

Bengt af Klintberg

**Fluxus Games and Contemporary Folklore:
on the Non-Individual Character of Fluxus Art**

(Paper read at the symposium *In the Spirit
of Fluxus* at Walker Art Center, Minneapolis,
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To Ken, again

with best wishes,

Bengt

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Fluxus Games and Contemporary Folklore: on the Non-Individual Character of Fluxus Art

BENGT AF KLINTBERG

The similarities and differences between the work of individual Fluxus artists have been much debated. The views expressed are divergent, to say the least. The artists themselves stress their individualism. Eric Andersen, for example, has claimed that the only unifying factor is that the Fluxus artists happened to appear together in public at a certain time. At a press conference held in Copenhagen in connection with the arrangement "Excellent 1992" several of the artists present protested against being called a group.

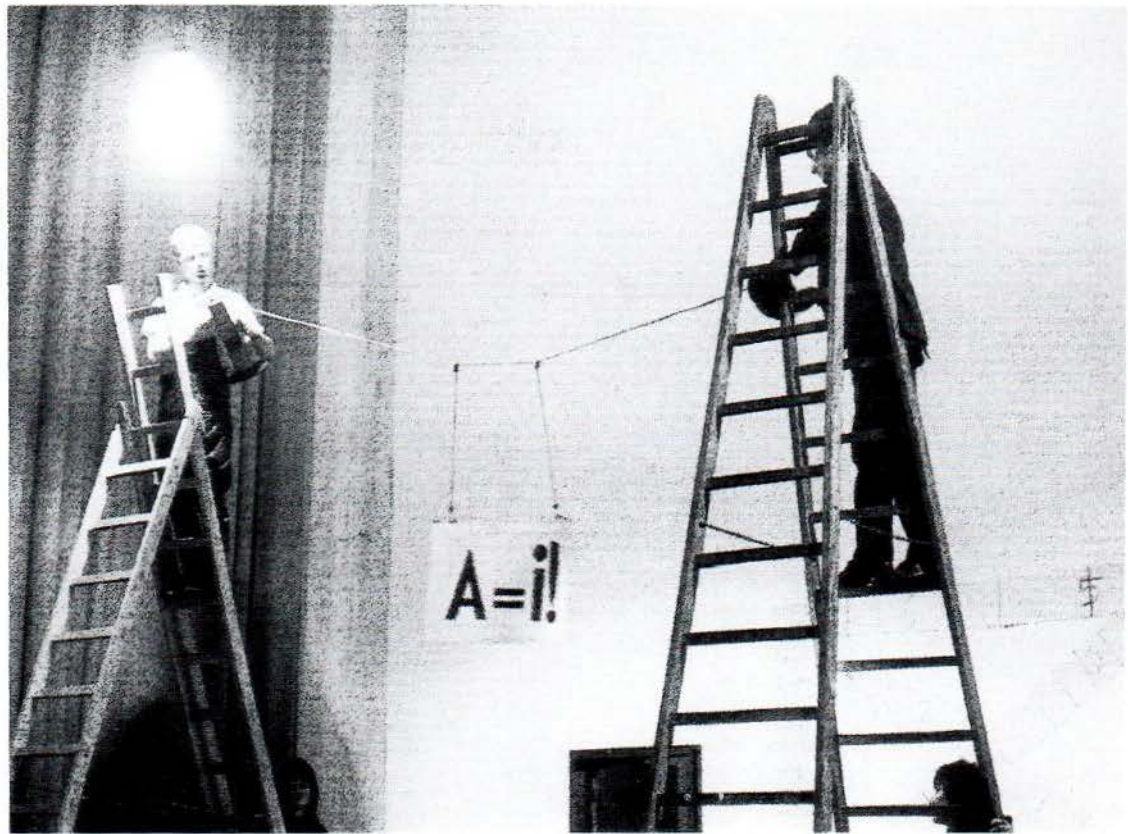
There are, nevertheless, Fluxus artists as well as art critics who see many unifying factors in the works which have been presented as Fluxus art. Dick Higgins has distinguished nine criteria of Fluxus art (Higgins 1991, 33ff), and his list has been expanded into twelve criteria by Ken Friedman (Friedman 1990a, 329ff). The time does not permit me to discuss their lists in detail. Here I confine myself to mention those qualities that I have found most characteristic of Fluxus art: it is intermedia, it is experimental and research-oriented (thereby often using chance as an artistic method), and it favours simplicity and playfulness.

