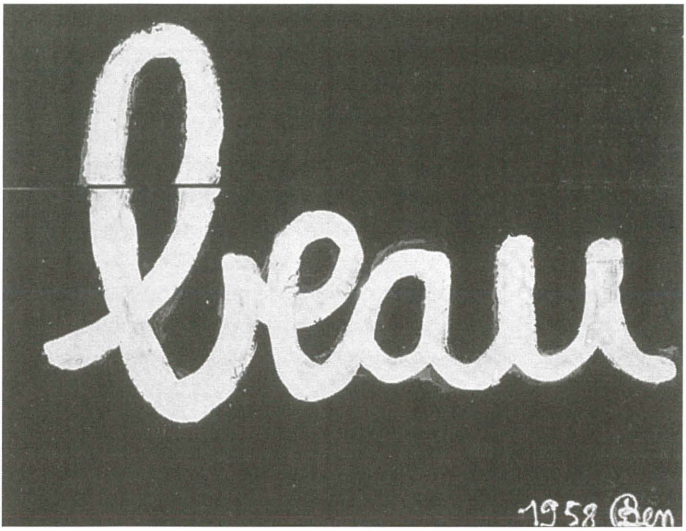
> *De 1950 à 1957, surpis par le courage des créateurs contemporains, je pris conscience et goût à la recherche du nouveau, et j'ai voulu jouer au jeu de la création. Je dessinai des formes que je jetais si je retrouvais leur source d'influence.*
> *(Between 1950 and 1957, taken aback by the courage of contemporary artists, I got interested in the search for the new and wanted to participate in the game of creation. I designed forms that I threw away if I found their original source.)*[39]

39 1962 statement, in Vautier, *Ben*, p. 34.

From Ben's perspective, the game of abstraction also seemed like a game of appropriating forms: Mondrian had the squares, Delauney had the circles, Soulages and Hartung had the cuts, etc. Ben was in other words searching systematically for forms that would be absolutely idiosyncratic, personal, singular. From this perspective it is interesting to look at what he did not throw away, what he considered at once "new" and "personal" enough. The series of works called *Recherche de formes (Investigations into Form)* show one common point. In these works painting has basically become a matter of tracing the outlines of shapes by means of single black lines on a white background. Starting, from a single line *(Ligne, 1955)* which divides the canvas in two *(figure 5)*, his search for form seems at the outset to define form quite traditionally in terms of shape or outline. The shapes contained by these lines would or would not be new.

In 1957 Ben pronounced himself happy to have finally found a form that was not already taken: the form of the banana *(figure 6)*. In a series of works, the banana is represented in terms of a very rudimentary black tracing on white ground of one or two thick curved shapes. Some of the bananas remain floating in this white space, others seem to be dutifully inscribed in the grid shapes that reference a kind of standardized modernism. Formulating the canvas as a grid signifies a thoroughly modernist stance: as Rosalind Krauss has pointed out, it is through this radically new pictorial measure that painting will finally stop being a picture window and turn into a surface only. But Ben's use of the grid is as tongue in cheek as his "claim" to the banana-form. In his paintings the grid is at once so rudimentary, clumsy and explicit it that it seems like a hastily done notebook sketch rather than an expression of a profound devotion to the surface of the canvas.

The "new-ness" of the banana-form was in any case quickly shown to have been illusory. Ben quotes Yves Klein, who pointed out to him that the form had already been used: bananas were *"sous-Kandinsky."* He advised Ben to rather continue his attempt to write poems with ink on canvas, as this was



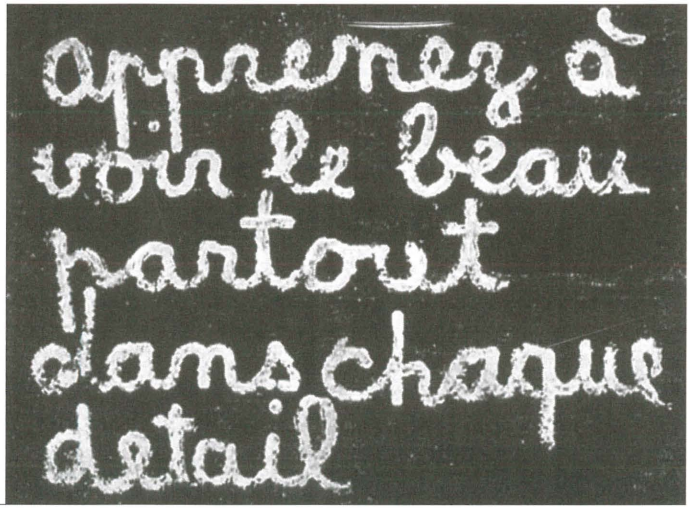


FIGURE 9 ***Beau,*** Oil on canvas, 1958

FIGURE 10 ***Apprenez a voir le beau partout dans chaque détail,*** Oil on canvas, 1958

(he claimed) "more original."[40] However, Ben's outlines and tracings had for a long time seemed to take on a kind of writerly meandering. In the *Recherche de formes* paintings, and in the paintings on the walls of his room above the Nain Bleu bookshop in Nice, his lines at times do not so much outline form as wander off on their own, all over the place, as traces of a writing hand. What starts out as Mondrian-like grids continually deteriorate into soft loops and letter-like figures.

40 **Vautier,** *Ben*, p. 107.

