

The

FLUXUS

Reader

EDITED BY KEN FRIEDMAN

AE ACADEMY EDITIONS

THE FLUXUS READER

Edited by KEN FRIEDMAN

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Much Fluxus research has been made possible by four individuals who have been responsible for publishing the three largest series of publications of Fluxus material: objects, scores, and multiples, books and catalogues. George Maciunas' Fluxus editions launched Fluxus publishing as an organized phenomenon. Dick Higgins' Something Else Press books brought Fluxus to the larger world. Gilbert Silverman and Jon Hendricks are responsible for the catalogues that have become the largest series of Fluxus research documents.

Several collections are central to the research on Fluxus. Three major collections are now readily accessible. Hanns Sohm's Archiv Sohm is now located at Stadtsgalerie Stuttgart and Jean Brown's collection has become The Jean Brown Archive at the Getty Center for the History of the Arts and Humanities. The collections and archives of Fluxus West and my own papers have been distributed among several museums and universities. The largest body of material is located at Alternative Traditions in Contemporary Art at University of Iowa, the Tate Gallery Archives in London and the Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth College. Substantial holdings that once belonged to Fluxus West are now part of the Museum of Modern Art's Franklin Furnace Archive Collection, the Museum of Modern Art's Performance Art Archives, the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art, the Ken Friedman Collection at the University of California at San Diego and the Henie Onstad Art Center in Oslo. All of these holdings are available for research, publication and exhibition under the normal conditions of research archives and museum collections. A number of important private collections are available under restricted access or by special appointment. Most notable among these are the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Foundation in New York and Detroit, Archivio Conz in Verona, and MuDiMa in Milan.

The documentation section was edited by Owen Smith. I developed the first versions of the documentation at Fluxus West in 1966 and supported improved versions over the years since. Project scholars and editors included Nancy McElroy, Kimberley Ruhe, Matthew Hogan, Judith Hoffberg, Giorgio Zanchetti, and James Lewes. Hoseon Cheon, Dick

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The Norwegian School of Management has been generous with resources, time and freedom for research and publishing. The poetic and playful dimensions of Fluxus often involve intensely practical phenomena. We wanted to work with industry. Our experiments in media and industrial production, successes and failures both, led me to doctoral work in leadership and human behavior. Our ideas on design, manufacturing and marketing took me to Finland and then to Norway. This is the place to thank Lisa Gabriellson and Esa Kolehmainen who brought Fluxus into a working industrial organization at Arabia in Helsinki, and this is the place to thank John Bjørnbye, Ole Henrik Moe and Per Hovdenakk, who brought me to Norway, together with the American Scandinavian Foundation, which funded a year of research.

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Here, I thank also Ditte Mauritzon Friedman. Canon and deacon of Lund Cathedral, psychotherapist-in-training, and wife, Ditte has enriched my perspective on Fluxus and on life. And I thank Oliver Mauritzon, walking companion, philosopher and the first taster of whatever I happen to be cooking for Ditte.

Another wise man made this book possible in many ways. He was the secret patron of Fluxus West. The Fluxus West projects in San Diego, San Francisco and around the world did more than anyone thought possible on limited resources and money. As creative and resourceful as it was possible to be, however, money often ran out. That was when our patron stepped in. He made it possible for me to follow my passion for knowledge. He helped me to organize and preserve the collections that are now housed in museums and archives around the world. He was profoundly generous, the more profound considering that he was a patron of the arts on a college professor's salary. I dedicate this book to an outstanding human being: advisor and patron, friend and father, Abraham M Friedman.

THE CONTRIBUTORS

The scholarly content of *The Fluxus Reader* has been the product of a laboratory of ideas, a virtual colloquium. It has been my pleasure here to work with a number of the leading scholars now writing on Fluxus. The authors of the history chapters wrote doctoral dissertations on various aspects of Fluxus. **Owen Smith** is associate professor of art history at the University of Maine. He wrote on George Maciunas at University of Washington. Simon Anderson is head of art history, theory and criticism at the School of the Art Institute Chicago. He wrote on Fluxshoe and British Fluxus at the Royal College of Art. **Hannah Higgins** is assistant professor of art history at University of Illinois at Chicago. She wrote on the interpretation and reception of early Fluxus at University of Chicago.

