

Fluxus Feminus

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There's no denying it: Fluxus was an inclusive operation. The 1993 retrospective exhibition "In the Spirit of Fluxus," brilliantly organized by Elizabeth Armstrong and Joan Rothfuss of the Walker Art Center, confirmed that there were probably more women and artists of color associated with Fluxus than with any other previous grouping of artists in Western art history. This is no insignificant fact, given the origins of Fluxus in the early 1960s in the wake of the seemingly monolithic, white, male-dominated phenomenon of Abstract Expressionism. Charlotte Moorman, Nam June Paik, Alison Knowles, Benjamin Patterson, Carolee Schneemann, Kate Millett, Shigeko Kubota, and Yōko Ono are only a few of the artists who at one time or another were associated with Fluxus and were represented in the exhibition.

Inclusivity is a relative term, however, and when it comes to figuring Fluxus into the discourse on, say, gender issues, the title of this exhibition should be taken very seriously. For it was, indeed, "in the *spirit* of Fluxus" that its practices be inclusive. But the historical reality was somewhat different—a history impossible to document in exhibition format due to the amorphous nature of its underpinnings. It is this history I wish to explore here, in an effort to expose those underpinnings and the affect they had on work by women associated with the artistic activities that came to be known as "Fluxus."¹

As is well-documented in numerous texts, one of the most recent being the substantive catalog that accompanied the exhibition (see Armstrong and Rothfuss 1993), it was Lithuanian architect and graphic designer George Maciunas who in 1962 bestowed the name "Fluxus" on an array of international artists who shared a particular sensibility from which they would work for many years, up to and including the present moment. For the same amount of time, this shared sensibility has defied firm definition—a predictable and no doubt intentional outcome of Maciunas's neologizing a name for the group from a root word signifying constant change and transition.

The Fluxus retrospective, which in January of 1996 finished a three-year tour through the United States and Europe, revealed certain characteristics common in much of the artists' work—wit, love of language games, a purposeful childlikeness. But, very accurately, the exhibition revealed no unifying sense of style, form, or content that might ever allow Fluxus to be pigeonholed. It was precisely this lack of stable identity—a condition stunningly prescient of postmodern art practices—that opened Fluxus up to wide participation but also, it would appear from a close look at Fluxus history,

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closed off that possibility. Between 1962 and his death in 1978, Maciunas carried out frequent acts of excommunication which were paradoxically motivated, I believe, by unconscious factors—the “amorphous underpinnings” of Fluxus history—that are part and parcel of acts of destabilization.

Fluxus archivist Harry Ruhé has documented one of Maciunas's more consummate dismissals in his flamboyantly entitled book *Fluxus, the most radical and experimental art movement of the sixties*. He quotes a letter he received from George Maciunas in November 1975: “[Charlotte] Moorman is on a Fluxus-blacklist which means that I boycott and do not cooperate with any exhibit, gallery, concert hall or individual that ever included her in any program or show, past and future” (in Ruhé 1979:n.p.). It was not only work by Fluxus women, however, that suffered from exclusionary practices. Ruhé quotes another section of the above letter in which Maciunas categorically brushes aside Joseph Beuys, Philip Corner, Toshi Ichiyangi, Takehisa Kosugi, Jackson Mac Low, Robin Page, Terry Riley, Tomas Schmit, Wim T. Schippers, and Wolf Vostell, claiming they had “nothing to do with Fluxus—ever” (1979:n.p.). Despite the absoluteness of this last proclamation, excommunications were not necessarily final. Alison Knowles, for example, has reported that she and Dick Higgins were once excommunicated by Maciunas for presenting a concert in Sweden that was not in keeping with a preferred list of events he had sent them—sent too late, that is, for them to change their plans (Knowles 1993). The excommunication was fleeting, however, as it was with many of the individuals on the above list, a fact that can be witnessed from the volume of these two artists' works considered by Maciunas to have qualified as Fluxus, several of which were included in the “In the Spirit of Fluxus” exhibition.

1. & 2. Left: Kate Millett, *Stool*, 1967. Right: Kate Millett seated on her *Stool*, 1967. (Photos by George Maciunas; courtesy of The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, Detroit)



Such stories of excommunication—often temporary—of female *and* male Fluxus artists abound. Nonetheless, even when excommunications were not official, final, or even clearly stated, it was more often than not the female artists who took such responses seriously.² It is the latter stories that are of interest to me, but not in terms of searching out gossipy details of who was officially excommunicated from Fluxus when. Rather, I wish to stay focused on the phenomenon of exclusion, its practice, and its possible root causes. Given the fact that exclusionary practices have plagued artists throughout history—up to and including, especially, the last several years in the United States (Karen Finley, Tim Miller, John Fleck, Holly Hughes, the late David Wojnarowicz, and Ron Athey are only a few of the more high-profile names that can be cited)—speculating on causes is not only warranted, but imperative.

It is my contention that the root cause of these practices, at least in part, has to do with the relationship in the work between *body* and *text*. And I mean these terms to be taken in the most down-to-earth way: body, as the actual physical entity of the artist; text, as the words the artist uses or produces. More to the point, it is, perhaps, the threat this relationship poses to dominant forms of power, when exploited—especially by women—that prompted dismissal of certain artists and/or certain of their works from the canon of Fluxus production. (In the case of Fluxus, that power was initially embodied by Maciunas, and then by those who followed his lead.) I say “*especially* by women” since it has been thought within Western and some Eastern traditions that concerns related to the body rest more in the domain of women, and textual concerns in the domain of men. Put the two on a collision course and there is bound to be a volatile outcome.

“Volatility” is the key word here and one that readily comes to mind when one thinks of the infamous combination of Karen Finley’s chocolate-and-tinsel covered body in *We Keep Our Victims Ready* (1990) and her ear-splitting text about the perception of women as nothing but shit (symbolized by the chocolate) and decorative objects (symbolized by the tinsel). In order to get at the sticky issue of exclusionary practices within Fluxus, it is necessary now to step back and ask some basic questions: What precisely was the relationship between body and text in Fluxus? What did it look like? What did it suggest?

