

The Eve of FLUXUS

a fluxmemoir
billie maciunas

with commentary by
Dr. Kristine Stiles, Geoffrey Hendricks
and Larry Miller



Arbiter Press
Orlando • New York

Editor: Bonnie Fesmire
Publisher: Christine Blackwell
Designer: D.S.H. Watson

*Profits from the sale of this book benefit the
Atlantic Center for the Arts, New Smyrna Beach, Florida*

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1732 Arbor Park Dr., Winter Park, FL 32789

Library of Congress Control Number: 2010901983

ISBN 978-0-615-35216-9

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
FIRST EDITION

for unknown artists

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Foreword

Or, Unbuckling The Belt of Fluxus Through Billie Maciunas' Experiences

Fluxus was officially born in 1962 when a group of artists assembled in September to perform their art live in Wiesbaden, Germany. George Maciunas, Lithuanian-born artist and graphic designer, had coined the term *Fluxus* in 1961 for a magazine he planned to publish on the unusual work of a loosely organized group of international artists, working across media and disciplines (from humanities to the social and natural sciences). The artists drew upon the performative events of “happenings” and the Japanese Gutai; the musical compositional scoring of John Cage; the assemblage approach to art by such artists as Robert Rauschenberg, Ray Johnson, Bruce Conner and the European *Nouveaux Réalistes*; and the international movement of Concrete Poetry, among other things.

At the same time, Maciunas identified Fluxus as an art movement with a distinctly political dimension, writing in his 1963 “Fluxus Manifesto” that Fluxus aimed to

Purge the world of bourgeois sickness, “intellectual,” professional & commercialized culture. PURGE the world of dead art, imitation,

artificial art, abstract art, illusionistic art, mathematical art, —PURGE THE WORLD OF "EUROPANISM"! PROMOTE A REVOLUTIONARY FLOOD AND TIDE IN ART. Promote living art, anti-art, promote NON ART REALITY to be grasped by all people, not only critics, dilettantes and professionals. FUSE the cadres of cultural, social & political revolutionaries into united front & action.¹

In this strong emphasis on politics and his stance against European culture (despite being a European and borrowing from European culture), Maciunas depended heavily upon and adapted the theories of the artist, musician, and philosopher Henry Flynt. Known for his strident public lectures beginning in the late 1950s, Flynt railed against European "Serious Culture" and all forms of cultural imperialism.²

Augmenting Maciunas' concepts, Dick Higgins coined the word *intermedia* in 1965 for art that existed "between media." This hybrid approach reflected an attitude toward "the social problems that characterize our time," Higgins pointed out, and required rejection of a "compartmentalized" method of art-making in recognition of "the dawn of a classless society, to which separation into rigid categories is absolutely irrelevant"; intermedia was, Higgins concluded, "an irreversible historical innovation."³ In fact, Fluxus artists made considerable cultural contributions. By combining media and bringing together wide areas of knowledge at the intersection of politics, science, technology, society, gender, and class, they created eccentric and original objects, published fascinating theoretical texts, and performed some of the most noteworthy actions in the complex history of what is otherwise called "performance art."

Fluxus artists also rendered laughable all fixed meanings of art, unbuckling their belts so that art and aesthetic actions could exist independent of rigid classifications. As the years accumulated under their loose trousers and skirts (Fluxus included more women artists than any prior avant-garde art movement), competition for definitions of Fluxus grew more inflexible among the artists themselves, as well as among curators and art historians, with the effect of rebuckling and cinching the belt of Fluxus tighter and tighter until the loosely organized group and its alliances could no longer breathe. Billie Hutching Maciunas entered the scene in such a moment of compression, which only constricted after George Maciunas' death in 1978.

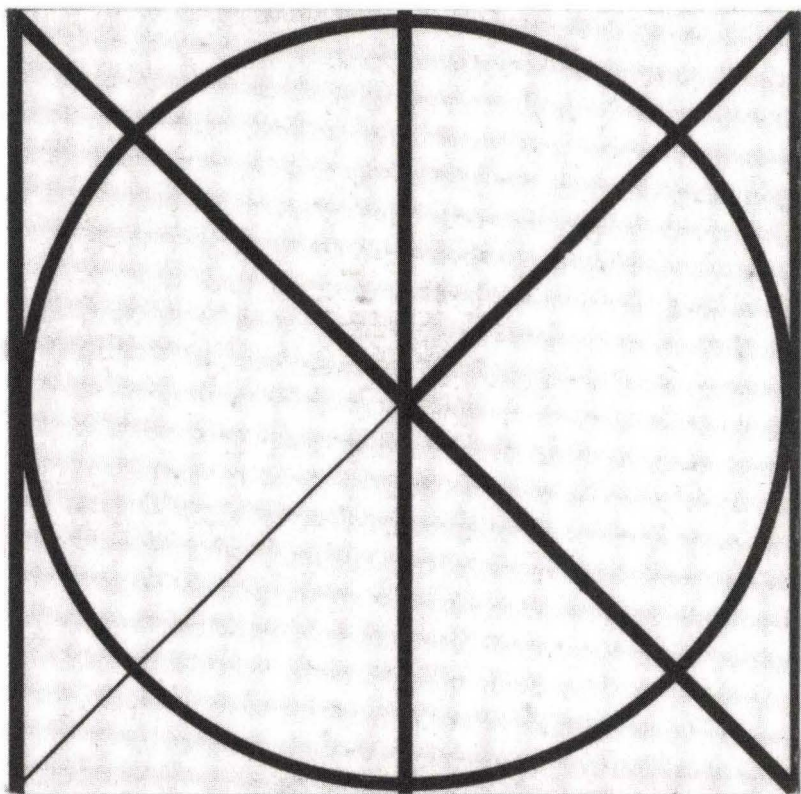
Maciunas was himself responsible for setting the stage for such a breathless condition. As self-appointed titular head of Fluxus, he issued mandates and directives for who was "in" and "out" of Fluxus, redrawing his flow charts and reorganizing his lists as if life itself depended upon it. Some of the first generation that managed, usually, to remain in his good graces included: Dick Higgins, Alison Knowles, and George Brecht [U.S.A.]; Ay-O and Mieko Shiomi [Japan]; Nam June Paik [Korea]; Ben Vautier and Robert Filliou [France]; and Eric Andersen [Denmark]. Second-generation Fluxus artists such as Geoffrey Hendricks and Larry Miller [U.S.] remained mostly without serious reprimand. But already by 1963, Flynt and German artist Tomas Schmidt were censured for their leftist politics, quite simply because George Brecht threatened to disassociate from Fluxus if the group, and particularly if Maciunas, supported Flynt's and Schmidt's radical activities. Deeming Brecht crucial to the very identity of Fluxus, especially for his innovation of the "Event Score" (cards with short texts or lists of words that gave conceptual

instructions for thoughts and actions), Maciunas moved away from his own political inclinations.⁴

Focusing more on his production of Fluxus publications, “multiples,” and eventually housing (e.g., Flux Collectives in Soho, the forerunner of artist’s lofts) did not, however, prevent the indomitable Maciunas from continuing to dismiss others from Fluxus ranks. German artists Wolf Vostell and Joseph Beuys were found to be too political and expressive (Vostell brought Beuys into the Fluxus fold, and despite Maciunas, Beuys claimed association with Fluxus throughout his life). “Too emotive and erotic” were the charges leveled against Carolee Schneemann [U.S.A.], Shigeko Kubota and Yoko Ono [Japan], and other women (even though Maciunas adored Ono).

Over time, Maciunas’ self-identified heirs have followed in his censorial tradition, dictating the terms and definitions of Fluxus, and determining who would find a place in art history. Related to such developments, I predicted in 1993: “Increasing attention by the art market, art history, and the institutions of art to the objects, publications, and material ephemera of Fluxus threatens to erode its performative legacy and to erase the critical social dimension of the Fluxus enterprise.”⁵ But as Billie’s writings prove, my observation came fifteen years too late, as the situation was already dire at the time of Maciunas’ death. Part of the enormous value of Billie’s memoir is that she discloses how this shift occurred. Billie’s book unbuckles the Fluxus belt again, dropping its secrets like loose garments on the floor of history.

Predictably, readers will be most fascinated by the titillating facts of Maciunas’ previously unknown multifaceted sexuality.⁶ Given the courageous representation of, and work on, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and



Yoko Ono monogram card, c. 1965; designed by George Maciunas; one from a set of forty cards. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, Gift, 2008.

transgender identities today, Maciunas' cross-dressing appears quaint and closeted. But Billie's revelations restore his place in those histories. Of equal cultural and historical significance is the insight readers may gain into the unprincipled shenanigans of some Fluxus participants and associates who, under Billie's microscope, present as proverbial emperors with no clothes. A whole company of characters appears naked as jaybirds before the watchful eyes of a confused, traumatized, romantic, and grieving young woman. Her narratives

and diaries make for the stuff of legend. Nevertheless, as with all personal accounts, Billie's detractors will counter her stories. Yet even if "truth" has become a fiction under the poststructuralist gaze, Billie's experience of Fluxus counts alongside those who would disparage her memories.

Billie's memoir (and this book) follows the structure of a Greek tragicomedy: tragic because, as her diaries explain, both her own and Maciunas' sexuality and relationships were shaped by traumatic events beyond their control, determining the often lonely, secretive dimension of their lives apart and together; comic because Fluxus provided droll relief for such psychic pain, as well as a stage on which to act out aspects of clandestine identities. Moreover, their tragicomedy was exacerbated on both sides—tragic and comic—by the folly of the personalities and relationships she exposes within Fluxus. Add to this situation Maciunas' anguished physical suffering from allergies and his painful cancer, both of which were augmented by persistent financial troubles, and it would appear that Billie and George lived their love affair in a condition of relentless stress alleviated only by their mutual tenderness and trust.

As with all tragicomedies, this one contains a *prologue*, namely my foreword, the narrative of an art historian who, accepting the task of identifying enough Fluxus history to orient readers to the events Billie relates, introduces its cast of characters. The *parodos*, or the song sung by the Greek chorus as it first enters, is the role played by Geoffrey Hendricks, an artist associated with Fluxus since the mid-1960s. Next, Billie's story unfolds in episodes of dialogue, usually between Billie and George, as well as in the *stasimon*, or choral ode that reflects on those conversations. Finally, the *exodus*, a recessional song sung by the chorus at the end of the play, which provides the

wisdom necessary for grasping the meaning of the production, is taken up by Larry Miller, also associated with Fluxus since the late 1960s, and who, like Hendricks, has developed his own artistic practice distinct from Fluxus.

What remains to be said in establishing an opening for Billie's story is that it was her unassuming, gentle, and retiring nature that permitted Maciunas at the end of his life to live the truth of his desires, knowing that he would not be judged by her but rather accepted and accommodated in his most intimate wishes. In short, these two individuals recognized the artist in each other and also had fun: dressing up, cross-dressing, going places together, having a "partner," however fleeting their pairing may have been. In this exchange, George offered Billie a modicum of companionship, tinged by love, as well as protection insofar as he gave her a place to live, a modest inheritance, and the rightful claim to be part of the unruly clan of Fluxus. Billie's memories offer a necessary addition, and important corrections, to Fluxus histories.

At the same time, Billie repeats some myths about Fluxus: that it was "the most radical and experimental art movement of the sixties,"⁷ a highly arguable claim, given the extreme implications of conceptual art; and that it is "nonproductive behavior." Ironically, what her memoir highlights is that Maciunas' administration of the irascible group, as well as the continuation of that management by his successors, contradicted such a fantasy right from the start and up to the present. Fluxus was anything but "non-productive." It had the makings of big business, big museum exhibitions, and big art history even from its proto-Fluxus days when performances were held at Yoko Ono's loft in 1961. In short, Fluxus was always "high art," despite oratory to the contrary. A self-conscious movement, born

during the period of the equally self-confident advent of happenings, pop, minimalism, and conceptual art, Fluxus was created by sophisticated and learned artists who knew their own and each other's worth, had contacts with artists throughout the world, and sought to change art history, as well as to find and establish their own place within it, just as did the notorious "anti-artists" of Dada. Being identified with "anti-art," a misnomer if there ever was one, is one of the more absurd nomenclature to come out of art history. For both Dada and Fluxus artists produced some of the most significant art and aesthetic theory of the twentieth century. Fluxus succeeded, thanks in no small measure to the efforts of George Maciunas, to whom this book is a tribute.

George believed in reincarnation, according to Billie, who states that she will only remarry if she meets him again. I wish them both that reencounter.

Kristine Stiles

Introduction

Although I knew about Fluxus and George Maciunas from the early sixties through my colleague Bob Watts, who shared his Wiesbaden correspondence with me, and I met George at the Flux Loft on Canal Street sometime in the fall or winter of 1963-64, it was not until the mid-sixties that I became fully involved with Fluxus activities. Billie I met in October 1977 at the Halloween event George organized in New Marlborough where he had requested everyone to come with a different identity. He appeared as a striking blonde woman in a scarlet evening gown wearing spike heels. When he greeted me at the door, I did not recognize him until he spoke, which pleased him immensely. In retrospect, I think my most important contribution to Fluxus is the role I've played as catalyst and organizer for various Flux-Rites, honors and celebrations, including officiating as Flux-Minister for George and Billie's wedding.

Billie Maciunas' *The Eve of Fluxus* is a poignant love story and includes journal entries on her "immobilization therapy" sessions with George, together with many other insights and information. Her contribution provides a vital addition to the bibliography on Fluxus and to our understanding of George Maciunas, which in turn increases our understanding of the shape and form of Fluxus. Although the time George and Billie were together, chronicled in

this book, is less than a year, it is a critical transformative moment, and Billie's story is an extremely important chapter in the life of George. There is a special beauty in the way this narrative unfolds, interconnecting the events of their lives as their relationship comes into full bloom.

In 1970, when George was presenting the *Flux-Mass* at Voorhees Chapel, Douglass College, Rutgers University, a newspaper reporter asked, "What is Fluxus?" George's curt reply was, "Go look it up in the dictionary!" This was an apt response, since George used the definition for *flux* [Latin: *fluxus*] as a manifesto and played with it in a number of ways. *Flux* is both fusing and flowing; it is an excessive, abnormal discharge from the bowels, as well as the substance used to promote the fusion of metals and minerals. George's additions to the dictionary definition in the "Fluxus Manifesto" expand and focus the context, taking it to the world of art, politics, and revolution, bringing a group together to effect change and "purge the world of dead art." However, "old art" was nevertheless something that George loved, studied and charted, including the art of the Scythians, nomads from the ancient world.

Eve, like *flux*, is a word with a cogent/rich yet modest cluster of meanings that also include complementary concepts and suggest the microcosm and macrocosm, embracing the individual body and the cosmos, nature, the world and universe. *Eve*, the first woman, Adam's wife in the biblical creation story, is the beginning. Billie as *Eve* in the life of George is the beginning of his making visible to us, the Fluxus family, the essence of his self-identity.

Eve as a word for "beginning" can be a darker word than *dawn*. One speaks of the eve of the Second World War, but the dawn of a new age. *Eve* can be the beginning of some major change. *Eve's*

meaning in a cosmic sense, “evening,” occurs when the sun is setting, the close of the day, the transition from day to night. So we move from the microcosm of the body, the first woman, to the macrocosm of the earth, the sunset, the departure of the sun—the ending of one phase and the beginning of another.

Billie’s narrative demands that we take our consideration of Fluxus beyond the “jokes, vaudeville, pranks, fun and games,” which have also always been a part of Fluxus, to a deeper psychological interpretation and philosophical dimension. *The Eve of Fluxus* adds depth to our understanding of “What is Fluxus?” In a profound way, it amplifies an answer to the question posed to George by that newspaper reporter at the *Flux-Mass*.

Geoffrey Hendricks



George Maciunas in Jonas Mekas' *Zefiro
Torna: Scenes from the Life of George
Maciunas*

this is not art

*Maybe you just want to have some fun and need some
other playmates—will Fluxus love you?¹*

Asked to define high art near the end of his life, George Maciunas said that high art was marketable, involved “big names,” and was to be found in museums. Fluxus was none of this in George’s lifetime, so it could not be called high art. Beyond this, he insisted that Fluxus was low art, on the level of “maybe a good gag.” He didn’t object if someone wanted to call Fluxus art. After all, George considered Buster Keaton’s gags a “really . . . high art form.”² Another way of looking at Fluxus is as “a way of life,” influenced by Zen philosophy and imbued with humor. One can experience Fluxus directly, without a professional artist or a museum to define the art experience.³ Because the boundary between life and art is absent, anything mundane can be seen as significant. Thus, Fluxus presents myriad possibilities for creating art from chance and everyday events.

George believed in reincarnation, and as a reincarnated soul, he would think something completely different now than he did then. Still, I can’t help struggling to reconcile his “anomalous”⁴ ideas about art with what the art world is making of his personality and work. George is now known as the founder of Fluxus, “the most radical and

experimental art movement of the sixties.”⁵ More than thirty years after his death, George has an array of apostles and acolytes struggling to remember his words, understand his meaning, and preserve his legacy.

My experience with George is particular and limits the information I have to share. He was my husband for a brief time. We dressed together in drag, performed together, and had a wonderful time. He gave me a home, enabled my education, and changed my life for the better. He is still a source of puzzlement, delight, inspiration, frustration, and sorrow. This is a story about the intersection of a guileless young woman and a generous and prescient man.

Excellent art histories have been written about Fluxus. Among the best is *Fluxus: The History of an Attitude* by Owen F. Smith. Several wonderful biographies are available, and my favorite is Emmett Williams’ *Mr. Fluxus, A Collective Portrait of George Maciunas: 1931–1978*. To anyone interested in the evolution of Fluxus as an art movement, I recommend the first, and to anyone wanting a loving portrait of this rare and gifted man, I recommend the second.

what is fluxus not?

*Maybe you have accidentally already done something Fluxus—
how would you know it was Fluxus?*⁶

When I knew George, he regularly wore an old mustard-colored cardigan with a zip front and a pair of brown polyester pants. His habitual attire makes it easier for me to remember things he said at particular times, because there was nothing to distract me from his face, eyes, and words. One day he said something to me that it has taken me a long time to figure out.

I had arrived at the farm in New Marlborough,⁷ a small “village” in the Berkshires, in August, just as the long grass in the front yard was turning colors. It was early fall. George and I were in the large kitchen. There was a long table in the middle of the room with benches on each side. The pale green walls were lined with white cabinets, and one wall had glass-fronted cabinets. The style was every bit that of a 1920s manor house.

The day was sunny and quiet, and George and I seemed to be the only ones around. He was dumping something into the garbage can, and we were talking. He said, “Artists are parasites.” I didn’t know him well, and I knew nothing about Fluxus, his lifework. I had only popular ideas of what an artist might be: famous names of dead

people, such as Vincent Van Gogh. I thought he meant that living artists were egotistical and felt entitled to being supported without doing any practical work. I didn't know any living artists, and I didn't think of myself as one—or maybe only vaguely so—so I didn't argue with his stark pronouncement. It sounded a little parental, something a mother or father might say if their child decided to be a musician rather than a lawyer.

I learned about Fluxus by participating in it with George at the end of his life through our Fluxwedding and marriage. When he said, “Artists are parasites,” we were in the courtship phase, before we knew that he would soon die. I had been at the farm for about a month, and George had been in Seattle for most of that time participating in a Flux festival. He laughed as he told me about the gags and jokes—toilet seats with adhesive on the seats, for example. My favorite was the idea of using rocks as currency instead of money. Fluxus certainly sounded interesting, but also a little strange.

George was the most playful person I ever knew. I don't mean that he was a stranger to labor—I mean that he approached everything with a sense of possibility. He didn't fail in anything because he didn't waste anything. He had a continual recourse to absurdity in order to rescue the moment. He found funny, for example, a plane trip that he took to a German city for an event. When he got to his destination, he realized that he had the wrong date. So he slept at the airport and flew back the next day. The experience for George was an “event.” As for success, that was when absurdity and elegance were married. When he highlighted these moments in the context of the formality called Fluxus, it was both fun and brilliant.

George one day showed me Mieko Shiomi's *Spatial Poem no. 1*, following a conversation we were having on the importance of tech-



Spatial Poem no. 1, by Mieko Shiomi, Japanese, born 1938; first conceived 1965 in *Flux Cabinet*, 1975-77; assembled by George Maciunas. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, Gift, 2008.

nology versus imagination in art. I was arguing for imagination, but when I saw the Poem, I was impressed by the small wooden box it was in. There was something about the containment of the idea that was as fascinating as the idea itself. I asked, “Who made the box?”

“I did,” he said, snapping it shut and walking away, as if to say, “I rest my case.”

In October, I met Jean Brown, the Grande Dame of the art world in Lenox, Massachusetts. I viewed her Fluxus gallery, which included George’s *Diagram of Historical Development of Fluxus and Other 4 Dementional* (sic), *Aural, Optic, Olfactory, Epithelial and Tactile Art Forms. (Incomplete)*. This was a miracle of tiny letters on a chart documenting everything from church processions to George’s Shit Anthology, formally named *Excreta Fluxorum*. Reading George’s

Diagram, I definitely saw the humor, but I don't remember whether I appreciated its prodigious scholarship and organization.

I liked most of the pieces in Jean's gallery, including a wonderful "Fan Clock" in two parts: the clock's hands ran as fast as a fan, and a fan's blades ran as slowly as a clock.⁸ There was also a dead mouse in a jar of formaldehyde. It was George's piece, and it had no label at all. It struck me as bizarre rather than amusing, but regarding Fluxus, I lived in a state of willing suspension of disbelief.

I was never especially curious about art and didn't think about art history. I called myself a poet, and I thought that being a poet was a way of life rather than a profession. I was beginning to wrestle with the idea that the only way I could write was to forget that I was "a writer." I had begun experimenting with certain practices, such as writing with my left hand, using whole sheets of paper to write a single letter, using paper with texture or color, colored pens, etc. I had lately, while George was away, begun writing "breathing poems," which consisted of spelling out on many pages the sound of exhaling.

This was as close as I came to the notion of art as process or playing. I still thought of these processes as exercises to get the "real" poetry flowing. I could accept that toilet gags, the Spatial Poem, the history of art *Diagram*, the Fan Clock, and the pickled mouse were not art. They weren't expensive, incomprehensible, and made by famous people. However, I had mixed feelings about the idea that artists were parasites. It didn't seem to apply to my experience of "being" a poet, which entailed foregoing all security to seek experiences outside of whatever boundaries I met.

George lived stringently, having no evident profession. I certainly had nothing but hope and a promise. I had come to the farm at the suggestion of a medical researcher for whom I had done some typing

in New York. She knew George and knew that he rented rooms to quiet people who didn't smoke. I had rented a room on the promise of payment for the typing job—enough for a month's rent. When I got on the bus in New York and headed to the Berkshires, I had a dollar and was carrying a single bag. It was a yellow newspaper bag used to deliver *The Militant*.

I was also ghostwriting a confessional memoir for a woman who'd said she had an affair with John Lindsay when he was the mayor of New York. She said she wanted to "capitalize" on her affair and had hired me to transcribe her tapes about what she wore, what they drank, etc. So far, I had not written the steamy stuff she wanted, and I didn't know how I was going to deal with it. Nevertheless, I thought I could do it somehow and thus earn enough to meet my severely pared needs.

The medical researcher who had recommended this idyllic farm had described the owner, George, as unmistakable by his thick black glasses with a green lens covering his left eye.

