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Fluxus

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Fluxus.

Active primarily in the 1960s and '70s, Fluxus was an international network of artists whose members shared an interest in expanding the boundaries of art. Fluxus first emerged as a collective in 1962 when its self-appointed “chairman,” Lithuanian-born George Maciunas, traveled from his adopted city of New York to organize a series of new music concerts in Europe, beginning in Weisbaden, Germany (Kellein, 1995, p. 10). This official account is complicated, however, by statements issued by the Fluxus artists involved in the Weisbaden concert. Emmett Williams claims, for instance, that Fluxus began with an earlier publication proposed by composer La Monte Young and that Weisbaden was “simply performance” (Hoffberg, 1998). On the other hand, Dick Higgins argues that Fluxus came about quite naturally four years earlier, when artists and composers “began to look at the world differently” (Higgins, 1997, p. 87). Ken Friedman, while not at the concert, contests the assertion that this event inaugurated Fluxus, arguing that Fluxus is not any single event but an ongoing “laboratory of ideas and social practice” (Friedman, 1998, pp. ix–x).

That Fluxus cannot define itself may be its defining feature. To begin cautiously, then, Fluxus can be credited with introducing four influential practices into contemporary art: (1) the *Event Score*—a spare, instructional text intended to be distributed widely, interpreted by its readers, and result in a variety of objects and events; (2) the *Event*—the outcome of a reader’s interpretation of an event score; (3) the *Fluxconcert*—conducted in the style of a classical concert and consisting of a series of events; and (4) the *Fluxkit*—multiples composed of a myriad of objects including texts, scores, films, and games distributed to a network of participants. All of these Fluxus activities were marked by a focused interest on the everyday, both in terms of the artists’ choice of objects—a hammer or scissors, for instance—but also by calling attention to activities (such as dripping water) and distribution venues (such as the post office) that, in their ubiquity, democratize art. Alison Knowles’s event score *Identical Lunch* (1968) is a case in point. The instruction reads, “a tunafish sandwich on wheat toast with lettuce and butter, no mayo, and a large glass of buttermilk or a cup of soup was and is eaten many days of each week at the same place and at about the same time” (Knowles, 1971). This score resulted in events, graphics, and a book that collated the participants’ experiences, thereby demonstrating that no one instantiation of the score is like another, since chance, as well as the viewer’s interpretation, enter into each seemingly identical lunch.

History and Influence: Grandfather Duchamp, Father Cage.

Fluxus members hailed primarily from Europe, the United States, and Japan. Maciunas was the group’s tireless promoter and lead designer who organized the disparate network of artists in the fashion of avant-garde leaders such as André Breton by granting and denying membership. Like his avant-garde predecessors, Maciunas promoted Fluxus as an anti-art movement dedicated to challenging traditional notions of art and, in so doing, the social hierarchy upon which tradition rests. Following this, many Fluxus works altered the principles of classical music notation, instrumentation, or presentation in order to challenge the biases imbedded therein. For instance, Maciunas’s event score *Solo for Violin (for Sylvano Bussotti)* (1962) consists of a list of unorthodox musical instructions, such as “scrape strings with a nail, loosen strings and pluck...hold bow to shoulders and bow with

violin” and, finally, “bite violin” (Maciunas, 1990, p. 39). In Nam June Paik’s dramatic interpretation of this score in Dusseldorf in 1962 he dressed in classical attire, entered the stage, raised the instrument above his head, and smashed it against a table. In this case the instrument was used to create sound, but only one, which was the sound of its own destruction.

Dada was a primary influence on the Fluxus artists and in his 1962 manifesto “Neo-Dada in Music, Theater, Poetry, Art” Maciunas explains that Fluxus, like Dada, rejects “bourgeois sickness, ‘intellectual,’ professional and commercialized culture” (Maciunas, 1990). Fluxus was particularly influenced by the anti-ocular pranks of Dada-associated artist Marcel Duchamp, including his theory of the readymade as an act in which the artist chooses “a new thought” for the object (Duchamp, 1917, pp. 2–3), and his notion of the “creative act,” which privileges the spectator, who “brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualification” (Duchamp, 1957). Simultaneously, Fluxus looked to the LEF movement (Left Front of the Arts) in the Soviet Union, particularly its embrace of alternative forms of production and distribution. Yet, despite its affinity to the avant-garde, Fluxus distanced itself from its precursors by introducing the idea of “art-amusement”—a whimsical approach that embraced popular and lowbrow cultural forms—and thus Maciunas dubbed Fluxus *rear-guard* as opposed to *avant-garde* (Maciunas, 1965).