This appears to be the beginning of writing in Ben's work. In one 1958 painting in particular the big rounded loops of the lines are very similar to the exaggerated loops of Ben's signature at the bottom right of the painting *(figures 7 and 8)*. There are no other figures in this painting but these loops. The continuity between unique new form and the unique signature has in other words been made explicit in terms of its most crude consequence. In a series of other paintings the big rounded tracings turns into words: *Mais, Paix, Hier, Spirale* (with the figure of a spiral), *Beau, Laid (figure 9)*. It is also the start of the long series of personal statements in Ben's work: *Je suis un menteur, Je pleure pour moi être immense. (I am a liar. I cry so as to be great.)* At the same time, this signature begs to be viewed in terms of its formal particularity: *Apprenez à voir le beau partout dans chaque detail (Learn to see beauty everywhere, in every detail)*, one painting states with typical New Realist gusto *(figure 10)*. But rather than pointing to the details of the "world," the statement draws the attention to the details of its own pastose paint-writing — uncannily similar to some kind of physical bodily trace or discharge. It would appear that Ben's search for new painterly form had finally fallen down on the most particular shape of all — notably the shape of his own handwriting. This, however, is not exactly the case. When asked, Ben asserts that the loopy rounded handwriting is "not even" his own. Had he been able to afford it, he might even have appointed a sign-painter — in other words, a close colleague of the *afficheur*.[41] Pointing out the generic, artificial and fabricated nature of these handwritings, Ben draws attention to the way in which the trace of his hand — which is also identified with all kinds of bodily discharges — returns to the writing subject only by cutting into its own circulation around itself. The circle traced by the signature writing turns out to be a hole. By suggesting a formal continuity between this circulation and the huge loops of his own signature, Ben seems to make literal — at the level of a graphic, formal invention — the difficult question of the signature's closure.

41 **Vautier,** *Ben*, p. 57.

In addition, this loopy writing is loaded with a series of particular visual associations. As it turns out, the formal models for his handwriting mark out another typical case of the collapse between public and private. In one 1960 painting Ben gives an approximate rendition of the iconic Coca Cola signature *(Buvez Coca Cola frais)* with its flashy "handwritten" loops and circles: the signature Ben in the corner is of a piece with this writing. In a 1958 work, a

part of a wall sign with similar flashy signature handwriting is framed and signed. This piece *(figure 11)* bears the incomplete letters *"fense fficher"*—a cutout of the message *Défense d'afficher.* (No bill posting permitted.) Through these works the graphic *form* and *style* of Ben's signature-writing is entirely identified with commercial and public forms of communication: publicity on the one hand and the public ban of putting up posters on the other. As we have seen, such acts of publicity are already central to Ben's work. But beyond this general point, the identification of Ben's signature writing with the style of these two *particular* examples of public communication has an added significance. Both the Coca-Cola logo and the *fense fficher* sign already imitate the genre of the personal signature: both are in other words already signatures in that they demarcate a collapse between private and public registers. Both choose the most private of forms (handwriting) for the most public of communications. Furthermore, it must be noted that the flashy holes and loops of these writings underscore the ambiguity of a writing whose "public" and "private" nature seems to collapse into one another. The Coca-Cola signature in particular can be read as an emblem of the abject character of the signature itself. Its well-known loops imitate the attempts at elegance of the one who practices his signature for public display—it is the signature of the ultimate wannabe or the eternal teenager (the target group of its publicity campaign). The highly exaggerated loops of the signature Ben similarly indicate the worked-at stylistics betraying lack of confidence or a desire of becoming. Attaching itself to the Coca Cola-logo, the graphic form of Ben's rounded writing is, in other words, the essential signature of the "not-yet"—the abject missing-out on oneself.[42] The rounded graphic forms both encircle and undercut the totality of the self that it signs, as well as the signature action itself.

Totalities, holes and the possession of space

THROUGH THIS PURELY FORMAL DEMARCATION OF THE COLLAPSING OF THE borders between public and private, the loops and circles of Ben's signature takes on an added significance. Now, their circularity seems to trace the contours of a hole. There is an entire series of holes forming off—or caving in—the forms of Ben's writing. Starting with the tracing of the banana forms, it moves on to the loops and circles of Ben's over-elegant signature B and his rounded adolescent writing, to finally end up with the image of the asshole, as well as the images of numerous other holes.[43]

As the cutout of the *Défense d'afficher* sign indicates, the hole is even at the core of the concept of putting up posters. One meaning of the word ficher that sounds forth from within the *"fense fficher"* is the practice of plugging in, or perforating, underscoring Ben's many demonstrations of how the advertising of one's affects perforates the subject—stabs it in the back, so to speak. At

42 The both childish and elegant aspect of Ben's writing (as well as his tendency toward spelling mistakes) is in other words at one with Coca Cola's strategic appeal to the adolescent market. It must be noted, however, that Ben rejects the idea of a graphological interpretation of his writing, and for a good reason. A graphological focus would only lead to an easy psychologizing of Ben, the artist, in other words simply re-install all of the categories that Ben's signature operations reworks and reverses. For this reason it must be specified that, in pointing out the material traits of his writing, we are not searching out such a psychological truth about Ben "himself." Rather, we are searching to identify the forms of communication to which his particular writing attaches itself, in order that it might be able to convey (by the means of certain structural operations), what Ben calls "truth." In this sense we appreciate Ben's assertion that he is *non pas Monsieur Graphologie (...) mais Monsieur Vérité. (Ben,* p. 57) In line with this assertion we may suggest that the "wannabe"—style of an adolescent writing is able to work as the structural marker of just such a truth-function.