George was waiting at Melvin's Drug Store in Great Barrington when I stepped off the bus. He pointed to my newspaper bag and said laconically, "That's all you have?" Then we went to Price Chopper for food. Not having been inside a supermarket for a good three years, I was dazed by its brightness, size, and soporific Muzak. It reminded me of being inside the *Space Odyssey: 2001* spaceship with the eerie computer voice of Hal. I was used to buying food as needed from fruit stands and corner markets. Sometimes I ate meals of raw vegetables or fruit standing on the street. At Price Chopper, I stood fondling a grapefruit, considering how best to spend my last dollar. I glanced up and saw George in the middle of the aisle watching me.



A view of the manor house at New Marlborough showing the two joined houses

fluxlove, just an eight-letter word

*Phyllis and Chloris with a garland of flowers/
on their head, are singing love songs⁹*

The farm at New Marlborough included two ten-to-fifteen-room main houses joined by a portico. There were also twelve outbuildings and an apple orchard. At the farm, George showed me my room on the second of three floors of the main house. The centerpiece of the room was an industrial vacuum cleaner. Otherwise, there were a bed, a dresser, and a table. The front of the room had curtainless windows facing a meadow and the evening sunset. The floors were shiny blond oak, and there was a screened porch almost the size of the room, shaded by tall trees. It was sunny and the only sound was birds singing.

I thought suddenly about a dream I'd had a couple of years earlier, when I'd first moved to New York. In the dream, there was a balmy and enveloping wind. Everything was green, and large birds like peacocks were roosting in the trees. Their long aqua-blue tails swept the ground, and I walked through this place like Eve in the garden.

I also remembered a dream I'd had shortly before meeting

George, of riding in an open horse-drawn wagon with an older man. The sun was warm. He was smiling at me and I felt inexpressibly secure and happy. This image may have been inspired by a tarot card from a deck I had that was designed by artist Pamela Colman Smith.

In what had to be a reversal of that tarot dream, reality intruded one day to again remind me of this dream. I had been at the farm for a few days and had wandered about looking at the wildflowers. One morning, I took a pad and some colored pencils to draw the flowers. I was sitting in the weeds by a path when the former owner of the house, who was still living in half of it, rode up in a horse-drawn cart. She warned me imperiously to stay on George's side of the property. As she drove away, the horses dropped big turds in their wake.

On my first night in New Marlborough, following George's recommendation, I slept on the screened porch in a sleeping bag he lent me. There was a violent storm that night, and I was too frightened to get up and run inside until I remembered a book on the history of medicine that George had just lent me. It was lying near an open window, and I ran to rescue it from the rain.

The next day I woke to the sound of an electric drill on the porch. George was installing a light. I tried to ignore the noise and him, even as he tromped through my room, throwing quick glances at me on the bed reading his book. I finally got up and went for a four-mile walk. The birds singing, the cows lowing, and the two-foot-high grass drying in the August sun in front of the manor house enchanted me. The grass turned lazily in the wind—purple, green, and gold. I learned later that some of George's neighbors didn't like his inattention to the lawn, but I thought it was beautiful and he wonderful to let it grow.

I don't remember exactly how I fed myself day to day. I was

slender and fit, having ridden a bicycle around New York and otherwise walked everywhere I wanted to go, and having eaten stringently for the past three years. I found an old bicycle at the farm and went out most days exploring. One time I came across a fruit stand on the side of the road. No one was in attendance, though there was a sign with a big eye on it and a basket for customers to pay for what they took. I took some fruit but didn't have the money to pay. I rode down the road a bit and stopped on the side of the road to devour the delicious plundered peaches, plums, and other things. I think that George found out about this—I saw the owner of the stand talking to him in the yard one day. Although George never said anything to me about it, I think he paid for the food I had stolen.

We had a brief dating interval. George invited me to a local concert of Purcell's music played on the virginal. We didn't have four dollars for the tickets, so he borrowed the money from Jean Brown, and the three of us went together. I didn't have appropriate clothes for the concert, so I rummaged around in trunks and in the attic until I came up with a powder-blue men's dress shirt, a pair of polyester, maroon-colored men's pants that were long enough to cover my ankles, and a pair of large white bucks for men. When I appeared, George approved the results, congratulating me on coming up with an impromptu outfit. Another time, George invited me to a movie. As we were waiting for it to start, he popped another of the Tums he had been eating all summer to quiet his stomach pain and said quietly, "Maybe I have cancer."

Throughout the rest of that gorgeous summer and into the fall, George introduced me to friends and visitors. Along with Fluxus gallery owner Jean Brown, I met Fluxus artists Robert Watts, Shigeo, and Simone Forti. I also met Almus and Nijole Salcius, close friends

of George's who were, like George, Lithuanian. They were a hearty and good-looking couple who brought big loaves of brown Lithuanian bread to the farm. Almus asked me why I wanted to be a writer, since I was pretty, as Nijole scoffed at him for his manners. I remember Almus asking me how or what I ate, and George interjected, saying, "She lives on air."

George's friends didn't indulge in the melodrama, ego-tripping, and pettiness that is often part of relationships. One evening when Jean Brown and Shigeko were visiting, we were all sitting on the large first-floor porch and there was music. Shigeko began to dance by herself, and she was lovely in her unself-conscious freedom. She moved and circled in tiny steps, like a ballerina in a music box. This image characterizes the mood at New Marlborough that late summer.

When I lived in New Haven, Connecticut, in the early 1970s, I was part of a bohemian group that was politically socialist. George and his friends reminded me of those times, except that there was less polemical edge and more graciousness. The cultural composition of the visitors and groups in New Marlborough was heterogeneous: Japanese, Lithuanian, French, American. Nearly everyone had traveled, and everyone could share stories about places where they had lived and visited. In retrospect, I think that my company made George happier, and that his friends were pleased that he might have finally met a companion. If I was not Fluxus, I was at least a breath of fresh air. I had no agenda, no attachments, and seemingly no desires other than to write. I was quiet, solitary, and wasn't impressed by "big names," even if I knew any. Not least important, I was slender and attractive, looking younger than my thirty years.

I think that George, a connoisseur of classical music who had studied architecture at Cooper Union in New York City, and a world-

traveler, was amused by my ignorance, which in another light could be seen as innocence or guilelessness. He told me, “You have to read *The Idiot*.” He explained that the idiot, Prince Myshkin, was “the most attractive” character in the book. Prince Myshkin was socially inept because he didn’t understand lies. He accepted what people said as truth and he told the truth himself. He ended up insane, unfortunately, but that is a story for another book.

I read *The Idiot* that summer and fall, along with all the rest of Dostoevsky’s novels. George had the entire collection, and I loved to read. I also wanted to understand why Dostoevsky was George’s favorite writer. It was a long time, however, before I understood his subtle and wonderful compliment when he compared me to the idiot. Others compliments were equally subtle: he described me as “laconic” and “pleasing to the sight.”



Billie and George Maciunas. Photo by brother-in-law
George Valaitis.

shelter

- *Dugout (shelter)*—*a primitive house made by digging a hole in the ground*
- *Public transport stops, such as:*
 - *Bus shelter*
 - *Tram stop*
 - *Railway platform*
 - *Taxi stand*
- *Rock shelter*—*a naturally formed shallow cave-like opening at the base of a cliff*
- *Shack*—*a type of small house that is in disrepair*
- *Shelter half*—*a military tent used in UK and Australia*
- *Typhoon shelter*—*protection for boats from typhoons*¹⁰

I have to comment here on a passage in Thomas Kellein's biography of George, where Kellein says of me, "She described herself as a homeless person by persuasion."¹¹ This is true only if one understands that I had rejected the choices available to me to that point. I left my mother's home at seventeen, hardly able to wait escaping her wearisome, bitter temper. I married at nineteen and then divorced four years later, leaving a house and its furnishings to my ex-husband. I also had a daughter, about ten at the time I met George, who lived

with her father. I may have appeared unattached, rootless, and “homeless by persuasion,” but that is not to be confused with being homeless by choice, which would have been a luxury.

I can’t say whether I was a sort of angel who came from nowhere to help George through a difficult time, or a rootless, parasitic poet-type. Perhaps I was neither, both, or some hybrid of the two. All I’m sure of is that George gave me shelter. Because of this, I was struck when Hollis Melton told me after George’s death that “he thought home-making was the greatest art.”¹² I also remembered this amazing statement when I learned about the Fluxhouse Cooperative that developed into Soho, because in the end, George provided shelter for many.

He had envisioned the farm in New Marlborough, also, as a communal home and school for artists, modeled after the defunct Black Mountain College in North Carolina, which had included on its faculty Buckminster Fuller, John Cage, and Merce Cunningham. As it turned out, few of those whom George contacted were interested in his idea. Jean Brown told me that she thought this was a big disappointment for him.

George may have experienced some homelessness in his youth. In *Mr. Fluxus: A Collective Portrait of George Maciunas*, Emmett Williams writes that the Maciunas family fled Lithuania when “the Russians marched in.” This would have been at or near the end of World War II, following the Nazis’ exodus. George’s father, Alexander, educated in Germany in architecture and working for Siemens-Schuckert, would have been targeted by the Red Army. In addition, George’s mother, Leokadija, was “an aristocratic Russian . . . whose father had been an officer in the army of the czar.” Leokadija mentions the Lithuanian Displaced Persons Camp in Hanau, but the

Collective Portrait is unclear whether the Maciunas family ever lived there.

In 1948, the Maciunas left Germany for the United States. George would have been about eighteen years old. Emmett Williams records Leokadija saying that the Church Field Service “took care of” the family and that the family stayed at a hotel. By 1952, the family was settled in bourgeois comfort. George’s friend Jonas Mekas, the filmmaker, included footage of the family in his 1997 film *Zefiro Torna: Scenes from the Life of George Maciunas*. Watching this film, I noticed that everyone except George looks complacent. He either hugs himself tightly or makes what I now recognize as his characteristic clown gesture before the camera, sticking his thumbs in his ears and wiggling his fingers. This image is immortalized as a 1993 screenprint by the artist Ay-O, used on the cover of Emmett Williams’ biography.

There is another trauma that George frequently talked about. When he was about nine, he was operated on without anesthesia. His appendix was on the point of bursting and there was no time to rush him to a hospital. He was tied down to a dining room table and cut into. In Mekas’ film, Mekas quoted George as saying that he screamed and screamed, and that he never lost consciousness during the entire procedure. He considered the pain of that operation comparable to the pain at its worst from the pancreatic and liver cancer that killed him.

Given George’s several displacements, the fact that he never forgot the excruciating, makeshift appendectomy, and his lifelong suffering with near fatal asthma for which he took cortisone, I was interested when I read some of art historian Kristine Stiles’ work on the association of trauma and creativity.¹³ In trying to understand

her, I came to suspect that the “affected ignorance” of irony,¹⁴ which strongly characterized George’s humor and which characterizes Fluxus gags, might be a symptom of trauma. Jonas’ narration in his *Zefiro Torna* captures these ideas:

In a sense, George’s stance is like one who is totally disillusioned, of one resigned to the fact that he has no longer a firm place on this earth, neither in body or geography. His country has been sacrificed on the altar of Yalta. His body is here only by the grace of cortisone, an artificial—by now—frame held together only by his willpower. The only thing left to him is his laugh. So he became a king in his own kingdom. A court jester presiding over the games of life, jokes, insignificances, the light and the subtle. The heavy importances he leaves to the rest of the world.

applesauce

*"You're an out-and-out holy fool, and God loves the likes of you."*¹⁵

When George went to Seattle for the Flux festival in late September, he left me in care of the farm. He had rented rooms to a lot of tenants, following the exodus of the former owners. The new tenants began monopolizing the facilities, inviting friends overnight and using George's wine glasses for communal dinners. The tranquility I had found with George disappeared in waves of insipid folk guitar and rock music. Also, C. R. visited me from New York.

I had maintained a relationship with C. R. for most of the three years I lived in New York. He was one of the rejected and hurt with whom I felt kinship while I was there between 1975 and 1978. When I met C. R., he told me he had come "home" from Vietnam with borderline schizophrenia. I knew he was dangerous, but I began spending most of my time at his place, which was as depressing as mine. We both lived on the Lower East Side. We didn't think it necessary to have electricity, so we lit our respective railroad flats with candles, which sometimes made the environment look romantic.

I had fun with C. R. because of the freedom I enjoyed with him. No one messed with me when I was with him. What was impressive—and scary—about C. R. was his outsider's contempt for those

manifestly self-entitled. We rode our bicycles anywhere we pleased, and mostly at night. We went up to Harlem, alien territory. We visited all-night diners and hobnobbed with the truly deranged and marginal. We walked all night all over the place, never running out of things to say and do.

I didn't bother very much with thoughts of his inner life, and he told me little. I knew he regularly went to a clinic and took Thorazine. Eventually, he became stranger than ever, burying glass in the sand at the beach and throwing big rocks onto the highway while waiting in the bushes for an accident. Walking with him, I would see him thrust his hand up women's skirts as we passed them, or bat Moonies, especially women, around on the street. In time, he batted me around a little bit too, and then it was time to leave.

I began taking typing jobs to get a little money together. As I mentioned earlier, it was through one of these jobs that I learned about George's farm. I took a bus out of Manhattan on August 15, 1977. I had my canvas bag of clothes, having left everything else on 11th Street (there wasn't much to leave). On the way to Massachusetts, I discovered a bag of cherries that C. R. had hidden in my bag for me to eat. It was the only food I had. At my most lucid, I know that in befriending C. R. I had seriously risked becoming a murder statistic, yet he had given me comfort, a place to go, and some kind of security. In Massachusetts that fall, C. R. helped me clean the house for George's return. Then I tried to make him leave. He insisted on staying the first night George got back, but I didn't introduce them. He left the next morning before anyone was awake.

Soon after George returned, I had to give up the lovely room with the wraparound porch. I never received payment from the medical researcher for the typing job I had done, and I hadn't done anything

more about the steamy memoir; so I couldn't afford the rent. George then allowed me to live in an outbuilding that I thought I could fix up. He bought three goats and said that my job would be to take care of them, milk them, and help him make goat cheese in exchange for living there.

As the apples started to fall, I made apple jelly, apple rings, applesauce, and apple dumplings in George's kitchen, and I took inexpert care of the three goats. I never got any milk out of them, but I loved to let them out to graze and watch them as I lay in the grass. One morning I discovered a neighbor leaving the barn with a bucketful of goat milk. I told George about it and he decided to sell the goats. That was a sad day for me, but I never argued with any of George's decisive actions.

The outbuilding had been a tool shop, but its tables, walls, and floor were solid oak. A carpenter George had hired to do minor carpenter work helped me sand the floors. George installed a wood-burning stove—it was not fancy, but it worked well. He also gave me a bed after asking me what I proposed sleeping on. I was going to use hay, but he said that there might be insects to contend with. There were some holes in the walls, which separated the shop from a former stable. I stuffed apples in these holes every night. As I drifted to sleep, I could hear animals crunching on the apples, and in the morning I found the apples on the floor with teeth marks in them. I thought this was amusing as I told George about it.

As fall descended, George gave up on the Tums and began taking something with opium for the persistent, worsening pain. He said I could live on the third floor, the attic. We soon began meeting for tea and meager meals in the big kitchen on the first floor. I tried several times to cook, but I was no good at it. George called the

undercooked brown rice that I once served “peasant food.”

During our soirees, George told me his fantasies of traveling by boat through the canals of France. That fall, looking for warm clothes against the drafty house, I discovered closets full of 1950s chiffon dresses. George said I could wear them if I wanted. He himself loved wearing women’s clothes, he said, and now that I knew, we could travel through Europe together as two elegant sisters. He also confessed to being a masochist and asked if I would beat him with a horsewhip. He thought it would be cathartic and help me with my writing. I said I’d try it.

One night not long after this, I heard high heels clunking methodically up the three flights of stairs to my attic room. The eeriness of that single sound scared the hell out of me. When finally there was a knock, I opened the door. George stood there wearing heels, a dress, the glasses with the green eye patch, a blond wig, and the old mustard-colored sweater. He had a whip and asked if I would please tie him up and beat him with it. I tied him to the bed and zinged him lightly once or twice. He winced with pain. Then I went back to writing and left him tied up.

Lying there, he told me he wanted to build a torture chamber. I told him about a Greek ceremony adopted by the Romans in 204 BC. Aspirants of the cult of Attis castrated themselves and flung the severed parts into the doorways and windows of houses. Afterward, those households had to provide the new eunuchs with women’s clothing. George asked me to save this information for the torture chamber archives.

On Halloween, George threw a costume party and wore a blond wig and a red chiffon dress. The room was large enough for dancing, but that was not on the program. Instead, we performed. Someone

suggested a piece in which the participants would respond (or not) to sounds, chance and otherwise. What might otherwise have sounded like quiet was filled with spontaneous communication. A cough brought a snuffle; a snuffle, a laugh; a laugh, an impromptu note on George's white harpsichord. Olga Adorno started to gasp like she was coming, which prompted me to sigh, and that drew a laugh. This sophisticated play and the people performing it were new to me, and I loved it. I had never known people whose life was play. The irony of being both serious and not serious about breaching the boundaries of conformity appealed to me, especially since it was not the dangerous kind of breaching that had previously threatened me with self-destruction.

Bob Watts was the sour note that night. He came to me with his hangdog face and sadly proclaimed his dismay at George's transformation. Like many who'd known George for a long time, Watts thought George was "asexual." I had no idea why Watts was confiding in me, but I thought he was the strange one. All the guests were in costume, after all, and in this crowd, who wasn't accustomed to performing? I scoffed at Watts. I didn't see George's transvestitism as a symptom of illness, but rather as part of his personality and a delightful freedom of expression.

Life became miraculously smooth for me in George's house. We spent time together doing laundry, altering clothes, dressing up, walking around, shopping, and enjoying each other's company. I was hardly aware that he had begun to fall in love with me because he was so unassuming. As time went by, I began to respect the purity and depth of his feelings for me and returned the affection. But his increasing pain and the strain he was under in taking care of the huge house in Massachusetts troubled me. He did all the maintenance

work himself, having fired the summer help for ruining a floor in a bedroom, and not having enough money to hire anyone after that.

George never talked about his own achievements or about Fluxus, nor did I ask many questions. I began to understand, though, that much of his work was developing and promoting the ideas of other artists. When I spoke with George about my writing, he understood my groping at the intricacies of the creative process. When he asked if he could read what I had written, I was shy, but he told me that I was a good writer who should be writing for myself.

As his pain worsened, we became more dependent on one another. With the cold, the house took on an increasing aura of horror, relieved by several dazzling parties George held. We had a “Renaissance party” and invited some friends. George’s good friend Hala Pietkiewicz made most of the costumes from scraps of cloth and old clothing. George played Renaissance music from his collection, and we danced in our costumes according to his instructions, altogether having a wonderful time.

George installed a speaker in my attic room so that I could hear the music of Monteverdi and Purcell, which he loved. I thought George was conveying his moods to me through the music, and I was captivated by the ineffable and undeniably decadent mixture of love and death in the same house. I was not innocent of the erotic nature of these mixed elements, but I was susceptible nevertheless to the fatalism intensified by all that went unspoken between us.

The music would start without warning, and I would listen transfixed by angelic voices singing songs I had never heard. At the same time, I felt grief, presaged by his mysterious, intense pain. Sometimes my emotions were so mixed I flung myself to the floor, not knowing what else to do with my sorrow.

fluxtherapy

Thera ... related to therapon ... "attendant" ¹⁶

I began seeing in my mind images of myself being attacked by a mad-woman. I knew irrational energies were playing havoc with my excitable nerves, and I was doing my best to remain in control. I asked George if he would let me practice with him a method of therapeutic body relaxation that I had learned while taking an independent study from NYU at Queens Psychiatric Center. A psychologist trained in hypnosis and psychotherapy had developed the method by using the body's natural tendency to rest when one simply lies on a flat surface and keeps still.¹⁷ Beyond that, released images can be analyzed, but the involvement with a therapist is minimal. I had been using the therapy, called "immobilization," on myself for more than a year. I recorded the sessions with George in my diary and include them here.

December 5, 1977

The first session takes place in the afternoon. We agree to use my room on the third floor, because it is equipped with a wood-burning stove and there will be no interruptions. The floor is padded with a braided rug. He removes his shirt and shoes, then lies on his back. I make small adjustments in the position of his arms and legs. He stares at the ceiling. I remove

his glasses and sit near his feet and out of his sight. After five seconds, he closes his eyes, breathing shallowly through his nose. His rib cage is distended, or his stomach sunken. His body curves to the right.

He lies still for about a minute, breathing lightly. Then his stomach gurgles. This is a sign that he is beginning to relax. He says, "My mind is jumping all over." Five minutes of quiet follow; then I notice his right hand twitch, again a sign that his body is trying to find a more relaxed position. The faint growls come continually, and after another five minutes, his hand twitches again. Now his eyes open. He mentions "a distance between mouth and mind." I ask what he means, and he says that he is debating whether he should say what is on his mind. I ask him to breathe through his mouth.

In a moment he complains that his mouth is dry and says he will breathe through his nose. Stomach growling dwindles. I try pressure just under the rib cage, pressing lightly upward to try to get his back into closer contact with the floor. He comments that he feels pleasure from this, even though it hurts. At one point I press directly and strongly on his chest. He gasps and says, "Now it's hard to breathe." Stomach pain disrupts the session.

December 6

The session takes place early evening. He doesn't eat, hoping to avoid pain. He removes his shirt and shoes. I remove his glasses. This time we use a cardboard cylinder under his neck so he will have to breathe deeply. His eyes are wide open and the right side tense, with the right foot pointing at a higher angle than the left. After a minute he swallows and takes a deep breath.

He says the sensation of hearing my pencil scratching on the paper produces erotic sensations that prevent him from thinking of anything else. He then becomes verbose, beginning with talk of setting up a microphone in my room so he can listen to me writing. He recalls the film version of *And Quiet Flows the Don*, in which all sound is magnified. He gets pleasure from hearing certain sounds, like a carpenter sawing wood. No. On second

thought, too noisy. Say, a watchmaker. He goes on to tell me that the sight of my dress when he entered the room made him weak in the knees.

He says that his arms now have the feeling of wanting to embrace a cylindrical object, like a tree trunk. I interpret this to mean that he feels confined and suggest that he adjust his position. He says, "No, I'd like to see what happens." In a moment he adds, "I think I'll dress up all day tomorrow. One of my fantasies is to stay always dressed up. Yet I'm not a homosexual. Men wouldn't attract me at all." Later he asks me if I will tell him, rather than ask him, when I want something.

I ask if he still has the same feeling in his arms as earlier. He says, "No, it has gone away." Suddenly his right hand twitches. He notices he has no stomachache. He says, "I think I'm a sensual person." I agree that he is. He makes a joke about his stomach, laughs, and takes a deep breath. He says, "My hands seem to be in the air. My legs seem to be in the air." The only part of him that seems to be in contact with the floor is his coccyx, which he calls "the opposite of the nipples."

I adjust his right foot so that it presses closer to the floor and stretch his arms farther from his body. Then I lightly press his stomach, hoping to bring his lower back closer to the floor. There is a quick, reflexive resistance, so I don't press long or hard. He remarks that the sensation is pleasant.

He begins talking again. Perhaps he will build a chamber of fantasies, rather than a torture chamber, in which he will be a piece of furniture. His ideas range further, so that finally he is talking about an idea for dispensing cream from four suspended fake udders. All at once a flood of information pours out. His mother and sister accuse him of being infantile. His sister says the mother was overprotective, preventing him from knowing any girls. He is still a virgin. He compares immobilization therapy to a monk's confessional, only a monk would lie on his stomach.

