

The topics addressed in this informal discussion include John Cage's response to George Maciunas' work, the composer's recollections of Marcel Duchamp, the complex relationship between inelegant material and revealing works of art, neo-Dada and neo-Fluxus, Wittgenstein and the artist's ultimate responsibility to initiate a change in the viewer or receiver.

JOHN CAGE DISCUSSES F L U X U S

ELLSWORTH SNYDER

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ES: John, because so many of the people involved in Fluxus had formerly been students of yours at the New School for Social Research in New York, you have been thought of as the spiritual father of Fluxus.

JC: You could also say not a spiritual father but kind of a source, like a root; and there were many roots and I was just one. You've seen the tree design that George Maciunas made of Fluxus. Well you recall that the roots are given at the top and my name is connected with one of the roots. So I wasn't the only one who brought it about, but I was one of the ones. And I never had...oh, a sense of being one of the roots. It was George Maciunas who actually thought of Fluxus, who put me in his design of the tree with roots. It was his idea. But his idea of Fluxus is not necessarily another person's idea of Fluxus. So that there could be, and I think there must be, so many people involved with Fluxus who don't think of me as a member of Fluxus, or as having anything to do with it.

ES: I never thought of you as being a member of it, only a resource at the beginning.

JC: But some would think I had not even that function.

ES: I tend to think of Maciunas as the Diaghilev of Fluxus. Does that make any sense to you?

JC: Yes. I think, though, that he was a very interesting artist himself. He gave me a piece that was in some way based on my name. He worked letteristically to take the C of Cage and then the A and the G and the E, much as I make my mesostics (you know, paying attention to letters). He paid attention to the letters and made something in a box that was based in part on the principles of collage and juxtapositions. His craftsmanship was extremely elegant. The box, for instance, was filled with beautifully chosen material. And everything was arranged in such a way that there was no wasted space. One thing abutted another and it was very beautiful. I don't have his work now because I gave it to someone who had an interest in Fluxus...I've forgotten his name.

ES: Why didn't you become more involved in Fluxus?

JC: For the same reason that Marcel Duchamp didn't become more involved in Dada. I don't like organizations, and I don't think any artist really does. And when a term gets to be an umbrella, a person who wants to remain free of organizations, moves out from under the umbrella. I'm not opposed to Fluxus, but I'm opposed to being in an institution or part of an organization.

ES: Do you think Fluxus is still going on?

JC: It's having a rebirth now, it's having a great renaissance. It's being given an important place rather than being ignored.

ES: It's another case of intending not to make art, which turns out to be art.

JC: Well, I think that what George Maciunas was doing was clearly art, but it was not an art based on two plus two equals four, or even upon I love you or I hate you. And those are common conventional views of art – that you should have something to say that can be expressed in numbers or in emotions and say it. All right? But he wasn't doing that. He was involved in collage.

ES: But he did say that the artist shouldn't be doing what we call the fine arts, he ought to be doing practical arts, such as journalism or design. That the artist should do something practical from 9 to 5...

JC: Yes, but what does that mean, though? I mean, the practicality of one person is not the practicality of another.

ES: Well...it seems as if he wanted to make a kind of anti-art statement.

JC: Yes, but his own work was very elegant and beautiful.

ES: Is there a way to make art that isn't art?

JC: I don't think one need approach that as a problem. Maybe Duchamp did. He's often connected with anti-art.

ES: Though he certainly considered it art.

JC: But we're not sure, are we, that it is? I have every now and then the idea that Marcel's work is memorabilia. I have over there a membership card in the Mushroom Society, which Marcel signed, and he signed it beautifully. It's thought of as an important work of his because it has a certain connection with the check which he signed...

ES: For the dentist?

JC: Yes. So that seems to be more memorabilia than art. I doubt whether all that has happened in the name of Fluxus would be enjoyed by Maciunas were he still living. Some people have taken it as an excuse for not doing their work carefully.

ES: The work that was done was, as you say, elegant.

JC: His work.

ES: And inventive.

JC: Yes. And a great deal of other works are things one can enjoy. But some of them seem to move toward the acceptance of the careless.

ES: Because some of them began to think of it as something flushable.

JC: Have you noticed the difference between Duchamp and [Francis] Picabia?

ES: Yes.

JC: And though there are some beautiful Picabia's, there are many that are careless. And there's almost nothing by Marcel that's careless. It's all elegant.