43 *1. J'ai signé « les TROUS » en 1960. 2. Le trou en soi est unique: Sequestré a quinze ans, deux jours dans une viterne d'essence de blockaus, il y avait un trou de trente centimètres à travers lequel je voyais le ciel. Suite à cette expérience, je conclus en 1961 que plus la surface de la paroi qui entoure le trou est étendue, plus le trou est beau. 1959: Trous circulaires dans des feuilles et des BOITES DE CONTREPLAQUE. 1960: J'ai fait des trous dans les murs des autres la nuit. 1961: Depuis mars 1961 je signe les trous que le hasard me présente. A: Trous de mur, B: Trous du cul, C: Trous d'égout (vus de dedans). PS: Je ne discute pas l'influence de Fontana mais je considère le domaine du trou beaucoup trop vaste pour un seul créateur.* (in *Ben Dieu—Revue d'art Total,* 1962) Since Ben claims that the beauty of holes are determined by the extension of what surrounds it, it could be pointed out that the form of the gramophone record—the objects sold in Ben's shop—could be considered beautiful, since the gramophone record is essentially a big black shiny surface circling around a small hole. Ben makes this connection in a poster for his record shop. Beside the image of a black hole, the poster states: *Ce trou vous est offert par la Bourse du Disque, qui est un Libre Self-Service du Disque a moitié prix...*

FIGURE 12 ***Partie du tout à Ben.*** Photograph, 1962
FIGURE 11 ***fense ficher.*** Found object, 1958

the core of the signature, there is the hole. Ben's rounded writing is in other words simply circling around a hole, or the edges of the abyss. But the word *ficher,* which also means inscribing something in a filing cabinet or inventory, also points to the presence of a certain system and order. Ben is not simply delving into the hole and its excesses, he is equally obsessed with categories: boxes, files, lists and systems of all kinds. Ben's focus on holes goes alongside his equally persistent systematizing of wholes or totalities. If his rounded signature is a figure of perforation, then the *tout* or totality he takes over from Yves Klein might now appear to be a perforated totality, too. But here it is important to follow the *performance* of Ben's signature. Ben does not simply criticize Klein's appropriation of totality. By signing this totality *once more* he simply puts the notion of totality to *work,* following its implications to the end—and then beyond. If Ben's signing of totality shows totality to be hollowed out it is only because totality and hole (whole and hole) are two terms that work too perfectly alongside one another—so perfectly that they seem to continually change places, or to displace each other's finality.

For this continual juxtaposition and confusion of whole and hole is obviously just another presentation of the duplicity of the signature, whose mobility Ben explores in his exhausting and mocking repetition of the megalomaniac terms of the avant-garde. One photograph in particular is used as a crude allegory of a signature signs wholes and holes in one single gesture. It is an image of a large wall with a small hole in it, against which a sign is propped *(figure 12),* claiming the whole structure as *Partie du Tout à Ben.* Holes

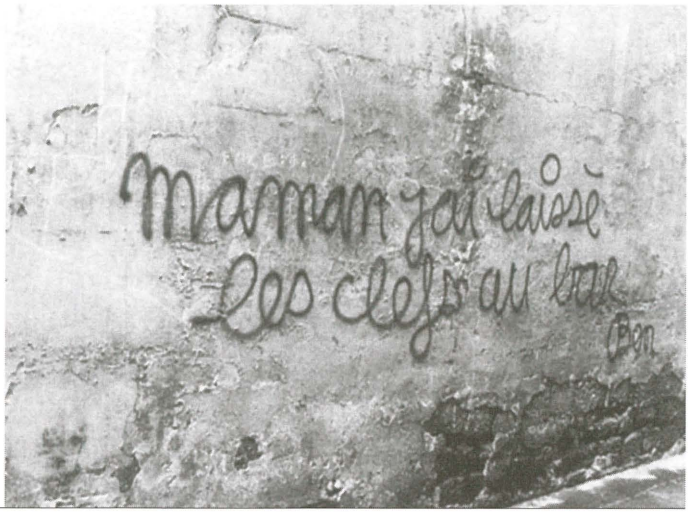


FIGURE 13 ***Maman j'ai laissé les clefs au bar.*** Graffiti, n.d. (ca. 1960)

and wholes become indistinguishable as each hole is listed or filed as part of Ben's totality. This perspective becomes even more apparent in the way in which Ben actually handles the notion of totality. The whole/hole dialectic seems to have been relegated to some sort of bureaucratic materialism—i.e., to an appeal to the "beauty of its every detail"—a marked contrast to Klein's lofty exchange of totality for the "immaterial." Such details are found in the material traces of handwriting—in an attention to its various loops, dots and indentations. Totality disintegrates into an infinite inventory of details, for the moment he posits the totality of the signature Ben starts making lists and inventories of all of its particular parts.

The "wholeness" or "uniqueness" of such particularities are perforated precisely by the fact that they are forced to signify their part-ness, their "having a part of" totality. By simply fulfilling, to its most grueling conclusion, the avant-garde's aesthetics of the absolute, Ben cuts a hole in its appropriating totality. For this is what happens as his *signing* of all gets literal—i.e., when it turns out to become a continual and immense process of filing and making inventories. Holes may be "parts" of this totality—but so is a postcard picture of a Mediterranean port, a bundle of garlic, the notepad entry *"2 steaks 1 salade téléphoner maman mésurer les abdomens,"* the British Encyclopedia, the Larousse dictionary, the history of art, various medical products—and so on, endlessly. Each particular addition to the lists of Ben's totality seems to cut into Klein's "immaterial" totality like a hole. Having signed all, Ben shows that ownership is nothing unless it is continually postered-up, advertised. Precisely because

of his totalizing act of appropriation—greater and more megalomaniac than anything conceived of before (since totality is now finally at one with the signature)—Ben discovers the bureaucratic necessity of being specific. In order to own totality he has to *continue* to sign it, to continually repeat the signature to itself.