He has often mentioned that he wanted once to be a monk, and his life has been monklike. I say to him that he might move or adjust himself if

he would be more comfortable. He says he is O.K., just feeling suspended. I ask him how his mother controlled him so much.

They lived together until 1968, when George was thirty-seven. His father died when he was twenty-three. His mother seemed entirely lost, so he couldn't leave her. In 1968 she began to encourage him to meet women. By this time, however, he was too shy, isolated, and passive. He calls living with his mother a sad situation, because it "affects one's whole future."

He says masculinity repels him, so that he would not, for instance, want to be hairy. His father was very masculine and domineering. He, his sister, and mother were afraid of his father, though he never hit any of them. He describes his father as imposing. George still has the habit of being punctual because his father used to get upset if any of the family was five minutes late.

December 7

The session takes place in the early afternoon. When he first lies down, his hands are close to his shoulders. I say, "Is that comfortable? Not too close to your body?" He moves his arms farther away. The stomach seems sunken. I ask if he had any pain the night before. He says he had, but that it wasn't any worse than usual. His eyes are staring, his expression vacant. Breathing is shallow. I have an impulse to align his hips with his waist. The two parts look disjointed, as if they belonged to two different people.

He begins to talk about a film, Valdez, in which a man is forced to carry a cross on his back. The man keeps falling down and once couldn't get up until someone happened along to help him. He recalls methods of torture he's read about among Mongols, Tartars, and New Englanders. He says he'd like to build a torture chamber that would also be a museum.

I ask him to close his eyes and breathe through his mouth. Then I gently press his stomach just under the rib cage, center, applying pressure gradually and pressing upward. Immediately there is a growl. After I move my

hands, deeper growls come. The right arm twitches five minutes after he closes his eyes. I ask him what his images are. He says they are all sound. He is hearing Purcell's Music for a While, with Russell Oberlin singing counter-tenor. He says he gets tremors and tears from this piece. Is that normal? I say yes, I think so. The growls deepen: the stomach resistance lessens.

I realize that George is in love with me, and that these sessions are erotic events to him. He is not always rational and has outbursts of temper, besides his fixation on me in his transvestite fantasies. He is in a great deal of pain as well. I'm not sure that I have the stamina, and especially the scope, to be responsible.

December 8

I am feeling a curious anger. I don't want to give direction but feel instead like leaving him lying unattended. My mind strays, but I force my attention back. His eyes are closed. We have both been silent for five minutes. I wonder how much of my mood is conveyed to him. I was disorganized when he entered the room. He seemed uncertain in his movements, waiting for me to clear the floor as he fumbled with his shirt.

We are at cross-purposes, aggravating fantasies while trying to achieve equilibrium. I press his stomach. Tight reflex, a few growls, time slips by. His pain worsens. I ask him to describe it to me. He says it is symmetrical, behind the last rib on each side. It feels like broken bone pain, coming in waves until it has spread over the chest and backside. He is ready to get up, but I ask him to wait for one minute, trying to observe the progress of his stress. He manages a minute, and then goes to take some medicine. He returns in less than ten minutes and sits huddled on the floor until the pain lessens. It subsides within fifteen minutes.

I agree to make up his face. He says the sensation of my touching his face makes him feel weak all over. I tell him that for someone who is inhibited, he is pretty uninhibited about telling his feelings. He thinks it might be

the effect of the immobilization therapy. The makeup is successful. By the time I finish, including hair styling, he looks like an elegant dyke. I can't stop looking at him and half fall in love. He goes downstairs to prepare materials for the New Year's Eve piece.

The theme is the Coming of Eros. We will exchange formal clothing to the accompaniment of a Monteverdi madrigal. We go through one rehearsal. I admire George especially when he looks like a woman dressed as a man. When he changes to women's clothes, he looks made up and ludicrous. I tell him his own hair would be better than a wig if he had his sideburns cut off and the back tapered. He agrees, sort of, saying, "If you say so . . ." but he has no intention of giving up the wig.

He changes from his own glasses, which have large, round, black frames with one opaque lens, to a pair of wire rims. I tell him he looks older. He checks the mirror. When he faces me again, I have second thoughts. He looks like someone's very hip aunty.

December 9

This is a long session that starts early in the afternoon. George removes his glasses, along with his shirt and shoes. He lies down and asks me how his hands should be. I show him how to position them so that the thumb and index finger are slightly apart, in a self-contained position curving toward the body. He wiggles his feet, then lies still, staring straight up at the ceiling.

He looks nearly emaciated but talks about losing ten pounds so that he and I will be the same weight. I remind him to place the cylinder under his neck. He breathes shallowly through his mouth. I am deliberately not interfering with him because his stomach sensitivity is frightening. Yesterday he said it seemed not to hurt as much if he thinks I cause it by pressing, but I don't want to hurt him.

The left leg curves in to the right. His left eye has been blind from glaucoma since 1975, following a beating in New York City. After five minutes,

his right hand moves slightly. His hand and right arm seem to want to curve down, which would lower the shoulders and bring the lower back into closer contact with the floor. A phone call about the film society George wants to start interrupts. Afterward, we have a short discussion about the films. It will be possible to select from a hundred films, mostly French, but some in Russian, Japanese, and Italian. Ingmar Bergman is too expensive and has very few from the 1950s anyway. Naked Night was a good one. I watch his pulse beat through his stomach. Every word requires alarming energy to speak. He says, "Now the pain is sneaking in."

Another phone call. He stands talking through the pain, shivering and strained. It is an order from Jean Brown's son for a birthday box for Jean. The box will have artifacts and symbolic objects of memorable events from the year of her birth. For 1911, for instance, the first airmail service occurred, so the object would be a small air carrier or an airmail stamp. For 1947, my year, he thinks of Hiroshima. He tells me to remember, when I visit my mother at Christmas, to get photographs of myself as a child.

For his box, he will make a cabinet. An object for each year. "This year very eventful . . ." Short laugh. "For the year 1975, an eyeball. We'll preserve the billy goat's eyes in alcohol after he is slaughtered." Like the mice he preserved and sold for \$5 each. "Nineteen forty-nine, read Dostoevsky, 1953, saw John Cage . . ."

I finger my hair. I want a trim. The Christmas season panics me with its demands. I have \$70 to my name and no prospects of anything coming in. George tells me he will give me money for the weekend in NYC. "Better spend it while I have it. Keep yours in case something happens to me." I don't want to think of anything happening to him, yet he might be seriously ill. He says he isn't afraid to die. I readily believe it. In spite of my caution, our relationship is romantic. My impulse is to match his heroism, yet I'm very afraid. We are reacting to one another; there seems not enough time to speak, or too much to say.

I hear a deep growl from George's stomach. He remembers that he wants to buy some Bermuda Gold in New York. Another growl. He's still thinking about Jean's gift. A box about the first year of Dada? Or a toilet seat with brushes facing up? My careful thinking is tedious compared to his unbridled imagination. I press his stomach. He is still for a while, the growls coming rarely. After a while I ask him if he's ready to get up. He says yes, because the pain is getting worse.

In the evening George brings me an evil-looking horsewhip and begs me to beat him. The rest of the night I'm busy organizing notes taken during the immobilization sessions. I'm suddenly turned on by work after months of desultory scratching and thinking. I work continuously for two hours and come down to the kitchen at 11 P.M. for tea. George is there, euphoric from the morphine. We begin a conversation about films. That's always difficult because I didn't become interested in films until 1974. I've seen hardly anything from the 1950s, which is his favorite decade for films.

We sit at the table; conversation fails. He throws his hands up in a gesture of part despair, part submission. He begins talking about the torture chamber and I watch him with enjoyment. He tells me he can understand why people take morphine. He adds that he isn't addicted, because he has no urge to take it unless he is in pain. "Anyway, it's only temporary. Once the stomach is fixed, there will be no need to take it." I am reserved, thinking that he's fooling himself. His pain increases with his tolerance of the morphine. What if he is not so simple to fix?

December 10

Stretching begins late in the afternoon. George looks more symmetrical when he lies down. I am full of thoughts but don't know how much I should say to him, how much I should take for granted, where responsibility begins and ends. If inexperience and ignorance don't betray me, we may carry out our drama with some aplomb. Perhaps neither of us is as afraid as we should be.

His first words are, "Oh, it's a mouse," referring to a scratching sound that he hears at night. For a few minutes he is quiet. He makes an adjustment in his position. Head back, chest flatter, arms spread freely, deep breath. The room is quiet, so we hear the wind and wood cracking in the stove. He says, "Now the pain comes in." I ask him to concentrate on which muscles become tense when the pain starts. With no hesitation he describes how it spreads. First the stomach, then the sides, then all over the chest. He feels cold, so rises to put on his shirt. "Strange," he says, "that the stomach is not colder from the pain." I comment that certain emotions, like anger, make the body radiate heat.

When he lies down again, he begins talking about a boat trip he took around Greece. He bought the cheapest ticket, which was a seat on the deck. To keep warm, he piled his body with deck chairs, first sitting in one, and then looping others around his neck. What if the ship started to sink? There he would be with his necklace of deck chairs, while everyone else was busy being saved. He recalls how when the ship docked there were about a hundred people who rushed to get on board before the passengers had gotten off. He watched the melee from an upper deck. "The farther south you go," he says, "the more hot-blooded the people."

He speaks about a birthday box for René Block. Nineteen forty-two, when the Germans obliterated Lidice. The Czechoslovakians, with a British plan, had assassinated Reinhard Heydrich, the storm trooper in charge. He recalls political activity of the 1960s, the jokes about Lyndon Johnson being a mad bomber. There is a deep growl from his stomach. He says there is no stomach pain. I ask him to close his eyes, breathe through his mouth, and visualize the crescent just under his ribs.

I put another log on the fire. George becomes distracted by my activity, forgetting to concentrate on his stomach. I'm trying not to be involved so that he will depend on himself for relaxation. I notice that his fingers are closely curled. He mentions that he has received a film catalogue from

McGraw Hill. Most of the films he wanted, particularly *Volpone*, are not available. He'll try to order it in France. A deep growl, yawn, he wiggles his toes. I am easily irritated. His talk seems like pointless chatter. He's quiet for a while, then scratches his right ear. He asks if it's dark outside. He is getting impatient, thinking of dinner. I ask him to tell me the predominant color of his images. Gray. Potatoes. I apply slight pressure beneath the rib cage. Slight, deep subterranean growls. I press lower. He says it is painful, and asks if I can feel gallstones. I tell him the pain comes from my pressing too hard. He says, "No, there is a wound in there."

December 12

On Sunday we travel to NYC by bus. I read the beginning of *Nana* while George sleeps, half leaning on my shoulder. We go to Jean and Olga's at 537 Broadway.¹⁸ They aren't expecting us, but then neither are the five other people who show up that night. We want to see Stuart Sherman's *Portraits of Places*, and wonder about going in drag. The temperature is 17°, and we are walking. We decide to dress normally, which is a wise decision, since the theater is small and brightly lit, and we would have been more of a spectacle than the spectacle.

The performance is coordinated with perfect timing and goes fast. That it doesn't drag on is one of its good features. I look around while George takes notes. A man across from me holds his cheek up with elbow and knee support, his disgust showing profoundly. A sweet couple stares fixedly. Sporadic snorts of laughter break out. George invites Stuart to perform for the New Year's event.

Later at Jean and Olga's I am driven crazy by chatter and inertia. I leave at midnight, frantic, mumbling something about a talent for talking insanely. I go to C. R.'s and return about dawn, mellowed and nearly absent-minded. I keep my night's whereabouts a secret. George wakes me at 8:30 to do his face. I have had three hours of sleep at the most.

He gets into his purple sheath, I in my black velvet skirt, to go out shopping. The shopkeepers we visit go along with our little drama, good-naturedly calling us "ladies." Most of the people on the street merely give us strange looks or nod to their companions at us. A street vendor selling hosiery and hats calls to us as we pass, "Hello, lovelies!" I have the time of my life, prissily promenading in tawdry splendor with the exotic George. He wears a tiny pair of spectacles with one lens missing, caring only that from a distance of five feet he looks like a woman. Close inspection devastates him. Twenty memorable blocks later, we round out the adventure over tea back at 537 Broadway, in sane clothes.

We go out again dressed normally, but our pace is still frenzied. We buy books, makeup, shoes, and a dress from Leon's place on 2nd Avenue and 8th St. We have not a minute to rest. I am frazzled and uncommunicative by the time we board the bus for Great Barrington, but George doesn't seem at all affected. He takes a rear seat so he can read, while I use one of the front seats to sprawl out.

Melvin's Drugstore is deserted of cabs at 10:00 P.M., and it is freezing. Both phones are out. We walk the few blocks to the cabstand and take a taxi home. A letter from the doctor in Queens who taught me immobilization therapy has arrived. I had written to him asking for advice and describing the nightmare images I was having. George is curious about the letter, so I read him the first paragraph:

Your letter comes as an astringent reminder that one must always be prepared to entertain the messenger of darkness. I am at a loss as to how to be of assistance insofar as there is no mutual foundation for my participation in your affairs. My intuition recommends that you strongly heed those positive forces of your own survival—you are flirting with evil.

We both have a good laugh over the first sentence. I decide to for-

get about asking for guidance from this pious patriarch, even if it means commending myself forthrightly to the underworld. I can't hide my discouragement from myself, though.

December 13

I come down to dinner wearing a dress. I confess, George's interest encourages me to be more experimental and meticulous in my appearance. We sit across from one another eating potatoes or something. George says he feels very agitated and asks me if I want to beat him. He blushes and looks into his plate. I don't know what I feel. I only want to respond, probably to please him. "Yes, I do, in fact," I say stupidly.

He comes upstairs about an hour later, wearing his purple sheath and heels. No wig this time. Without it, he is a little less disconcerting, particularly since he has also flung his old diarrhea-colored sweater over the dress. He takes off the sweater and starts to unbutton the dress.

"That dress is difficult," I say. "Why don't you put this on?" I hand him a black silk slip. He puts it on, then sits on the bed.

"Let's take these off," I say, removing his glasses. "And take off your shoes. Good. Now lie on your stomach."

I tie him to the bedposts. Then I give him ten or so lashes with the whip. "I'll let you go when I'm ready." I sit across the room facing away from him, going over notes. Fifteen or so minutes pass, during which I ignore him as he struggles slightly or not at all. I know that, left to his own thoughts, he is watching me, but I go on calmly with my work. I ask him only one question—the correct pronunciation of the word "Phrygian." After my notes are in order I return to the bed.

"I'll beat you again," I say, "then I'll let you go." I give him a few more cracks, some on the ass and legs. He jerks with each one, though I am not exerting much effort and can't imagine that it hurts so much.

"Does that hurt?"

"Oh, yes." His throat sounds parched. I untie him. He sits up, all out of breath, and begs me to let him sit for a minute. I say, "Sure," and prepare to vacuum the floor. "Let me vacuum for you," he says. I am only too happy to let him. He gets on his knees in the delicate slip and black stockings. I sit cross-legged in the swivel chair, quite unconscious of his agitation, until I see him glance furtively up at my swinging leg.

"You're wonderful," he breathes as he leaves.

December 14

George enters my room. He takes off his shirt, shoes, and glasses, as usual. The room temperature is perfect. Outside, rain drips steadily from the eaves. The house is quiet. I have been reading *The Confessions of Felix Krull*. Since George recommended it to me, I tell him that I am enjoying it.

He lies down after the usual preparations and closes his eyes. I am still worrying about the letter, in which the doctor said that I was "projecting self-denial." What in God's name does that mean? That George is a victim of some pathetic aberration of mine? I make an adjustment in George's arms, bringing his hands down and closer to his shoulders. I remind him to breathe through his mouth. He closes his eyes. His feet seem wider apart than they have at other times. Within a minute or two he opens his eyes and blinks. "They made a film of *Felix Krull*. Very accurately made." I don't reply. I notice that his chest is tight. He is startled by the sound of snow sliding off the roof. His breathing is slow and shallow. My mind strays as I watch him. He seems at times to be a silhouette, heavily outlined against the violet glow of the lamp, yellow lights playing around his upper body. He seems featureless below the waist in his baggy trousers. He lies still and quiet. A fly buzzes annoyingly at the window. I wad a towel and swat it, then stoke the fire. George doesn't seem disturbed by my activity, except to appear to be in suspense. He tells me that he felt satisfied by the beating last night, as if he'd had a "good dessert." By contrast, I had a nightmarishly restless night. I

explain that I was trying to integrate images of the witch into my personality. He asks me if I am writing down my impressions.

Now he feels he's in a very tiny box. Then as if he is putting his hands around a large tree trunk. It is as if he is embracing the room. I ask him if he can feel his own weight. "No, I am upright, embracing the tree. The weight is on my arms." I remind him that he'd had the same feeling last week. I venture to say that I can only imagine it as the feeling of being tied to a tree.

"Yes, that's it," he says.

"You can move your arms if you want." No reply. No movement.

"Feel anything in your chest?"

"No. What's that, the wind?" There is a big sigh, he moves his arms up, and I suggest to him that he shake his arms with a snapping wrist motion. He does so, then places his arms in a new position that tends to elongate his body, drawing his lower back off the floor.

"Is it dark out?" he asks.

"No. Are you impatient to get up?"

"No. Just anxious about that leak. I think it's O.K. It's just over the porch."

I touch his stomach lightly, saying, "Will it have to be patched?" There is a quick reaction. He is ultra-sensitive and, conscious of his intake of breath, he laughs.

"Yeah. In spring . . . black tar . . . spread it around."

I had withdrawn my hand at the first instant of resistance. Now I replace it. Goose bumps rise on his skin.

"Are you warm enough?"

"Yeah." His voice is a whisper. Some gurgles come from his stomach.

"My stomach wants to swallow your hand. Watch out."

"How could it do that?"

"I don't know. Like an amoeba."

"Is that a warning?"

A deep growl sounds. I notice his head moving slightly.

"Let your head go where it wants to," I say. There is uncertain motion. A slight roll to the left. His left hand twitches. His head rolls farther to the left. The hand jumps as I press harder, and I tell him to let me know if it hurts. I take him by the left shoulder and move his shoulder and arm down. His left hand twitches considerably, as if stopping itself in the natural motion of resting. Suddenly he informs me that I have found the place where his pain is. It is about one and a half inches below his stomach.

December 15

I tie George to my bed and read a Robert Graves poem to him:

She is no liar, yet she will wash away
Honey from her lips, blood from her shadowy hand,
And, dressed at dawn in clean white robes will say,
Trusting the ignorant world to understand:
'Such things no longer are; this is today.'

December 16

During stretching, George begins by talking about some posters made by Nam June Paik depicting people tied up. He wants to try variations, getting increasingly bizarre. He tells me he likes me to ignore him while he is tied up. We joke about it. After a few minutes he notices his stomach beginning to hurt. I place the cylinder under his neck and tell him to breathe through his mouth. I grow slightly alarmed and suggest that he is exciting himself. He replies, "Yes, but that's what's on my mind. Shall I think of something else?"

Disconcerted, I say, "I thought you were only making your pain worse." He says, "I don't want to think only of pain. Some pain is O.K., even pleasant. Bone or muscle pain is bad."

I fidget with the stove, my attention distracted. I tell him that I heard him cry out in his sleep one night in August.

"I've done that before," he goes on, "talking to the pain as if it were another person, like saying, 'Oh, shit!'" He laughs his spasmodic laugh, then coughs. I tell him maybe crying out is good for him. He agrees.

"Like the Japanese," he says.

Irrelevantly, I add, "Or like Zouzou Kruckruck in Felix Krull, who says, 'Silence is unhealthy.'"

In response, he begins to talk about a doll he saw in a toy shop. There was a George Washington doll, no more than eight inches high. "Those eighteenth-century costumes aren't easy," he says.

I notice that his lower body is slung to the right. I touch his stomach, explaining again that I am not practicing magic but trying to let us both know the point of his resistance. His stomach is very warm to the touch. He is feeling pain, which steadily worsens until finally he has to sit up. After fifteen minutes or so, he lies down again.

This time he asks me to put my finger on the place where it hurts. He says the pain feels like a stab wound. I put my finger to his lower left side. The pain subsides. I keep my finger on his side for twenty or so minutes. He asks me to withdraw it to see what will happen. I remove my finger. I remind him to breathe, pointing out that he is concentrating on that spot as if he expects the pain to return. Sure enough, it does. But when I put my finger on it again, it subsides.

A phone call ends the session, which is well enough.

That was the end of the immobilization therapy sessions.

dénouement

*Maybe you wonder if there is certain attire for Fluxperformance—
should you get any common worker's uniform, get nude, get a
tuxedo and gown, cross dress or simply come-as-you-are?*¹⁹

I left Massachusetts at Christmas for a visit with my mother and siblings in Maryland. I wasn't looking forward to the visit and didn't know why I kept up with this imaginary duty. My long-standing fear of my mother's temper and my unexplored emotions about my father's abandonment had accustomed me to radical independence, isolation, and even homelessness. I didn't know that I wasn't living a real life, but a fictional life with myself as a character. Nearly everything I did was perversely self-destructive, including my habit of concealing my most human feelings. The most positive force motivating me at this point was my promise to George that I would return, because he feared I would abandon him.

I stayed a week and was happy to leave, but I wasn't yet finished with depression, the usual aftermath of a trip to Maryland. I arrived at the station in NYC just in time to catch the only bus back to Massachusetts that night; but I defied reason and went to the Lower East Side to see C. R. For the next six hours, he terrorized me, saying repeatedly that I wouldn't leave alive. He ripped my jeans from top

to bottom and painted me with the makeup I had begun wearing. Finally, he threw me to the floor and began to strangle me. I didn't struggle, thinking that I wanted to die peacefully in this sordid, candlelit Lower East Side railroad flat.

Then C. R. let go and told me to get out. I lost no time, except to dig into my bag for new clothes. At 2:00 A.M. I went to Jean Dupuy and Olga Adorno's loft on Broadway and tried to explain to them what had happened. Olga talked to me about her relationship with her crazy ex-husband, Billy Kluver, and Jean took my hand, saying, "When you are low, you are low." Was it his Frenchman's imperfect English, or was he telling me that with my low-life friends and my clandestine activities I was a creep?

In Massachusetts, more horror awaited with the unknowns of George's illness about to be revealed. I returned to Great Barrington the following day to a cold and dark house. I learned that although George had been in unbearable agony, he had tried to wait for me to return before going to the hospital. Unable to wait when I didn't arrive as expected, George had allowed someone to drive him there. That night, one of his friends called to tell me that George had been diagnosed with inoperable cancer, and he had only three months to live. When I entered his hospital room the next day, he smiled. I blurted out that I had heard about the cancer. He became angry because he had wanted to tell me himself, and at the same time assure me that he was not going to die.

While George was still in the hospital, Bob Watts, an artist and one of George's closest friends, called to ask if the house bills were paid. "I think so," I told him. "They'd better be," he rudely replied, "because my name is on the deed and I don't want to be stuck with the bills after George dies." According to Watts, George owed him

thousands of dollars and he would be coming to Massachusetts to “lay it on him.” When George heard about Watts’ claim, his response was that Watts had “better have his papers in order.” George told me that Watts had tried to make him share losses in a property deal in which he had no share. George also said that the money Watts lent him to buy the New Marlborough house came from a share of rent receipts for 141 Wooster Street, a loft in what would become Soho, that partly belonged to George. He owed Watts nothing, he said.

I understood least of anyone the implications of his impending death concerning property. I declined interest when he offered me his music tapes and the IBM composer on which he had produced many of his graphic works. I told him I was “still mobile.” I meant that after his death, I would be homeless again and without means for keeping such precious things. I didn’t want to presume anything. Even more, I wanted to stay above the revolting veniality that I thought Watts was displaying. I don’t know whether George read between the lines of my terse refusal. He said only that he was disappointed, because he didn’t think anyone would appreciate the tapes as much as I.