I am going to concentrate on only a few examples of work, many of them performance pieces, by women who at one time or another were associated with Fluxus. Body-text relationships are most obviously explored in the arena of performance, where the activities of both the artist’s body and her text (whether the text be taped, read aloud, or printed) are often experienced simultaneously. However, as Kristine Stiles has pointed out in her essay in the catalog for “In the Spirit of Fluxus,” all Fluxus production is “performative” in nature (1993:65). Indeed, whether it be an object like Kate Millett’s 1967 *Stool* (plates 1 & 2), a simple event score like George Brecht’s 1962 *3 Piano Pieces* which simply reads “standing/sitting/walking,” or an entire evening of live events—a “concert,” as Fluxus artists would call such an evening—the activation of the body is implicit, if not totally explicit.

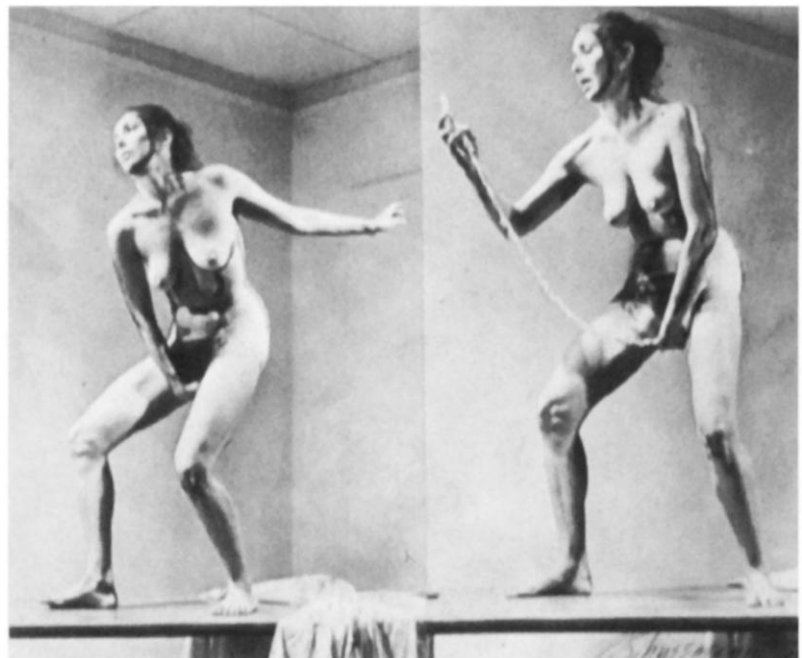
Many works by Kate Millett and Carolee Schneemann serve as examples of, respectively, implicitly and explicitly performative pieces. Both these artists were at one time “officially” associated with Fluxus. An examination of the relationship between body and text in a selection of pieces they produced both during and after their official Fluxus tenure, along with a brief look at a more subtle form of prohibition experienced by consistently official Fluxus artists Yōko Ono and Shigeko Kubota, will elucidate some of the motivating factors in exclusionary practices within Fluxus.

In 1975 Schneemann presented a performance entitled *Interior Scroll* for “Women Here & Now,” a program of events held in a church in East Hampton, Long Island. *Interior Scroll* brought together elements operative in Schneemann’s work at least since her 1962 contribution to an evening of performances organized by Dick Higgins and Philip Corner at the Living Theatre in New York. There, in *Glass Environment for Sound and Motion*, she “collaged” the stage with broken mirrors and safety glass, then encouraged performers to move through the environment in an effort to “find and develop personal motivations by immediate contact with materials and each other” (Schneemann 1979:21). As Philip Corner and Malcolm Goldstein played music, Schneemann shone high-powered flashlights on the performers, producing an effect of “drawing with light” (21). From this performance through subsequent performances at the Judson Church and elsewhere, Schneemann continued to demonstrate a devotion to processes of drawing and painting.

Schneemann also remained committed to a combinatory use of body and text. That is, the body, according to her foundational theory, was to function as responsively as the human eye (9–11); text was to be incorporated in the form of audiotaped voice-overs, text recited aloud, or written documentation that could serve as inspiration for subsequent performances, akin to the use of scores in Fluxus. *Interior Scroll* brought these features together with Schneemann’s feelings toward how she had been received in the art world to date.

Schneemann entered the performance space wrapped in a sheet, under which she wore a small, decorative apron tied at the waist. She disrobed, climbed onto a table, and proceeded to outline the contours of her body with brushstrokes of dark paint, intermittently taking up what she calls “action poses,” like those implemented in life-drawing classes. Throughout, she read from her 1975 book *Cézanne, She Was a Great Painter* (Schneemann 1975). At the end of this segment, she dropped the book, stood up on the table, and performed the most frequently reproduced portion of this piece. Legs apart, knees slightly bent (plate 3), Schneemann slowly extracted from her vaginal “interior” a long “scroll” of paper from which she read a text that began:

3. Carolee Schneemann, *Interior Scroll*, performed in “Women Here & Now” program, East Hampton, Long Island, 1975. (Photos by Anthony McCall; courtesy of the artist)



I met a happy man
 a structuralist filmmaker
 —but don't call me that
 it's something else I do—
 he said we are fond of you
 you are charming
 but don't ask us
 to look at your films
 we cannot
 there are certain films
 we cannot look at
 the personal clutter
 the persistence of feelings
 the hand-touch sensibility
 the diaristic indulgence
 the painterly mess
 the dense gestalt
 the primitive techniques [...] (1979:238)