ES: I don't want to go too far afield here, but can art be careless?

JC: I don't think it should be. I think that a definition of art could be "paying attention." That would include the work of Duchamp because he was able to sign my card, for instance, not in just any old way, but in such a way that the card is not changed by his signature.

ES: But could an artist intentionally be careless? I mean, if you considered it to be a kind of spontaneity. There are some people who think certain forms of abstract expressionism are careless.

JC: Well, there is certainly some Fluxus that goes in that direction.

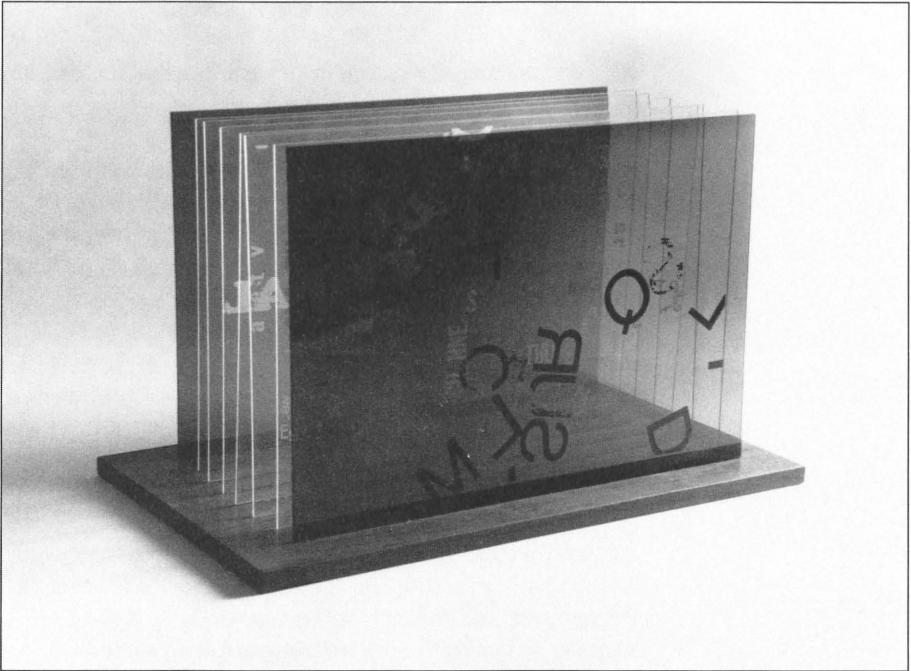
ES: Spontaneity shouldn't be construed as license...

JC: Yes, well, I think they do. I think many do. And when I say many, do I mean it? But what happens if we go to an exhibition of Fluxus? Do we see the elegance of Maciunas, or do we see the principles of spontaneity, and so forth, taken to the extent of license?

ES: Well, I quite agree that we see a lot of that. But the problem is that if you choose to use mundane materials, there is a great tendency to then use them in just any old way.

JC: Well, there's also the possibility of using them beautifully. There's a great deal of work by Robert Rauschenberg that is beautiful and the materials are clearly inelegant, where the result is revealing. All right? And we can also see works by lesser artists that are in no way revealing, which are simply careless and sloppy.

ES: Do you think Fluxus is depersonalized art?



John Cage, *Not Wanting to Say Anything About Marcel*. Multiple, eight silkscreened plexigrams each 35.6 x 50.8 x 0.3 cm., walnut base 36.8 x 61 x 1.9 cm., 1969. Ellsworth Snyder Collection. Photograph by Angela Webster, Courtesy of Madison Art Center.

JC: Oh, do you mean that a Fluxus work is a work that doesn't have any personality?

ES: I was thinking more of how much ego removal is there?

JC: Well, I think in the case of Maciunas there is a great deal. I think in the case of some others, there's not. That could be another way in which one could criticize, or think about, Fluxus work.

ES: Or help draw the line between that which...

JC: ...seems to be good and that which doesn't.

ES: One reason I brought that up is that Ben Vautier has said that one of your great contributions to Fluxus was your insistence on depersonalizing art; and that, he seemed to think, was a kind of brainwashing that had been done early, that helped the possibility of formulating Fluxus.

JC: How do you think of him, of Vautier...do you think of him as a descendent of Maciunas?

ES: He seems to me, I guess, like a different stream.

JC: A different stream? He seems to me more like a critic. But he's also an artist.