George asked Hala Pietkiewicz to come to the farm and help him. He said she was one of the few people he knew who had no self-interest in helping him. One day, in answer to a characteristic question about who would benefit from his social security after his death, Hala suggested to him that he marry me. She asked me if I was already married—that’s how little George or anyone else knew about me!

I told Hala that I would marry him, not for his social security, but for love, and he had to ask me himself. George came to my room that night and kindly proposed. I artlessly accepted. Little did I know that my apparently seamless acceptance of life’s circumstances had

everything to do with desperation. If I hadn't been such a fool, I probably wouldn't have survived that far. My *modus vivendi* was blind optimism aided by a youthful body and a sweet countenance. All George had to do was convince me that he loved me. Although he never said the words, exactly, I figured we were a suitable couple anyway. George said he was very happy, adding laconically that he only regretted he wouldn't "be around very long to enjoy the relationship."

In early February we were legally married in Lee, a nearby town, with Jean Brown and an itinerant friend of a friend, "Emilio Fishback,"²⁰ as witnesses. On February 25, we had a Flux Wedding at Jean and Olga's loft. Like every celebration in which I had participated and which George had created, it was spectacular, not least in the way it came together seemingly without effort. I now know that many of George's friends were delighted that he had found someone he wanted to marry and were pleased to be part of this particular event. Among the participants were artists La Monte Young, Jackson Mac Low, and Louise Bourgeois, as well as the usual cast of Fluxus artists.

Just before the Flux Wedding, there was another conference between George and Bob Watts at Jonas Mekas and Hollis Melton's loft. I didn't participate, but when George called me from my room and asked me to sign a paper, I signed it immediately without reading it. I wanted George to know that I trusted whatever he asked me to do. I didn't know until after his death that I had signed over to Watts George's ownership of 141 Wooster Street.

Gender masquerade was an extended metaphor of the Flux Wedding. Larry Miller was the maid of honor in a long blond wig and pink satin dress; Alison Knowles was the best man in a tuxedo; and Geoffrey Hendricks, who is gay, was the officiating minister. George and I both wore white wedding dresses.

Flux Wedding



Billie and George at the Flux Wedding that took place at Jean and Olga's loft. Geoffrey Hendricks and Brian Buczak, Money for Food Press.

For the cabaret that followed the ceremony, all the guests had to perform an erotic piece for "The Coming of Eros." ("Vampire Sings to Eros," p. 110.) George and I performed "Black and White," a piece that George had originally conceived for a New Year's Eve performance. The title of the piece was a play on the fact that George was color blind. For "Black and White," George and I exchanged clothing to the accompaniment of Monteverdi's *Zefiro torna*. Significantly, George ended up wearing the long white sheath in which I had entered the performance, while I ended up wearing the black attire of the groom.

THE FLUX WEDDING OF BILLIE HUTCHING & GEORGE MACIUNAS

February 25, 1978 at 7:30 P.M.

at the loft of Jean Dupuy and Olga Adorno

537 Broadway (near Spring Street), New York, New York

Bride: Billie Hutching (in antique white wedding dress)

Groom: George Maciunas (in antique white wedding dress)

Father of the Bride: Jon Hendricks (in bride's maid dress & blonde wig)

Best Man: Alison Knowles (in tuxedo/black tie)

Bride's Maids (all in dresses):

Olga Adorno, Larry Miller, and Barbara Moore

Monk: Jonas Mekas (in monk's habit)

Ring Bearer: Oona Mekas

Minister: Geoffrey Hendricks (in clerical robe)

Ushers: Bracken and Tyche Hendricks

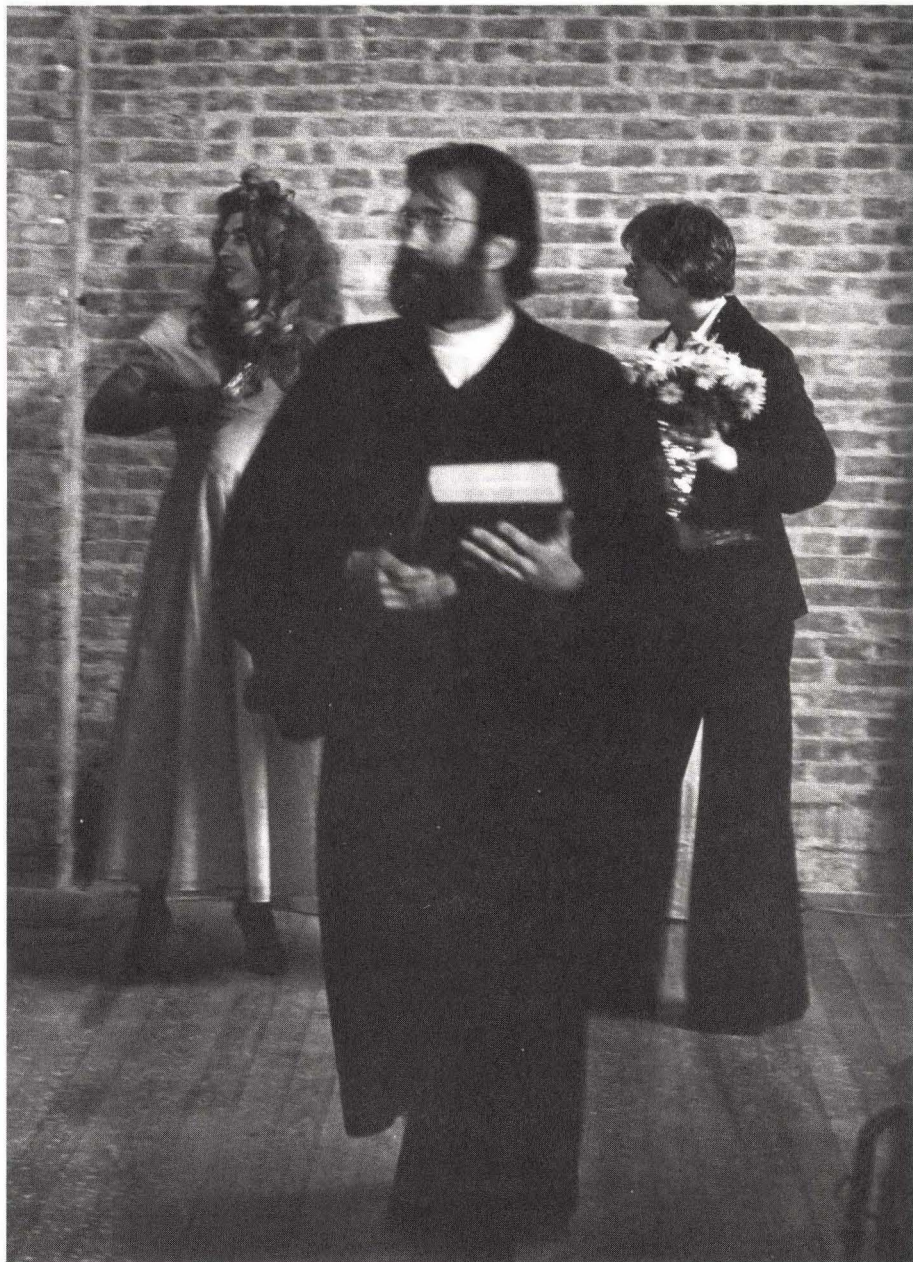
Cupid: Aurora Hendricks

The flowers were arranged by Sara Seagull.

The "ring" of bells was arranged by Alison Knowles.

The rice throwing was arranged by Joanne Stamerra.

Wedding music: Joe Jones at the tape recorder.



Geoffrey Hendricks, Larry Miller (background), and Alison Knowles



THE MARRIAGE



REGISTER OF WITNESSES

Brian Buczek
Jonas Bekas

Kelis Mellon
Joanne Hamana & Aurora
Prudon Handman

Lallyli Melle
Jesse Higgins
Nadia Antrabus
Nick Higgins
Tyshe Hendricks
Je Jones

Lisa Baum
Shigeko Kubota
Olga Adriano

Barbara Moore
Sharon Gilbert
Julip Connor
Rosario Winick
Marianne Green
Steve [Signature]

Sara Reardon
Emilio Falback
Jale Motliger
Stephanie Barber

[Signature]
Kath. Moore
Jean Brown
Vera Zuck

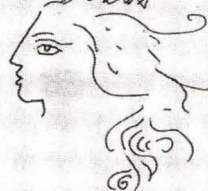
[Signature]
R Monte Young
Simone Forti
Cala [Signature]

Louise Bourgeois
Jean-Louis Bourgeois
Bob Watts

Jean Dupuy
Vera Bakantis
[Signature]
Adolf Meier
Yoshimasa Wada

1957-58 - E-9

Edwards



Sharon Thirsk

Jerry Diner

Bank Stewart
Jackson Mac Low

John Capelle

Noel Howe

Ann
Wanda Smith
Leleka
(OO)

Steven Alant
Michel Oren

♥ Mary Lucier

Tatone Esquilat

Stuart Sherman

Pip Hayma

like Maple

Shelton Barst

M. FISHKIN

June Davidson

Maureen Bruner

Collage by Brian Buczak

PLX
Certificate of Marriage



This is to certify

That George Maciunas
and Billie Hutching
were lawfully Married

on the 25th day of February 1978

ACCORDING TO THE RITE OF THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH
and in conformity with the laws of the State of Arizona

Rev. Geoffrey Hendricks officiating, in the presence of
Jim Henderson and Miriam Knauer

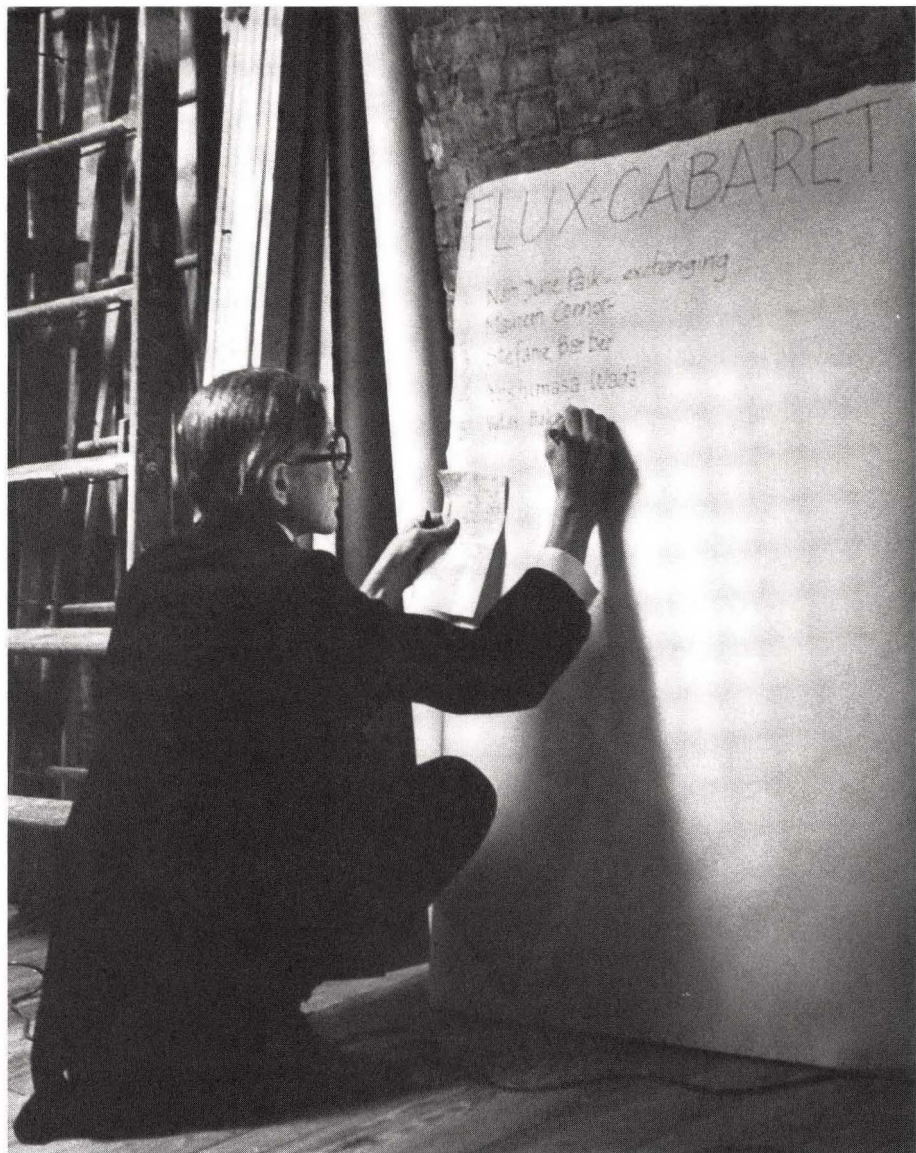
Witnesses, as appears from the Marriage Register of this Church.

Dated 25 February 1978

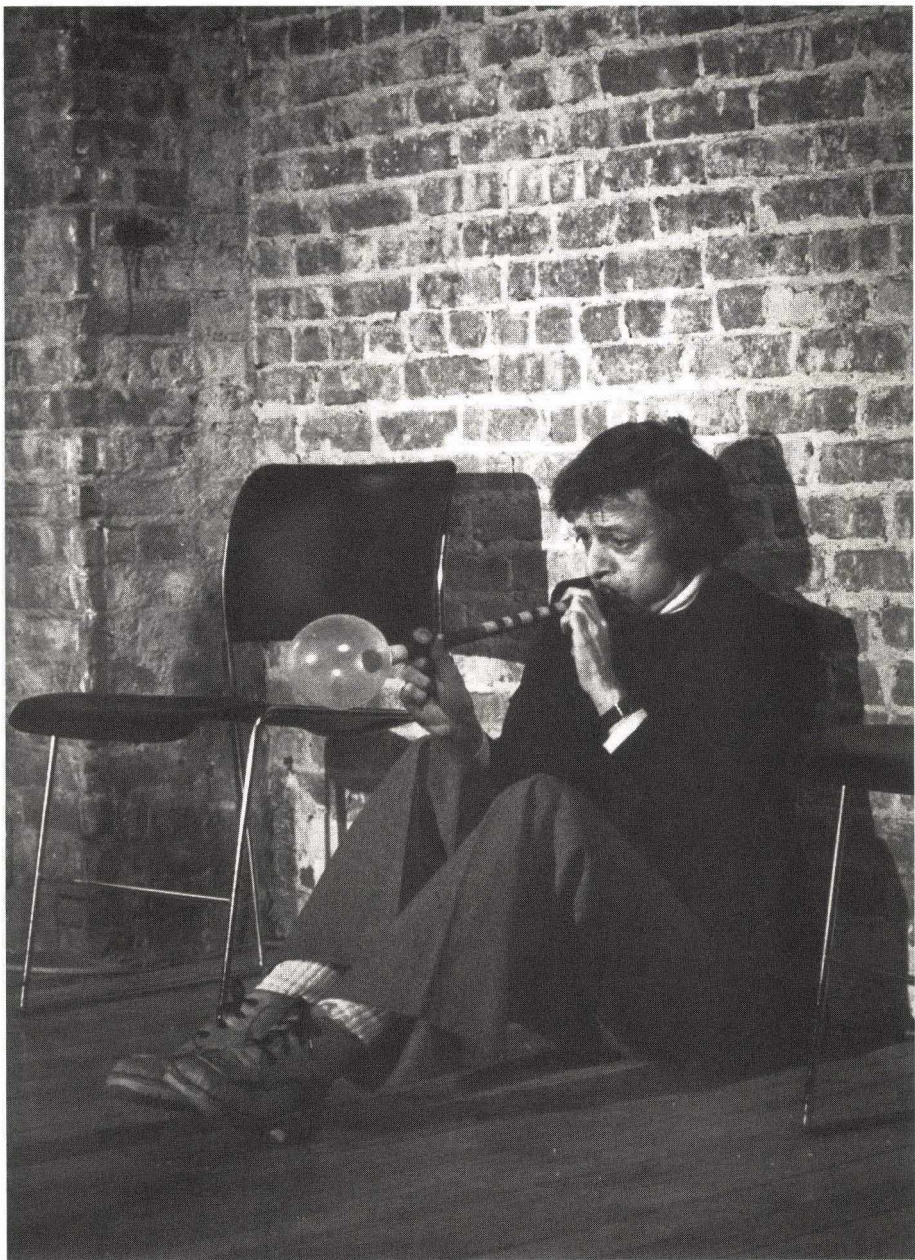
Geoffrey Hendricks
Rectory

Flux Cabaret

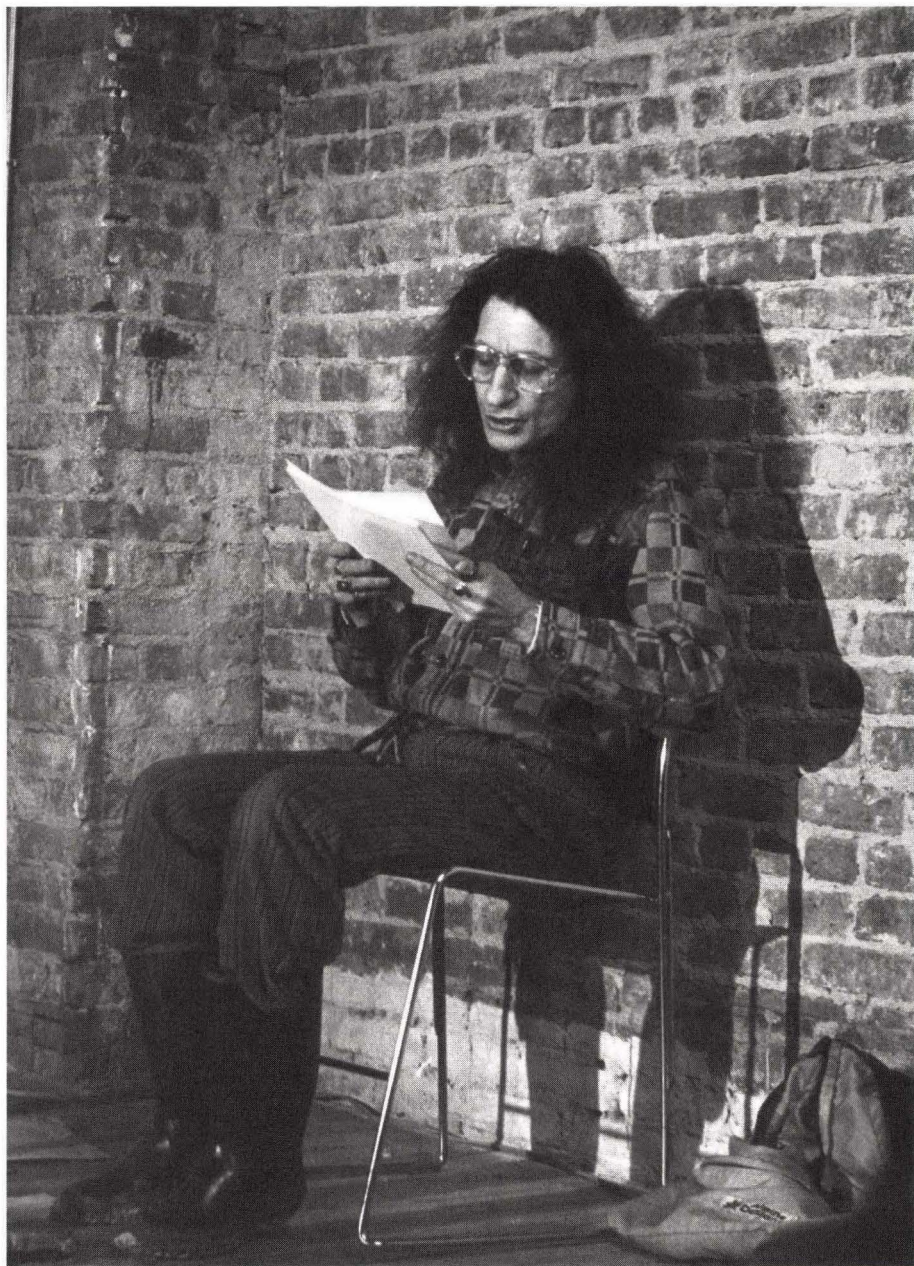
Photos by Hollis Melton



George preparing a list of events for the Flux Cabaret



Joe Jones



Jackson Mac Low



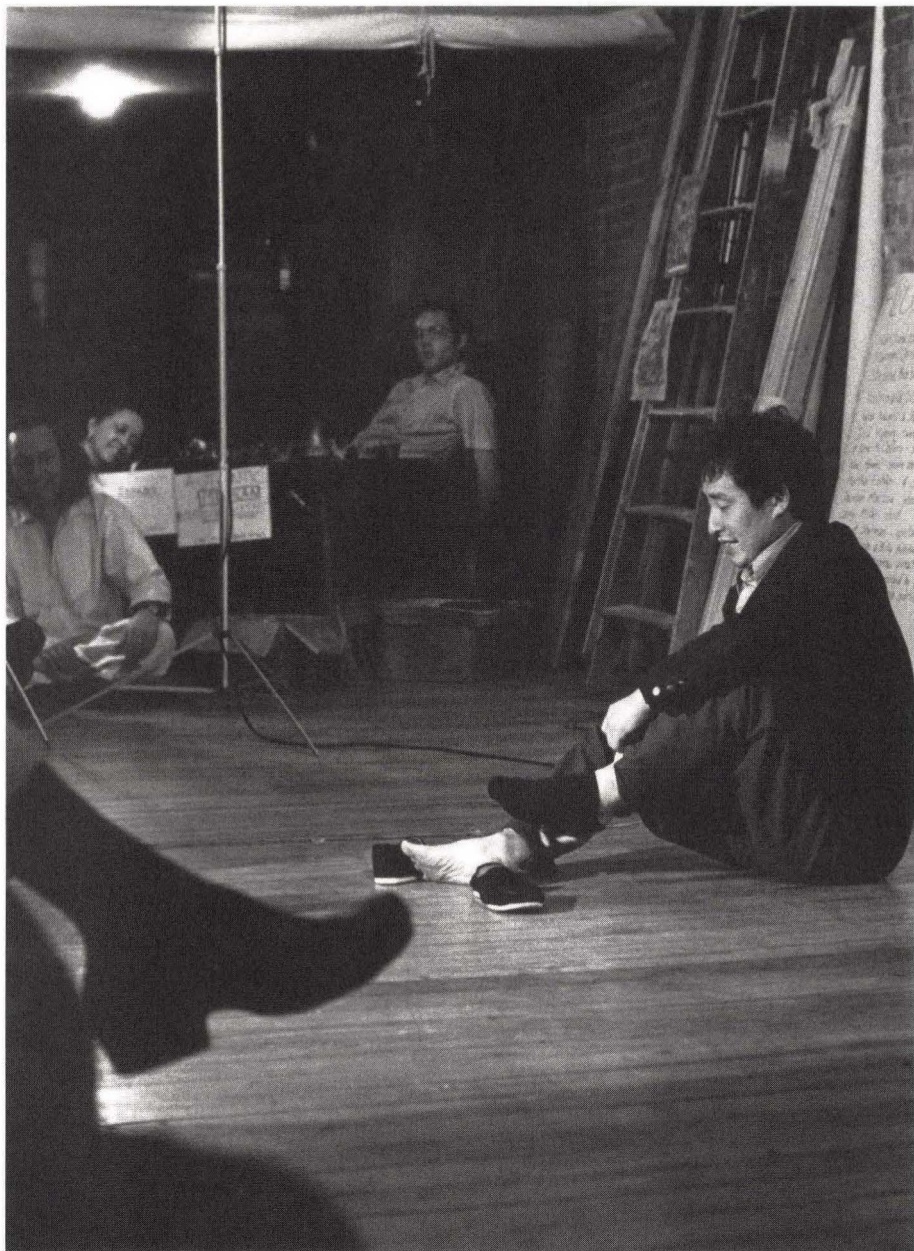
Maureen Connor



Stuart Sherman



Louise Bourgeois (with Alison Knowles in the background)



Nam June Paik (with Emilio Fishback in the background)

Black and White Piece



The best interpretation I have heard of this performance is that of Kristine Stiles. In 1998 I was living in Durham, North Carolina, never having escaped the sweet sunny South after graduate school in Chapel Hill. I had a stupid job at Duke University, where Kristine taught in the art department. She somehow learned of my existence and called to ask if I would agree to an interview with one of her students, Susan L. Jarosi.