Fluxus was equally informed by the compositional practice of John Cage, who was a mentor to the burgeoning Fluxus artists that attended his experimental composition class at the New School in New York City from 1958 to 1959. The students in Cage’s class included, among others, George Brecht, Al Hansen, and Dick Higgins, with periodic visits by poet Jackson Mac Low, all of whom would become important figures in the development of Fluxus. Cage, who studied with Arnold Schoenberg while looking to Duchamp for inspiration, developed aleatoric or chance-controlled compositional techniques in order to draw attention to sounds that already exist in the environment (his “silent score” *4' 33"*; from 1952, which directs the performer to remain silent during three movements of chance-determined durations, is the most oft-noted example). These compositional procedures were part of Cage’s larger Zen Buddhist-inspired project to withdraw subjectivity from the artistic process in order to allow reality—thought in aural terms, noise—to emerge from its obscurity—as sound.

Extending Cage’s musical ideas to the visual and spatial arts, Maciunas coined the term *concretism*, to refer to an anti-illusionistic practice that avoids traditional artistic devices (such as mimesis or symbolism) in order to present concrete reality itself (Maciunas, 1990). In practice, the Fluxus artists developed a range of innovative approaches to the problem of presenting reality. For example, Robert Watts used humor in his *trompe l’oeil* work *TV Dinner* (1965)—a photo-embossed placemat featuring a life-size image of a Swanson’s TV dinner—to comment on the reality of postwar American culture. By contrast, Yoko Ono took a psychological approach to representing reality in her 1965 performance of *Cut Piece* at Carnegie Recital Hall (memorialized in a 16mm black-and-white film by Albert and David Maysles), which revealed a variety of responses—some quite callous—to her simple appeal to audience members “to cut a small piece of the performer’s clothing to take with them” (Ono, 1970).

The Invention of the Event Score.

In 1963 Maciunas produced a second manifesto with multiple dictionary definitions of the term *flux* interspersed with crude handwritten declarations in order to associate Fluxus with both bodily discharge (“discharge from the bowels”) and political revolution (the desire to purge the world of “dead art”). The third and final definition of *flux* cited in the manifesto is a chemical one, and Maciunas exploits its reference to *fusion* in order to drive home his political point: “Fuse the cadres of cultural social & political revolutionaries into united front & action” (1963). While in this manifesto Maciunas introduced the idea of chemical fluctuation it was actually an earlier text by George Brecht, a chemist by profession and painter by passion, that probed Fluxus's interdisciplinary relationship to science, particularly the kinetic theory of gases (Brecht, 1966). In *Chance-Imagery*, penned in 1957 but published a decade later, Brecht mounts various examples (such as the melting of an ice cube) to argue that natural processes can be ascertained only in terms of probability. In this light, Brecht considers various chance-procedures in the arts—including Cage’s compound chance procedures, the Surrealist *cadavre exquis*, coins, dice, and *objets trouvés*—and concludes that the production of images “by a lack of conscious design” is a proper method to compensate for human bias in apprehending natural processes. Ultimately, however, Brecht’s goal is not accuracy but rather to blend scientific methods with those employed for spiritual awakening. Having studied Zen Buddhism with D. T. Suzuki, as did Cage, Brecht advanced these chance procedures in order to apprehend structures of experience that frame the changing states of nature as a “unified reality” (Brecht, 1966).

The event score emerged circa 1960 in New York City in a number of guises—notably, as a performance instruction, a mailer, and as a gallery object. Brecht's *Three Aqueous Events* (1961) is a notable example of the way in which the event score incorporates an interest in the “changing states of nature” with Cagean indeterminacy. After the title, the score consists of three words printed in a vertical column down the center of the page with each word punctuated by a simple black dot. From top to bottom it reads, “Ice Water Steam” (Brecht, 1961). Without adjectives or proper nouns the score leaves specific instances of the processes invoked to the interpreter, thus emphasizing the fact that water is regularly solidifying, liquefying, and vaporizing. The events that resulted from event scores such as this were equally spare, unlike the baroque “happenings” of Allan Kaprow or Jean-Jacques Lebel. As Ono defined the event in 1966, it is “not an assimilation of all the other arts as Happening seems to be, but an extrication from the various sensory perceptions” (Ono, 1970).