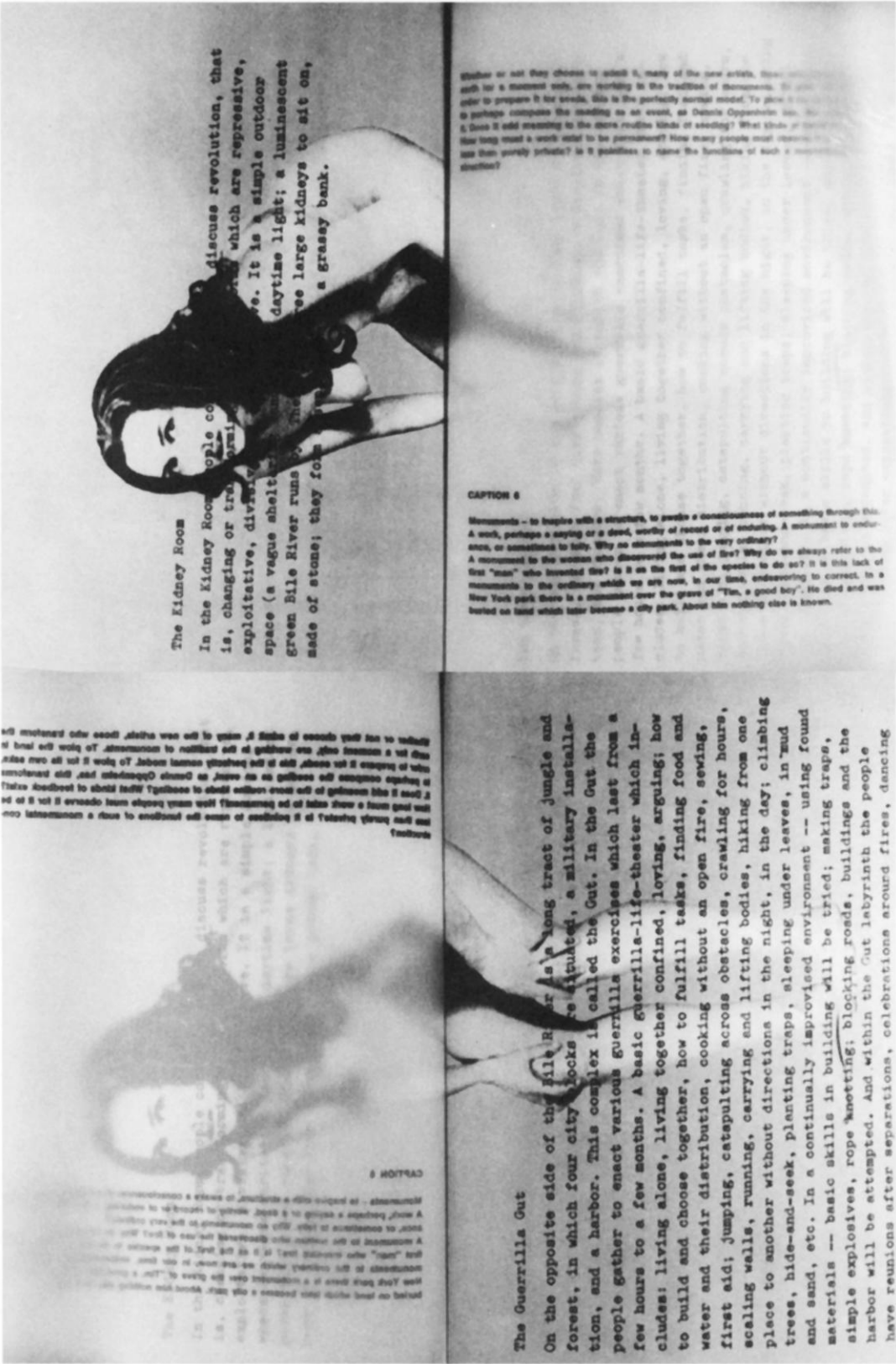
The complaints of the filmmaker in this quasi-narrative are reminiscent of those of Maciunas, who, in his excommunication of Schneemann a decade earlier, pronounced her, she recalls, “guilty of Baroque tendencies, overt sexuality, and theatrical excess.”³ Why this alleged inability “to look” on the part of the male filmmaker in the narrative, or the inability “to include” on the part of Maciunas?

Performance theorist Jeanie Forte suggests an answer that builds on French feminist thought, namely the theories of Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray who claim that an inextricable bond exists between female sexuality and writing or, said more plainly, between woman's body and text (see Forte 1990:259ff). These theories have been hotly debated for over a decade, but Forte maintains that any dissent concerning this bond

becomes pointedly rhetorical with women's performance art [...]. The very placement of the female body in the context of performance art positions a woman and her sexuality as speaking subject, an action that cuts across numerous sign-systems [...]. The semiotic havoc created by such a strategy combines physical presence, real time, and real women in dissonance with their representations, threatening the patriarchal structure with the revolutionary text of their actual bodies. (1990:260)

Forte goes on to address Schneemann's *Interior Scroll* specifically, claiming that “it seems as though [Schneemann's] vagina itself is reporting [...] sexism” (260).⁴

“Semiotic havoc” is not only the province of performance art, however, as Schneemann proved in her contribution to the book *Fantastic Architecture*, edited in 1969 by Fluxus artists Dick Higgins and Wolf Vostell—a book that included works by Fluxus and non-Fluxus artists. As part of her essay on “Parts of a Body House,” in which enlarged organs of the body serve as sculptural environments for human activity, Schneemann displayed a nude self-portrait (Schneemann 1969). The image of her body appears across the middle of the book, with semitransparent pages of text separating the two parts of the picture (plate 4). The superimposition of Schneemann's body and text constitutes a send-up of the *Playboy* centerfold tradition. Unlike *Playboy* centerfolds, however, which typically feature women in poses configured by men, Schneemann's self-portrait is in a position of her own construction, poised as if ready to pounce, eyes assertively, if not warily, trained on the viewer. With



4. & 5. Carolee Schneemann, from "Parts of a Body House," in *Fantastic Architecture*, ed. Dick Higgins and Wolf Vostell (1969, Something Else Press). (Photos courtesy of the artist)

the semitransparent pages of text cutting across the picture, her body, no matter how you look at it (plate 5), cannot be seen as a totalized and thus more easily controlled entity. Only Schneemann's body and text, superimposed and interrelated, can be seen as a totality—one whose agency rests with the artist herself. But something's wrong with this picture: that which has been left out.

Besides the written text for "Parts of a Body House," Schneemann had expected that the editors would include the detailed drawings of the various "body rooms," such as "Guerilla Gut Room" (plate 6) and "Genitals Play Room" (plate 7). While the ostensible reason for the work not to be included was financial⁵—understandable on a conscious level—is it too speculative to imagine that on an *unconscious* level, the editors may have felt that to include yet another form of "Fluxus Feminus" representation would only have increased the excessiveness of the body-text relationship already inherent in the "centerfold"?