Ultimately then, the megalomania of the signature appears as a form of addiction (from Ben's point of view, the avant-garde is addicted to absolutes in the sense that there is apparently no end to its game of appropriation). Ben demonstrates that addiction must be understood not as an addiction to a substance but as an addiction to the addiction itself—a play with the purely *momentary* power of self-presence. Ben's act of continually signing the parts of totality resembles Anthony Wilden's example of the smoker who wants to quit, but who has to start smoking again in order to quit once more so as to be the master of his own quitting—again and again.[44] Every time, the momentarily empowering act of the decision only signs on to the experience of a void. In a similar way the power of Ben's signature continually underwrites a state of dispossession. In fact, this underwriting of dispossession writes off the territorial demarcations created by the avant-garde's all-powerful signature acts. Ben's obsessive focus on the material writing of this signature itself actually reverses its appropriating power. Once his signature appears in terms of an endless and abject material addition—as if he was filling up a hole—the very notion of territorial closure is reversed so that even the end of the world turns out to be perforated. In his enormous inventorizing of totality, the signature turns out to be a figure whose additive operations are excessive: there is always *more* to be added to Ben's totality. Its constant activity is exhausting, but never exhaustive. And it is precisely in this reversal that Ben imagines the possibility of the *new*. The *potential* of a "not-yet" is located in the exhaustion of the never-ending signature acts.

44 **Wilden, Anthony. 1980.** *System and Structure. Essays in Communication and Exchange.* London: Tavistock, pp. 62-87.

In fact, from his earliest work onward, Ben connects the signature to territorial dispossession. He does this in the most obvious way possible–that is, by presenting his writing as a form of graffiti. For Ben is the essential graffiti artist, someone who writes all over all available material surfaces, suspending his own signature across them. "My first writings were on walls in the street," he claims.[45] If graffiti is both the mark of appropriation and dispossession (the writing of the one who is not the owner of the territory), this point is overdetermined in Ben's graffiti-signature. It permeates even the level of his messages—in contrast to the usual empowering accent of much other graffiti. One early wall writing in the streets of Nice leaves the message *maman j'ai laissé les clefs au bar (Mom, I left the keys in the bar)*, another one simply spells out the word maman in big rounded letters *(figure 13)*. Using, once more, the most public of mediums for the most private of statements, his territorial writing is now literally that of the ultimate abject wannabe.

45 **Vautier,** *Ben*, p. 90.

To risk making sense

THIS SLIPPING AND SLIDING AROUND THE DOUBLE FIGURE OF APPROPRIATION/dispossession is perhaps the clearest example of how Ben's signature events open up a space beyond the historical determination of the avant-garde tradition. Something is placed at risk here. And what is risked is above all the sense of a legacy: what has been conquered or accumulated through the avant-garde's history. In fact, it is the very "sense" or "meaning" of the avant-garde that is put at risk. What is generally seen as the main conquest of the avant-garde is the right to a certain legacy of nonsense, of indeterminacy, of lack of certifiable "meaning" in the work of art. But Ben's writing places even the meaning of this legacy at risk.

Here his writing strategies are in some ways structurally parallel to the way in which Georges Bataille displaces Hegel's dialectic of master and slave precisely by following and repeating the terms of the master.[46] Like Ben's egomaniac signature, Bataille's repetition of the logic of mastery and its fundamental complicity with its own repressed connection to servility, seems to offer a glimpse of the excess, void and meaninglessness that Hegel's notion of mastery must separate itself off from. But this does not leave either Bataille or Ben in the more advanced or "poetic" position of someone who is able to face the "irrational" excess that a narrow-minded reason (or a by now systematized and ordered avant-garde tradition) cannot cope with. Bataille's strategy—like that of Ben's signature—consists in starting a process in which all of the terms involved (reason-unreason, signature-anonymity, appropriation-expropriation) starts to slide around.

In this sliding, however, one risks not only the obvious loss of meaning. More specifically one also *risks making sense.* This is Derrida's formulation—and in relation to Ben the ambiguity of its wording has some pertinence. To risk making sense is not only the risk of a destruction of knowledge. To the extent that avant-garde art may be inscribed within the system of art as this system's own disorder, it could also be seen to have become domesticated, conceptualized, ordered. From another position, which is the one Ben seems to identify with, one might equally well take the risk of making sense, of "agreeing to the reasonableness of reason." From the outset, Ben seems prepared to risk making sense. Against the purely formal search for the uniquely new in painting, he literalizes painterly innovation as a name and a written signature. Against the cut-up syllables and sounds of dadaist and concrete poetry, he writes words and sentences whose semantic meaning is squarely placed in the foreground. He is even emphatic on this account: *Dans mes écritures, la signification compte plus que le graphisme formel. L'important est la vérité véhiculée. (In my writings, the meaning counts more than the graphical style. The important thing is the truth conveyed).* What is "risked" by "making sense' is the specifically artistic or poetic position of non-sense which has become

46 "... rarely has a relation to Hegel been so little definable, a complicity without reserve accompanies Hegelian discourse, "takes it seriously" up to the end, without an objection in philosophical form, while, however, a certain burst of laughter exceeds it and destroys its sense, or signals, in any event, the extreme point of "experience" which makes Hegelian discourse displace *itself;* and this can be done only through close scrutiny and full knowledge of what one is laughing at. Bataille, thus, took Hegel seriously, and took absolute knowledge seriously. (Derrida, Jacques. 1990. *Writing and Difference.* Alan Bass, translator. London: Routledge p. 253.)

identified with the avant-garde. But to "risk making sense" within the terms of language or knowledge itself is also a strategy of repetition in which the *sense* of language doubles up, becomes simulacral. In Ben's work, the dry and almost maniacally non-poetic reason may be seen as a ruse in which the sense of the avant-garde itself is at both reversed and put at risk.