ES: Yes. About a year ago, when I was in New York, I saw a wonderful painting of his that was nothing but a black background and then in white, written in his hand, it said "The story of my life" and then down below it said "death."

JC: That's quite beautiful.

ES: And I thought it very provocative and quite beautiful, but often the things he says seem to me not to be any better than I could think them, and I guess one of the things I like is to come in contact with art that is better than I can think or make.

JC: Well, you could change what you just said; by substituting for, however you put it, "as good as," you could put it around the other way so that you wouldn't be less than what you were looking for, but equal somehow...it should be written in the language which you speak.

ES: I need art that can make the mind twist. I also remember the remark that Richard Wright made about meeting Gertrude Stein, when he said, "She blew the hinges off the doors of my mind!"

JC: And Bob Rauschenberg has said the same kind of thing, that you can tell whether a work of art is good or not by whether it changes you, and if it doesn't change you, it's either no good or you're stupid, one or the other.

ES: Or I suppose it could mean you've already been changed.

JC: Well, but all of these important things have to be repeated – so that you don't give up the need to be changed, you have to be changed continuously. Isn't that it? That's why we have to brush our teeth.

ES: I just want to say, that's why you have meant so much to me – because it seems to me that you always are doing something that does something for my sensibility when I come in contact with it; which helps this change take place, or this growth, or whatever. I don't know what to call it. I think that's one of the things I look for in a really great artist. One of the big things that bothers me right now is that there seems not to be enough of a line between simplicity (i.e., taking something of great complexity and by a process of distilling coming up with something simple) and just being simple-minded. It seems to me much of that we come in contact is...

JC: The thing that makes me question Vautier, or not be wholly grateful to him is...are his critical views, particularly of Duchamp.

ES: I actually don't know about those.

JC: I don't know if I'm right, either, but he has written so many, what you might call, "open letters," in which he questions the basic importance of Marcel Duchamp's work.

ES: But he, of course, is younger than Duchamp, so I always think of what Mrs. Schoenberg said about Boulez when he wrote the article "Schoenberg est Mort."

JC: What did she say?

ES: She met him shortly thereafter, at a party, and said, "Don't worry, I know it is the habit of the young to ride the backs of the old."

JC: And that's how the *Making of Americans* begins. Isn't it?

ES: "I only dragged my father this far." Yes.

JC: When I saw Marcel in Venice, I said, "Isn't it strange that I'm doing now what you did when I was born."
And he smiled and said, "I must have been fifty years ahead of my time."

ES: That's wonderful. Are there any figures in Fluxus besides Maciunas who particularly interest you?

JC: I grow increasingly interested in the work of Alison Knowles (I don't know whether it's properly called Fluxus) – and Dick Higgins.

ES: Certainly Maciunas felt that way.

JC: And I find her work more and more, oh, useful.

ES: You know, Maciunas, at one point in a letter to Vostell, said the current Fluxus Committee is this: myself, chairman; Kubota, co-chairman, for New York; Barbara Moore, administration, for New York...

JC: She's the wife of the photographer.

ES: Peter, yes. And then he has co-chairman, Akiyama, for Japan; and de Ridder and Vautier, co-chairmen, for Europe. And then the inner core Fluxus people: George Brecht, Ay-O, de Ridder, Dick Higgins, Alison Knowles, Joe Jones, Kubota, Kosugi, Maciunas, Ben Paterson, Shiomii,

Vautier, Robert Watts, Emmett Williams and La Monte Young. Jackson Mac Low didn't make his list.

JC: It's an interesting list.

ES: But none of their works particularly interest you.

JC: On the contrary, I find it an interesting body of work. I go with pleasure to these Fluxus exhibitions. One of the last ones I saw was in an important museum, outside Zurich, a beautiful exhibit with some astonishing work by Nam June Paik. Was he on the list?

ES: He wasn't listed, but certainly he could have been, he was in *An Anthology*, he was certainly very active. And you know, I have from the collection of your letters at Northwestern, the letter that La Monte wrote asking you to contribute to *Beautitude east* which never came out, and a lot of that material is what became *An Anthology*.

JC: A beautiful book.