In this presentation I choose to disregard individual features and focus on similarities. Therefore I will not talk about art works shown at exhibitions during recent decades, where the artists' personal modes of expression have become more and more obvious. Instead, I want to concentrate on the performance pieces of the early, collective years, which I regard as Fluxus'

most distinctive and important achievement. They are characterized by such a striking similarity that it is legitimate to talk about an art form with a conscious *non-individual* character. It is, as a matter of fact, difficult for a person who sees photo documentation of these early pieces or reads or hears descriptions of them to decide which one of the artists is the originator.

Ken Friedman has recently collected a great deal of them in *The Fluxus Performance Workbook* (Friedman 1990b). Something that strikes the reader is that this volume from 1990 is actually the first attempt at collecting scores of performance pieces by all artists who have been associated with Fluxus, scores which belong – with some few exceptions – to the sixties. What was published before was scores by single authors, such as George Brecht's *Water Yam* (1963), Dick Higgins's *Jefferson's Birthday* (1964), Yoko Ono's *Grapefruit* (1964), and pamphlets in the Something Else Press series *Great Bear Pamphlets* (1966–69). Many important scores are missing from *The Fluxus Performance Workbook*, but it still overwhelms the reader with its vitality and wit.

The reason why I have chosen to take up similarities between the Fluxus performance pieces and folklore is that I have been active as a folklorist exactly as long as I have been involved in Fluxus. In the Fall of 1962 I lived a double life in Stockholm. In daytime I worked as an assistant at a folklore archive, researching old folk beliefs and legends. In the evening I devoted myself to Happenings and other artistic experi-



From left: Staffan Olzon and Bengt af Klintberg performing the latter's *Alternative to Another Rattlesnake* at the Fluxus concert in Düsseldorf, February 3, 1963. Photo: Manfred Leve.

ments at a small theatre together with Staffan Olzon, who later became a theatre director.

At the end of November I came to Copenhagen to see Danish folklorist colleagues. One of them gave me a free ticket to the Nikolaj church, where several Fluxus concerts had already taken place. She warned me: it is something very strange, some kind of Dada music, many people have become upset and left the concerts. I went there and experienced an evening very different from those Happenings I had seen and performed. The Happenings were often loosely structured, expressionistic pieces based on material effects. This was another kind of work rooted in music, more sophisticated, with a clear structure and playful humour. I became fascinated and afterwards made contact with the artists, which had as a consequence that Staffan Olzon and I were invited to participate at the

Fluxus concerts in Düsseldorf at the end of January the next year. The journey took a longer time than expected and we arrived at the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf just in time for the second concert. It was an explosion of creative energy that I will never forget. When Dick Higgins and Alison Knowles told me that they planned to visit Stockholm one month later, we decided to give three evenings with Fluxus compositions in Stockholm. The concerts took place at the Alley Theatre on March 1–3, and all performers except Dick and Alison were Swedes: among others Staffan Olzon, myself and Carl Fredrik Reuterswärd. George Maciunas sent a telegram to Dick, forbidding him to use the name Fluxus when not all artists were present but the poster was already printed. Carl Fredrik Reuterswärd wanted to participate under the pseudonym, Charles Lavendel (= Lavender

ALLÉTEATERN • NARVAVÄGEN 7

happenings

danger music

FLUXUS

Dick Higgins - Alison Knowles

framför kompositioner av Higgins, Knowles, George Brecht
Al Hansen, Nam June Paik, La Montey Young m.fl.

Svenska bidrag av bl.a. Lars Gunnar Bodin, Bengt Emil Johnson,
Bengt af Klintberg, Charles Lavendel, Staffan Olzon

Föreställningar:

Fredag 1 mars kl. 20.

Lördag 2 mars kl. 20.

Söndag 3 mars kl. 14.

Entré från 4:—

Biljetter i teaterns kassa två timmar före varje föreställning



Bengt af Klintberg: *Orange Event No. 3 or How to Transform a Ball into a Straight Line*. 1963, revised 1991.

His contribution was that he poured out a bottle of lavender perfume in the auditorium during the first evening and then disappeared.

Later the same month I went to Oslo and by chance got Swedish composer Sten Hanson as my travel companion. We organized a concert with Fluxus compositions for students at the University of Oslo. The reaction was vehement; I had to leave the concert hall through a back exit and returned to Stockholm by train the same night. The following years I functioned as

a Northern outpost of Fluxus, participating when Fluxus artists came to Stockholm to give concerts. Between these visits I devoted most of my time to research into Swedish folklore.