When we got on the subject of “Black and White” piece, Kristine said that in some cultures death is imagined as a bride. I knew this from a film I’d seen, though I hadn’t known that the image had mythical status. Kristine added that people who died virgins were sometimes seen as brides or grooms, wedded to the persona of Death. She thought this lore was Romanian.

Partly because of Kristine’s insight, “Black and White” has become for me emblematic of a side of George that many did not see. Because

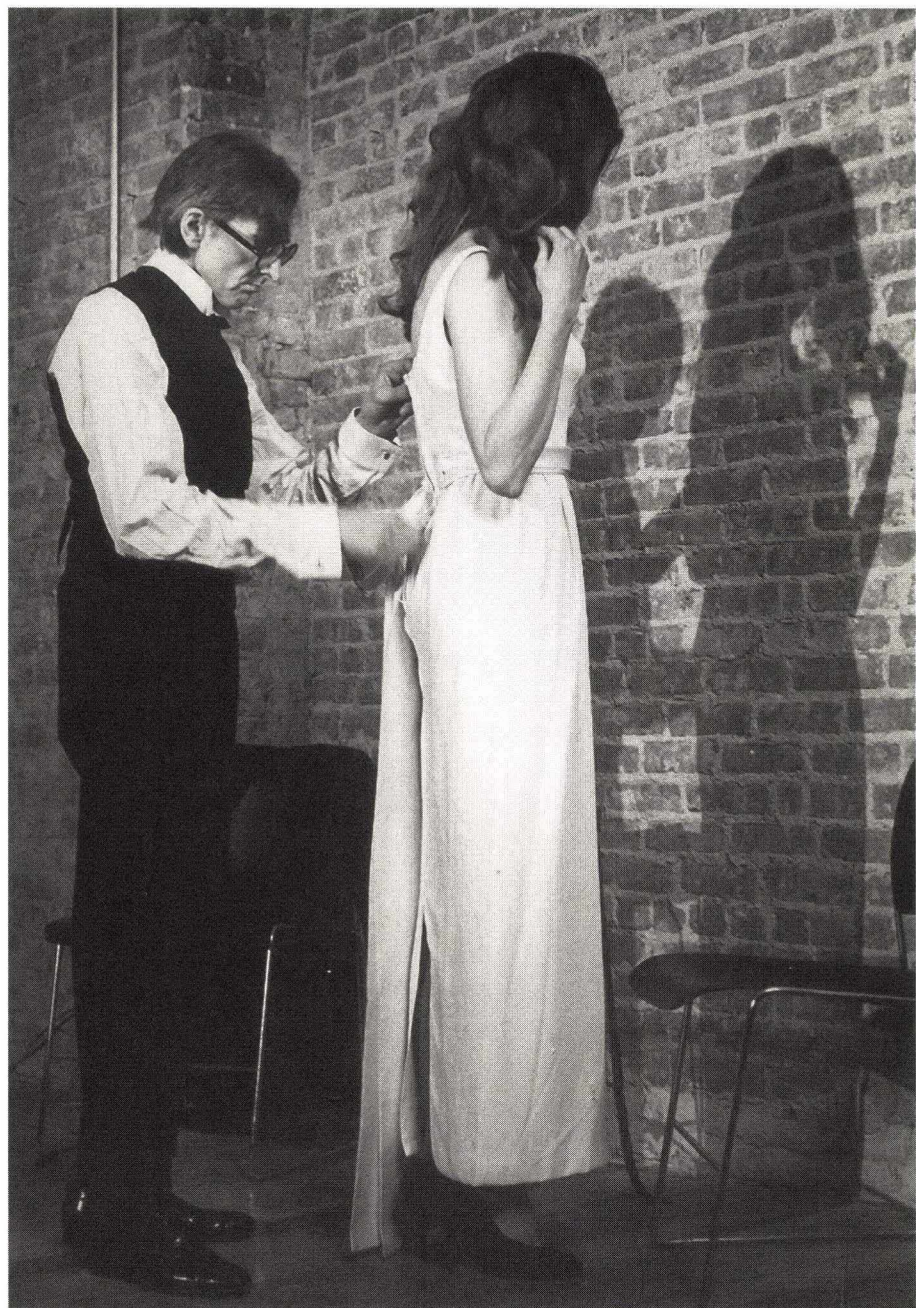
Billie AND GEORGE

BLACK AND WHITE PIECE

February 25, 1978

photographed by Hollis MELTON

Hollis Melton's Black and White Piece is an accordion foldout of taped together 8" X 10" photos of the clothes exchange.



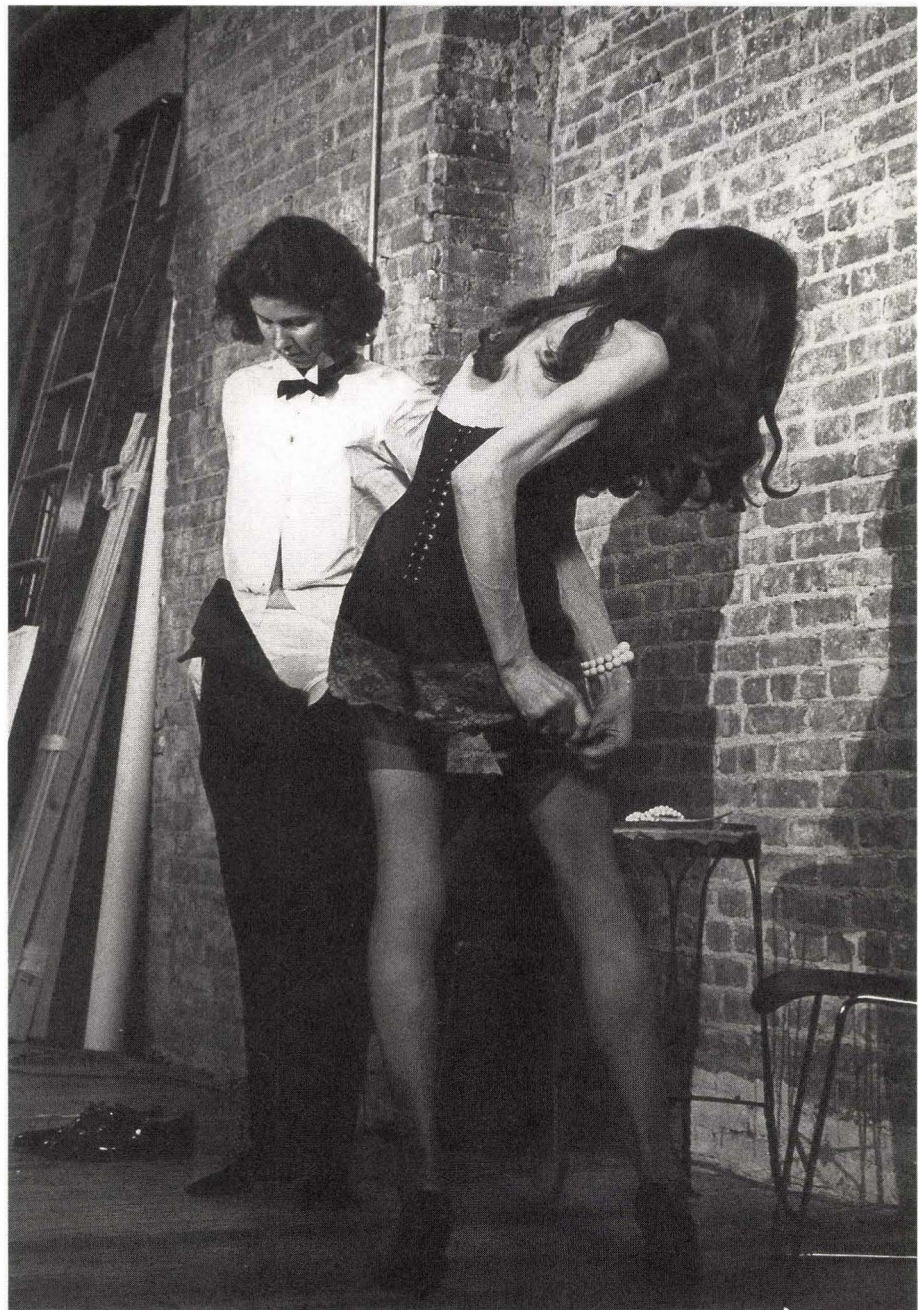


















it was George's final public performance, and because our marriage was so imbued with Death, "Black and White" piece could not fail to be romantic in the literary sense. To begin with, the theme was the coming of Eros, and Eros is the Greek god of love and of sexual desire, and the twin of Thanatos.

In addition, though I cannot say what George's intention was when he conceived this piece, its execution was a reminder of personifications of Death, including Death as an angel and Death as a bride. I think it was a weight off his shoulders to be able to take on the persona, as well as the gender, of that bride, and to leave the weighty matters of life to others.

"Black and White" piece was accompanied by Claudio Monteverdi's *Zefiro torna*. The following is a modern translation of Ottavio Rinuccini's verse:

Zephir returns and fills the air
with good scents, and warms the waters,
and, whispering in the green branches,
gets the flowers to dance in the meadow.
Phyllis and Chloris with a garland of flowers
on their head, are singing love songs,
while the sweet harmony echoes through the woods,
valleys and caves.
A beautiful dawn rises in the sky
and the sun is shining more, while a silver light
adorns Thetys' cerulean mantle.
I only, through lonely deserted woods,
now give way to my grief, as it's my fate,
now sing my beloved's beautiful eyes.²¹

George chose the same madrigal to be played at his funeral. There is no mistaking the mixture of love and death, either in the words of the sonnet or the occasions on which George chose to have it played. I understood the romantic fatefulness of marriage on the eve of death, but I thought of it as a configuration of my imagination, since I was literary. I didn't understand how significant the madrigal was to George. He had experienced physical pain his whole life, and he always knew that he would not live through many springs.

I followed George's lead in his final months, which seem on reflection to have been filled with celebration, beautiful music, kind and doting friends, and the extraordinary attention of a man the likes of whom I had never met. No one was as much fun as George. I wanted only to see his every wish fulfilled. There was no difference to me between that morphine dream of his of us traveling through the canals of France dressed as "elegant sisters," and the eventual reality that I knew George would realize if he lived. We were simply too busy, and we had too much still to do together, to think about death.

Only Kristine has ever suggested to me that I was as much protection for George as he was for me during this time. In the interview at Duke, Kristine, Susan, and I talked about George's transvestitism. I told them that George had kept this part of his life a secret from friends and family. He had been cross-dressing since age nine. Kristine suggested that the indifference to bourgeois mannerisms that George saw in me allowed him to reveal his sexual desires.

I think that the symbolic depth of the "Black and White" piece was one of the consequences of opening erotic channels for a man like George, and that, surely, his lifelong suppression of his sexuality added to the deep sense of despair that underlay his ironic humor. To his friends, and as he survives in art history, George was not a

Ay-O

FEB. 20. '79

Dear Billie

Thank you Orange Box burning

Thank you 6 Tactile people burning

Thank you Rainbow staircase burning
and

Thank you on thing, Thank you Two things.

Thank you Three things
and

Thank you etc. etc. etc.

and

Thank you < Romantic Event for memorial of George >

Call me. If you come to New York City

Kiss to you and Ash

Love Ay-O

The poem that Ay-O sent to me after the burning of some of George's works in the pasture at New Marlborough

romantic. But I saw his romanticism despite his insistence on the ascendancy of technology and functionalism over imagination in art.

So did Ay-O, who, the winter after George's death, came to the farm to burn a piece of his own installation art in the meadow. He set fire to the piece at night in the freezing cold, snow-covered meadow. His assistant filmed the event, and we passed around a bottle of whiskey to keep us warm. In the morning, Ay-O collected some of the ashes in a small Japanese box used to collect funeral ashes. He labeled the box "Romantic Piece for George Maciunas," signed it, and gave it to me.²²

For me, Ay-O's "Romantic Piece for George Maciunas" was an antidote to the behavior of gallery owners Barbara Moore, Jean Brown, and others who were hysterical over the disposition of George's collection after his death. They thought his art wasn't safe in my hands. They were right. Along with Ay-O, and in honor of George's own view of high art as I then understood it, I threw a few things onto the pyre.



Photo by George Valaitis

. . . now give way
to my grief

. . . *[S]hould you surmise that Fluxus wants to be immortal or that
it just thinks death is good material too?*²³

After the Flux Wedding, I returned to Massachusetts while George stayed in New York to seek another diagnosis from Sloan Kettering. They wouldn't even see him and told him to go home, since there was nothing they could do for him. He came back to Massachusetts with Jon Hendricks and Barbara Moore, who owned Backworks gallery, where Fluxus objects were sold—very cheaply in those days. Now Moore and Jean Brown were arguing over who owned certain Fluxus documents. During one conversation between them I watched George. He returned my look with a steadiness that I read as stoic.

In March, Fluxus artist Joe Jones came from Italy to visit George. The Massachusetts cold and the deathly atmosphere of the house were very hard on him. I was of little help to Joe because I was so involved with my own sorrow, and I was worried by George's distance since the Flux Wedding. I talked with Joe about my worries. He was so kind, telling me that in New York after the Flux Wedding,

George had cried because he thought I was disappointed by the disappearance of sexual passion in our relationship. He said that George didn't know how to prove to me that he loved me. Joe's kindness was a balm to me in those days, because I was unable to understand the kind of separation taking place as George reconciled himself to his death.

Around Easter time, George's sister Nijole arranged for George and his mother to go to Jamaica for a cancer cure she'd heard about. The trip would be paid for with money that George's friends had collected to help him. When George accepted this arrangement, I had no choice but to defer as gracefully as I could, but I was hurt because I had been so deliberately excluded from their plans. I remained at the farm with Joe and tried to convince myself that it was better for me to be there for practical reasons. I didn't fool myself. When Joe left, I went to New York and stayed with Jean and Olga until George returned.

As it turned out, George hated Jamaica and shortened the stay by two weeks. He had told me before he left as I stood at the door crying that he would return cured. When I saw him at the airport in a wheelchair, I knew the truth. He could no longer walk and was tiny from so much weight loss. I was happy he was back and smiled for him, but my heart was breaking. I knew that he was reading me as well as I was reading him.

Back at the farm, the flow of visitors lessened and I spent my time taking care of George. I prepared high-protein meals made with soy that I hoped he'd be able to digest. I helped him get to and from the toilet, which he insisted on doing without a walker. Most of the time he lay curled in the fetal position in pain and there was nothing that would relieve it. I think he was trying to stay at the farm as long as possible, as if that would keep him alive.

I tried to put myself in his place but could only sustain the terror for a moment at a time. There was no way I could die, nor could he live, and he had been the first to understand it. All meaning in the things he loved, even music, was fading. He selected the pieces he wanted played at his funeral, including *Zefiro*, and stopped listening. (“I Wanted to Go, But I Was Alive,” p. 112.)

One morning I woke up and wanted George to hold me. His arms were like a vise, as if he couldn’t move except by a concentration of will. The final stage of jaundice had begun too. He asked me to take him to Boston Hospital, where his niece was a nurse, so that his death would “not fall on my shoulders,” as he put it. He told me that if he died at home, I was not to be afraid. I drove him to the hospital, and later wondered why he urged me to return to the farm that day. He only asked that I sit for a little while so he could, as he said, “remember your face.” Jonas came to visit him, and he included images of George from his last days in his film *Zefiro Torna*. Many friends visited him, including Emmett Williams, who came every day, but George was alone when he died on May 9. The doctor who telephoned to tell me about George’s death said that he had been a strong and courageous man in the last days of his life.

I stayed at the farm, dutifully paying bills to local businesses and to the bank for the house mortgage from money I collected from the tenants who remained. I wrote to the funeral home saying I couldn’t pay the bill yet. Within a few days, Nijole came to the farm and we consulted George’s lawyer together.

We learned that George had left no will and therefore, as his wife, I would inherit all his property in Massachusetts. Nijole was the first to mention his New York assets and produced a will that George had written ten years earlier leaving everything to his mother. It happened

that the will was invalidated by his marriage. Then Nijole, in extreme chagrin, told me that I was a “complication” when all George had intended by marrying me was to give me his social security benefits.

I was too shocked to treat this as anything but a joke, since I couldn’t receive the social security until age sixty-five, if at all, provided I didn’t marry before then and the economy of the United States didn’t collapse in the next thirty-five years. Most important, I considered his social security the least of the reasons he had wanted us to marry. I wasn’t surprised that Nijole resented me, but I didn’t expect her to reveal it this way.

Bob Watts began calling me within weeks following George’s death, tormenting me by talking about George’s indigence, his dependence on Watts for support, and his “deception” in not leaving a will. Watts presumed too much on my suggestibility with these calls. George’s emotions toward me before the marriage had been tender, or I would not have married him. I loved him for his integrity. I needed recognition of that before I would ever be able to talk about his financial entanglements in cold terms that degraded him. I told Watts that I would not listen to unfounded slander.

Then Nijole’s husband began phoning me on behalf of Nijole, who had stopped speaking to me. He repeated the themes of George’s indigence and his dependence on his mother and sister for support. What both Watts and Nijole were saying was opposed to what George had told me, as well as what I had seen of George for myself. Besides, I didn’t see what I was supposed to do about his debts.

The tenants soon began insulting me. Admittedly, my temperament was not calculated to win them as friends; I was aloof and unable to reassure them of their security in the wake of George’s

death. I longed for privacy, which they, along with prospective buyers of the house, constantly invaded. It turned out that Nijole's and Watts' names were on the deed for the house, but George's was not. My request for a modest salary for work as a laborer wasn't even answered by Nijole and Watts. I was able to accept that I had no share in the house but could not understand why I was then expected to take George's place in keeping it solvent.

The aftermath of George's death was a continuation of the pettiness, anger, and cynicism that had already driven me from place to place. I started smoking marijuana that I had grown on the farm and hung to dry in the attic. I also started an "Astrological Novel" that consisted of actual letters sent to twelve of George's friends. These friends were "characters" as described by the astrological signs. The letters contained current news as well as sequential excerpts from the diary I'd kept since I had first arrived in New Marlborough. When the "characters" responded, they thus had a past, present, and future, with chance influences.

Most of George's friends replied kindly to my letters, save one who sent anonymously a nasty little pamphlet that opened to an image of "Fluxpost 13," the skull among the images of dental patients in pain (Fluxpost stamps, 1977) that George had made when he was in such extreme pain himself. This scared me as if it were a threat. Also, Jean Brown declared my work "ridiculous," and in truth, much of the writing was solipsistic and incomprehensible, reflecting isolation, grief, and bewilderment.

I soon called Hala Pietkiewicz. She came to the farm and helped me begin packing George's documents and Flux objects in the event the house was sold and I had no place to go. She told me I must stop ingratiating myself to everyone, no matter how much reassurance I

needed. Hala and a few of George's artist friends, notably Geoff Hendricks, Jonas and Hollis, and Jean and Olga, had offered me that reassurance. However, they were all too far away to be of immediate help. I took Hala's suggestion and got legal advice. I learned that there might be some value to the Fluxus/Maciunas works that I was holding. In the meantime, I received a "widow's allowance" of \$3,000.

I felt that I owed George's memory at least a step toward self-control and autonomy, and for the moment that was enough motivation for me to undertake the struggle to preserve what remained of my dignity. To put this more bluntly, I decided to "fight fire with fire," and in a poem I wrote at the time, I called this energy "demon fire." (Untitled, p. 115.)

now a little light reading

Literature: c.1375, from L. lit(t)eratura "learning, writing, grammar," originally "writing formed with letters," from lit (t)era "letter."²⁴

Considering the inspiration George had been, I tried to give up the self-destructive behavior in which I had been indulging. I threw away all the marijuana hanging in the attic. I also closed the house to tenants and told Watts that I no longer felt responsible for the house's maintenance, informing him that the tanks were going to need oil in the fast-approaching cold.

Researchers interested in George and in Fluxus, including Michele Oren, Ken Friedman, and Mats B., were coming to the house for information. I was embarrassed that I couldn't help them in view of my state and the state of the house; but Mats B., who came in November, was humane enough to help me as I tried at least to put plastic over all the forty or so windows of the house for protection against the coming cold.

Ken Friedman also came to the house and had the questionable pleasure of watching me destroy a book of damp matches as I tried

unsuccessfully to light a joint, striking one match after another until they were all gone. Years later, when I apologized to him for this, he kindly told me that it had been like watching a Fluxus performance and that he had not been at all offended.

One day, with Mats B. present, I received a letter from C. R., who was now in San Francisco. In the letter was a check for \$1,000, saying that I must consider the money as his investment in me as a writer. With the money C. R. sent, I went to New Mexico to see my daughter, Barbara, who was living with my first husband.

The night before I left, I heard pipes cracking all over the house as I lay in bed. After a week, when I returned to Massachusetts, the pipes in both houses had frozen and broken. When Watts heard about it, he called to say that he and Nijole were holding me legally responsible for the damage, on top of his claim against the estate for \$80,000. Watts claimed that a buyer who had been interested before the damages had changed his mind; but actually, the buyer had already told me that the sewage system made his plans to operate the farm as a summer resort unfeasible.

By now I was disgusted by Watts' ruthlessness. I told him I would not be a scapegoat, especially since I had told him long before that I would not be responsible for the house with no money to pay the bills. One night I heard noises in the house and went to investigate. I discovered that the house had been sold and the new owners were moving in. No one had informed me as I continued to live in the house without heat or water.

I called Nijole to plead for time to move the estate. She told me I was lucky to have an attic room and dealt the final brutal blow by telling me George had told his mother before his death that he was disappointed in me. I hung up on her and called Jean Brown. Jean

said I might as well finally hear the truth, because Nijole had been saying the same thing to “everyone.” This rumor still haunts me even today, and it is one of the cruelest things I have ever endured.

The next day, I called my lawyer to get the legal sanction I needed to remove the estate in peace and agreed to move by January 1, 1979, if I were left alone until then. In the following days, I arranged to clear the huge house of thirty rooms of literally everything in it. What I couldn’t carry with me I gave in payment to a neighbor who helped me move. We undertook this incredible task in 30 below weather, in the dead of night, like criminals.

One of the people who helped me during that time was a young man named George. He had been hired by the new owners to live at the farm in an outbuilding in the interim between my move and their takeover, because the new owners had been told I was insane and might, for instance, burn down the house. George became my friend, forcing me to eat an apple and drink a glass of brewer’s yeast and water every morning to keep up my strength. In the end he stopped working for the new owners out of disgust for what he saw happening.