Event scores were circulated to a network of friends and, to aid in their distribution, a number of relatively inexpensive compilations were published and later distributed through the Mail-Order Warehouse/Fluxshop. For instance, in 1963 Young collaborated with Mac Low and Maciunas to publish *An Anthology* with a variety of contributors including, among others, Young, Brecht, Cage, Ono, Higgins, Mac Low, Paik, Williams, Richard Maxfield, Henry Flynt and Toshi Ichiyanagi, Walter De Maria, Ray Johnson (founder of the New York Correspondence School), Simone Morris (the dancer also known as Simone Forti), Dieter Roth, Robert Morris, and Terry Riley and Christian Wolff. The variety of practices represented by these contributors demonstrates the way the event score emerged in tandem with shifts occurring throughout the art world at the intersection of the two-dimensional arts (particularly visual art and concrete poetry) and the time-based arts (performance, installation, music, and dance). While these early collections might be considered artists’ books they were designed in accordance with the principles of the event

score. For example, *Water Yam*, also published in 1963, is a collection of Brecht's scores designed by Maciunas and typeset by Tomas Schmit in order to increase anticipation for the Yam Festival, which Brecht coordinated with Watts. Thus, *Water Yam* was designed as an event score with many parts and the festival was its event.

Event scores encourage a particular mode of attention in order to illuminate simple occurrences, acts, or tasks. Young, in particular, takes up the issue of attention in his event scores. As in his drone music, Young's event scores emphasize the way the repetition of a simple action over time, while seeming to narrow the scope of the viewer's attention, in fact broadens it. For instance, in Young's 1960 *Composition #10*: "Draw a straight line and follow it" the interpreter of this score might appreciate the possibilities that reside within this simple act, and, indeed, Young took this score to be instructive for his life. Duchamp's notion of the *inframince* (ultrathin) was likely an influence, as well as the idea of "ma" in Japanese philosophy, wherein the space between elements, rather than being thought of as empty, is considered a place of relationality (Galliano, 2006, p. 257). The incompleteness of the event score thus provides the opportunity for the interpreter to step into this site between the score and its interpretation, between the viewer's perception and the unseen events that occur every day (such as vaporization or the creation of a line that extends from points), and to perceive it as full.

Whereas in *Chance-Imagery* Brecht proposed a variety of sources for this depersonalized form of attention—including Dada, Duchamp, Surrealism, advances in scientific method, the modern art of Jackson Pollock, the compositional practice of Cage, and "Oriental thought"—Maciunas argued that it was conscious engagement with the revolutionary impulse of anti-art that made it possible for the interpreter to participate in the work of art. The discrepancy between these two positions would come to a head at composer Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Originale*, performed at Judson Hall in New York City on 8 September 1964. Although *Originale* was performed by non-musicians it retained conventional aspects of European classical music and thus, among others, Maciunas, Flynt, Ben, Ay-O, and Takako Saito picketed the event as elitist, while other Fluxus artists—including Brecht, Knowles, Higgins, Paik, Mac Low, Charlotte Moorman, and Joe Jones—participated. For some members Fluxus officially ended on the pavement outside Judson Hall. Maciunas threatened the participants with expulsion, a threat that was, in turn, refused by the participating artists. Brecht was characteristically philosophical about the scandal, noting that this division was inherent to Fluxus (Brecht, 1964). Soon after, however, Brecht would leave the United States to open a store for useless ideas and objects with Robert Filliou in Villefranche-sur-Mer in the south of France. Brecht and Filliou christened the shop *La Cédille Qui Sourit* (The Cedilla That Smiles). The project would soon fail, and in 1968 Brecht and Filliou sent out flyers announcing a new project titled *La Fête Permanente*, or, the *Eternal Network*. The *Eternal Network* was intended to encourage a mode of attention that frames not only events as they occur within a particular duration but all events everywhere and for all time. Filliou claimed that the *Eternal Network* would ultimately replace Maciunas's avant-garde idea of the collective, since a network operates without the artist's volition (Robertson, 1977).

Fluxus Antinomies.

While internal disputes, such as the clash at the 1964 production of Stockhausen's *Originale*, were often painful for the Fluxus members involved these crises also prevented

stasis within the collective and energized the artistic practice of the members. Two fundamental antinomies— contradictions that exist between two apparently valid principles—can be understood to underpin Fluxus activities, including its disputes. These are the object/time antinomy and the choice/anti-subjectivism antinomy.