The authors of the theory chapters have specialized in different aspects of intermedia. **Ina Blom** is doctoral research fellow in art history at the University of Oslo. She has written extensively on Fluxus and intermedia. Craig Saper is assistant professor of criticism at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. He has written on intermedia, multimedia, artist publishing and visual poetry. **David Doris** is a doctoral fellow in art history at Yale University. The chapter on Fluxus and Zen was adapted from his award-winning master's thesis at City University of New York.

The chapters on critical and historical perspectives have been written by three internationally renowned scholars in art history, art theory and literary theory. **Stephen Foster** is professor of art history at University of Iowa and director of the Fine Arts Dada Archive. **Estera Milman** is associate professor of art history at the University of Iowa and founding director of Alternative Traditions in Contemporary Art. **Nicholas Zurbrugg** is professor of English and head of the department of English, Media and Culture Studies at De Montfort University.

The section titled 'Three Fluxus Voices' is the result of two unique collaborations. The first is an extensive interview between Fluxus artist **Larry Miller** and Fluxus co-founder George Maciunas. Made just before Maciunas's death in 1978, it sheds important light on Maciunas' view of Fluxus. The second is the only known interview with Maciunas' wife, Billie. This interview was recorded by **Susan Jarosi**, doctoral candidate in art history at Duke University. The section ends with Larry Miller's own thoughts on what it is to think about Fluxus. Here, I beg the reader's indulgence. There could have been, perhaps there should have been any number of other views, other chapters. Time and space limit every book. I selected these three voices because they are unique and because they form a conceptually elegant triad. If there is a clear message in the sections on history, theory, critical and historical perspectives, it is that there no way to encapsulate Fluxus in any neat paradigm. On another occasion, and for other reasons, I will present other voices: here, time, a page limit and circumstance dictate a useful choice that makes available an interview with ideas that have never before been published.

The section titled 'Two Fluxus Theories' makes available the thoughts of two Fluxus artists who have attempted to theorize Fluxus and place it in a larger intellectual and cultural framework. The first is by **Dick Higgins**, Fluxus co-founder and legendary publisher of Something Else Press. The second is my own: as editor of this book, I feel obliged to put my thoughts on the table here, too.

FLUXUS READER WEB SITE

The World Wide Web is making a vital difference to many fields of human endeavor. The arts and scholarship have been particularly well served by this medium.

One of the most important developments for research and writing on Fluxus is a consortium of five major universities and museums with a key focus on Fluxus and intermedia. These five are developing a Web-based series of virtual resources for scholarship and reflection on contemporary art. University of Iowa's Alternative Traditions in Contemporary Art, the University of California Museum of Art at Berkeley, Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth, Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and Franklin Furnace in New York maintain the site. ATCA at University of Iowa will be hosting a wide variety of scholarly and pictorial materials that dovetail with the material in this book, and a portion of the site will be dedicated to expanding and reflecting on the specific chapters presented here.

The URL is: <<http://www.lib.uiowa.edu/spec-coll/resources/atca.html>>. Please visit the site.

INFORMATION AND IDEAS

I welcome queries and idea on any of the subjects covered in this book. If you have questions or thoughts you would like to pursue, please contact me at:

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KEN FRIEDMAN: INTRODUCTION: A TRANSFORMATIVE VISION OF FLUXUS

A little more than thirty years ago, George Maciunas asked me to write a history of Fluxus. It was the autumn of 1966. I was sixteen then and living in New York after dropping out of college for a term. George had enrolled me in Fluxus that August. Perhaps he saw me as a scholar, perhaps simply as someone with enough energy to undertake and complete such a project.

Not long after, I grew tired of New York and I was ready to move back to California. That was when George appointed me director of Fluxus West. Originally intended to represent Fluxus activities in the western United States, Fluxus West became many things. It became a centre for spreading Fluxus ideas, a forum for Fluxus projects across North America – outside New York – as well as parts of Europe and the Pacific, a travelling exhibition centre, a studio in a Volkswagen bus, a publishing house and a research programme. These last two aspects of our work led George to ask me once again to take on a comprehensive, official history of Fluxus. I agreed to do it. I didn't know what I was getting into.