This background has made me aware of the similarity between the Fluxus performance pieces of the first collective years and folklore. I am by no means the first to notice that Fluxus artists have a predilection for games, jokes, gags, and rituals – all wellknown folklore genres. Dick Higgins has observed the close affinity



Yoko Ono at the exhibition *Ubi Fluxus ibi motus* in Venice 1990. Photo: Bengt af Klintberg.

between Fluxus scores and the rituals of so-called primitive people, presented by Jerome Rothenberg in his comprehensive anthology *Technicians of the Sacred*. When taken out of their usually sacred context these texts are, according to Dick Higgins, "so close to Fluxus pieces as to the nearly indistinguishable from them" (Higgins 1991, 36). When Dick published my collection of events, *The Cursive Scandinavian Salve*, in his Great Bear Pamphlet series, he advised me to include some texts from my anthology of Swedish magic formulae. They are found under the title "Three Magic Events".

It is worthwhile to take a folkloristic look at George Maciunas's by now classical definition of what he labels "Fluxus Art-Amusement", where he says that "anything can be art and anyone can do it. Therefore, art-amusement must be simple, amusing, unpretentious, concerned with insignificances, require no skill or countless rehearsals, have no commodity or in-

stitutional value. – It strives for the monostructural and nontheatrical qualities of simple natural event, a game or a gag. It is the fusion of Spike Jones, Vaudeville, gag, children's games and Duchamp" (1965, quoted from Hendricks 1981, 9). To me it is striking how close this definition comes to a definition of a contemporary folklore genre. The only thing missing is the most typical quality of folklore: the anonymity of the originator. It would have been interesting to know how Maciunas would have looked on the possibility that the Fluxus pieces become eventually detached from their originators and live on as an orally transmitted contemporary genre!

At this symposium there are participants much more expert on Fluxus chronology than I am. Therefore I will not try to elucidate in detail the birth of what I refer to as "Fluxus games" in the title of this paper. By this I mean scores of principally monostructural performance pieces,

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"events" with George Brecht's term. Such scores first appeared a few years before Fluxus had been established. Peter Frank writes: "These verbal scores proposed simple activities as art. They were deliberately distanced in their relatively elemental gesturality from Happenings and avant-garde theater" and he mentions that they were written as far back as 1959 by Yoko Ono, La Monte Young, George Brecht, and many other Fluxus members (Frank 1990, 436).

The earliest dated score that I have found in "The Fluxus Performance Workbook" is Yoko Ono's "Lighting Piece" from 1955 (a dating which must be taken with strong reservations since it has been made afterwards): "Light a match and watch it till it goes out". George Brecht's "Drip Music" has 1959 as its year of origin. In his "Water Yam" George Brecht developed a lapidary, poetically effective form that makes it clear that many Fluxus scores are not merely instructions but also literary texts in their own right. Some of them were apparently never intended to be performed, for example Dick Higgins's "Danger Music No. 9 for Nam June Paik": "Volunteer to have your spine removed" (to which Paik responded with "Danger Music No. 1 for Dick Higgins": "Creep into the vagina of a living whale").

Can folklore theory explain why Fluxus pieces make a non-individual impression? A classical article that might give some leads is "Die Folklore als ein besonderer Form des Schaffens" (= Folklore as a Special Form of Creation) by the Russian scholars Pjotr Bogatyrev and Roman Jakobson, published in 1929. They try to answer the question why folklore lacks that individual character that is found in literature. The reason is that the oral transmission process functions as a filter, letting through only elements which are collectively accepted. All folktales and folksongs have their origin in the works of individual storytellers and poets, but these works are not yet folklore. They become folklore when other people choose to remember them and perform them. The transmission process is no mechanical act of repetition. On the contrary, some epi-

sodes or stanzas are misunderstood or forgotten, others are improved. Among those details that disappear are all traits which constitute an individual style.