ULTIMATELY, BEN'S EMPHASIS ON "TRUTH" MUST BE SPECIFIED HERE, since the statements in his signature writings should be seen as part of his strategic and performative operations, and not anchored in some transcendental principle that would aim to give us the final truth about avant-garde art. Still, truth's operative connection to some notion of overreaching totality plays an important part here. Ben's "truth" is perhaps best understood in terms of his dialectic of holes and wholes. As his work discloses how such cherished avant-garde notions as "openness" or "indeterminacy" is based on a systematic repression of all notions of selfhood, Ben's truth has all the conceptual weight of a real critique. It makes sense, and risks taking part in the closure of meaning. At the same time, Ben's truth perforates, since the signature performance through which this critique is stated also interrupts the signature of the avant-garde as it seems to close off around *one* sense of its own tradition. It is precisely this dialectic which sets the terms for any discussion of Fluxus after Fluxus. Ben's performance mimes the continual positing of avant-garde traditions and inheritors despite all claims to the contrary, as well as the sheer force with which such functions are imposed. But, just as importantly, it also opens up an endless chasm under all such impositions. In this way he provides the minimal precondition for a continued production of events.

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Abstract

This essay examines issues that typify Fluxus work and thinking through reflections on historiography, hermeneutics and historicism. Because Fluxus actively engenders possibilities and futures, it activates the question of legacy. Generating futures entails a dialog with the past. This dialog with history requires historiography, articulate reflection on how we make and write history—and articulate reflection on how we understand it. While such an understanding is necessary for historians who seek to understand the past of a phenomenon such as Fluxus, it was of central import to the artists, architects, composers and designers who created Fluxus and to those who desire to actively continue the Fluxus traditions. This conversation transcends the art world to embrace larger social and cultural aspirations. This key to understanding Fluxus has often been overlooked, and it partly explains the failure of mainstream art historians to understand Fluxus. The first developments that became Fluxus reveal a community of artists, architects, composers and designers with an articulate awareness of history in all its many dimensions. Throughout its history, Fluxus has continued this multidimensional dialog between the past, present and future.

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History, *Historiography,* & legacy

KEN FRIEDMAN AND OWEN SMITH

1. Legacy

THE QUESTION OF LEGACY IS A FUNdamental problem for any group that works within a paradigm of change and change agency. Those who consciously generate a future must enter into dialogue with the past. This is dialogue with history, and a serious dialogue requires historiography—articulate reflection on how we make and write history, and articulate reflection on how we understand it. This dialogue is one key to understanding Fluxus, and it has often been overlooked.

When Sean Cubitt describes Fluxus as "the last of the revolutionary vanguards,"[1] he captures an important distinction by

1 Cubitt, Sean. 2005. "The Wealth and Poverty of Networks." *At A Distance: Precursors to Internet Art and Activism.* Annemarie Chandler and Norie Neumark, editors. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 428-429.

choosing the term "vanguard" in place of the more common "avant-garde." The term vanguard refers to troops at the head of an army or to individuals at the cutting edge of an action or movement.[2] It is an active, outgoing role, contrasted with the restricted, inward sense of an avant-garde as a group of intellectuals developing new concepts for the arts.[3] It may be uncommon to describe avant-gardes as restricted, but the attempt to adopt the avant-garde position within an acknowledged art world necessarily restricts the avant-garde to the boundaries of that world. The concept of an avant-garde originates in the concept of the vanguard, but the notion of the avant-garde shrinks that concept to fit the size of the art world. The concept of the vanguard embraces larger social and cultural aspirations.

2 **Merriam-Webster, Inc. 1990.** *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary.* Springfield, MA, p. 1303.

3 **Merriam-Webster, Inc. 1990.** *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary.* Springfield, MA, p. 119.

The idea of the vanguard dates to the 15th century, a time of global change. This was a time when the printing revolution and the spread of a knowledge economy collided with an early phase of the industrial revolution in renaissance and reformation. The idea of the avant-garde dates to the early 20th century. This, too, was a time of global economic and social change. Nevertheless, most artists who aspired to engagement in great social causes actually lived in a world of private patronage where they conflated art and social change. The reason, perhaps, was a failure to understand the complex relations between the symbols or symbolic representations that artists create and the social or physical worlds that lie beyond or outside those symbols.

As with other groups that are often allied with the tradition of the avant-garde, Fluxus is self-aware. This involves a self-awareness of history in general, along with a specific attentiveness to its own place in the cultural and social structures of its own time. What often differentiates Fluxus from the practices and ideologies of the other forms of the avant-garde, however, is the playful exploration of a belief in the fragmented, discontinuous and contradictory nature of reality. This is combined in Fluxus with a persistent use of deconstructive engagements and intermedia interpretations of cultural materials of all kinds to establish a paradigm of textuality in which on-going exploration and recombination is permitted and even necessary.

Some Fluxus artists rejected the notion of an artistic avant-garde as one more predictable face of the art world, a predictable, constraining force that substitutes illusion for development. Others accepted and welcomed engagement with art, while refusing to be constrained by the art world. For others still, art was a convenient framework in a world where it was easier to make a living by playing with art than it was to make a living simply by playing. While the perspective of each group differs, a twinned sense of engagement and irony makes history significant for each.

With the possible exception of those few artists who have been totally detached from the world, most Fluxus artists have been interested in their own work, the work of their colleagues, and what might flow from it. This

flowing was an outpouring or—to use the name that Maciunas and Higgins coined—a Fluxus. In some deep sense, the nature of time and history means that no one can cross the same river twice. It is nevertheless possible to swim, and some swimmers contribute to the stream. Those who are concerned consciously with their contribution—the question of legacy—are aware of their actions against the past and future of historical time.

2. Aspects of History

TWO ASPECTS OF THE FLUXUS ENGAGEMENT WITH HISTORY REQUIRE PARticular consideration. The first involves history and historical knowledge as a foundation for current practice. The second involves history as knowledge of the past.