This history project was never completed. In part, I lacked the documentation, and despite gathering documents and material for years, I never did accumulate the material I should have done to carry out the job. Moreover, I found that it was the ideas in Fluxus that interested me most, far more than the specific deeds and doings of a specific group of artists. While I am a scholar in addition to being an artist, my interest in Fluxus does not focus on documentation or archival work.

The documents and works I did collect have not gone to waste. They found homes in museums, universities and archives, where they are available to scholars who do want to write the history of Fluxus, as well as to scholars, critics, curators and artists who want to examine Fluxus from other perspectives. The history that I never finished gave rise to several projects and publications that shed light on Fluxus in many ways. This book is one of them.

The key issue here is explaining a 'how' and 'why' of Fluxus. Emmett Williams once wrote a short poem on that how and why, writing 'Fluxus is what Fluxus does – but no one knows whodunit.' What is it that Fluxus does? Dick Higgins offered one answer when he wrote, 'Fluxus is not a moment in history, or an art movement. Fluxus is a way of doing things, a tradition, and a way of life and death.' For Dick, as for George, Fluxus is more important as an idea and a potential for social change than as a specific group of people or collection of objects.

As I see it, Fluxus has been a laboratory, a grand project summed up by George

Maciunas' notion of the 'learning machines'. The Fluxus research programme has been characterised by twelve ideas: globalism, the unity of art and life, intermedia, experimentalism, chance, playfulness, simplicity, implicativeness, exemplativism, specificity, presence in time and musicality. (These twelve ideas are elaborated in the chapter titled 'Fluxus and Company'.) These ideas are not a prescription for how to be a Fluxus artist. Rather they form a description of the qualities and issues that characterise the work of Fluxus. Each idea describes a 'way of doing things'. Taken together, these twelve ideas form a picture of what Fluxus is and does.

The implications of some ideas have been more interesting – and occasionally more startling – than they may at first have seemed. Fluxus has been a complex system of practices and relationships. The fact that the art world can sometimes be a forum for philosophical practice has made it possible for Fluxus to develop and demonstrate ideas that would later be seen in such frameworks as multimedia, telecommunications, hypertext, industrial design, urban planning, architecture, publishing, philosophy, and even management theory. That is what makes Fluxus so lively, so engaging and so difficult to describe.

We can grasp the phenomenon through the lens of several disciplines. One such discipline is history, and there is a history of Fluxus to be told. While the core issues in Fluxus are ideas, Fluxus ideas were first summarised and exemplified in the work of a specific group of people. This group pioneered these ideas at a time when their thoughts and practices were distinct and different from many of the thoughts and practices in the world around them, distinct from the art world and different from the world of other disciplines in which Fluxus would come to play a role. To understand the how and why of Fluxus, what it is and does, it is important to understand 'whodunit', to know what Fluxus was and did. History therefore offers a useful perspective.

Fluxus, however, is more than a matter of *art* history. Literature, music, dance, typography, social structure, architecture, mathematics, politics ... they all play a role. Fluxus is, indeed, the name of a way of doing things. It is an active philosophy of experience that only sometimes takes the form of art. It stretches across the arts and even across the areas between them. Fluxus is a way of viewing society and life, a way of creating social action and life activity. In this book, historians and critics offer critical and historical perspectives. Other writers frame the central issues in other ways.

The ideal book would be three times as long as this one is and impossible to publish. I therefore chose to focus on issues to open a dialogue with the Fluxus idea. Rather than teaching the reader everything there is to know about Fluxus, this book lays out a map, a cognitive structure filled with tools, markers and links to ideas and history both.

Fluxus has now become a symbol for much more than itself. That companies in the knowledge industry and creative enterprise use the name Fluxus suggests that something is happening, both in terms of real influence and in terms of fame, the occasional shadow of true influence. Advertising agencies, record stores, performance groups, publishers and even young artists now apply the word Fluxus to what they do. It is difficult to know whether we should be pleased, annoyed, or merely puzzled.

Tim Porges once wrote that the value of writing and publishing on Fluxus rests not on what Fluxus has been but on 'what it may still do'. If one thread binds the chapters in this book, it is the idea of a transformative description that opens a new discourse. A new and

appropriately subtle understanding of Fluxus leaves open the question of what it may still do. That's good enough for me.