We can find a similar process of filtration during the 30 years that Fluxus artists have performed their pieces in concerts. The Fluxus repertoire now consists of pieces which share a general non-individual character. Those pieces which have disappeared often were so personal that other Fluxus artists could not perform them. From the Fluxus festival in Düsseldorf I have a strong memory of Joseph Beuys's *Siberian Symphony*, in which a dead hare was hanging from a blackboard and Beuys was playing a prepared piano. It was a piece charged with magic, but apparently it could not be performed by anyone else than Beuys. Therefore it could never enter a collective repertoire. On the other hand such contributions as Brecht's *Drip Music*, Maciunas's *In Memoriam to Adriano Olivetti*, Tomas Schmit's *Zyklus* and Ben Patterson's *Paper Piece* have been performed hundreds of times, often without the composer being present.

This theory does not explain, however, why so many pieces could resemble each other from the very beginning. *The Fluxus Performance Workbook* is full of pieces where papers are read loud, objects or bodies are wrapped, holes are cut in clothes and pianos and other instruments are used in an unconventional way. We know that many of the artists who composed very similar pieces did not know of the existence of each other's pieces. How come that they were so similar? Here folkloristic genre theory offers an answer. Examples of folklore genres are: fairytale, joke, riddle, singing game. We all recognize them when we meet them. This is because they conform with a set of rules or conventions, governing their form, contents and performance. The folklorists describe genre as a cognitive matrix or grammar, shared by the performer and the audience. Creations which do not conform – at least to some degree – with the matrix will fall outside the genres and never become part of an oral tradition (Ben-Amos 1976).

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via del Carmine
20121 Milano
telefono 87.45.13

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alle ore 18

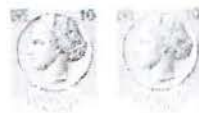
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per invitare al discorso
e alla presentazione del
gioco Fluxus di Ben.

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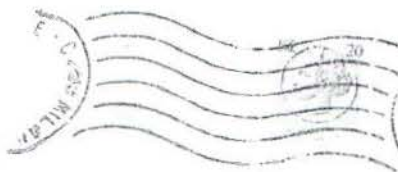
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1967, by Fluxus
1965
Ben Vautier
Lecteur Walter
Vendredi 19 novembre
Montebelluna 200
Svevia

FLUX
POST
CARD



1967, by Fluxus
1965
Ben Vautier
BENGT AF KLINTBERG
VENDEVAGEN 13
18-134 LINDINGO
SVEBEN

Ben Vautier: The Postman's Choice. Postcard 1973 (1965), front and back.

It happens that new genres (or sub-genres) are born, and this has given folklorists the opportunity to study the emergence of their generic grammar. One example is a joke fad which spread among adolescents in the USA around 1962–63, the elephant jokes. In less than one year hundreds of jokes were created which became internationally spread. Here are some examples:

How do you put four elephants in a Volkswagen? – Two in front and two in back.
 How can you tell if an elephant has been in the refrigerator? – There are footprints in the butter.
 Why do elephants paint their toenails red? – To hide in cherry trees.