The artists, architects, composers and designers active in Fluxus always had an articulate awareness of history. The Fluxus people themselves wrote the first histories of Fluxus and they have continually been active in compiling historical research and documentation. One reason for this is the long, dry era when art historians and art critics had little awareness of Fluxus and even less interest. Some historians still fail to understand Fluxus and its significance in the cultural history of the 20th century. The situation was worse four decades ago. As a result, Fluxus participants took on the role for themselves.

More important, however, Fluxus practice involves an awareness of the role that history plays in change. This awareness is embedded in Fluxus itself, and in the many activities that embody an historical dialectic. These activities are explicitly set against the background of social, cultural and economic history. They are framed in the context of a changing future, a context that requires past history along with future histories.

The large-scale social, cultural and economic concerns of Dick Higgins, George Maciunas or Nam June Paik, for example, entail a sense of history. Maciunas's historical charts and diagrams challenge the multiple streams of art and culture while locating his concerns within them.[4] From early works such as *Postface* or the famed intermedia essay to late essays on Fluxus reception or the arts in society, Higgins's books and essays pursued a rich stream of inquiry sited in historical frames.[5] In playful works and carefully developed studies, Paik developed a forceful critique of technology, proposing new media and cultural strategies that require history as background and as future.[6]

Other Fluxus people addressed issues in the specific frames of art history, music history, or the histories of the different media. Some had formal training in art history, Geoffrey Hendricks, Milan Knizak, George Maciunas and Robert Watts among them. Many had rich foundations in music and musicology, including Giuseppe Chiari, Henning Christiansen, Nam June Paik, Ben Patterson, Mieko Shiomi and La Monte Young. Several worked in film, such as

4 Schmidt-Burkhardt, Astrit. 2003. *Maciunas' Learning Machines. From Art History to a Chronology of Fluxus.* Detroit and Berlin: The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Foundation and Vice Versa Verlag.

5 Higgins, Dick. 1964. *Postface/Jefferson's Birthday.* New York: Something Else Press; Higgins, Dick. 1982. *Postface* [reprint] *The Word and Beyond. Four Literary Cosmologists,* New York: Smith; Higgins, Dick. 1978. *A Dialectic of Centuries. Notes Towards a Theory of the New Arts.* New York: Printed Editions; Higgins, Dick. 1997. *Modernism Since Postmodernism: Essays on Intermedia.* San Diego: San Diego State University Press; Higgins, Dick. 1998. "Fluxus Theory and Reception." *The Fluxus Reader.* Ken Friedman, editor. London: Academy Editions, pp. 217-236.

6 Paik, Nam June. 1964. "Utopian Laser Television." In *Manifestoes.* New York: Something Else Press; Paik, Nam June. 1976. *Media Planning for the Post-Industrial Society.* (Reprinted in *The Electronic Superhighway.* Nam June Paik and Kenworth W. Moffett, editors. New York, Seoul, and Fort Lauderdale: Holly Solomon Gallery, Hyundai Gallery, and the Fort Lauderdale Museum of Art, 1995, pp. 39-47.)

Jonas Mekas and Paul Sharits. Others worked in literature and poetry, including Jackson Mac Low and Emmett Williams, and more.

While Fluxus today is seen in terms of art, music, architecture and design, a significant number of Fluxus people came to Fluxus from far different backgrounds. Robert Filliou was an economist, for example, Henry Flynt a mathematician, George Brecht a chemist and Robert Watts an engineer. These diverse backgrounds often helped to define the work these artists did along with making art: printing and typography for Dick Higgins as a publisher and designer, social science and human behavior for Ken Friedman as an entrepreneur and management professor, architecture for George Maciunas as a graphic designer and real estate developer, folklore for Bengt af Klintberg as an author and professor. At the same time, these engagements visibly shaped the Fluxus projects of these artists.

Wide interests and active research went deeper than an attempt to cover a territory abandoned by mainstream historians and critics. The role of Fluxus artists, composers and poets in recording and writing their own histories is one cause. The other is philosophical.

For some, historiographic inquiry into Fluxus is part of understanding Fluxus itself. The kinds of questions that historiographers ask became a way to approach Fluxus as well as a tool for considering the history of Fluxus and Fluxus history. While most scholars use historiographic research to analyze the work of historians rather than the subject of study, historiography serves both ends.

3. Historiography

HISTORIOGRAPHY IS THE EXPLICIT STUDY OF HOW HISTORY IS CONCEIVED and written, involving its theories and methods, the assumptions on which history is based, and the principles of historical research and writing. Conal Furay and Michael J. Salevouris define historiography as "the study of the way history has been and is written—the history of historical writing." Historiography does not study past events. It studies "the changing interpretations of those events in the works of individual historians."[7]

Historiography entails many kinds of useful questions. Some questions help us to understand the historic inquiry. Is the source authentic? What is its authority? What biases and interests does the source entail? Is it intelligible?

Some questions help us to understand the authors. Who wrote the text? What was this person like? What theoretical orientation does the text reflect? What or who was the intended audience?

Still other questions shed light on background and context. What sources does the narrative privilege or ignore? What streams of work does this work engage? What method did the author use in compiling and organizing evidence? In what historical context was the work of history itself written?

7 **Furay, Conal, and Michael J. Salevouris. 1998.** *The Methods and Skills of History: A Practical Guide.* Arlington Heights, IL: H. Davidson, p. 223. Compare this with Webster's definition of historiography as "the writing of history; especially: the writing of history based on the critical examination of sources, the selection of particulars from the authentic materials, and the synthesis of particulars into a narrative that will stand the test of critical methods, b: the principles, theory, and history of historical writing <a course in historiography>, 2: the product of historical writing: a body of historical literature." Merriam-Webster, Inc. 1990. *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary,* p. 537.