Owen Smith and I were discussing this book one afternoon. We reached the conclusion that it is as much a beginning as a summation. If, as George Brecht said in the 1980s, 'Fluxus has Fluxed', one can equally well say what someone – Dick? Emmett? – said a few years later: 'Fluxus has not yet begun.' There is an on-line discussion group called Fluxlist where the question of what lies between those two points has been the subject of much recent dialogue. One of the interesting aspects of the conversation has been the philosophical subtlety underlying the several positions. Those who believe there is a Fluxus of ideas and attitudes more than of objects feel that there is, indeed, a future Fluxus. This Fluxus intersects with and moves beyond the Fluxus of artefacts and objects. This vision of Fluxus distinguishes between a specific Fluxus of specific artists acting in time and space and what René Block termed 'Fluxism', an idea exemplified in the work and action of the historic Fluxus artists.

Beginning or summation, this book offers a broad view of Fluxus. It is a corrective to the hard-edged and ill-informed debates on Fluxus that diminish what we set out to do by locating us in a mythic moment of time that never really existed. Fluxus was created to transcend the boundaries of the art world, to shape a discourse of our own. A debate that ends Fluxus with the death of George Maciunas is a debate that diminishes George's idea of Fluxus as an ongoing social practice. It also diminishes the rest of us, leaving many of the original Fluxus artists disenfranchised and alienated from the body of work to which they gave birth. In the moments that people attempt to victimise us with false boundaries, I am drawn to two moments in history.

The first moment occurred in sixth-century Chinese Zen. It reflects the debates around Fluxus in an oddly apt way, and not merely because Fluxus is often compared with Zen. It involved the alleged split between the Northern and Southern schools of Zen. The real facts of the split seem not to have involved the two masters who succeeded the Sixth Patriarch, one in the North and one in the South, Shen-hsiu and Hui-neng. The long and tangled stories of schism seem rooted, rather, in the actions of Hui-neng's disciple Shen-hui and those who followed him. It has little to do with the main protagonists who respected and admired each other to the point that the supposedly jealous patriarch Shen-hsiu in fact recommended Hui-neng to the imperial court where he, himself, was already held in high renown. This is like much of the argument around Fluxus. It seems that the protagonists of one view or another, the adherents of one kind of work or another, those who need to establish a monetary value for one body of objects or another, seem to feel the need to do so by discounting, discrediting or disenfranchising everyone else. That makes no sense in a laboratory, let alone a laboratory of ideas and social practice.

The other moment I consider took place a few years ago, when Marcel Duchamp declared that the true artist of the future would go underground. To the degree that Fluxus is a body of ideas and practices, we are visible and we remain so. To the degree that Fluxus is or may be an art form, it may well have gone underground already. If this is true, who can possibly say that Fluxus is or isn't dead? We don't know 'whodunit', we don't know who does it and we certainly don't know who may do it in the future.

PART V
TWO FLUXUS THEORIES

DICK HIGGINS: FLUXUS: THEORY AND RECEPTION¹

This is not an introductory text on Fluxus. To explain what Fluxus is and was and where it came from is not my primary purpose at this time, having already done so in my long essay 'Postface' (1962) and my short one, 'A Child's History of Fluxus', among other pieces as well. Others have done so too, of course, each in his or her own way. My concern here is to try and deal with some aspects and questions in Fluxus – what do we experience when we encounter a Fluxus work? Why is it what it is? Is there anything unique about it? And so on.

DOES FLUXUS HAVE ANTECEDENTS?

Fluxus appears to be an iconoclastic art movement, somewhat in the lineage of the other such movements in our century – Futurism, Dada, Surrealism, and so on. And, indeed, the relationship with these is a real and valid one.