The majority of the Fluxus artists championed the event score as a means to implicate the viewer in the work's completion. Joseph Beuys and Dieter Roth, however, focused on the temporal processes inherent to the life of materials as a means to achieve the same goal. This interest in the life of materials can be traced to the influence of the Nouveaux Réalistes in France and Gutai in Japan (both flowering just prior to Fluxus). Roth, for example, incorporated decaying foodstuffs and excrement into his sculptures and multiples while Beuys developed a personal language of materials (using, notably, fat and felt) as well as a shamanic persona, thereby refuting both the spare style of the event score and Maciunas's insistence on artistic anonymity. While both Roth and Beuys participated in Fluxus activities, they eventually distanced themselves from Maciunas in order to continue their investigations unhampered.

The conflict between Beuys and Roth on one side and Maciunas on the other revolves around the assumption that the event score is at odds with a florid, temporally expansive, materials-based practice. According to Maciunas, the event score and chance procedures are intended to locate concrete reality and not remystify it. As noted above, Maciunas employed the term *concretism* in *Neo-Dada in Music, Theater, Poetry, Art* to draw this distinction and argue that Fluxus is focused on the concrete object and *not* its extension in time, exemplifying this by stating that unless a vocal piece refers to the sounding object ("its true source") it is not concrete (Maciunas, 1990). The goal of concretism, thought this way, is to direct the viewer's attention to the physical object or body from which sound originates rather than the temporal sound produced. However, as Maciunas elsewhere notes in the same text, Fluxus draws the viewer's attention to the concrete object or gesture *within a time span*—that is, within the time span it takes for the object to manifest or transform in time ("a flight of a butterfly"). This temporal span—more accurately called "duration" by philosopher Henri Bergson—necessarily involves the disappearance of the object, either through its decay or transformation, or due to the object withdrawing from the viewer's gaze.

Ono's works address the object/time antinomy as a complex, phenomenological problem akin to Bergson's theory of duration. In *Apple* (1966)—a sculpture in which an apple sits atop a plastic pedestal with a brass plate affixed with the word *Apple* etched upon it—the apple withers while the brass plaque speaks to another apple—a timeless apple. And in her Fluxfilms—shot by Peter Moore on a high-speed camera that reduces the speed of the film—Ono further explores the problem. In *Film No. 5 (Smile)* (1968), for example, the camera focuses on John Lennon's face as it prepares to smile, smiles, and relaxes. The film runs fifty-two minutes, and the viewer is challenged to isolate the precise moment when Lennon actually smiles. However, despite the fact that the film is subtitled "Smile," *Film No. 5* demonstrates the impossibility of perceiving a smile at the pace given by the film, thus suggesting that either there is no "true source," that there is no actual moment of smiling, or that the precise instance of smiling is imperceptible to the viewer.

A second Fluxus antinomy is based upon the impossibility of reconciling Duchamp's assertion that the artist chooses the art object with Cage's advancement of methods

intended to subvert the artist's will (anti-subjectivism). While most Fluxus artists engaged with this problem obliquely, Ben Vautier addressed it directly. In 1978 Ben explained that, "Fluxus exists and creates from the knowledge of this post-Duchamp (the readymade) and post-Cage the depersonalization of the artist situation" (Vautier, 1978, p. 52), and the bulk of his works seek to explore the contradiction inherent to this dual paternity. For, although Duchamp advocated indifference in his notion of artistic choice, this in no way squares with Cage's Zen-inspired anti-subjectivism. In order to expose the impossibility of inhabiting both positions Ben signed all manner of metaphysical states including death and the universe. In his 1961 "Dieu" series, for example, Ben issued a written declaration: "I Ben, display, sign and sell God." As the declaration explains, a client might "buy" God, an entity that is purported to exist within an empty black box, for approximately 30 francs, although the exact price is determined by the cubic dimensions of the contents. One box from this series reads: "Attention this box contains God in a work of art" (1979). In his numerous texts Ben argues that these two seemingly oppositional positions ultimately fold into one another. The Duchampian notion of artistic choice, Ben argues, is clearly a form of egoism but Cagean depersonalization (what Ben calls "anti-egoism") is also egoism, as it veers toward the desire to be different, a desire that is quickly commodified as authorship within a marketplace economy. Thus, in 1965 Ben created a series of draped banners reading "To change art destroy ego." Not unlike Andy Warhol or, more recently, Barbara Kruger, Ben's sardonic propositions have found a home in the marketplace, and they are now featured on billboards, and embossed on bags, notebooks, and cards for sale throughout France, where the artist lives and works.