These questions take on a new light when authorship and artistry collapse the separable distinction between the subject and the object of historical consideration.

This parallels similar discourse traditions in which the practitioners of process or action were simultaneously the creators of an intellectual discipline for inquiry. It also parallels the plural meanings and dialectical progressions that emerge in the hermeneutical and exegetical traditions. The classical tradition of exegetical hermeneutics examines four senses of meaning. The first sense involves the literal meanings embedded in history. The second engages the interpretive meanings embedded in metaphor and allegory that extend and transpose history into a new key. The third examines the moral and ethical applications of the ideas and issues disclosed by the first two senses. Finally, there are the forms of meaning that create and encompass a future in which meaning is consummated. These four senses of medieval exegesis date back to St. Augustine's theology, developing in the writings of Gregory the Great and the later medieval scholars who use the four-fold senses of history, allegory, tropology, and anagogy. This leads to the eighteenth and nineteenth century traditions of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey on to the twentieth century hermeneutics of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer. In the late 1970s, Dick Higgins explicitly brings Gadamer's hermeneutics into the discourse of Fluxus and intermedia with his analysis of intermedia in which works imply the fusion of intermedia horizons. The unfolding development of Higgins's nine—later eleven—criteria of Fluxus[8] and Ken Friedman's twelve criteria[9] imply hermeneutical engagement.

One useful parallel would take us beyond the boundaries of this article to the exegetical traditions of theology. We will not develop this beyond suggesting that attention to the distinctions raised by the traditions known as lower criticism and higher criticism would be useful in understanding Fluxus, particularly among those who hope to understand the issues that animated Fluxus as a productive community.

The lower criticism is a textual or archival criticism rooted in the details of text. The lower criticism seeks to identify and authenticate textual sources, to determine accurate and inaccurate documents and to establish reliable versions and meanings. The higher criticism involves historical and historiographic awareness. This is seen in source criticism, form criticism, tradition criticism and redaction criticism. Source criticism investigates the sources on which the text is based and the development or derivation of ideas from one source to the next. Form criticism examines text genres and locates their meaning in the social life of a community. Form criticism seeks an understanding of the rooted life experience, the *sitz-im-leben* that gives rise to the text or to the oral transmission and to the social customs on which the text is based. Tradition criticism examines the life context more closely, tracing

8 Higgins, Dick. 1997. "Fluxus: Theory and Reception." *Modernism Since Postmodernism: Essays on Intermedia.* San Diego: San Diego State University Press, pp. 160-198, esp. 174-175, and 225; Higgins, Dick. 1998. "Fluxus: Theory and Reception." *The Fluxus Reader.* Ken Friedman, editor. London: Academy Editions, pp. 218-234, esp. 224.

9 Friedman, Ken. 1998. "Fluxus and Company." *The Fluxus Reader.* Ken Friedman, editor. London: Academy Editions, pp. 237-253, esp. 244-251.

the development of themes in social life and exploring how they shape texts and ideas. Finally, redaction criticism examines the work of interpreters and writers, exploring their choice and use of source and material in shaping a narrative.

The writings and work of some Fluxus artists demonstrate an implicit and explicit awareness of these issues that few art historians or critics brought to the consideration of Fluxus until the late 1990s. This is especially the case with theorist-editor-publishers such as Higgins or Friedman, historically trained scholars such as Knizak or Maciunas or a folklorist such as Klintberg.

4. The Open Dialectic

WHEN YOUNGER ARTISTS APPROACH FLUXUS, SOME ARE OUTRAGED TO DISCOVER the deep interest of Fluxus artists in history and philosophy. They argue that Fluxus is a free and open source, available to everyone on equal terms. Some go even further. They argue that an interest in history is the self-serving attempt of once-radical artists and composers who have turned to history in their old age in an effort to replace their lost creativity while using history to consolidate and maintain positions in the art world. How valid is this claim?

The general view that Fluxus offers something to anyone who is interested is true. A deeper truth is that Fluxus requires openness, commitment and, most particularly, study.

Fluxus seems simple. Few restrictions prevent an artist from presenting almost anything under the Fluxus rubric. It may perhaps be that there are no barriers at all, but the case is not as simple as it seems.

The premises and works associated with Fluxus are simple, but they are not simplistic. Neither are they ungrounded. Fluxus is the product of artists who thought—and think—deeply about art, culture and society. Their works are a manifestation of this cognitive engagement.

Whether they present these works under their own names or under the Fluxus rubric, the works demonstrate a nature that is unified by several central themes. Often profoundly simple in form, they are based in creatively rich complex awareness. The best Fluxus work leads to surprising results, results that may be more complex than the works themselves.

The philosophical constitution of Fluxus suggests an open arena that anyone may enter to somehow become "Fluxus." Nevertheless, becoming Fluxus in a meaningful way requires work, and sometime requires thinking in ways that seem—on the surface—antithetical to the Fluxus spirit. To fully understand Fluxus and its implications requires a firm knowledge of its history and its theoretical premises, together with an ability to think and act beyond them. There is a visible parallel to this in Zen, where the simplicity of Zen activity and Zen practice are balanced by the subtle and often difficult disciplines of Buddhist psychology and philosophy.[10]

10 **For a deeper consideration of** the relationship and parallels between Fluxus and Zen, see: Doris, David T. 1998. "Zen Vaudeville. A Medi(t)ation in the Margins of Fluxus." *The Fluxus Reader.* Ken Friedman, editor. London: Academy Editions, pp. 91-135.

In any game, the real masters are those who know the rules so deeply and the history so fully that they no longer seem to think of the specific rules or history at a first level of consciousness. Some no longer seem to be aware of them. Fluxus is no different.

It is precisely this nature of mastery that Fluxus requires. This is a form of mastery in which history is not insignificant, but fundamental.

