Fluxus as Experience

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ART AS EVENT

Compared to the brief flash of the Happenings in New York City, in Europe, Performance Art was a far more important part of the post war experience for artists in Germany and France. Many of the European artists reconnected with the old Dada spirit, going back to art as it existed before the First World War to retrieve *avant-garde* art in order to play out the final fate of the pre-war art movements. For German artists, it was necessary to go back in time to the decade before Nazi art had polluted all art forms, except for "Degenerate Art" or Modernist Art. For the French artists, the period between the wars was a conservative one, ultimately leading to New York taking the lead. So there is no place to go but backwards in order to move forward. Dada had been a performance based art movement, derailed by New Objectivity and Surrealism and it was with performance that the Europeans could combine their own heritage with the kinetic art of the painter Jackson Pollock.

If the origins of Dada were "disgust" as Tristan Tzara put it, the origins of Fluxus were American. The founder of Fluxus was George Maciunas, a Lithuanian expatriate, an entrepreneur and art dealer who coined the term "fluxus." Maciunas, who was working as a designer-architect with the American Air Force, discovered the word "flux" as the result of a random search through the dictionary, much like Tristan Tzara found the term "dada" in the Larousse dictionary in 1916. The movement was born in Wiesbaden, West Germany in September 1962 at the "Fluxus Internationale Festspiel Neuester Musik," the first public appearance of the word, "Fluxus." Although many of the Fluxus artists are still alive and active, the international art movement, Fluxus, dates from approximately 1949 to 1979, and the glory days of Fluxus were between 1962 and 64. When Maciunas, who published the works of Fluxus artists and produced their concerts and exhibitions, died in 1978, it was said, "fluxus has fluxed."

Just as its prototype Dada was shaped by the First World War, Fluxus was profoundly impacted by the philosophical change in Euro-American culture following the Second World War. The Post-War world was a brave new world recovering for a Holocaust and facing immanent annihilation from the newly invented atomic bomb. Existentialism, a philosophy developed by Jean-Paul Sartre, insisted upon a nihilism—total despair in a world now without meaning or purpose. With all institutions of church and state discredited, the human being could exist only through act or "acting out" a life. The pure act was the only means of self-affirmation and of self-confirmation of individual existence. Existentialist philosophy had influenced the writings of Harold Rosenberg, the famous New York art critic, who used Existentialism to explain "American Action Painting."

Beyond philosophy, other changes, more material and social, shaped Fluxus. Mass media was becoming a genuine force in society, spreading knowledge of art movements from one continent to another; and economic changes made it possible for artists to travel and maintain close contact with each other. As a result, Fluxus was an international and racially diverse movement, made up of men and women, European, Asian and American. Fluxus members included the Danish musician and artist Erich Andersen, the Korean video artist, Nam June Paik, Dick Higgins, Robert Watts, Alison Knowles, La Monte Young, Jackson Marlow, Philip Corner, and Benjamin Patterson, an African American artist who was a student of John Cage, Daniel Spoerri, Terry Riley, Ben Vautier, the Fluxus power couple, Toshi Ichiyanagi and Yoko Ono, the performance and word event artist and musician, George Brecht, master of the pure word event, painters Georges Mathieu and Lucio Fontanta, Robert Filliou, Addi Kopcke, and Emmett Williams, author of *My Life in Flux–and Vice Versa*, 1992.

Former enemies, German, Japanese, and American artists, became friends and collaborators. Women artists, Shigeko Kubota and Yoko Ono, were able to create and work as equals in an art world that excluded women from other movements, because Fluxus was outside the mainstream art world and outside of the white cube. In such a movement, a Japanese woman who was an American expatriate, Yoko Ono, could find acceptance and a venue for her conceptual art works and performances. An African-American musician, Emmett Williams, could escape American racism in Fluxus. Fluxus was not placed in museums, was thought to be not object based and, therefore, not collectable, and for many decades was ignored by the art world and its critics.

The post-war mood produced a dialectic of creation and destruction, seen in the performances of Gutai in Japan, and a preoccupation with the temporal dimension of art–the act, the performance. The act or the performance existed only in the moments of time when it was enacted and then it ceased to exist. The emphasis was upon the process of artistic innovation and creation during the performance. Unlike the lone "performance" of Jackson Pollock "dancing" around the canvas, Fluxus allowed and even demanded that the audience participate in the act. Performance Art existed, however briefly, in contrast to the supposed timelessness of solid or material art works, such as paintings or sculptures. Planned but not repeatable, Performance art vanished completely at its conclusion, could only be preserved in documents and in artifacts.

Performance art could not be "art," according to Modernist critics because it was not permanent and could not be judged in terms of its formal properties. Any arguments against performance art would be intensified in relation to Minimal Art. Installation art, like performance art, was audience-dependent and temporal or temporary. In a word both movement were "theatrical" or acts of theater. Therefore, Fluxus was a profound challenge to Modernism. In contrast to Modernism's emphasis on the lone creative artist, Fluxus artists worked together and in reference to one another's work. In contrast to Modernism's insistence on purity, Fluxus art was hybrid, a combination of objects, images, sounds, music, theater, and audience participation. Neo-Dada in America was already working with the confluence of art and life and, indeed, John Cage merged ways from Neo-Dada to Fluxus. No clear line separates the art of Fluxus from life's ordinary actions.