It would appear that it was a similar exercise of agency and excessiveness, launched from a provocative relationship between body and text, that prompted Kate Millett's disappearance from the Fluxus camp. In Millett's case, however, there was no formal exclusion carried out, simply the end of her inclusion.⁶

Millett met Maciunas in the mid-1960s and, as the documents compiled by archivist Jon Hendricks in *Fluxus Codex* show (1988:403–05), between 1967 and 1969 Maciunas considered mass-producing some of Millett's objects, including *Stool*, which is pictured in the *Codex*.⁷ A plain wooden stool with a cushioned seat and each leg stuck into an everyday shoe, *Stool* displays typical Fluxus principles of wit and surreal juxtaposition—here, the juxtaposition of movability and stasis. According to Millett, it was the dada fun and surreal transformation inherent in Fluxus that kept her involved in the movement.⁸ She explored this quality in her installation work of the period as well—for example, in *Trap* (1967).

Trap is represented in the *Codex* via a photograph, taken by Maciunas, of a segment of the installation entitled "City of Saigon" (cf. plate 8). Consisting of high-heeled papier-mâché legs protruding from a string of wall urinals, the segment was meant as a commentary on America's perpetuation of prostitution in South Vietnam during the war. The female body, trapped by an emblem of male bodily needs, is reduced to and framed (entrapped) as fetishistic fragment.

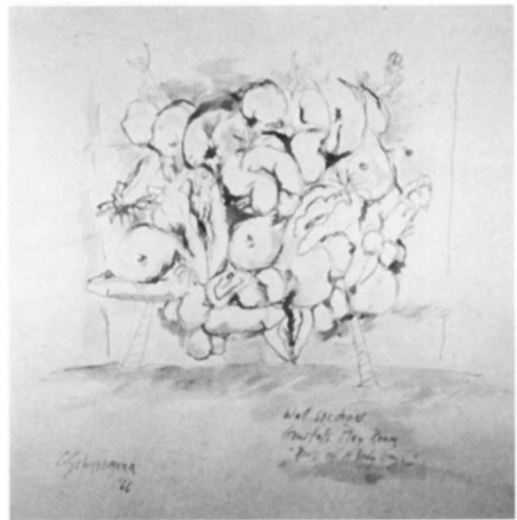
Another segment, not pictured in the *Codex*, featured the haunting torso of a female figure (plate 9). This figure makes the most direct reference to the background narrative from which Millett's work from mid-1967 onward grew. The year before, Millett read a newspaper story about a young girl named Sylvia Likens, who had been brutally tortured over the course of weeks by several teenagers and a woman with whom she had been boarded in Indianapolis by her parents. The girl was eventually found in a back bedroom of this woman's house—found dead, with an inscription carved into her body. The inscription read: "I am a prostitute and proud of it."⁹

This utterly shattering relationship between body and text, and the myriad meanings issuing from that



6. Carolee Schneemann, "Guerilla Gut Room," 1966, originally intended for publication with "Parts of a Body House." (Photo courtesy of the artist)

7. Carolee Schneemann, "Genitals Play Room," 1966, originally intended for publication with "Parts of a Body House." (Photo courtesy of the artist)



8. Kate Millett standing next to "City of Saigon," a segment of her installation *Trap*, 307 Bowery, New York City, 1967. This photo is similar to the one in *Fluxus Codex* (Hendricks 1988). (Photo by George Maciunas; courtesy of the artist)



relationship, became the touchstone for almost all of Millett's subsequent artistic and written production. In *Sexual Politics*, published in 1970, Millett analyzed patterns of sexual domination in history and literature to show the ideological hold those patterns have on Western culture. This book, Millett's other writings, and her artwork contributed immensely to American radical and cultural feminist thought and artistic practice in subsequent decades.¹⁰ Her work also connects, as does Schneemann's, to French feminist theory, especially to the concept that "to write from the body is to re-create the world" (see Jones 1985:366). Clearly, the fact that Sylvia Likens' body had been so tragically "written for her," her sexuality fictionalized and inscribed upon her, motivated Millett to write in an effort to "re-create the world." And she has done so, in both her art and her writing up through her 1994 book, *The Politics of Cruelty: An Essay on the Literature of Political Imprisonment*.¹¹

The *Codex*, as already mentioned, does not include a photograph of this segment of *Trap*, nor does it indicate in any other way that the Sylvia Likens story is a reference point for Millett's work. This absence, as I see it, produces a disturbing decontextualization of the *Trap* installation, a troubling separation of body and text that disallows full cross-referencing between this story of entrapment, the story of entrapment of South Vietnamese women in the 1960s, and millions of other stories of oppression.

In all fairness, the *Codex* does not profess to provide a wide-ranging documentation of Fluxus. Given that, one can be grateful to Hendricks for having included *Trap* at all. For to qualify as an entry in the *Codex*, as Hendricks writes in his “Foreword,” an artwork has to have been “listed or described in a Fluxus publication or [...] mentioned in correspondence by George Maciunas as being planned as a Fluxus work” (1988:25). *Trap* did not qualify.