Futurism was the earliest such movement. It was founded by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in the first decade of the twentieth century, was proclaimed on the front page of the *Figaro littéraire* and elsewhere, and it developed a group character which was sustained from its early years until the Second World War. Marinetti was its leader, though not in a totally dictatorial sense. Its members were supposed to follow along pretty much with what he said, but he forgave them when they didn't. He proclaimed *parole in libertà* ('words at liberty', a form of visual poetry); *teatro sintetico* ('synthetic theatre', that is, performance pieces that were synthesised out of extremely raw-seeming materials, similar to the *musique concrète* of the post-Second World War era); simultaneity, a time-related form of Cubism; a music of noises, and many such formal innovations or unconventional arts that are still worth exploring. If, however, one hears the existing recordings of, for example, the music of Luigi Russolo, one of the main Futurist composers, one finds something far more conventional than what one might have expected from reading his famous *Arte dei rumori* ('Art of noises') manifesto. One hears, to be sure, amazing noises being made over a loudspeaker – roars, scraping sounds and suchlike. But one hears these superimposed over rather crudely harmonised scales. If one goes into the content of Marinetti's writings, one finds him a very old-fashioned daddy-type, rather hard on women, celebrating war as an expression of masculine virtue, and so on. Even the visual art, in the works of Giacomo Balla and others, being the summit of Futurist fine art, is rather conventional with regard to its formal structures and implications – it is certainly rather conservative when compared to the innovative Cubism of France at the same time. In other words, Futurism is a goddess,

nineteenth-century style, with one leg in the future and one in the conventional past and not too much in the present. Considering that the two legs are moving in opposite directions, it is no wonder that Futurism falls a little flat in the evolution of modern sensibility. Of course, it is of great technical and historical interest, as a starter and a precursor, but its works have only moderate intrinsic interest as works.

Dada, when one looks at it in isolation, seems more unique than it is. But most of the Dada artists and writers came out of Expressionism; and if one compares the Dada materials with those of their immediate antecedents, they are less unique than one might have imagined. Perhaps an anecdote is appropriate here. In the 1950s and 1960s the journalistic image of Dada had become so extreme, so far from the reality of the work, that Dada was considered to be the limit of the extremely crazy in art – as wild as possible, as droll as possible, simply inexpressibly ‘far-out’, to cite the slang of the time. Thus, early happenings and Fluxus (like the works of Rauschenberg and Johns) were often dismissed as ‘neo-Dada’. This was, of course, extremely annoying and embarrassing to those of us who knew what Dada was or had been. For example, I knew several of the old Dadaists, had been raised on their work, and there was no doubt in my mind that what we happenings and Fluxus people were doing had rather little to do with Dada. Well, returning to my story, in due course I became the director of Something Else Press, a small publishing firm. I knew that before the split between the French and German Dadaists, Richard Huelsenbeck had published an anthology of Dada materials, the *Dada Almanach*; I therefore got his permission to reissue it in facsimile. The response to it was very revealing: I was told that this was ‘not real Dada!’ The material seemed too conservative, far too close to the Expressionism of the pre-First World War years to gibe with the image that my 1960s friends and colleagues had built up in their mind as to what Dada was. Yet Huelsenbeck was not, at the time he did the *Dada Almanach*, a conservative at all. He had published a wildly leftist booklet, *Deutschland muß untergehen!* (‘Germany Must Perish!’), and he saw no difference between political and cultural innovation and revolutionary thinking. His poems were as experimental as those of the other Dadaists, Raoul Hausmann for example. In other words, the journalistic myth had come to replace the substance to such an extent that the substance was overwhelmed.

Surrealism is, of course, an outgrowth of Dada, historically. It was, quite self-consciously, a ‘movement’, unlike Dada, which was more unruly, spontaneous perhaps, and undirected. Surrealism was presided over by the relatively benevolent Trotskyite *littérateur*, André Breton. Breton was much given to café politics, to reading people out of his movement or claiming them for it, proclaiming them and disowning them according to their conformity or non-conformity with the theoretical positions that he built up analogously to Marxist theorising in his various Surrealist manifestos. Ideology may have masked personal feeling in many cases – as if to say, ‘If you hate me, you must be ideologically incorrect’. The commonplace about Surrealism is that it is of two sorts – historical and popular. Historical Surrealism usually refers to what was going on in Breton’s circle from the mid-1920s until the late 1930s in Paris (or in Europe as a whole), usually involving the transformation of social, aesthetic, scientific and philosophical values by means of the liberation of the subconscious. This led, of course, to a kind of art in which fantastic visions were depicted extremely literally. A concern with the subconscious was, of course, typical of the time, and the story is

told of that great liberator of the subconscious, Sigmund Freud, that someone asked him about surrealist art. His reply? Normally, he said, in art he looked to see the unconscious meaning of a work, but in surrealist art he looked to see if there was a conscious one. Well, to return to my main concerns, with the passage of time and of the entry of Surrealism into popular awareness, 'surrealistic' came to be more or less synonymous with 'fantastic' or 'dreamy' in art. Popular Surrealism, then, has little to do with historical Surrealism, although careless critics tend to equate the two.