The Fluxus *Weltanschauung* was shaped by the concerns of John Cage who was interested in redefining "sound" as "music," Merce Cunningham, who was interested in redefining "movement" as "dance," and of Marcel Duchamp, the discoverer of the "found object," or *oject trouvé*, who was still alive and well as an underground artist in New York City. Cage and Duchamp felt that the effects of personality and taste should be removed from art, which should also be purged of aesthetics. Fluxus exhibitions were about the commonalities of everyday life and of ordinary everyday activities. Slices of life were transported onto a stage where the ordinary was made to look extraordinary. For Fluxus artists, the very environment was art: life flows into art, art flows into life.

Blurring of the boundary between art and life, Ben Vautier, a French performance artist, brushed his teeth on the street, as a Fluxus Happening for the Parisian passers by. Daniel Spoerri, another French artist, displayed the remains of his meals, fixed to a tray, and hung from a wall like a painting. Fluxus, like Dada is also anti-art, meaning that the artists eschewed aesthetics, that is they rejected (like Duchamp) attractive and beautiful art. Fluxus pushed art out of museums and galleries and into the streets. George Maciunas understood Fluxus in social terms and as a stance against wasting materials and human energy. Like Joseph Beuys, who advocated people as "social sculpture" in Germany, Maciunas thought of all people as artists. In his 1963 Manifesto for Fluxus, Maciunas wrote (by hand):

> **"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!" (sic)**

Inspired by the early anti traditionalist works by John Cage, such as 4'33", a performance, which used silence or ambient noise as music, the Fluxus artists proceeded boldly without traditional musical or conservatory skills into a new definition of music. In order to pay homage to John Cage's Chance methods of production and the indeterminism results that followed, Fluxus musicians and artists produced "Event Scores," often of a single word, such as George Brecht's "EXIT." "Composition 1960 #10 to Bob Morris" by La Monte Young read: "Draw a straight line and follow it," and was realized by the late Korean artist, Nam June Paik, in his performance "Zen for Head," "Destruction in Art," 1963 symposium and performance by Charlotte Moorman and Paik at the Judson Memorial Church, New York City, in which Moorman repeated Paik's Word Event by destroying a violin. Because of John Cage's work on the Prepared Piano, 1941, the piano was the preferred instrument of Fluxus.

The title of Hannah Higgins'2002 book, *Fluxus Experience* is an apt one, for Fluxus is an experience, difficult to interpret. The historian is very much limited to a description of a fluid and fluctuating event that almost certainly escaped any intentions the instigator may have had. Key to erasing the old-fashioned separation between art (incarcerated in museums) and life (existing everywhere else) was audience participation in the Fluxus experiences. On no account was any spectator allowed to simply spectate. Yoko Ono asked the people who attended her 1965 performance, *Cut Piece*, to cut off her clothes while she sat still until everyone had had their turn in the acts of "cutting." According to Fluxus member, Ken Friedman, "The radical contribution Fluxus made (to art) was to suggest that there is no boundary to be erased."

When the Fluxus artists made objects, they were not called "art" but "Fluxkits." These Fluxkits were a cross between Duchamp's *Boîte en Valise* (1935-40) and a children's game. One was encouraged to handle, touch, pull, poke, and explore, sometimes at one's own peril. Annemarie Chandler and Norie Neumark's 2005 book, *At a Distance: Precursors to Art and Activism on the Internet,* compare Fluxus acts and kits to play or what the authors call "infinite play." According to the authors, the Fluxus kits were like informal games that are continuous, without beginning, middle or end; play that is "expansive" and as "open ended" as Fluxus discourse that "stresses relations rather than a linear production and discrete pieces of information." Although there are no particular rules to these forms of free play or activities without purpose, the Fluxus artists had very particular reasons for making these "kits."

In 2011 the Fluxus artist, Alison Knowles explained that the Fluxkits and mechanized objects were part of an effort to combat "the work of art" hung on a wall with a multimedia and multi-art, as it were, combination of creative encounters. These Fluxkits were extensions of art books which within Fluxus became cans, like containing objects which, unlike unique sculptures, for example, can be replaced. One of the best known Fluxkits was the *Finger Box* by Ay-O, a wooden box with a set of instructions on the front: "Put your finger in the hole." The player would insert finger…at his or her own peril. Of course, as soon as Fluxus became encoded into official art history, these playful, toy-like objects became "works of art" and the viewers were discouraged to keep their distance. Sadly, playtime was over.

The humor and the wit of the well-crafted objects in well-constructed boxes are a visual signal that Fluxus was an anti-art movement that sought to make "art" more inclusive. In contrast to Dada, whose surviving members denounced Fluxus, Fluxus did not emerge from the Second World War with the intent of rejecting the entire premise of Western civilization. As the activities of Joseph Beuys would demonstrate, Fluxus was a social and often a political activity the aim of which was to change the world for the better. In 2010, Dorothée Brill argued in *Shock and the Senseless in Dada and Fluxus* that the difference between neutral and passive position of Abstract Expressionism and Fluxus was the political activism of the decade of the sixties. There are powerful examples of Fluxus as social critique such as Yoko Ono who worked with John Lennon to end the war in Vietnam but ultimately Fluxus was mild-mannered and benign. As one of the pioneers of Fluxus Dick Higgins wrote in his 1979 *A Child's History of Fluxus,*

> …Fluxus has a life of its own, apart from the old people in it. It is simple things, taking things for themselves and not just as part of bigger things. It is something that many of us must do, at least part of the time. So Fluxus is inside you, is part of how you are. It isn't just a bunch of things and dramas but is part of how you live. It is beyond words.

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