ES: In the letter he mentioned that because you couldn't agree with a lot of the people involved, you weren't sure if you wanted to contribute or not. And at that point he also lists some other people, like Bob Morris (who is the one person who had his contribution withdrawn from *An Anthology*), and then Henry Flynt is listed, and Terry Riley, Dennis Johnson, Walter DeMaria, Toski Ichiyonagi, Ray Johnson, James Waring (whom I don't know), Richard Maxfield, (and another name I don't know) David Degener and Terry Jennings. And he was also asking Christian Wolff, David Tudor, Hans Helms, Dieter Rot and Claus Bremer. He said, "Also I want to get something from or about Nam June Paik," and he was asking if you had his address. People talk about Dada as if there were still something going on that could be called Dada. Is this a misapplication of the term? Or do you think there is such a thing?

JC: Are you speaking now of what we sometimes call neo-Dada? Well, I think there is such a thing and I think that could be related to Fluxus, in particular to what we could now call neo-Fluxus.

ES: Exactly. That's where I was heading. But would it make sense now to call what happens in the name of Fluxus, so to speak, neo-Fluxus?

JC: Yes. Or even find things that are happening now that seem to be more in the society...in connection with Fluxus; and Fluxus very much helping the idea of Dada and vice versa, don't you think?

ES: I think it could really be that what we're talking about is a kind of sensibility, right? A kind of mentality...

JC: The insistence upon an alternative culture...a culture which is not authoritarian. That I think is a big principle in both Dada and Fluxus.

ES: But the principle of doubt...

JC: ...of anarchy, really...

ES: ...that at some point, anything I've ever been able to think or say could be art. But only if the statement is not careless.

JC: Yes. It's a very difficult situation in which to say what you mean. It may be that we can't do it, I don't know. We know what we mean, but we're not able to say it.

ES: Well, that's true. I vacillate, you see...I think of that Santayana saying, when someone asked him what beauty was, and he said, "If you know what it is, then you don't need to define it; and if you don't know what it is, you can't define it." And I vacillate between thinking that's an adequate thing to say, and that it's a cop-out.

JC: How do you feel about Wittgenstein saying that beauty has no meaning and it just means that it clicks with us, that is to say, we approve of it. And if we approve of it, that only means it clicks, then why don't we have a clicker in our pocket and mechanically make something beautiful by clicking. That comes close to Duchamp. That's very profound. And that we might have to take the clicker with us to the Fluxus exhibition and we might fail...to make something beautiful.

ES: To have the clicker click. Is the clicker clicking when it has tripped our capacity to be delighted, but not necessarily just delighted on a mundane plane, but on the level of changing us...but that's a delight. Am I making any sense?

JC: Yes, yes. No, I think that's what it has to do. If we don't accept something and then do, we've changed. That's what the clicker would do. Then we would be interested in art as something that changed us. And that's what Rob Rauschenberg says is necessary. I think we agree with him.

ES: And we'd be going constantly on trying to find the next click.

JC: And our changes, the changes in us, would be toward the broader use of our perceptions rather than toward the narrowing of our perceptions. So that instead of moving toward virtuosity, for instance, or

elitism, or any of those things that require polishing, we would be moving toward, oh, toward the world that isn't art or hasn't been thought of as art, and turning it into art. Isn't that true?

ES: Yes, I think that's true. My question is, if we don't polish, how do we get elegance?

JC: By paying attention – particularly to what we do. And what should we do? I would say we should do something in such a way that our doing leaves no traces.

ES: No dust on the mirror.

JC: Exactly. In our discussion, why have we not heard the name of Al Hansen? He wrote music, and he was a performing artist.

ES: Are there any others that aren't listed of whom you think highly?

JC: I thought of him as one.

ES: Is there any other kind of statement about Fluxus that comes to your mind or seems important to you?

JC: There's one interesting thing we haven't talked about, and that is that in many of these statements it all seems to be here in New York, but it was spread around the world.

ES: As we sit here, I am wondering: is the clicking of the sounds from Sixth Avenue memorabilia?

JC: Yes, of course it is. It's momentary ephemera. It's junk sound. Not junk mail. But it comes to you.

ES: It's memorabilia passing through circumstances, but in this case the circumstances are sound.

JC: Yes, and the receiver transforms it all into art. I mean, it couldn't be better art. It doesn't matter who made it. Or that it hasn't been made. We know through Duchamp that it exists apart from being made and is only made when it is perceived. Or just the perception of it makes it. I can't think of any sonic experience that I've had that is superior to the sound that is freely given and received here on Sixth Avenue.