What interests me historically about this system in the case of Kate Millett is the fact that the last recorded “listing [...] description [...] or mention” of her work “in Fluxus publications or by Maciunas in correspondence” (hence, her last mention in the *Codex*) is cited as “ca. December 1969” (403–05)—precisely the time frame in which *Sexual Politics* was being published. Millett has claimed that virtually all her sculpture qualifies as Fluxus (and there are many more examples beyond those already mentioned, ranging from *Roller Skate Table*, (1965), to “Window in Clare” from the installation *Madhouse*, *Madhouse* (1987; plates 13 & 14), to *Psychiatry* (1995; plate 10), which was featured in an entire exhibition she entitled “Flux Sculpture,” held at the Noho Gallery in New York, March–April 1995). She has also clarified that she did



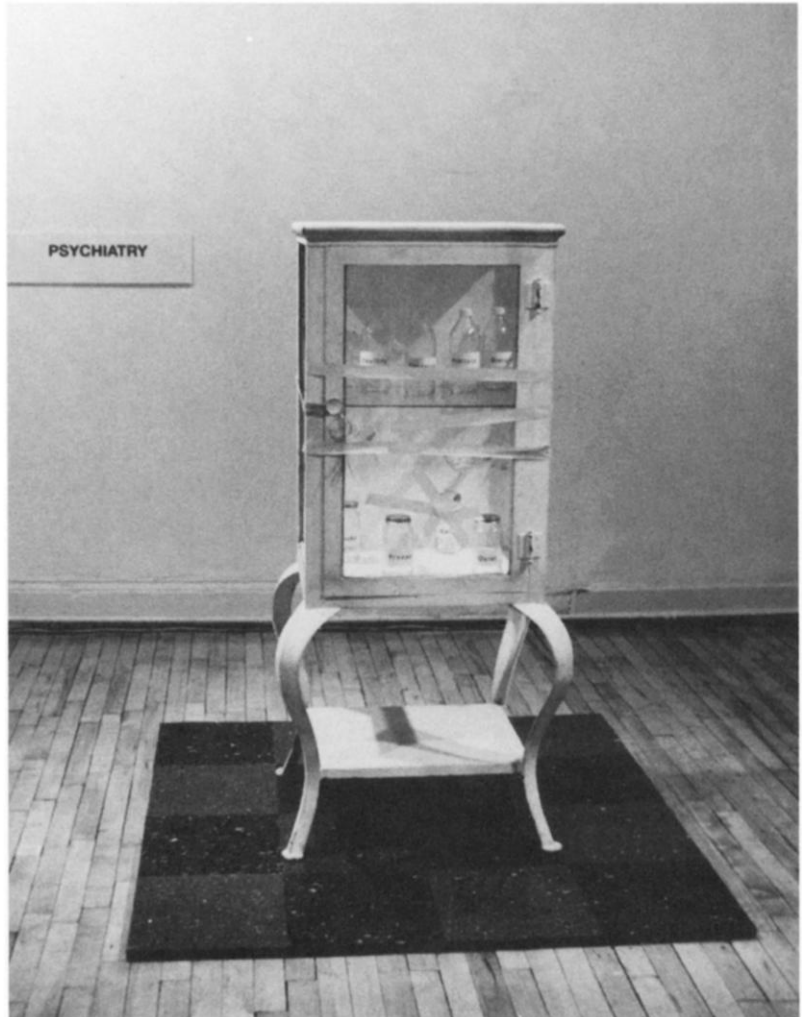
9. Kate Millett, segment of *Trap*, 1967, referring to the Sylvia Likens story. (Photo by George Maciunas; courtesy of the artist)

not feel excluded by Maciunas personally. Nonetheless, documentation of Millett's official inclusion in Fluxus stopped just as her writing started spilling out into the world, taking the body—"sexualized" and "politicized," to borrow from the title of her groundbreaking book—with it.

Is it too speculative, once again, to suggest that what could be construed as an excessive body-text relationship—that is, energetic literary *and* artistic production regarding this relationship—might have had something to do with the cessation of Millett's official involvement in Fluxus, in the same way that excess seems to have prompted Schneemann's excommunication? If so, the motivations were no doubt, as in Schneemann's experience with the *Fantastic Architecture* project, unconscious. But should unconscious motivations not be taken into account when considering the ramifications of exclusion?

The concept of women's texts exceeding the body but never leaving it and all its "sexual politics" behind is, I believe, fundamental to the work of many women who at one time or another were associated with Fluxus. Other examples, which attracted an arguably less serious form of exclusion—harsh critique—can be found in certain works by Shigeko Kubota and Yōko Ono.

10. Kate Millett, *Psychiatry*, at her "Flux Sculpture" exhibition, Noho Gallery, 1995. (Photo by Kate Millett, courtesy of the artist)