At the same time, Jonas called to warn me that a party had been organized by Barbara Moore to come to the farm to “save” George’s work. Jonas said that I must act quickly to avoid the confrontation, not knowing exactly what they had in mind. When I told him I had already moved everything of importance, he was relieved. He could only explain Moore’s behavior as “crazy,” as opposed to what was generally considered to be my craziness.

I took everything to Cherry Valley, New York. I had met Charlie Plymell, who was teaching printing at Open Studio Press, through the press’s owner, George Quasha, a friend of Jean Brown. Plymell had been a part of the Beat Movement. His wife, Pam, was the

daughter of Sylvia Beach, one of the Paris expatriates from the 1950s. Beach had a bookstore in Paris that was frequented by the famous Left Bank writers, including Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemingway, and Djuna Barnes. Pam and Charlie Plymell started Cherry Valley Editions, which first published Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs.

Plymell offered me “temporary respite” in the apartment over his garage. He may have had second thoughts when he saw the magnitude of my situation and the mountain of material I had brought with me. Most of it was inert without George, and it was definitely of questionable value. Used to owning nothing, I moved and maintained this mass because of my commitment to George.

I didn’t know that Plymell hated my generation, represented in Cherry Valley by a self-defined “counterculture,” many of whom were really only refugees from the suburbs outside NYC, choosing to stay high on drugs and trading partners as if in a relay race. One day Charlie came to my apartment. I was listening to a tape of Bob Dylan. He blew up, yelling at me that I was “typical of my fucked-up generation.”

Plymell swore constantly and threatened that he would throw me out if I didn’t give him more money. One day I told him that his language offended me. He screamed at me that I was nothing but a “fucking hanger-on poet type” who should be checked for V.D. After that, his wife began to be abusive too, calling me a dumb cunt and snubbing me on the street. I thought I must have died and gone to hell. After fewer than three weeks, and even though I was worn out, I had no choice but to move again.

Now Charlie relented, explaining that he was bitter because he had never found success as a writer. He admitted that he was

abusive to everyone, including Allen Ginsberg, who had a run-down house called “The Committee on Poetry” in Cherry Valley. “The Com-mittee” sounded as if were some sort of literary headquarters. However, it mostly served the function of a party headquarters for the caretaker and his friends.

Plymell helped me contact Paul Bley, a jazz pianist who kept a summer place in Cherry Valley. Plymell thought Bley would rent his place to me. Within a few weeks, I realized that I had strayed into a desolate water hole that had not only nothing to distract me from loneliness and despair, but everything to guarantee it. In a village of 6,000 people, the only form of entertainment was a bar, called the “Bowling Alley,” and sexual intrigue with its attendant emotional turmoil, fondly known as the “Cherry Valley Follies.” (Untitled poem, p. 114.) The so-called counterculture thought all this was very cute, but personally I would have rather read a John Updike novel. Predictably, the women of the town turned their backs on me. Equally predictably, the men saw me as fair game.

Then I got a job at a bookstore in Cooperstown, having succumbed to the pressure of the American work ethic. I also dug into some of George’s boxes and found some posters. Among them were original posters by John Lennon, which I knew were salable. I took these to Jean Brown’s son’s gallery and sold them for \$2,000. Jonas also helped me by giving me some of the proceeds of the Film Forum’s rental of Flux Films, short films by Fluxus artists. It wasn’t a lot in those days. Meanwhile, I tried to ignore the owner of the bookstore where I was working, who started telling me the history of his love life and expecting me to want him for some reason. Given my wages (\$2.00 per hour), I had no qualms about taking a little money from the cash-box for lunch.

I met the local caretaker of The Committee on Poetry, W. G. In my loneliness, I tried to relate to him. One day I told him the source of my lunch money. W. G. told me that all thieves should be shot. I told him the playwright Jean Genet was a thief. He said Jean Genet should have been shot too. I didn't understand that he hated intellectuals, poets, and women, though not necessarily in that order. To me, he didn't seem much more than a slave to Peter Orlovsky and Ginsberg, while he longed for escape from his circumscribed life as a country boy.

The Committee was isolated from the town, and the landscape was beautiful. Sometimes I took refuge there to escape the noise and the trivial morality of the town. I slept with W. G., trying to cover the bald fact of my isolation with the romantic notion that he was some sort of poet of the soil. When I became pregnant, W. G., who was already frightened by my expectations, took a stance of cowardly silence. This shock really opened my eyes and certainly did nothing to soothe my spirit. The chain of disasters I had already gone through should have made me turn gray, and now I realized that I would have to have an abortion.

About a month before I left Cherry Valley, I met Bonnie Bremser. She was a writer and at the same time an outsider to the Committee on Poetry. Bonnie hired me to help her at her dairy farm. She was running the farm alone because her husband was away except for one week in the month. She worked on the farm from 5:00 or 6:00 A.M. until late at night, besides raising three children with hardly any help.

I admired her determination to make things work. I cleaned her barn, which didn't have a hint of mechanization in it, except for the milking machine for her twenty cows. I dug into the shit with a sort

of vengeance, wanting only to forget everything by becoming like a machine. I didn't know how Bonnie dealt with the loneliness; I suppose just as I was doing, by working.

Bonnie had previously been married to Ray Bremser, who was published by Cherry Valley Editions. She had written a book, *For Love of Ray*, about her life with Ray in Mexico, where she had worked as a prostitute to support them. Bonnie was a noble spirit and I loved and admired her. She gave me a copy of Robert Graves' *The White Goddess*. This book inspired me, and since I had George's composer at my disposal, I wrote.

I kept the composer available for use at any moment and simply wrote whatever passed through my mind whenever I felt like it. I had no hope of matching anybody's standards anyway, because I had never had academic training of any sort. I did, however, have the influence of Fluxus by then, which had taught me that process is as valuable as, if not more valuable than, the "finished product."

After about seven months in Cherry Valley (or "Very Chilly" as Mats B. called it), I realized that in the two years since George's death I had written a lot. I saw a story in my Cherry Valley poems, so I showed the manuscript to Plymell. No one could have been more surprised than I when he said it was "a beautiful manuscript." He thought it should be published in a fine edition, just as he saw it then in his hands. Then I showed it to Jonas and Hollis and was again surprised when they thought it was good. Eventually, the manuscript, titled *Unsettled Oranges* and dedicated to "Madame George" after Van Morrison's song of that title, was printed in a limited edition of 500 at Open Studio Press in Rhinebeck, NY, in exchange for George's I.B.M. composer. I still have most of those 500 copies, never having tried to market them.

Another check for \$500 came from C. R., who said he knew I was writing, so the money was to help me do it. I was doing it as Vile Kisses, the demon whore, a persona that lived with a vengeance in the cynical image of the adventuress. I was doing it as Madame George, the lonely transvestite. I was doing it as the dead sun; the mad moon; the deathly visage at the Bowling Alley who said love was dead; the village idiot; the one lady stricken with fertility in the eerie feast of seasoned heat. It was fertility of brain, soul, and body, through the unlucky days when the heavenly demons were laughing loudest in my foolish heart. Because truly, were I an adventuress, I'd not have done it as it had been done. But anyway, it was done. I stored George's work in Jonas and Hollis' basement and moved to Portugal.

w(her)e?

“But after Q? What comes next? After Q there are a number of letters the last of which is scarcely visible to mortal eyes, but glimmers red in the distance.”²⁵

The choice of Portugal was inspired by George’s music collection. He made eight-track tapes of music he liked by sending for records, taping them, and then returning them for a refund. I had his tapes converted to cassettes and was systematically playing each one on George’s music system while I lived in Cherry Valley. In time, I came across a tape labeled “Portuguese Harpsichord.” The music was lovely, and listening to it, I began to think how wonderful the lyric poetry must be in a tiny, nonindustrialized country bordering the Atlantic Ocean. I had grown up on the Potomac River and knew how a horizon stretching across a body of water could inspire lyrical longing.

When I left New York for Portugal in spring 1979, I had a naive plan to stay there for seven years, learning Portuguese by osmosis, so that I could read the poetry. Of course, the reality was different, as it must be for a moneyless, single American woman in a country just liberated from a repressive dictatorship. I can’t imagine how odd I must have been, stalking about in jeans where neither tall, independent women nor jeans was part of the scene.

Without the mooring of family or affiliation of any sort, there was no one with whom I could talk. Rather, I was constantly subjected to lascivious gestures, grabbing, under-the-breath lewdness, and otherwise, general disapproval. I found lodging with a modern and educated couple, though, through a language school in which I tried my best to learn Portuguese quickly and grammatically—without success.

I supported myself as long as I could by teaching English in every language school in Lisbon that would take me. I lied about my credentials, claiming a university degree and experience, and explaining that the papers would be sent in the mail. When my credibility ran out and my teaching ability did not rescue me, I was fired or I quit.

I finally had to resort to the small reserve of money I had left in the U.S. and wrote to Hollis to wire it. I now owed two months' rent and could not afford food any more. It seemed to take forever for the money to arrive, and at one point I was three days without food, once resorting to stealing rolls from my landlady's bread-box.

I began to keep a journal of my life in Portugal, much as I had in New Marlborough. I had, after all, lugged a fifty-pound electric typewriter with me from New York to Portugal. I was often awake until 2:00 or 3:00 A.M. pounding on that typewriter. Maria once burst into my room demanding that I shut it off and go to bed. Eventually she arranged for me to move to her mother's much larger house, where the pounding would not be a problem.

Her mother's house was huge and virtually empty. Days went by in which I saw no one, and I could often sneak into the kitchen to steal spoonfuls of sugar. I was also eating too much porridge and outgrowing the clothes I had brought with me. Maria kept hoping

that I would meet “someone interesting” with whom to have coffee or something, but I had no interest in the men. They made sly comments as I passed, or hissed from doorways. I reacted by confronting them in English, a clearly useless—and sometimes hilarious—activity. Once I watched the face of a grocer in the doorway of his shop slowly change from benign playfulness to bewilderment as my tone grew vicious, and I walked away reflecting on my proximity to madness and brutality.

The journal that I kept in Portugal shows the disillusionment I underwent after George died, as well as the grief process and beginning recovery from it. I include excerpts from the journal here.

Every Monday, Joseph, Maria, and I go to Joseph's family's house for lunch. The table is presided over by Joseph at one end, and his tensely dignified son at the other. I am placed, as a distinction, beside Joseph's ninety-four-year-old mother. Across from me is Julietta. She wears coke-bottle glasses and has a perfect heart-shaped mole on her left cheek. She sees that I'm fascinated by the mole and sometimes coquettishly turns her cheek so that I can stare at it. I think it's a mark of distinction, both characterizing and sanctifying Julietta as a fool. She is about sixty-five years old; at first appearance having a kind of frailty that could be glossed as senility.

Julietta asks about my occupation. I say that I have had various "odd jobs." At the moment I'm learning Portuguese. "Your occupation, then, is studying?" she asks. Joseph intervenes, and Maria speaks too, on my behalf. "She is a poet," they say proudly, as if I were their favorite child. That humbles me, but when I begin to describe my plan for the next seven years to learn Portuguese by copying the poets in the manner of the character in Sartre's Nausea, who read books from the library alphabetically, my plan sounds insane even to me. The attentive seriousness given me is new, and

I fear I will cry at the table, proving what a fool I really am. In the car on the way home, Maria tells me, "Look, I must take personal care of you, because you're on another planet. O.K.?" I'm not very graceful about expressing my pleasure. I sit back in the seat, wondering about my luck in finding her.

Hollis' letter arrives, with mail from the States. I'm overjoyed and have a renewal of energy. I stay up late replying to the Massachusetts lawyers, who are still working on the estate settlement, and to Hollis. With Hollis, I can at last relate my bitterness about street abuse.

I order Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil by Hannah Arendt. I make dinner at home, then feel lonely while eating. Face hairs grow, my hair is a wreck, my face is drawn, and I'm sick with a head cold. Not much pizzazz in me, but I gather myself to try to make sense of my face. Tweezers, lipstick, and especially a hat, the Greta Garbo cloche with the rhinestones. Then the ready-while-u-wait plastic glasses, and I look O.K. At midnight, start out to see Smiles of a Summer Night. I pass a paunch-bellied jerk hanging out in front of a hospital. I don't want to notice him, his eyes glittering all too sharply. As I pass, I jab him in the gut, just as he mutters something wheezy. In the theater I'm pleased by my tiny triumph of aggression.

I venture into a small restaurant that has attracted me since my first days in Lisbon. The front is full of empty tables. I wander toward the back and am surprised by twenty African men, feasting genially at a long table. I take a seat. It's better now than in the beginning; I can order tea with lemon in Portuguese. The waitress is nice, even when I can't specify whether I want the lemon in the tea or on the side. The soup is good and warm. How pleasant to be an expatriate in this surreal place.

At the long table the talk flows with lots of laughter. I am alone. The port has made my face florid, my heartbeat faster. I cannot speak. What is it to be alone? Part of existence, and a circumstance of my haphazard, if chosen,

life. I might bear being a quiet center, but no, I am the thing on the fringe, to which all eyes are drawn. ("Portugal," p. 113.) Slightly drunk, I pick up my pen. A man in a pink shirt watches as I write. I see him, he sees me, then he looks away slowly, naturally, as if he had been inside my thoughts and then broken up like a cloud. Another man, big, brown, a turquoise shirt beneath a fatigue jacket, lifts his glass of red wine and leisurely drains it.

Slightly drunk, a half carafe of white wine with dinner, I wonder whether the waiter smokes hashish. I put on my glasses the better to focus once the heat starts to overtake me, the weary seasoned heat. Later, I dream of eating good things, stolen cakes, and fucking with a faceless man. No confusing shadows, no thwarted births.

Another dream, of walking on ice with an older man, thin, generally colorless. I don't trust the ice, decide to crawl on my belly. He defies reason and stands in an obviously thin spot, then falls through. I see his hand cling for an instant to the side of the hole. I thrust my hand down for him to grab. I can hear him screaming, "Save me! For God's sake, save me!" It goes on for ages. Finally silence. Then a young and vital man emerges from the hole, someone like Emilio. He embraces me and I feel full of wonder and happiness. Visualizing the country, the sun, and music.

I have a friend here, Elizabeth. We go to the Couleste Gulbenkian Museum. A youth calls in Portuguese as we pass, "Hey, what's your sign?" She turns to me.

"My sign? What a stupid question!" He lopes after us and begins talking with her. She says to me that it's a pity I can't understand, because he's talking about the separation of the young people. Some are political extremists, right or left, and others, like him, are aesthetes. He asks me, in English, "What do you think of the Beat Movement, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac?"

"Allen Ginsberg? He means nothing to me." Last I heard he was in Italy,

probably making lots of money. I had to wonder what the unknown Italian poets thought of him, especially as an unknown poet myself, whose interest in him was truncated, in spite of his reputation, by his lack of vitality when I saw him and Patti Smith perform together in NYC.

"Patti Smith means something to me," I say.

"Patti Smith? The punk rocker? Ah, God, the world is going down."

"She was a poet before she was a rocker. She wanted Ginsberg's publisher to publish her. He wouldn't, so maybe the world isn't going down after all."

He doesn't smile at this. Maybe I'm too old to take his dolorousness seriously, or maybe just too too. There's a lot I don't say.

"I went to Ginsberg's house at times," I tell him. "It was run-down, but the landscape was beautiful. Ginsberg was never there, but sometimes Peter Orlovsky came with a student from Naropa University in Colorado or a poet from New York City. People living there called themselves the counterculture. They were smoking grass, snorting coke, and ignoring civilization."

"You mean they just wanted to live in peace and freedom?"

"No. I mean they were afraid of freedom. The punks aren't afraid. They show terror so far gone there's no feeling. That's why I like Patti Smith. She's the essence of that violent anomie that the punks imitate. The game's up when a woman breaks out of the lie like she did. On whom are we going to foist our illusions of purity and righteousness?"

We stop in a coffee shop. It's a cheap, flat place—looks American. Neither the Portuguese man nor Elizabeth likes the place, but I think it's humorous in its unadorned functionalism. A song begins on the radio. He straightens.

"Frank Zappa!" He slumps. "Bad vibes," he says. "The world is going down."

"Yes," I answer, "but there will always be the Atlantic Ocean."

As we leave him in the coffee shop, he folds his hands in front of him as if in prayer, bows. He says, "Peace." I imitate the gesture. Bye.

Back at Maria's the white curtains at the window are still. There is that poem, after Monet, the lady dreaming over a plum in a glass dish. Why is there so much of everything? Why is there a word for everything, except . . . except . . . She has nothing to gain, nothing to learn, from degradation. All that remains hers is knowing the hour when she will rise—only when her dream repeats itself, long after Maria has been to her door to ask if she is all right.

She is dreaming of the Virgin Spring, the fake triumph called virtue. She wants to die now, ignominiously. She wants a war in which more women than men are killed, in which horror reigns relentlessly, so that when terror is born again it will be the servant of women. She herself would live for the pleasure of killing, so terrorized is she already that she is afraid to feel. That is her secret sorrow. She has a brute's heart, forever unfit for heaven; and hell is a place full of profane mockery. What is between for her to hold, the fruit of some tree? Like Samson, she would bring the temple down on everyone, even the small dog yapping at her heel, unaware of her humanity.

Awake all night, she hears the little dog yapping, and the cock crowing at the full moon. The traffic noises go on day and night so that she has no place to collect her thoughts. She thinks there are evil places, like warps in time, into which one can wander like a swimmer into a cold current. She has followed blindly, all her life, but now she knows. She blots her lips and stares at the imprint. The radio is droning on in Portuguese. She searches the frequencies for American or English punk; settles for medieval church music—majestic, not sweet.

She thought George was sacred and real when they listened to Monteverdi. They were both idiots. Everyone thought he was out of his wits for marrying her. Everyone was angry when he tried so hard yet failed. He

thought, too, when he married her, that she would be what he wasn't. He died, as expected, of cancer, three months after the wedding. He was the only man she knew in America who wasn't a brute; and then he wasn't American to his roots, only in his perception of the cheapness of heroes, at which he had to laugh, like a skeptic.

She finds herself at the bottom of a topsy-turvy civilization. All the heroes are dead, all the fools are cynics, and fate is something Greek. She thinks for a moment she is only a romantic—but no—she has been crushed, as if some maniac had sent her flying from the sixth floor. She hears Maria sweeping the terrace, the fanatic mother voice singing, "Hush, little baby. . . ."

flux Ph.D.

*“ . . . with all the rights, honors, and privileges
thereunto appertaining.”²⁶*

The myth that I had “disappeared” from the Fluxus scene was partially correct, but in going to Portugal, I also was continuing my exploration of language and poetry. I considered that learning to speak Portuguese would involve relearning my own mind—a kind of objective observation of my own thought processes. Without fluency, I would experience, I thought, a primal glossolalia far from the glibness of fluency.

I stayed in Portugal only two of the seven years. While I was there, the Massachusetts attorney who had settled George’s estate discovered a certificate showing George’s ownership of a loft on Green Street. Once it was sold, I had enough money to return to the States, and I didn’t hesitate.²⁷

I had always yearned to get a college degree, and now suddenly it was possible. I also wanted to make my life worthy of George, and it seemed to me that the discipline of formal study would be a start. I researched universities and came up with Brown as my first and only choice because it had a Portuguese program and Portuguese-speaking neighborhoods in Providence and New Bedford. I had no

idea that it was an Ivy League school! I was lucky that Brown had an experimental program for “older students,” in which they could use their accomplishments instead of SAT scores as evidence of probable success. As part of my application materials I submitted the Portugal journal and my book of poetry, *Unsettled Oranges*.

I chose languages and literature as my field and took to the environment happily. I was thirty-four, but the age difference between me and the “regular” students didn’t trouble me. Like Prince Myshkin, I didn’t see any problem with just being me! Eventually, however, I undertook psychotherapy. Its availability was one of the benefits of this privileged environment, and I also recognized that certain habits of thought and action left over from a troubled childhood could ruin an incredible opportunity.²⁸

Through therapy, I began to understand that I was living life as a survivor. I was unable to face the emotional abuse and neglect of my mother and the abandonment of my father. I had also witnessed their violent physical fights. I took big risks with my life just to keep moving forward and not look at reality. In relationships with dangerous or inappropriate men, such as C. R. and W. G., I convinced myself that I was safe. Once I really looked at the risks, however, I didn’t want to test limits anymore.

Having faced the losses in my life, I understand better who I was when I met George. My feet were not on this earth, and this lack of connection is why I was like Prince Myshkin to George. He could be open about his cross-dressing after I came along because he suffered no risk of disapproval, shock, or abandonment with me. Although I had intimations of danger about George, I ignored them for the more acceptable verities of altruistic and romantic love. George was also, for other reasons, a survivor and one of life’s “holy fools.” I cannot say

whether he also ignored some warning signs about me. He may have been blinded to my fragility by heavy doses of morphine—or he may not have cared. After all, he knew about C. R.

Because the relationship was condensed, highly charged with the imminence of George's death, and thoroughly infused with his brilliant creativity, George and I were in our own way and for a brief time, a "perfect" couple. In his titanic way, he created a beautiful event of our encounter, of which "Black and White" piece is one product, and the probable saving of my life another.

What has been more difficult for me to understand is how some could have considered me an opportunist or an adventuress; or George irresponsible, crazy, or delusional. Many years and a measure of maturity have taught me that the steady and the giddy²⁹ simply live in "separate but equal" worlds. They are equal in their guilt or innocence of evil, both intentional and unintentional.

When I was halfway through Brown, Gilbert Silverman contacted me. He wanted to buy whatever I had of George's collection. Silverman said that the collection would be available for researchers, and it would be expertly preserved. I wanted the collection to be useful, and I was relieved that I would not have to take care of it anymore. I was ready to start a new chapter that didn't include the bad memories associated with these objects. With what I received from Silverman, I continued my education. One wonderful result was that when I returned to Portugal around 1988, I could speak and read Portuguese. I eventually translated and published Portugal's most loved Symbolist poet, Florbela Espanca. ("Desert in Flower," p. 116.)

In the interim between the mid-1980s and the end of 2008, I heard little about Fluxus. I know there was an argument about whether Fluxus was dead or not, which concerned me little. I noticed that the

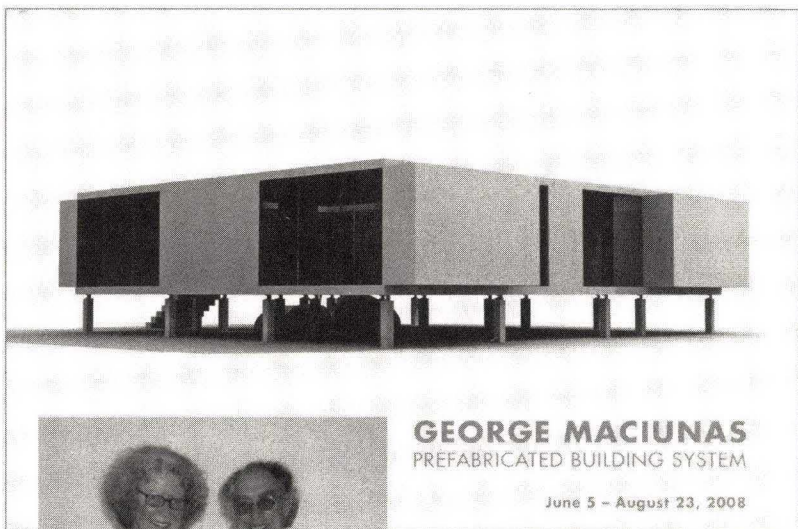
Fluxus Portal on the Internet changed several times to reflect new ideas and new artists, as well as to publicize the activities of now well-known Fluxus artists. Among those whom I met through George who have passed on are Dick Higgins, Nam June Paik, Jackson Mac Low, Robert Filliou, Bob Watts, and Joe Jones.

or does it just smell bad?