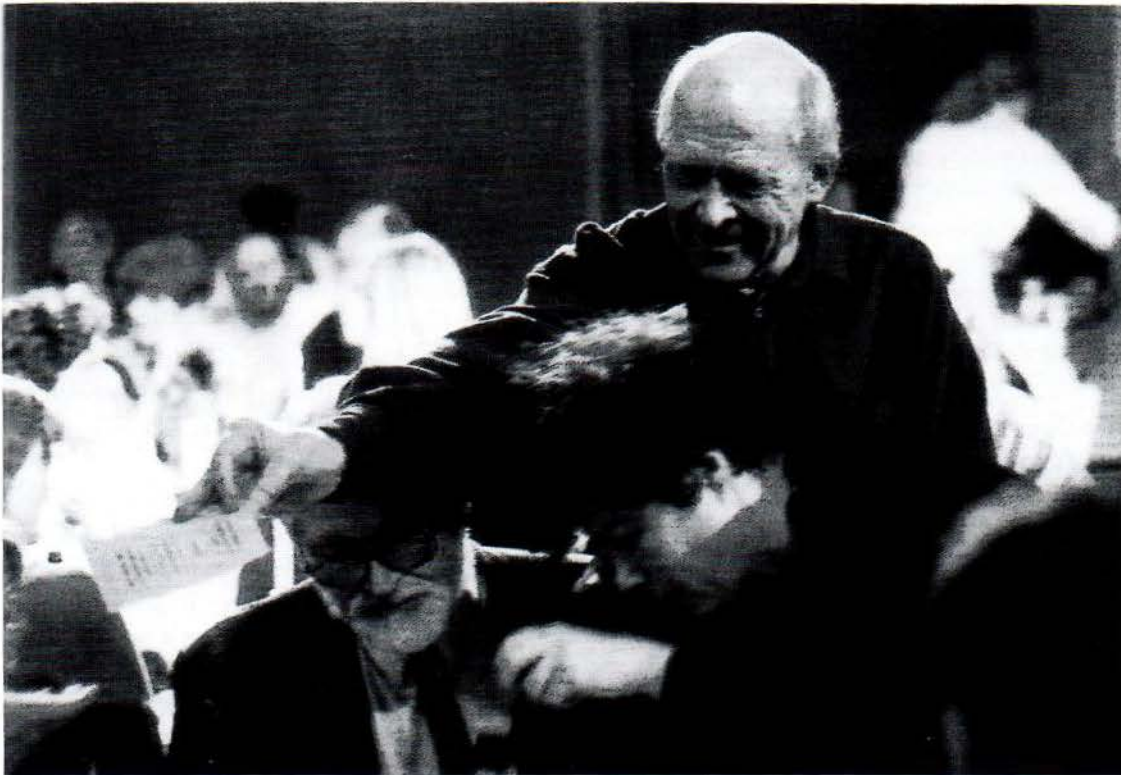
A closer analysis shows that all jokes which became widespread follow a matrix where the form, type of humour, general setting and specific situations were programmed. The form is that of a riddle-joke: the joketeller asks a question, makes a short pause and then answers it himself. The type of humour is absurd, fantastic, related to the so-called shaggy dog stories from the fifties, where the punchline consisted of an unexpected anticlimax. The general setting is sometimes the jungle but more often the modern urban world. Specific situations are: elephants are put or found in spaces where there normally isn't enough room for them, they climb trees, they dress or paint themselves in certain colours, they use the commodities of modern Western world. We may presume that innumerable jokes were created which did not follow these rules, but they never became part of oral tradition, they never passed the collective filter.

At this point I would like to put forward two theses regarding the verbal scores for performance pieces created by Fluxus artists: 1. These pieces are based upon a set of rules, created or accepted by the Fluxus artists. 2. The knowledge of the pieces was transmitted orally and underwent changes during that process, just like folklore. In that transmission process there were also filter mechanisms working so that some

pieces – not necessarily less valuable but less functional – did not pass the filter.

Which were the rules? The earliest pieces antedating the Fluxus concerts were not bound to a musical context, but from 1962 a concert hall with a stage and a piano became the most frequent setting. The conventional musical expectations created by this framework were an important prerequisite of the effect of the pieces. These have been characterized as musical theatre, but the word theatre gives wrong connotations since the Fluxus pieces are not enacted theatrically but rather *demonstrated*. The thrill for the audience lies in identifying the statement about music or art or other message that is given. The titles often attack musical conventions: Dick Higgins's *Danger Music* series has very little to do with music as it is conventionally defined. Emmett Williams's *Counting Songs* are not sung. George Brecht's *String Quartet* and Mieko Shiomi's *Disappearing Music for Face* are purely visual. The titles not seldom make use of gags and wordplay. La Monte Young's *Piano Movement* is literally a movement of a piano: the interpreter uses his physical strength to move the piano over the stage floor. Mieko Shiomi's *Wind Music* is not music for wind instruments but the music produced when scores are blown away from stands by wind from a strong fan. In several pieces the Fluxus artists concentrate on some detail in the rituals surrounding conventional performances of concert music, such as the bow of the conductor (Maciunas, *Solo for Conductor*) or the handshake between conductor and first violin (Brecht, *String Quartet*).

Formal elements were to a great degree borrowed from traditional game morphology. Singing games and other games often make use of fundamental geometrical forms such as the circle or a straight line, and these elements are found in many Fluxus compositions (La Monte Young's "Draw a straight line and follow it", Tomas Schmit's *Zyklus*). Chance has an important part in many games: the counting out ritual is a chance operation, as is the widespread game "rock-scissors-paper", to take just two exam-



Emmett Williams performing one of his Counting Songs at *Excellent 1992* in Copenhagen 1992. Photo: Bengt af Klintberg.

ples. Many Fluxus pieces answer to all thinkable criteria of a game. Emmett Williams's *Song of Uncertain Length* is one example: "The performer, with a bottle or glass balanced on his head, walks or runs about the stage singing or speaking until the glass or bottle falls off." (Williams 1991, 47). Many of Milan Knizak's pieces use the word "game" in their title. For example *Smile Game*: "Say hello to every pretty girl you meet. If she replies with a smile, you get a point. The one with most points wins." (Friedman 1990, 30). A classical game structure is used in Ben Vautier's *Push*: "10 to 20 performers push each other from the stage nonviolently until only 2 performers are left." The only thing that is not typical of a game here is "nonviolently". It is this instruction, however, that makes the piece a typical Fluxus piece. The performers at the same time play and demonstrate a play.