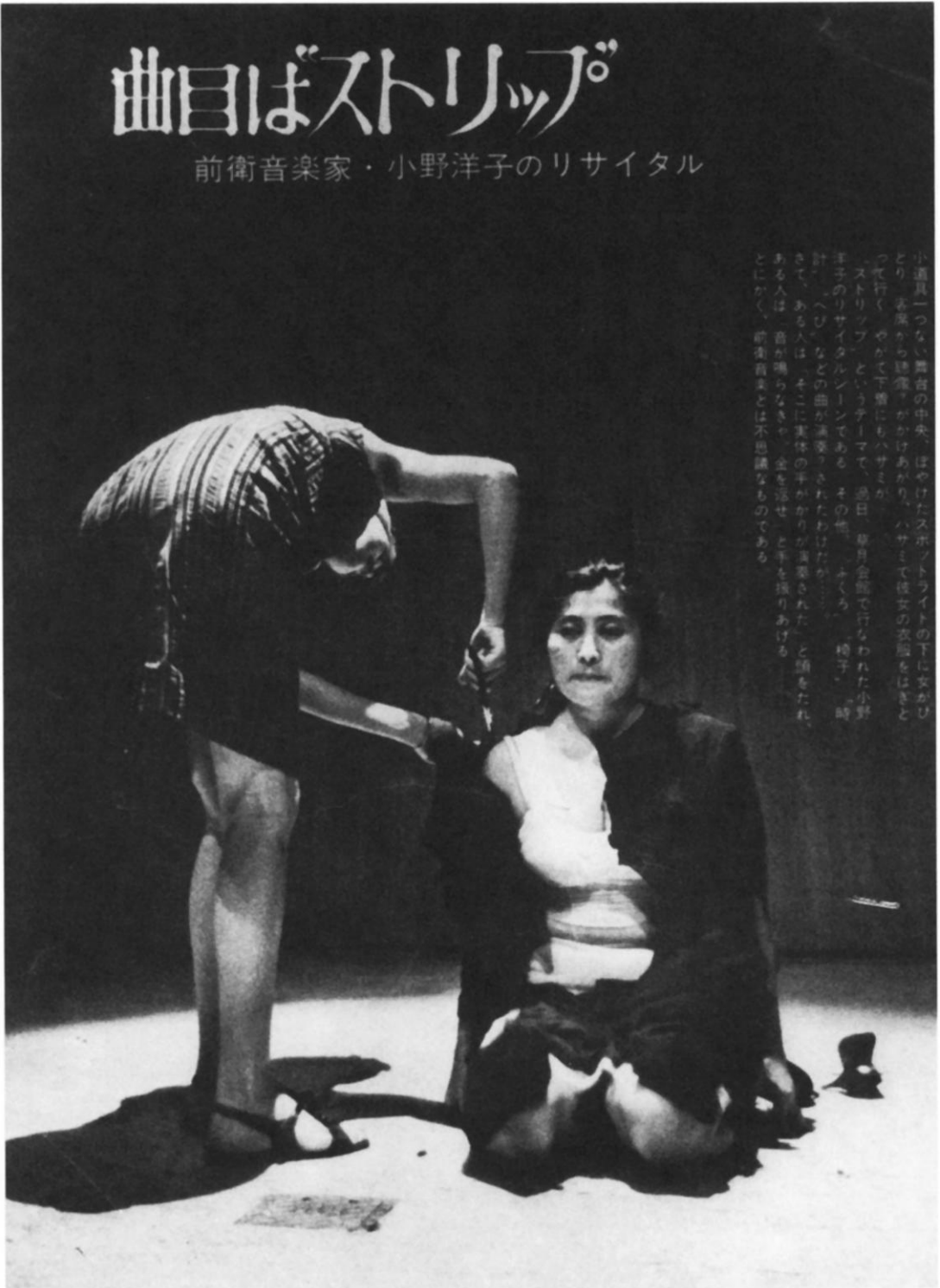


11. Shigeko Kubota, *Vagina Painting*, performed at Perpetual Fluxfest, New York City, 1965. (Photo by George Maciunas; courtesy of The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, Detroit)

Kubota enjoyed unbroken participation in Fluxus. But as Stiles reports in her catalog essay, the artist felt that fellow Fluxus members loathed her 1965 performance entitled *Vagina Painting* (plate 11), in which, crouching over white paper, she executed a painting with a brush attached to her underwear (1993:77). Kubota “redefined Action Painting according to the codes of female anatomy,” Stiles argues (1993:82). To be sure, when situated in the art historical context of Abstract Expressionism, Kubota’s piece can be seen as wreaking “semiotic havoc” with this mode of production’s masculinist concerns of mastery over ever-increasing amounts of visual space.

Stiles also quotes Yōko Ono, who felt her work was often rejected by Fluxus participants, because it was “too animalistic” (1993:77). Perhaps Ono was speaking of works like *Cut Piece* (plate 12), in which she takes on the look of a creature in the process of being skinned. In this performance, first presented in 1964 in Kyoto, Japan, then at Carnegie Recital Hall in New York in 1965, and at the Destruction in Art Symposium in London in 1966, Ono knelt, placed a pair of scissors in front of her, and invited audience members to come up on stage and cut the clothing from her body. Throughout most of the piece she sat completely still, training an icy stare on the audience, past those who took her up on her offer. By ironically replicating stereotypically male practices of voyeurism, as well as stereotypically female states of passivity, she competed with traditions of voyeurism and demonstrated another form of mastery over visual space.¹²

It would appear from all the examples discussed that it is the relationship between body and text—especially in the hands of women—that can trigger exclusion or, at the very least, harsh critique from those involved with a canonized art practice such as Fluxus. One aspect of the strategy used by the artists in the



12. Yoko Ono, *Cut Piece*, performed at Yamaichi Concert Hall, Kyoto, Japan, 1964.
(Courtesy of Lenono Photo Archive. © 1964 Yoko Ono)

works I have been discussing is that of playing ball, so to speak, in the boy's gym.¹³ As such, the strategy was situated time-wise in the early days of the second wave of 20th-century feminist thought and action, where vying with patriarchal concerns in an effort to claim a more feminized space was plenty to deal with. But there was far more going on in these works than a pro-con debate.

I believe that it was not only the implementation of a feisty, oppositional type of strategy that triggered practices of exclusion within Fluxus. There was yet another form of "semiotic havoc" in operation—a complex, ambiguous form that incorporates aspects of a more psychoanalytically based feminism that grew in prominence from the 1970s onward. This view disallows an exclusively resistance/counter-resistance reading of Fluxus works. Such a reading—driven by a notion of woman's difference from man wherein "difference" can be too easily construed as a simple, biological concept—is inadequate to these works and to be avoided.

In part, my caveat appends that of Ann Rosalind Jones, who is wary of feminist views that merge body and text in a manner that assumes the body to be a wholly natural entity—a "given" represented in or by women's texts as a source of essentialized self-knowledge. Jones, whose focus is feminist literature but whose argument applies to any form of representation, feels that to idealize women's writing in this manner—as "an overflow of [...] woman's unmediated communication with her body" (1985:374)—is to forget the impact of social realities that intrude in the very space that certain body-text conflationists (as one might call those who deduce the power of representation directly from corporeality) would like to shrink.

Theories challenging conflationists (or "essentialists," to use more common terminology) have come from feminists sometimes known as "constructionists" because they believe, according to Diana Fuss's concise summary of essentialism and constructionism, that gender has more to do with "the production and organization of differences [...rather than...] any essential or natural givens [that] precede the processes of social determination" (Fuss 1989:2–3). Constructionism has been informed by a wide range of theory—political, social, and psychoanalytic. In the psychoanalytic realm, the research of Jacques Lacan has been particularly useful. Lacan's findings also have resonance in the artworks under discussion.

Building on Freud's theories concerning the phallus, Lacan went on to emphasize its importance less as a biological entity than as a symbol of social power and, further, to question the context of the phallus in the patriarchal world of symbolism itself (see esp. Lacan 1985:61ff; Lacan 1977; Grosz 1990). Lacan's theories are based on clinical observations that led him to conclude that the male *and* female unconscious is encoded in the very first year of life and is shaped by language that issues from the phallogentric social patterns into which individuals are born. Differing from the theories of the conflationists/essentialists who believe woman can "write the body," Lacan believes the body is "already written." That is, the body, of which one becomes conscious by increments throughout child development, is already written by the unconscious mind. By locating precise shifts in this development when verbal language skills come into being to represent the unconscious, Lacan opens the door for individuals to seize control of what these moments entail, to take command of the powers of representation through which the body is already and always will be mediated, to marshal such effort toward doing one's mediating oneself.