*Maybe you are an ordinary person and might like
to do something Fluxus—should you first determine whether
Fluxus is dead or alive?³⁰*

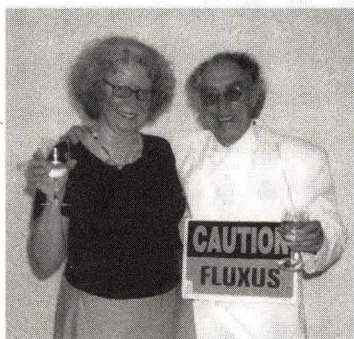
I first came to central Florida in the late 1970s to meet my father—yet another story. Many years later in Orlando, I met the owner of Arbiter Press. When I approached her with an idea for a book, she recognized my last name and we spent time talking about Fluxus and about George. At the same time, a gallery in New York was working with Jonas Mekas and showing Fluxus and Maciunas works. I went to see an exhibition of a model of the *George Maciunas Prefabricated Building System*, which George published in the mid-1960s as an appendix to Henry Flynt's *Communists Must Give Revolutionary Leadership in Culture*.

I thought the model was beautiful, but as shown, it was divorced from Flynt's "book" (which George designed).³¹ When I asked the gallery owner about it, he said that Flynt had nothing to do with Maciunas or vice versa. To me it was clear that the *George Maciunas Prefabricated Building System* was being edited for bourgeois consump-



GEORGE MACIUNAS
PREFABRICATED BUILDING SYSTEM

June 5 – August 23, 2008



(top) Model of Maciunas' Prefabricated Building System. By permission of Billie Maciunas. (bottom left) Billie Maciunas and Larry Miller. Photo courtesy of Christine Blackwell.

tion, while Maciunas' political statement on the efficacy of mass-produced housing was being branded as apolitical, seamless, and purely aesthetic.

Later, I saw Larry Miller walking through the exhibition wearing a white suit and a sign with the words "Caution: Fluxus." I thought Larry's performance was an astute comment on the subjugation of George's work to the demands of the art market, as well as a reminder that Fluxus might show up anywhere to laugh at the absurdity of things.

George is not here to let us know what he thinks about his elevation to the status of "Artist." We only know that in his lifetime, Fluxus

and high art were by design anathema. In Owen Smith's essay in *The Fluxus Reader*, Smith's quotation of Nam June Paik elucidates why:

The problem of the art world in the '60s and '70s is that although artists own the production's medium, such as paint or brush, even sometimes a printing press, they are excluded from the highly centralised DISTRIBUTION system of the art world.

George Maciunas' Genius [sic] is the early detection of this post-Marxist situation and he tried to seize not only the production's medium but also the DISTRIBUTION SYSTEM of the art world.³²

Like workers in the capitalist system, artists in the world of high art lose control of their own products, and George didn't like that idea, to say the least. He was not alone. In *Work Ethic*, Helen Molesworth explains that artists since World War II lived with "the corporatization of American culture, the professionalization of the category of 'artist,' and a burgeoning New York market for contemporary art."³³ Art in the 1960s resisted these forces with non-art, readymades, ludic art, and in short, anything that would not end up in museums or in the hands of private collectors.

Fluxus is "nonproductive behavior," valuing games, gags, and puzzles accessible to handling by and participation of an audience. One major difference between Fluxus and other nonproductive behavior is that George intended to subvert the commodity logic of the art market by producing multiples of Fluxus objects. These objects, many of which George published under the Fluxus umbrella, had a "visual and tactile similarity," because George made them with cheap plastic boxes and other detritus scavenged from Canal Street. The humor of the graphics was goofy. Molesworth describes it as evoking "the nineteenth-century American carnivals and circuses,

drawing a strong corollary between the role of art and the traditional spaces of play and leisure.”³⁴

It is ironic, then, or possibly pathetic, to know that Maciunas and Fluxus are “big names,” an art world scandal that George made fun of in his film *12 Big Names*. To be sure, it does not escape me that I am part of the branding process, beginning with selling George’s collection, and continuing with this book. It could even be that the only thing today that might make George turn over in his urn is my referring to him as a romantic. Therefore, to those reading this book who didn’t know George personally, be warned. Words cannot do him justice, if only because words are subject to elision by editors, as well as by self-censorship. Experiencing Fluxus as a way of life is the only way to know George.

It is tempting to say that Fluxus is dead, now that it is “high art” according to George’s 1978 definition. However, this may underestimate the subversiveness of art, especially Fluxus, which by its name evokes continuous flow as well as bodily functions that are perforce non-art products.³⁵ Some contemporary artists invoke Fluxus strategies as they continue to reflect the “dynamics of labor” by using 1960s ideas.

Molesworth says of these:

Far from a mere repetition, such a reinvention . . . resists the contemporary forces of global capital—forces that have transformed art into a mere commodity and museums into mandatory tourist destinations—and articulates the potential politics and pleasure in both resisting and shaping new forms of labor and leisure.

Contemporary art may hold a key, then, to new identities and to how the conditions of social possibility can be reshaped in the new millennium.³⁶

Manifesto:

2. To affect, or bring to a certain state, by subjecting to, or treating with, a flux. "Fluxed into another world." *South.*
3. *Med.* To cause a discharge from, as in purging.

flux (flüks), *n.* [OF., fr. L. *fluxus*, fr. *fluere*, *fluxum*, to flow. See **FLUENT**; cf. **FLUSH**, *n.* (of cards).] 1. *Med.* a A flowing or fluid discharge from the bowels or other part: esp., an excessive and morbid discharge: as, the bloody flux, or dysentery. b The matter thus discharged.

Purge the world of bourgeois sickness, "intellectual", professional & commercialized culture, **PURGE** the world of dead art, imitation, artificial art, abstract art, illusionistic art, mathematical art, — **PURGE THE WORLD OF "EUROPANISM"!**

2. Act of flowing: a continuous moving on or passing by, as of a flowing stream; a continuing succession of changes.
3. A stream; copious flow; flood; outflow.
4. The setting in of the tide toward the shore. Cf. **REFLUX**.
5. State of being liquid through heat; fusion. *Rare.*

PROMOTE A REVOLUTIONARY FLOOD AND TIDE IN ART,
Promote living art, anti-art, promote NON ART REALITY to be fully grasped by all peoples, not only critics, dilettantes and professionals.

7. *Chem. & Metal.* a Any substance or mixture used to promote fusion, esp. the fusion of metals or minerals. Common metallurgical fluxes are silica and silicates (acidic), lime and lime-stone (basic), and fluorite (neutral). b Any substance applied to surfaces to be joined by soldering or welding, just prior to or during the operation, to clean and free them from oxide, thus promoting their union, as to-in.

FUSE the cadres of cultural, social & political revolutionaries into united front & action.

Vilnius, Lithuania, was designated as the European Capital of Culture for 2009. Jonas, George's friend and compatriot, was at the center of this celebration through the Jonas Mekas Center for the Arts in Vilnius. Jonas had and continues to have an optimistic vision, in the spirit of Fluxus:

Let me dream. . . . What should this Center do besides housing and occasionally showing Maciunas and Mekas works? It shouldn't be a Museum, that is, a Center, a place devoted only to . . . works by Maciunas/Fluxus and myself. It should be a place for living working artists, working in film, video, computer, mixed media fields from all over the world, to present their works. . . . It should carry the flag of the avantgardes of all of the arts.³⁷

This is an invitation for artists to reflect and subvert the dynamics of the global economy, which commodifies entire cultures. There can be no better use, for example, of the *George Maciunas Prefabricated Building System* than as shelter for unknown artists, nonprofessional artists, and nonartists. I have also suggested that it can be used as mass housing, its original purpose, especially as relief housing for victims of natural disasters.

Nonartists have a role, which is to do away with artists in our experience of art. This is the meaning of "artists are parasites." To live Fluxus every day is to see ordinary activities and objects as art, without the documentation, vocabulary, and brouhaha of the art world. In particular, nonartists can practice nonproductive behavior, such as appropriating the products of the daily work world. For example,

- sign everything, a la Ben Vautier
- leave teethmarks on pencils; discard pen tops
- hit "reply all" to group emails and append a stupid message

- wear odd socks
- wear an article of clothing from the opposite gender
- erase something interesting
- sign with your left hand if you are right-handed, and with your right if you are left-handed
- grind gears
- don't make a point
- figure out ways to not work at all

Above all, appropriate the audacity of the artist to repudiate fear as the result of the pervasive regimentation, administration, and systematization of our lives.

I think of George nearly every day, more in the context of our marriage than Fluxus. I told him before he died that I would not marry anyone unless I thought it was he, reincarnated. George said, "Yeah, it is sort of 'unfinished business.'" He added that he would like to return as a bird (which negates, at least for me, the idea of remarrying him).

One day in the early summer after George's death, I was sitting under the portico overlooking the meadow in New Marlborough. It was dusk, and as I sat very still, a bird about the size of a sparrow lighted on my shoulder. I was astonished but also happy. I saw it as a sign that George was still around. Since then, I have seen many signs that George's spirit is alive, reminding me that a Fluxuslife is infinitely better than Fluxus as high art.



poetry by
billie maciunas

VAMPIRE SINGS TO EROS

When through the summer nightwails
The siren song fastens on,
hies me licking at Night's sheer heat
past all shame, O Craven god,
I blame you.

Careless you are of Reverence,
Hearth tender, Fathers' defender,
Sacrosanct, immortal Good,
and me, harrowed singer of your
Name, sucker for long nightwails.

(1984)

SLOW DEPARTURES

The New Yorker ad reminds me of slow
departures. Little Emilios in pink
dizzying swirls on designer towels.
But I am rarely frou-frou.

I light my shrine in a swamp of dog day heat,
Automatic Slim's matchbook in my hand.
Memphis blues, high and lonesome, too.
My muse is not virgin, Beauty or Truth.

She asks, will you put your hand
in the lion's mouth, your mouth to the lion's,
your loins to the lion's, and not be a dog

at my feet? Once more, an old song
roils my brain. "Your love, I crave,
I'll be your slave,
if you'll just give me
all of
your heart."³⁸

I WANTED TO GO, BUT I WAS ALIVE

The current around me coursing the pull;
The river rising, and each on one side.

The doctor's verdict: three months then he'd die
Of the cancer, famished, consuming all.
I wanted to go, but I was alive.

Three months of hard winter to reconcile
Full May's melting flood to a soul gone dull.
The river rising, and each on one side.

Muting the unending pain in his side
Music and morphine death's succoring lull.
I wanted to go, but I was alive.

Late April he grew unearthly quiet,
Then not even music swelled the mute hall.
The river rising, and each on one side.

The drowning savor Lethe's sweet sensate tide,
while the living, deadened, suffer the gall.
I wanted to go, but I was alive.
The river rising, and each on one side.

PORTUGAL

This Third World of sickness like foreignness
breeds the un-American not so niceness of fear—
when you think you're talking but something's
talking for you—the febrile stare, flushed cheeks.

Packed restaurant, light splayed on the wall,
your back to its silence.

Funny how this place is almost American.
People coming and going, and I foreign.

UNTITLED

The sharp bite of recrimination
flourishes and moves
like a wave, oh grief
o'erpouring, ah god
I speak to you with a capital

G

the day comic,
so rich is deep grief,
ordering Roast Beef
sandwiches at the BA*

Is it pure folly to speak
of the disappointment
harbored in her hero's death

sound fails, and light
a monstrous drama
she bumps and grinds
to Freud's tune,³⁹

*Bowling Alley, Cherry Valley, NY

UNTITLED

oh, she wishes not to sound
oh she wishes not to sound

unborne recordings
wind bound

She poison
she bear not
she pollute the
 field
she scatter seed
she bear not
the Christian seal

She demon fire
she herald Hecate
Like the nightmare

the virgin
the fool
oh foul abyss
you curse knowledge
and all its affinity

oh where the lamb the
light

DESERT IN FLOWER

My heart has outgrown, like magic,
the clamor of painful things . . .
Beneath the burnt heather are newborn roses . . .
I've put an end to my tears.

I'm unsettled . . . Wings open! What's happening
to me? I hear soundless mouths
murmuring unknown words
That stir me like a caress!

And in this impatient fever invading me,
I throw off my shroud, my habit.
And I'm no longer, Love, Sister Sorrow . . .

Eyes burning in ecstasies of love,
mouth tasting sun, fruit, honey:
I am the wild barren plain opening in flower! ⁴⁰

afterword

In the case of art from the deep past we can usually only guess at how the selection process worked. With contemporary art we can see it in operation. We can see history being written – recorded, edited, enhanced, invented – right before our eyes. It can be a disturbing sight. Such revisionism is, perhaps, a curator’s privilege but not a historian’s.

–Holland Cotter, “Framing the Message of a Generation,”

New York Times, May 31, 2009

By virtue of who she is and by chance of where she happened to be during a small window of time, Billie Hutching found herself in the middle of a complex situation that came to be played out in the last act of George Maciunas’ dramatic life story. In discussing with Billie what I might add as commentary on this book about her fateful meeting with and short marriage to George Maciunas in the months before his death, Billie characterized her book as a personal “memoir.” While it reads as a moving love story with lyrical sensitivity, for me it also fills a special dimension in fleshing out critically revealing history about George and something of the inner paradox in his outward pronouncements about art. I believe we are fortunate to have Billie’s compelling journal entries of the period about

the “immobilization” sessions, which she has fluidly folded in with her vivid recollections. It is during these encounters that I speculate Maciunas was transfixed in such an unusual manner of submission, subjugating his authoritarian personality, that he effectively entered into a state equivalent to a deep hypnotic trance. I will return to this later because it speaks directly to the romance and eroticism of their relationship, which Billie illuminates, but I think it also speaks to her questions posed as to whether George was a “romantic.”

In the years since Maciunas died in 1978, leaving her to cope with contentious matters of his estate in the immediate term, and with his growing Fluxus legacy in years following, Billie has remained an advocate for George’s philosophy of Fluxus. Questioning what it meant to be a “poet” at the time she met George, she naturally shared his view of artistic sensibility as “a way of life” rather than seeing Fluxus as being a finalized product; not intended as an ossified gathering of art objects and documents in museums, but as an ongoing “process” to enhance life awareness and appreciation of ordinary experience. Our first meeting since the late 1970s came relatively recently on the occasion of a Maciunas exhibition at the Maya Stendhal Gallery in New York, as Billie described in her text. Indeed, in the event she mentioned, I intended a “fluxing of Fluxus” in my appearance by wearing a “CAUTION: FLUXUS” sign.

As Billie has developed in her unique love and commitment to George’s legacy, she has remained actively engaged with the “living” aspects of the social applications and ludic qualities of Fluxus as a guiding philosophy. As you have read, Billie was a person changed by the intense experience of her brief time with George Maciunas. She assertively moved on to define her individualism—to study language, write, and to earn her academic degrees. These accomplishments and

further study of Fluxus apart from Maciunas add professional polish to her native talents as a poet and writer. However one may choose to characterize this book, I find it to be of intriguing value on various counts—whether taken as “romantic” biographical literature or viewed as a specially positioned, close-up lens on a historical figure in 20th-century art who was, and remains, an undeniable influence on the art of his own time and to this day.

A number of people found George to be irascible, and a few even saw him as belligerent. Particularly significant in the earliest days was that some artists that could be considered “Fluxus,” or related to that sensibility by practice, place and association, were put off from direct participation by his personality. Scholars are still sorting out histories of those who chose to distance themselves from George and his particular brand of Fluxus, those he did not want as “members,” those who sought him out for approval, and those he actively deemed to be “excommunicated” for reasons he perceived as failings. From 1969, when I first came into direct contact and began working with him, I felt that I could not hold him fully accountable for his sometimes bizarre behaviors, given the psychological trauma and chronic physical sufferings I understood he had endured since childhood. In a short time, Billie embraced the playful and profound aspect of his Fluxus activities, got past George’s histrionic side to the extraordinary extent of engaging him in her sense of poetics as he meanwhile taught her about Monteverdi. Revealed in her journal entries, as he lay still on the floor “like a monk,” she realized she had unlocked his heart to love—a romantic love he may never before have known.

Can even those among us who knew George well quite comprehend, when Billie casually says, “I was a breath of fresh air,” how it was she would become so life-altering for him as it happened? Even

George could not guess the romantic irony, when asked what she “lived on,” of his utterance “She lives on air.” How can those who know something of art histories pertinent to Fluxus not think of Duchamp’s statement, upon “quitting” art, that he merely wished “to breathe.”

“Black and White” was a metaphor with extensive depth for their marriage, in which they exchanged clothing and literally walked in each other’s shoes for a while, as individuals and as genders. Billie was in many ways a “foil” for George, bringing qualities that he had been missing, and had arrived in the eleventh hour of his life in time to become a complementary element in the brief window of their pairing. There are commonalities and juxtapositions I saw as I read Billie’s story. The picture of her having stepped off the bus carrying only a newspaper tote bag with a few clothes, and George’s comment “That’s all you have?” renders a portentous moment. It is a contraposition to the “baggage” that Maciunas had accumulated in the stacked boxes of Fluxus-related production materials, his social entanglements, legal problems, financial trials, and the philosophical-art stickiness of the Fluxus enterprise which he could not run away from. Both of them were alone, in different senses. Billie knew few people and owed little to anyone, while George was over his head in a maze of well-meaning schemas and ever-expanding plans that were to bury him before he could sort out all he had charted. With the thinness of her one dollar in assets, her slimness of frame and youthful experience, she was struck by the seeming vastness of an ordinary supermarket. She could hardly know that the also slim, but not-so-strong-looking older man waiting there to meet her at the bus stop was actually a highly educated, worldly man with an international reputation.

I was at New Marlborough on a number of occasions in the period 1977–78, and Billie and I participated together in events of George’s design, which pleased him as fun—such as playing dress-up with costume characters, including in drag, for the face cards of George’s “Fluxus Card Deck” (which Peter Moore shot as we staged the photographs). I videotaped George and Billie cross-dressed, working as waiter and waitress at the Ear Inn in New York (with Jean Dupuy as chef). There were other productive and gratifying visits to New Marlborough, but with a hovering, foreboding empathy for George to be kept at bay. Billie moved about quietly, and I focused on spending my time with George or other artists, such as Joe Jones, who arranged to be there for a while. My view of Billie in that situation was that she was pleasant and warm while having an aura of a respectful, translucent veil around her. It was easy to feel that George had some special connection with her and I remember thinking early on that Billie had an extraordinary look of childlike, radiant colorfulness about her that reminded me of some young women in Renaissance paintings.

Until I read Billie’s story, I could not realize the extent of complementary dualities that pulled them together, or fully understand how the masochism of George was of much deeper significance than his seeking a means for physical pain relief. It was also news to me that he believed in reincarnation or anything metaphysical. Billie’s thought that George was infantilized means to me that an aspect of the child-within-the-adult in him, which had not been fulfilled in the games and prankishness of his sense of Fluxus as a formal realization of his notions of “concretism” or “functionalism,” was finally released by a love for Billie that was enabled during the immobilization sessions. I think this release was an attending, consequential

effect of her intentions in helping him to heal. My reading is that he did acquire a new possibility of emotional expression, freed from the desire for a collective, sociopolitical vision to the personalized recognition of a fully erotic, romantic self. I think that Billie's "aligning" of George's body during the immobilization sessions also acted upon his unconscious such that there occurred a regeneration of capacity for him to admit and express sensuality rather than *only* to intellectualize about the senses as being concrete existential experiences. His finding the sound of Billie writing on paper "erotic" and wanting to wire that sound to his room represents an example of such a transformative breakthrough.

For me, it was no great surprise that George was dressing in drag; I had noted early on when I first worked with him the importance he attached to "formal" wear in a certain aspect of Fluxus sensibility, one which was definitely fastidious if not obsessive to a fault. But it did surprise me that he was apparently able to keep his cross-dressing a secret from so many people close to him and that he went out on the street as such. Dressing in costume made sense as a Fluxus-style get-away disguise for avoiding the New York City marshals sent after him by the Attorney General regarding his FluxHouse ventures, or some thugs in the contracting trade who were after him. But his long history of cross-dressing was proof of a fundamental need for personal satisfaction. I know of no evidence, but have thought that *someone else must have known* about his secret.

It is interesting to see the two as mutually liberating—as Billie has credited George with her advancement and endeavors to carry on. It is not an impossible argument to posit that George could be seen as a romantic. Among the evidence to consider is his earliest vision of a collective of artists who would throw their potent egos

into a common boiling pot called Fluxus to ultimately change the art market and distribution system, and in his grand vision to have groups of people come together to form a FluxHouse Cooperative in Soho or persuade the masses by Fluxus methodology that in the life/art dichotomy debate, the former reigns as the most true experience.

Despite legitimate questions about the veracity of numerous histories about Fluxus coming out in books and in a patchwork of entries on the Internet, George might well take some deep satisfaction in the evolution of “original” Fluxus art and the proliferation of younger artists declaring themselves as Fluxus artists, or “doing” Fluxus work. Although the first Fluxus website in 1994 was instigated by Nam June Paik, designed by artist ILIGILI and hosted by Paul Garrin, with myself as co-curator and participant artist, I believe George would have utilized the Internet medium even sooner and perhaps to greater effect using its inherent characteristics. In the presence of Maciunas, we would have by now surely exceeded the more than 600,000 entries found by search engines for “fluxus art.”

Whether George was a romantic or not, I think he would laughingly enjoy stoking the hot debate of who and what is Fluxus and is not. The word *Fluxus* was treated as an inside joke by most of the initial wave of artists, and to me it is a Hydra-headed question still. And I do believe George would be very gratified to know that Billie is active in producing her own work and in helping keep alive the spirit he started in the way she feels he intended it to evolve.

Larry Miller

Notes

Foreword

1. George Maciunas, "Fluxus Manifesto," February 1963.
2. See Henry Flynt's website: <http://www.henryflynt.org/> See also Kristine Stiles, "David Tudor – Alive, Free, and Without Need of Culture," in a special issue, "Composers inside Electronics: Music after David Tudor," *Leonardo Music Journal* 14 (2002): www.getty.edu/research/conducting_research/digitized_collections/davidthudor/symposium.html
3. Dick Higgins, "Intermedia" (1965), *Something Else Newsletter* 1:1 (February 1966); reproduced in *foew&ombwhnw* (New York: Something Else Press, 1968), 11, 13, 29. Higgins produced a manifesto on the same topic, "Statement on Intermedia," in Wolf Vostell's journal *de-collage* 6 (July 1967), unpaginated.
4. See Kristine Stiles, "Between Water and Stone: Fluxus Performance, A Metaphysics of Acts," especially the section entitled "Race, Gender, and Sex in Fluxus," in Elizabeth Armstrong and Joan Rothfuss, eds., *In the Spirit of Fluxus* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1993) 62-99.
5. Ibid.
6. Susan Jarosi published the first interview on Billie and George Maciunas' relationship and Maciunas' sexuality. See Jarosi's "Selections from an Interview with Billie Maciunas," in Ken Friedman, ed., *The Fluxus Reader* (London: Academy Editions, 1998) 199-211.
7. Harry Ruhé, *Fluxus: The Most Radical and Experimental Art Movement of the Sixties* (Amsterdam: "A," 1979). Qtd. in Owen F. Smith, *Fluxus, The History of an Attitude* (San Diego: San Diego State University Press, 1999) 1.