However, the most important rule of all that the Fluxus artists accepted and created was that

they permitted themselves and others to discover the magic and beauty of everyday life by defining everyday actions as art, music, dance. The early pieces by Yoko Ono and George Brecht which I have already mentioned have had many followers. Many of Alison Knowles's performance scores belong to this category: *Nivea Creme Piece*, *Make a Salad*, *Braid*. Ay-O has performed the act of teeth-brushing, a daily ritual which most people have ceased to experience with all their senses, so that its inherent magic becomes visible again.

It has been said many times that these pieces are applications of Marcel Duchamp's idea of the ready-made. It has also been correctly emphasized that it is this type of pieces which make Fluxus appear research-oriented. Dick Higgins's *Gångsång* is not only a suggestive, minimalistic piece of intermedia, it also presents an accurate analysis of the very common and simple act of walking. This extreme attention and sensibility

towards the poetry of everyday life and the hidden structures in our most common actions may be seen as a basic research on an artistic level. Let us look at George Brecht's *Three Telephone Events* (Friedman 1990b, 14):

When the telephone rings, it is allowed to continue ringing until it stops.
When the telephone rings, the receiver is lifted, then replaced.
When the telephone rings, it is answered.

It is clear that this piece has been preceded by an analysis of the alternatives open for a person who hears the telephone ringing, and the analysis presented has a beauty that some may call mathematical, others dramatical. When one hears that George Brecht nowadays very seldom practises alternative No. 3, one also starts to wonder if the everyday actions chosen by the different Fluxus artists are casual. I have chosen to emphasize the non-individual character of Fluxus art. Another analysis, in which a biographical approach is used, would perhaps demonstrate that the pieces are keys to subconscious strata in the artists' personalities!

The oral transmission of the Fluxus repertoire is something I have experienced myself. I learnt the pieces I performed in Stockholm and Oslo very much the same way as I learnt new games as a child: I saw others perform them, and I was instructed by those who already knew them, such as Dick Higgins and Alison Knowles. Today there exists, as a result of this transmission process, considerable variation in the performance praxis of classical Fluxus pieces. One example is Emmett Williams's *Counting Song*, which I saw him perform in the Nikolaj church in Copenhagen on November 29, 1962. Emmett Williams counted the audience loud from the stage, placing a bonbon in his mouth for each spectator. I have described the impression that Emmett's performance made on me (Sellem 1991, 66): "The audience can follow how his voice becomes more and more indistinct, and it can anticipate what will eventually happen: if the audience is small enough, he will be able to

count everybody. If it is big, he will reach a point when his mouth is so filled with candies that he cannot go on counting."

I have myself performed the piece several times exactly the way I describe it in this quotation. It was not until 1992 that I realized that *Counting Song* exists in no less than ten versions. They were born during the Copenhagen Fluxus festival in 1962 because the artists needed an exact head count to make certain the management wasn't cheating them on their share of the entrance tickets (Williams 1991, 51). The version I witnessed and passed on was *Counting Song* No. 3.

Another example is *Bibbe's Tao* by Al Hansen. I learnt it in 1963 by Dick Higgins and Alison Knowles, who described the piece in this way: each of the performers is given a paper napkin, preferably red. They use it as they wish: tear it in pieces, fold it etc. I have since then had it included in several Fluxus concerts and I have always been very careful to get red paper napkins. Recently, in November 1992, Dick Higgins told me that the piece was originally performed with props from *The Living Theater*.

These few examples may be enough to demonstrate that the repertoire of Fluxus performance pieces was never fixed but changed as it was passed on by word of mouth. I am sure that other Fluxus artists can add many more examples.

What I have wanted to demonstrate in this presentation is that there are many similarities between the repertoire of Fluxus performance pieces and folklore. The most striking similarity is their social significance. Both take place in the interaction between people. Some people in the audience might remain puzzled, others experience some kind of insight. I think this playful, explorative attitude towards art and life is what makes Fluxus important still today.

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