What is so compelling, I believe, about the artworks I have been addressing, is that there was an oppositional strategy at work (at least partially reminiscent of essentialist views) *as well as* a strategy inculcated with psychoanalytic prin-

ciples (prescient of later developments in constructionism). One strategy was never privileged over the other. *Both* were in operation. For example, for all of Millett's "writing from the body," it should not be forgotten that her motivating story was that of the worst possible case scenario of the "body already written." Indeed, Millett has continually demarcated woman's difference from man in her work, but it is always in terms of a highly politicized and socialized difference. And while works like Ono's *Cut Piece*, Schneemann's *Interior Scroll*, and Kubota's *Vagina Painting* may all focus on the body as a seemingly pure, wholly natural entity, they simultaneously literalize the activities, respectively, of shaping, writing, and painting. In so doing, the works represent the phenomenon of symbolic representation itself.

It is precisely this commingling—this adamant, though never trumpeted, desire to occupy some middle ground between what would only later be labeled essentialism and constructionism—that I feel may just have been the last push needed to trigger exclusion of the artists and/or aspects of their work just examined. For to occupy a middle ground was to defy the very kind of binary thinking on which the whole problem of sexism historically hinges—the very kind of binary thinking that is, ironically, at the heart of an exclusively biology-based essentialist strategy or, even more ironically, the debate between essentialism and constructionism itself.

While these Fluxus examples may only make subtle connections to then-inchoate psychoanalytic theories of representation like those I have sketched, the connections were crucial. For it was those connections, I believe, that helped facilitate—along with a strong element of social and political concern emanating from what to some might look like nature-bound essentialist works—the possibility of a middle ground. This conclusion may sound strange. Isn't psychoanalytic theory generally seen as one of the bolstering agents of constructionism pure and simple? The answer is, no. In fact, as Fuss so convincingly argues, neither constructionism nor essentialism is so pure, so simple, so monolithic in its definition. As much as Lacan has served as a touch-

stone for constructionists, he, too, as Fuss points out, veers toward essentialism—specifically, in his "aim to return the institution of psychoanalysis to its authentic Freudian roots. Lacan's mission is to restore psychoanalysis to its essential truths, to what is most radical and irreducible about it" (1989:10). Conversely, in regard to essentialism, Fuss shows how the social construction of the very language in which one has to think through or talk about natural essence makes it impossible to frame essentialism as purely natural (5).¹⁴

In more recent years, Lacanian theory has been put to use by many feminists and artists who grapple with, among other things, the ambiguities of gender: gender slippage, issues of masquerade, bisexuality, and other complex areas of representation that cannot be contained by a simple, male-versus-female, oppositional debate. Questions of identity—What is the meaning of "she"? *Is she a she?* Does it matter?—are buried like land mines in the middle ground between essentialism and constructionism. "Woman" then becomes an unstable category, a matter of nature as well as representation, a force that can be manipulated (made explosive, even) through the critical agency of feminists and artists.

13. Kate Millett, "Window in Clare," a segment of her installation *Madhouse*, Madhouse, Noho Gallery, New York City, 1987. (Photo by Kate Millett; courtesy of the artist)



Even though in today's art world, as in the earlier days of Fluxus, exclusion is not gender-specific—to wit, the list of artists cited earlier (Finley and Hughes as well as Wojnarowicz, Fleck, Miller, and Atthey have been plagued by censors)—nonetheless, it is, by and large, the work of women or gay men that has been under fire during the past several years. Thus, the speculative question with which I wish to conclude is this: Might not the impulse to excommunicate on the part of those with the power to do so, then and now, have something to do with their perception of what could be called the “femme’...in...us”—the “us,” of course, including men and women, gay and straight, alike?

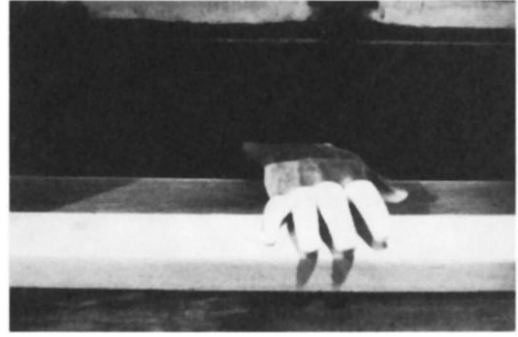
Those who represent and benefit most from the dominant power structure—generally white, heterosexual males—tend to stereotype the complex, ambiguous qualities of the “feminine” and, through the phenomenon of stereotyping, reduce, circumscribe, and contain those qualities, thereby making it easier to exclude the activities of so-called “feminized” artists, be they female or male. Thus, those in positions of power, presumably, can reduce the risk of discovering that complex, ambiguous gender-related qualities reside within themselves. What this would mean, of course, is that a middle ground exists—a middle ground of shared power. Very scary for those who think in absolute, either/or, black-or-white terms.

Maciunas, long past the height of his excommunication practices and just a few months before his death, carried out a cross-dressing ritual at his own 1978 Flux wedding.¹⁵ He exchanged with his soon-to-be-wife, Billie Hutching, his white tuxedo shirt and bow tie for her short, black, strapless slip and long-haired wig. One wonders, when imagining this scenario, if thoughts of the “Fluxus ‘femme’-in-us” could have been an unconscious motivating factor, along with all the other more conscious factors Maciunas proclaimed (his aversion to artists not sticking to his preferred lineup of performances, as cited by Knowles, or his dislike for “overt sexuality” and “theatrical excess,” cited by Schneemann) in at least some of his earlier excommunications? The ability of all the artists discussed to both write from their bodies and acknowledge that they have already been written, though once (perhaps) threatening, toward the end of Maciunas's life was (perhaps) a reminder that the “feminine” is not entirely about nature *nor* entirely about society and, therefore, not a threat to one's own biological or social status.