In an effort to reconcile the antinomies inherent to Fluxus activities Higgins put forth the idea of the "horizon metaphor," an idea he derived from the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer. The viewer of a Fluxus event, Higgins writes, "has his or her own horizon of experience. He or she watches the performance, and the horizons are matched up together...When the horizons fuse, wholly or in part, they are bent, warped, displaced, altered" (Higgins, 1997, p. 186). While this account in no way resolves the oppositions that reside within Fluxus it does suggest a way to understand the unique manner in which the viewer is positioned by the work. In Higgins's reading each Fluxus event score, event, object, concert, film, or kit exists as a game in which a viewer seeks to align the work's pattern of reality with her or his own and thereby alter her or his experiential horizon. By Higgins' definition this game operates in both directions. The horizon that lies beyond the viewer, reality as it were, is also altered by the viewer, and, hence, Higgins implies—though not in the political sense maintained by Maciunas—that Fluxus is world-changing.

Fluxus Today.

Due in part to the 2008 acquisition of the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection by the New York Museum of Modern Art, Fluxus is currently an object of scholarly interest. In 2013, for example, a number of U.S. exhibitions focused on Fluxus and related movements in Japan. These included "Tokyo 1955–1970: A New Avant-Garde" at NYMOMA (featuring Fluxus artists Ono, Ay-O, and Shiom, as well the Fluxus-related Hi Red Center), an important Gutai exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum, and another at the San Francisco Art Institute that yoked Gutai to contemporary art. In addition, after 1989 and the fall of the Iron Curtain, scholarship on Fluxus activities in Eastern Europe increased. For example, the traveling exhibition "Fluxus East: Fluxus Networks in Central Eastern Europe" (2008–2011) compiled information (including secret police files) on Fluxus

activities in the former Eastern Bloc, featuring artists such as Milan Knížák and György Galántai along with Fluxus artists in the West. The exhibition also introduced “artistic practices inspired by Fluxus,” such as that of the contemporary collective Azorro Group located in Warsaw and Krakow.

Fluxus has had an impact on a variety of sectors within contemporary art, particularly the informational arts. For example, the event score inspired the elaboration of instructional art and its translation to the Internet. A notable example is “Do It”—a project that grew from a conversation in 1993 between artists Christian Boltanski and Bertrand Lavier, and curator Hans Ulrich Obrist to become a series of publications featuring artists’ instructions, and later an online site that allows users to respond by uploading images and texts (Obrist and Altshuler, 1997; Obrist, 2013). Similarly, “Learning to Love You More” (2002–2009) by Miranda July and Harrell Fletcher is a successful instructional art project that, though now closed to submissions, persists online (July and Fletcher, 2007). Fluxus also contributed to new forms of Internet art in the 1980s and '90s. For example, Fluxus kits, mailers, films, publications, and periodicals—as well as Filliou’s and Brecht’s Eternal Network and Johnson’s New York Correspondence School—contributed to the development of alternative online communities (such as Rhizome), net.art, the open-source movement, and coded interventions (such as those practices by Eva and Franco Mattes under the auspices of 0100101110101101.org). The intermedial work of Paik, in particular, encouraged contemporary artists to engage directly with technology in a creative and irreverent manner (Smith, 2005, pp. 131–35). In a circular manner, the rise of Internet art also led to the late flowering of interest in Fluxus and Mail Art in the 1980s and '90s (Held, 2005, p. 104). However, Fluxus’s influence may be detected in less obvious corners of the artworld as well. For instance, while many contemporary artists turn away from technology and conceptual art in favor of craft production, some of these artists cite Fluxus as an inspiration. Sculptor Grayson Perry, for example, cites Beuys as a primary inspiration for his work. Indeed, Perry’s attention to materials, keen interest in social structures, and performative, cross-dressing persona signal an interest in mining Fluxus contradictions in a new way. This example suggests that Fluxus may bear an influence on contemporary practices that do not outwardly resemble the better-known Fluxus works produced in the 1960s and '70s.

[See also Aleatoric Processes; Anti-Art; Avant-Garde; Cage, John; Conceptual Art; Conceptualism; Contemporary Art; Duchamp, Marcel; Japanese Aesthetics; and Performance Art.]

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