Memoir

1. Larry Miller, "Maybe Fluxus (A Para-Interrogative Guide for the Neoteric Transmuter, Tinder, Tinker and Totalist)," *The Fluxus Reader*, ed. Ken Friedman. (Great Britain: Academy Editions, 1998) 212.
2. Larry Miller, "Interview with George Maciunas," *The Fluxus Reader*, 196-197.
3. Miller, 195.
4. See Kristine Stiles, "Anomaly, Sky, Sex, and Psi in Fluxus," *Critical Mass: Happenings, Fluxus, Performance, Intermedia and Rutgers University 1958-1972*, ed. Geoffrey Hendricks (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2003) 60-88.
5. Harry Ruhé, *Fluxus: The Most Radical and Experimental Art Movement of the Sixties* (Amsterdam: "A," 1979). Qtd. in Owen F. Smith, *Fluxus: The History of an Attitude* (San Diego: San Diego State University Press, 1999) 1.
6. Miller, "Maybe Fluxus," 212.
7. George planned for this property to be a "Post Cage Bauhaus Black Mountain College." Thomas Kellein, *The Dream of Fluxus: George Maciunas, An Artist's Biography* (London: Ed. Hansjörg Mayer, 2007) 151.
8. Conceived by Larry Miller and built by George in the mid-1970s. Jon Hendricks' *Fluxus Codex* (Detroit: The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection, 1988) 339.
9. From a translation of Ottavio Rinuccini's lyrics for Claudio Monteverdi's *Zefiro torna*, AllExperts <<http://en.allexperts.com/q/Italian-Language-1584/italian-madrigali.htm>> Jan. 5, 2009.
10. <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shelter>> Feb. 4, 2009.
11. Thomas Kellein, *The Dream of Fluxus: George Maciunas, An Artist's Biography* (London: Ed. Hansjörg Mayer, 2007) 55.
12. Hollis Melton, "Notes on Soho and a Reminiscence," *The Avant-Garde from Futurism to Fluxus* (Lithuania: The Jonas Mekas Visual Arts Center, 2007) 263.
13. See Kristine Stiles, "Shaved Heads and Marked Bodies: Representations from Cultures of Trauma," *Strategie II: Peoples Mediterraneens* [Paris] 64-65 (July-December 1993) 95-117; reprinted with a new Afterword in *Talking Gender: Public Images, Personal Journeys, and Political Critiques*,

- eds. Jean O'Barr, Nancy Hewitt, and Nancy Rosebaugh (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996) 36-64; reprinted without the 1996 Afterword in *On Violence: An Anthology*, eds. Bruce Lawrence and Aisha Karim (Duke University Press, 2007) 522-538.
14. From Online Etymology Dictionary, <<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?search=irony&searchmode=none>> Feb. 1, 2009 Gk. *eironeia* was used of affected ignorance, especially that of Socrates.
 15. Rogozhin to Myshkin, Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*.
 16. Online Etymology Dictionary, <<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?search=thera&searchmode=none>> Feb. 5, 2009.
 17. Seymour Halpern, "Body-image Symbols of Repression," *International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis*, 13.2 (April 1965): 83-91.
 18. Now the Emily Harvey Foundation. Maciunas used this loft as his studio before he was attacked and beaten there and went to live in New Marlborough. This was the last of the artists' co-ops that Maciunas created. Members of the co-op included Fluxus artists Nam June Paik, Shigeko Kubota, Yoshi Wada, Ay-O, and Simone Forti. The Flux Wedding and Flux Cabaret were performed here on February 25, 1978.
 19. Miller, "Maybe Fluxus," 213.
 20. Emilio left calling cards all over the house when he left. They said, "Emilio's Slow Departure, Movement 110.05." The number was George's mailbox number. I kept finding cards until I moved from New Marlborough, and I wouldn't be surprised if one turned up somewhere even today. See "Slow Departures," page 111.
 21. AllExperts <http://en.allexperts.com/q/Italian-Language-1_584/italian-madrighali.htm> Jan. 5, 2009.
 22. This is probably in the Silverman collection, but it is not listed in the *Fluxus Codex*.
 23. Miller, 213.
 24. Online Etymology Dictionary, Feb. 5, 2009.
 25. Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*.
 26. From The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Doctor of Philosophy certificate, 1995.
 27. The proceeds from the sale were shared with George's mother, per law when a Massachusetts resident dies intestate. Bob Watts was also

- awarded \$30,000, notwithstanding the loft at 141 Wooster Street that George had given him before his death.
28. Eventually, I earned a B.A. from Brown (1986), and then went on to get an M.A. (1988) and Ph.D. (1995) from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
 29. Origin Old English *gidig* [insane] literally ‘possessed by a god,’ from the base of *God*. Current senses date from late Middle English.
 30. Miller, 212.
 31. Hendricks, *Fluxus Codex*, 251.
 32. Nam June Paik, “George Maciunas and Fluxus,” *Flash Art*, no. 84-85 (Oct-Nov 1978), 48. Qtd. in *The Fluxus Reader*, ed. Ken Friedman, 18.
 33. Helen Molesworth, ed. *Work Ethic* (Baltimore: The Baltimore Museum of Art, 2003) 27.
 34. Molesworth, 45.
 35. George’s *Excreta Fluxorum* comes close to flaunting this exception, but not as close as Piro Manzoni’s *Merda d’artista* (1961), the artist’s shit, canned and sold “by weight, for the equivalent of the price of gold.” Qtd. by Julia Bryan-Wilson in *Work Ethic*, 208.
 36. Molesworth, 49-50.
 37. <<http://www.vilnius-tourism.lt/topic.php?tid=64&sid=97&aid=1> 204>, Feb. 2, 2009.
 38. The words in quotation marks are from a song that I have remembered and loved since I heard it as a child. It is called “Once More,” and it is by the Osborne Brothers.
 39. In Billie Hutching, *Unsettled Oranges* (Rhinebeck, NY: Small Towns, 1981) n.p.
 40. Florbela Espanca, “Charneca em Flor,” *Livro de Soror Saudade* in *Obras completas de Florbela Espanca*, ed. Rui Guedes et al. 6 vols. (Lisboa, Dom Quixote, 1986) 2:166. Maciunas’ translations have appeared in *Gávea-Brown: A Bilingual Journal of Portuguese-American Letters and Studies*, Vol. XXI, pp. 108-121.

Acknowledgments

I would like to give special thanks to Hollis Melton for donating the use of her beautiful photographs, which contribute immeasurably to the quality and coherence of this narrative. I would also like to thank Jonas Mekas for donating images from his film *Zefiro Torna: Scenes from the Life of George Maciunas*. Thanks also to Jonas for financial and psychological support during the writing of this book.

In addition, thanks to Mieko Shiomi for allowing the reprint of a photo of her *Spatial Poem no. 1*. Thanks also to Kristine Stiles, Geoffrey Hendricks, and Larry Miller for their wonderful contributions to the art historical value of this memoir, as well as for their kind words about me.

Appreciation goes to my daughter, Barbara Zdravesky, for helping me select the poems for this book. Additionally, I express my appreciation to Margery Pabst and Lenore Roland for their review of portions of the manuscript. Thanks also goes to Stephen Caldwell Wright for his generosity to and faith in the publisher, which jump-started the production of this book.

Appreciation goes to Gretchen L. Wagner, curatorial assistant at the Museum of Modern Art, for expediting photos from the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection, their 2009 gift to MOMA.

I would like to acknowledge publisher Christine Blackwell's belief in the importance of this book and the need to publish it, as well as her dedication to quality. I also thank David Watson, who contributed his time unstintingly to make a wonderfully elegantly designed book.

Thanks also to Bonnie Fesmire for her careful editing and great suggestions. Finally, thanks to all the virtual and physical friends who have encouraged and supported me, and who continue to support me as the book is publicized around the world.

Biographies

Foreword

Kristine Stiles is professor of Art, Art History & Visual Studies at Duke University. She is a specialist in contemporary art and theory, and internationally recognized for her scholarship on performance art, as well as destruction, violence, and trauma in art. She is the recipient of numerous fellowships, including a J. William Fulbright to Romania and a John Simon Guggenheim for her work on documentary photography of the nuclear age. She has published widely in international art journals, as well as taught and lectured internationally on the subject of “cultures of trauma,” the term she coined in 1993 to theorize visual representations of trauma in art, literature, film, and society. Stiles is co-editor with Peter Selz of *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings* (1996), forthcoming in 2010 in a revised, expanded 2nd edition for which Stiles is the sole editor. Stiles' forthcoming books include: *Correspondence Course: An Epistolary History of Carolee Schneemann and Her Circle* (Duke University Press, 2010); *Concerning Consequences of Trauma in Art and Culture* (University of Chicago Press, 2012); *Uncorrupted Joy: Art Actions, History, and Social Value* (University of California Press, 2012); and *World Art Since 1945*, co-authored with Kathy O'Dell (Laurence King, 2014). Stiles is also an artist and an equestrian.

Introduction

Geoffrey Hendricks first met George Maciunas in the fall or winter of 1963–64 when he went to one of the weekly gatherings at the Fluxloft on Canal Street, at the suggestion of Bob Watts, and from the mid-sixties on he has participated in the various Fluxus Banquets, Flux-fests and other events. In 1970 he organized George Maciunas' “Flux-Mass” at Rutgers

University, where he was a tenured professor and had been teaching since 1956. In 1971 he asked George to help organize a Flux Divorce to celebrate his 10th wedding anniversary with Bici Forbes (aka Nye Ffarrabas). He was principal organizer of a Festschrift Banquet honoring George in 1976, and of the Flux Wedding, as well as the Flux Funeral. He was editor and publisher of a *V TRE EXTRA*, a special newspaper for the Memorial Flux Concert on March 24, 1979. At that event, in a boat filled with water, he began his role as the Flux Navy. He has continued his calling as Flux Priest, organizing a wedding celebration for Jill Johnston and Ingrid Nyeboe following their marriage in the Radhus/City Hall of Odense, Denmark. In 2002 he restaged the *Flux-Mass* in Wiesbaden (Erbenheim), Germany for the 40th Anniversary of the first Fluxus concert in that city, together with a procession of the Fluxus Saints. In 2003 the *Flux-Mass* was presented at Amherst College in Massachusetts and again in Voorhees Chapel, Douglass College, Rutgers University, the original site. They were in conjunction with an exhibition that he curated, *Critical Mass: Happenings, Fluxus, Performance, Intermedia and Rutgers University, 1958 – 1972*. The catalog that he edited for that exhibition includes texts by both Miller and Stiles.

Memoir

Billie Maciunas is the widow of George Maciunas, “chairman” of the international Fluxus group of artists during the 1960s and 1970s. She participated in Fluxus performances with George and other Fluxus artists in New York City and in Massachusetts in the late 1970s and remains a participant in and active commentator on Fluxus activities.

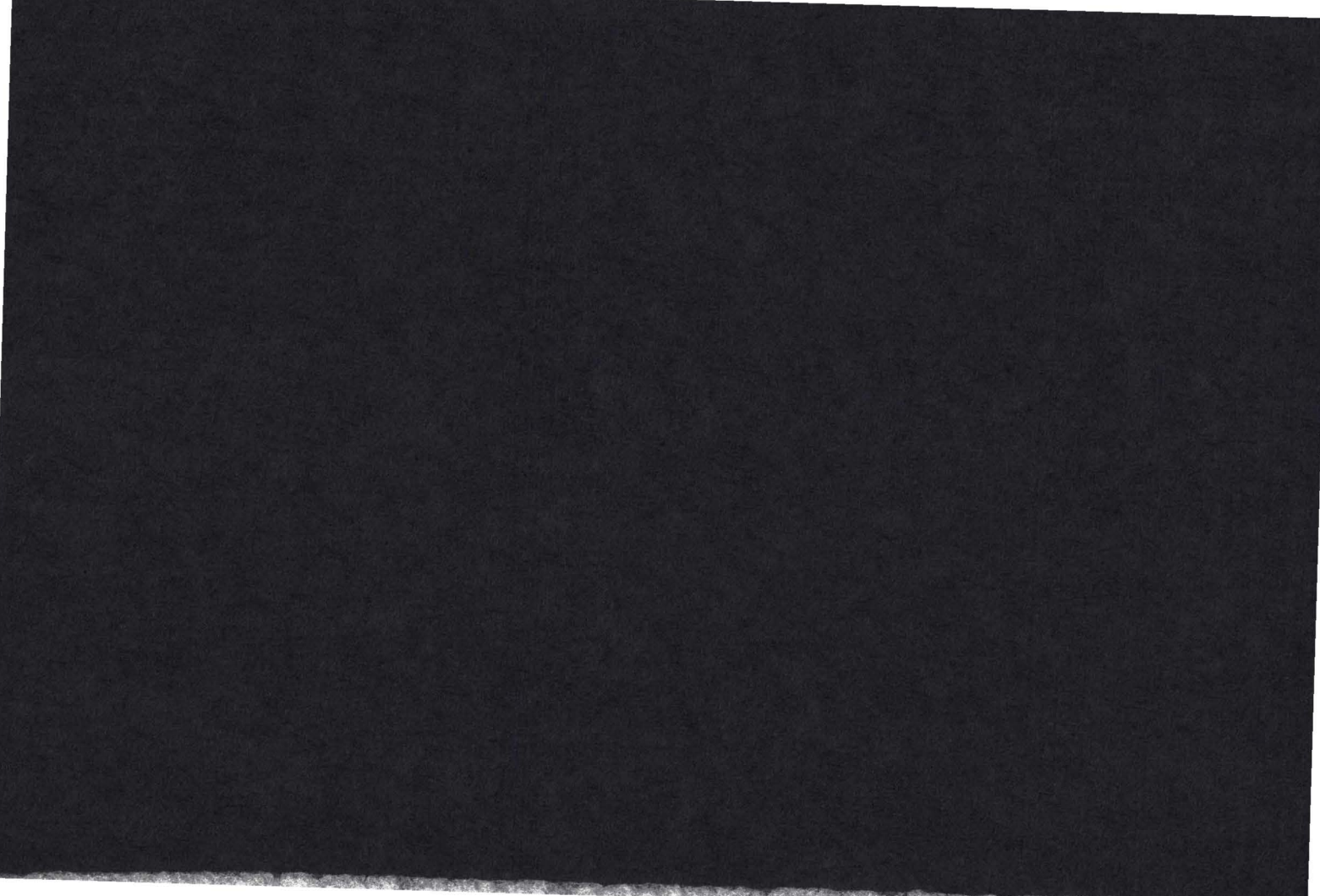
In addition to authoring this memoir, Maciunas is the author of *Unsettled Oranges* (Small Towns, 1981). Her translations of Portuguese poetry were published in *Gávea-Brown*, Brown University’s bilingual journal of the arts and literature (Vol. XXI, pp. 108–121). She has

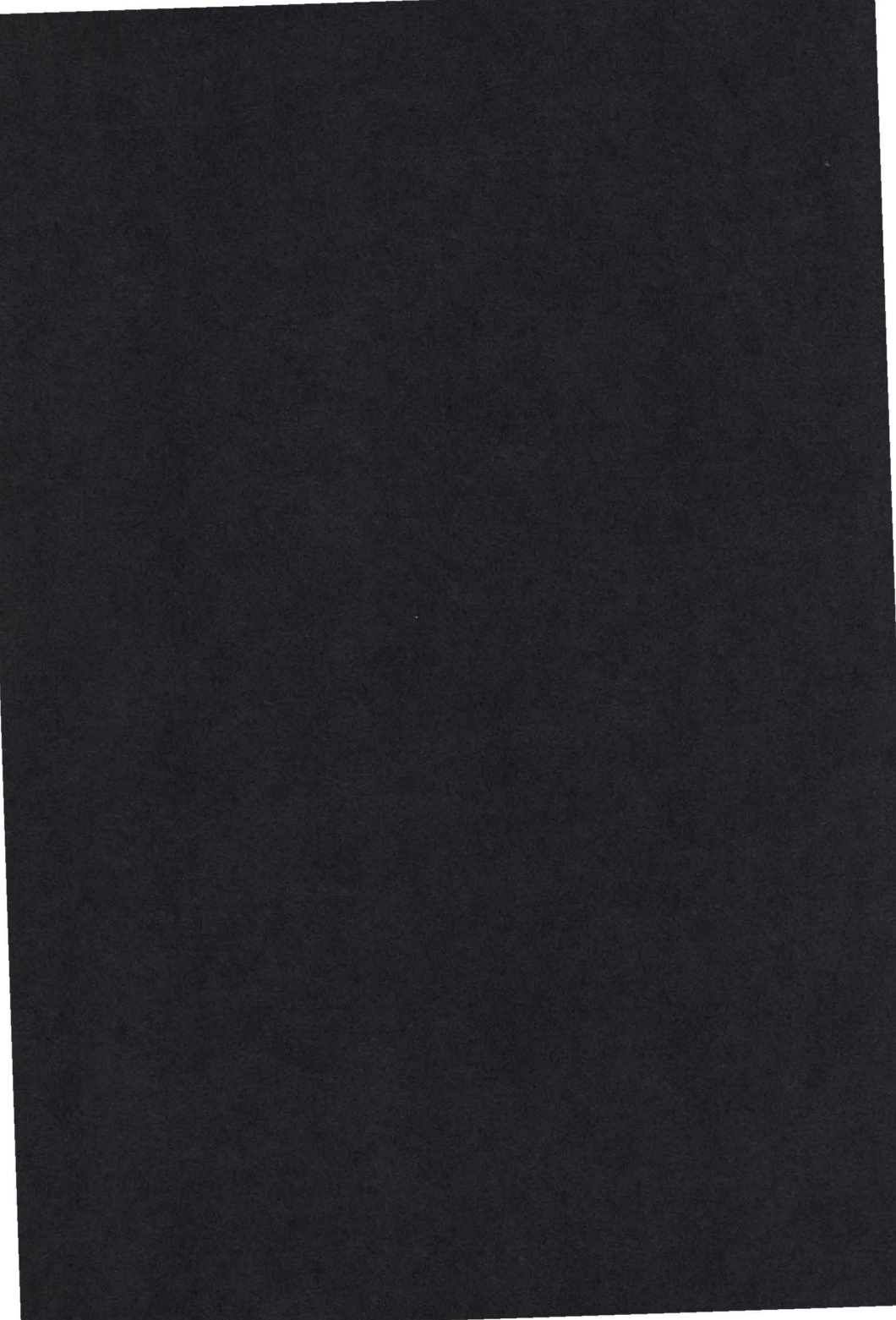
published articles and reviews on literature, as well as interviews about Fluxus, writing, and translation. Maciunas continues to write and translate.

Afterword

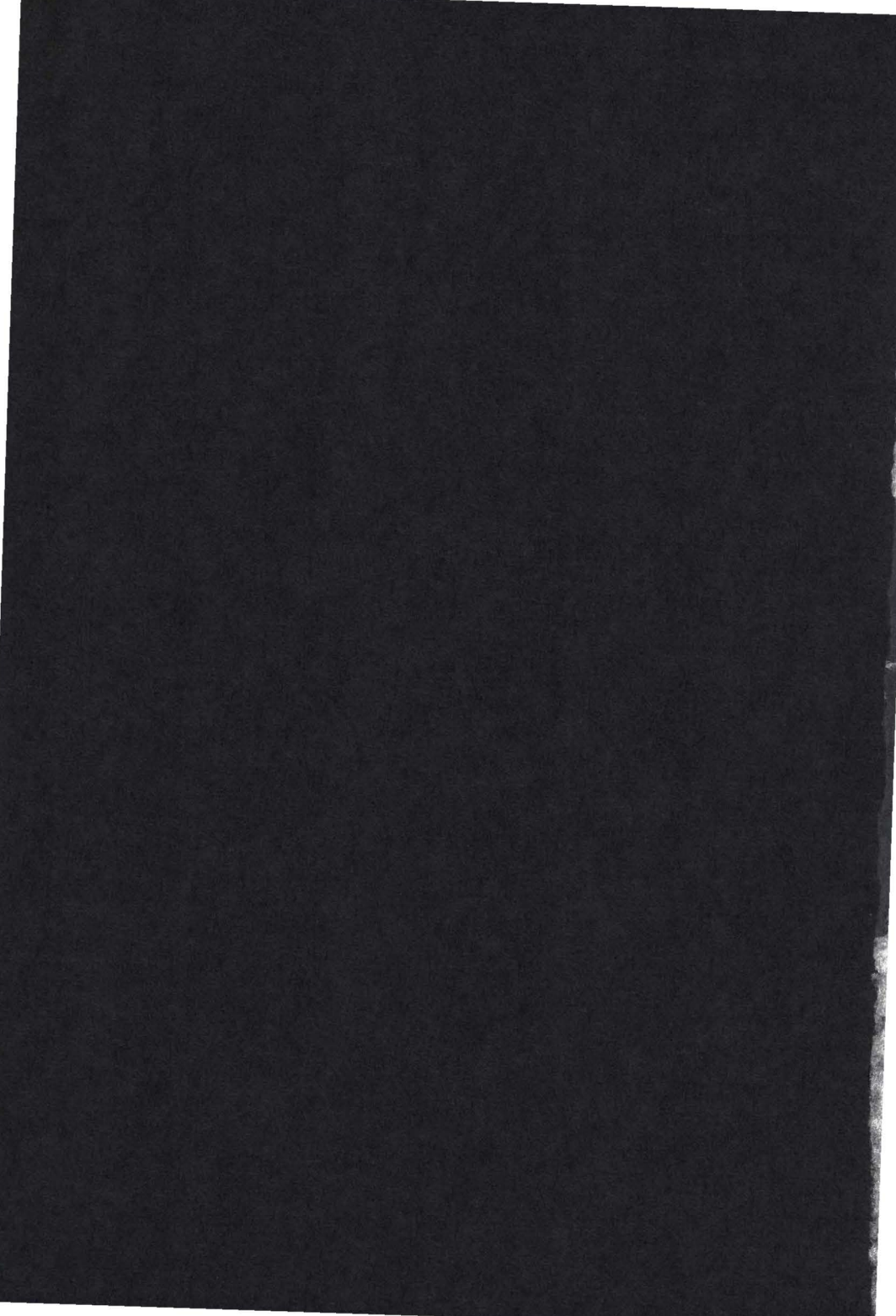
Larry Miller knew and worked with George during nearly the last nine years of his life, collaborating with him as an artist in Fluxus events and editions, and working for hire on his “FluxHouse” Cooperative loft renovations. Miller also spent quite a lot of time trying to delicately offer counter-arguments to Maciunas’ strict views (in his opinion) on modern art and artists and the matter of “plagiarism” as opposed to legitimate artistic, intramural dialogue. In New Marlborough and New York, Miller made audiotape conversations with Maciunas about art generally and about their working together on the Flux-Labyrinth (1976) in Berlin. He also made videos with George and Billie (1978) in Massachusetts and New York. But it was not until a few weeks before Maciunas died that Miller could get the intensive video interview he had first asked for back in 1973. He felt it was invaluable to talk with Maciunas in order to elicit his observations about his well-known, intricate “big chart.” The video was recorded at the home of his sister, Nijole, a day or so before he left for Jamaica to begin a cancer treatment. Since then, Miller has organized and participated in many Fluxus concerts and events to help bring the collective work to a succession of contemporary audiences not very familiar with the events live in performance, as well as write texts and produce video documentaries on the subject, which include interviews with many of the Fluxus-associated artists and performance events since 1978. Miller has continued production and exhibition of his individual work actively in this period, which in the mid-1980s began to focus on the subject of social and legal issues brought about by the legalizing of patents being granted by the Supreme Court on genetically engineered lifeforms.











The Eve of Fluxus