That Maciunas titled his performance *Black & White* is telling. I would like to think that Maciunas discovered what some of the work he and others had dismissed had been demonstrating all along—that natural and social conceptions of the “feminine,” and the connotations of power that attend, are not black-or-white, either/or issues. They can be constantly mixed—exchanged, as Maciunas so provocatively demonstrates by involving another person, a biological female, in this symbolic trade of gender-coded props.

The “feminine,” then, is shown to be both natural (the biological body does, after all, remain after all is said and done) and something wonderfully artificial, something that can be changed (at least in appearance, like any “text”) at will. Akin to the very field of language in which Maciunas loved to play, the idea of “woman” was shown to be something that could be constructed and reconstructed, neologized, put on and taken off.¹⁶

Maciunas's cross-dressing, then, his fake femininity through which the threat of woman was possibly dispelled, stands as an unconsciously motivated testimony to the successful contributions of the many women artists who have been, at one time or another, a part of Fluxus.



14. Kate Millett, detail, “Window in Clare,” a segment of the installation *Madhouse, Madhouse*, 1987. (Photo by Kate Millett; courtesy of the artist)

Notes

1. Versions of this article were presented at "FluxForum," a symposium held in conjunction with the opening of "In the Spirit of Fluxus," Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 12–13 February 1993, and at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2 June 1994, when the exhibition was on view there.
2. An exception here may be Alison Knowles. Knowles' relationship with Higgins afforded her the opportunity to observe firsthand a male artist's "excommunication" by Maciunas and to judge it somewhat less than personal or permanent.
3. These are the terms of Schneemann's excommunication as she remembers them. She received notice of her excommunication, originally published as a note in a Fluxnewsletter, in the mail in the mid-1960s, but in those days, she says, she did not hang on to things that brought her bad news (Schneemann 1993).
4. For another critical analysis of Schneemann's *Interior Scroll*, see Amelia Jones (1994:30–32). Also see Kristine Stiles' catalog essay for Schneemann's recent exhibition at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York (1996:15–25). Stiles brilliantly retheorizes canonized views of Schneemann's work, arguing that it be seen as constituting "breaches of decorum" rather than "transgression," a label Stiles feels is too often and inappropriately applied to the work.
5. Schneemann recalled in an interview that as the book was being put together, economic reasons might have been given for editing out her drawings. In the discussion period following the February 1993 "FluxForum" symposium panel on which I presented the first version of this paper, Dick Higgins, who was in the audience, stated that if his memory served him, the reason for the exclusion *did* have to do with financial limitations.
6. Recently, however, Millett was invited to participate in a "Fluxus Reunion Program" that was part of "SeOUL-NYmAX: A Celebration of Arts without Borders" held at the Anthology Film Archives in October 1994. (For a critical review of this event see Chin 1994.) Millett's contribution was entitled *Encounter with the Papal Nuncio*, in which she announced to the audience that a papal annunciate would soon arrive to hold a conversation with her about abortion, contraception, and AIDS; he would then, according to a prior agreement with Millett, telegraph the proceedings back to the Pope. As she waited on stage with a Roman Canonical Missal (a gift for the alleged visitor), Millett shared her own views on these issues. After ten minutes, when it became clear to the audience that Millett's initial announcement was a hoax and the visitor would not be arriving, Millett concluded her monolog, which had been stimulated in large part by controversies raised at the United Nations Conference on Population held in Cairo a few months earlier (Millett 1995a).
7. Some of the other works listed in the *Fluxus Codex* include "Dinnerware" and "Disposable Dishes & Cups," which Millett remembers (Millett 1995a) as her *Metaphysical Food*, *Food for Thought* series (1965), an example of which is pictured in the *Codex* (Hendricks 1988:403). Hendricks is the curator of The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, Detroit.
8. This and other previously unpublished comments by Millett in the upcoming section are from interviews with the author held between January 1993 and August 1996.
9. For Millett's account of the impact of this story on her artwork and writing, see her article, "From the Basement to the Madhouse" (1988), reprinted in O'Dell (forthcoming). Also see Millett's book, *Basement: Meditations on a Human Sacrifice* (1979).
10. One example of the high regard in which Millett's artistic contribution to cultural feminism was held is the choice on the part of the Woman's Building in Los Angeles to hoist atop the building, in celebration of the institution's fifth anniversary, one of the six colossal figures Millett had made during a residency there in 1977. The series of figures was entitled *Naked Ladies*. For discussion of this project, see Woo (1978); Buss (1977). For an excellent summary of the histories of, and distinctions between, radical and cultural feminisms, see Echols (1989:3–22).
11. In Millett's most recent book, *A.D.* (1995b), a memoir of her Aunt Dorothy, she still attempts to "re-create a world" that entraps through oppression; but here, oppression was experienced less in terms of physical incarceration and more in terms of a complex form of emotional entrapment enacted through familial guilt. For more information on Millett's artwork, see Keating (1995:329–406) and the exhibition catalog for Millett's first sculpture retrospective (O'Dell, forthcoming).

12. For more information on *Cut Piece*, see Stiles (1992:34–37); Stiles (1993:81); and Haskell and Hanhardt (1991:90–92).
13. Millett has used similar terminology (1993) to describe the sensation of being a woman working with Fluxus male artists in the 1960s.
14. Fuss bases her claim against essentialism's purism on John Locke's distinction between "real" and "nominal" essence in his 1690 *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (see Fuss 1989:122 for specific citations). Following Locke, Fuss argues that "real essence is itself a nominal essence—that is, a linguistic kind, a product of naming" (1989:5).
15. Photographs of this performance can be found on page 84 of the *In the Spirit of Fluxus* catalog (Armstrong and Rothfuss 1993).
16. Stiles' discussion of *Black & White* ("clothes contribute to the social constructions of gender, despite sexual affinities and attitudes supported by the corporeal and psychological body beneath them" [1993:85]) was helpful to me here, as was Rebecca Schneider's suggestion (1995) that I look at Fuss (1989) to help clarify my argument that "Fluxus Feminus" works occupy an unusual middle ground between constructionism and essentialism.

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