The earliest publications and works of the Fluxus artists, designers, composers and architects demonstrate a rich engagement in history and historical issues. History and a sense of historiographic issues emerge as a central concern in the work of Maciunas, Mac Low, Young, Higgins and others,

Over the four decades of its history Fluxus has continued to develop because it has embraced dialogue and transformation in the context of its own history. Fluxus has been born and reborn several times, each time in different ways. Historical self-awareness makes this possible.

This knowledge is an active force for change. It is a fluid understanding of Fluxus's own history and meaning. Fluxus reflects a central insistence on social creativity and discourse rather than on objects and artifacts. This perspective has enabled Fluxus to remain historically aware and dynamically alive at one and the same time. This has been true even when Fluxus has been declared dead. Perhaps it has been most true when Fluxus has been declared dead.

The historical dialectic is an aspect of the social memory that enables communities and cultures to survive.[11]

11 **Friedman, Ken. 2005.** "The Wealth and Poverty of Networks." *At A Distance: Precursors to Internet Art and Activism.* Annemarie Chandler and Norie Neumark, editors. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 408-422.

5. Historicism and Fluxus

SCHOLAR STEPHEN GREENBLATT DESCRIBES SEVERAL ENABLING ASSUMPtions behind what is known as the New Historicism. A useful paraphrase of two such assumptions sheds light on the issues we discuss here.

> *First, art —cultural production, events, etc.— is historical. It entails a social and cultural construct shaped by more than one consciousness.*
>
> *Second, creative practice—art, literature, etc.—is not a distinct category of human activity. It must be considered in a dialogic relation to history, and this means a particular vision of history.*[12]

Historicism and related theoretical approaches have gained considerable influence over cultural and literary considerations over the same 40 years that gave rise to Fluxus. What makes this more than mere coincidence is the fact they share many of the same ideas and beliefs.

12 **For more information, see:** Myers, D. G. 1988. "The New Historicism in Literary Study." *Academic Questions* 2, Winter 1988-89, pp. 27-36.

Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt[13] emphasize five central aspects of the New Historicism. These are: sharp focus on overlooked details, continual use of anecdotes, preoccupation with the nature of representations, interest in the body (or history of) and a skeptical relation to the function of ideology. The same issues can be said to be central aspects of much Fluxus

13 **Gallagher, Catherine and Stephen Greenblatt. 2000.** *Practicing New Historicism.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

work. While this comparative association offers intriguing possibilities, the key issue is not the specific similarities between Fluxus and New Historicism. Rather we point to these parallels to suggest that Fluxus, in focus and philosophy, parallels a form of historical practice.

Both historicism and the Fluxus ethos recognize that history is not embedded in static laws or fixed principals, but requires considering the infinite variety of particular historical instances. The traditions of historicism drawn from the 19th century further emphasize issues that are also central to Fluxus. These include the understanding that being itself rests on action; recognizing that all human ideas and ideals are subject to change; replacing generalizing schemas with individualizing approaches; and most particularly, understanding the historical nature of all human existence. At the same time, this historicist emphasis replaces an overall systematic model of history with an engagement with history that reflects the diversity of human expressions.

New Historicism stands traditional historical scholarship on its head. The first principal of historical investigation has traditionally been the recovery of the original meaning of a subject of study. New Historicism labels this as naïve at best. New Historicism instead posits a relationship between the work and history as dialectic. This dialectic argues that the subject of one's considerations—the works, or events—should be considered as both the source and the end of history.

In such a view of history, the recovery of meaning is held to be impossible, even naïve. In this view, the product and the producer are interpreted as one and the same. This leads many to criticize the approach as problematic because it elevates theory over the subjects of historical inquiry.

If, however, we selectively use some New Historicist methods to investigate Fluxus, the criticisms do not disappear, but rather become less valid. Such a process would not solely entail historical or critical methods. Instead, this becomes a productivist process that seeks to develop and engage in further work by investigating and responding to the subject. In this case, the subject is Fluxus. Rather than abandoning the source of one's supposed study—as New Historicism is said to do—this approach is both based in Fluxus practices and reflects Fluxus attitudes.

Here, the parallels among different hermeneutic approaches become illuminating, since some sense of hermeneutics seek to understand an idea of what historical facts meant in their own time by those who created, participating in and witnessed them. Even as we acknowledge that one cannot recover the past, we acknowledge that understanding entails a good-faith attempt to understand what we cannot truly recover. Fluxus requires a dialectical development that moves from history through interpretation to application and onward to the consummation that closes Gadamer's hermeneutical circle in Higgins's intermedia horizons.

As with historicism, one goal of Fluxus is to demonstrate the power of discourse in shaping the ways that dominant ideology creates the institutional and textual embodiment of the cultural constructs that govern mental and social life.[14] Both suggest that art does not imitate the world, but mediates it. For Fluxus, artistic praxis becomes a metaphorical lens that brings the multiple possibilities of human experience into focus.

For this reason, learning about the history and theory of Fluxus is crucial. This is not because this understanding enables anyone to see as Fluxus artists see (or saw) their work and world. Rather, it is a way to understand how Fluxus practice was (and is) a form mediation intended to shape rather then to reflect the potential of human experience.

14 There are parallels to the New Historicism in the exegetical tradition of narrative criticism. Narrative criticism argues the difficulty of establishing authentic text, so it focuses, instead, on entire narratives, comparing them with other narrative forms that have a beginning, middle and an end of some kind. Related to this is the school of reception criticism that focus on the role of the text in the reader's life.

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Index for Volume 39

By Author

By Title

PAGE DISTRIBUTION

Volume 39.1 contains pages 1–96
Volume 39.2 contains pages 97–208
Volume 39.3 contains pages 209–320

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