However, historical Surrealism has a far fuller history than our usual image of it. Breton lived into the 1960s, and as long as he lived, 'Surrealism' as a self-conscious, self-constricted movement continued, with new people joining and old members being obliged to withdraw. During the years of the Second World War, and immediately after, Breton and many of the Surrealists lived in the United States, and their impact is not sufficiently understood either in Europe or America. They became the most interesting presence in the American art world. Magazines such as *VVV* and *View* were the most exciting art magazines of the time. The Surrealists constituted the nucleus of the avant-garde. Some of us who later did Fluxus works were very conscious of this. I, for example, attended school with Breton's daughter Aubée ('Obie', to us) and, being curious about what her father wrote, acquired a couple of his books. Furthermore, from time to time there would be Surrealist 'manifestations', and some of these were similar to the 'environments' out of which happenings developed. These were, in any case, locked into our sensibility, as points of reference in considering our earlier art experiences, and Surrealism was absolutely the prototypical art movement, as such, for Americans at the time.

We shall return to this issue, but I would like to consider a few points along the way:

1 *Fluxus seems to be a series of separate and discrete formal experiments, without much to tie them together. In this way it seems to resemble Futurism. This is a point I will answer when I presently address the actual ontology of Fluxus.*

2 *Fluxus seems to be like Dada – at least like the popular image of Dada – in being crazy, iconoclastic, essentially a negative tendency rejecting all its precedents, and so on. In fact, there is some truth to this; but it is oblique. Fluxus was never so undirected as Dada, never so close to its historical precedents. Dada was, in fact, a point of discussion on those long nights at Ehlhalten-am-Taunus, during the first Fluxus Festival at Wiesbaden in 1962, when George Maciunas, myself, Alison Knowles, and, occasionally, others would talk into the small hours of the morning, trying to determine what would be the theoretical nature of this tendency to which we were giving birth, which we found ourselves participating in. Maciunas was intensely aware of the rivalry between the French and German Dadaists; we wanted to keep our group together and avoid such splits as best we could. What could we do to prevent this fissioning? The answer was to avoid having too tight an ideological line. Maciunas proposed a manifesto during that 1962 festival – it is sometimes printed as a 'Fluxus Manifesto'. But nobody was willing to sign it. We did not want to confine tomorrow's possibilities by what we thought today. That manifesto is Maciunas' manifesto, not a manifesto of Fluxus.*

3 *Surrealism lasted more or less forty years as a viable tendency, and, among other things, spun off a popular version, as I have said, lower-case surrealism. This seemed like a fine model for the Fluxus people. But how could we make Surrealism a model for Fluxus?*

One must, here, bear in mind that Fluxus was something which happened more or less by chance. In the late 1950s there were the Fluxus artists, sometimes thinking of themselves as a group, doing the work that later became known as Fluxus. But the work and the group had no name. We did not consciously present ourselves *to the public* as a group until Maciunas organised his festival at Wiesbaden, intended originally as publicity for the series of publications he intended to issue that were to be called *Fluxus*. The festival caused great notoriety, was on German television, and was repeated in various cities beside Wiesbaden, which is well documented elsewhere and need not concern us here. The point I am getting at here is that in connection with this festival the newspapers and media began to refer to us as *die Fluxus Leute* ('the Fluxus people'), and so here we were, people from very different backgrounds: Knowles, Vostell and Brecht originally painters; Watts a sculptor; Patterson, myself and Paik composers; Williams, myself and Mac Low writers, and so on. Here we were being told that we were the Fluxus people. What *should* that mean? If we were to be identified publicly as a group, should we become one? What did we have in common?

Thus the concept arose of constituting ourselves as some kind of 'collective', Maciunas was particularly pleased by that idea, since he had a leftist background, and, instinctively, a major portion of his approach to organising us and our festivals had at least a metaphorical relationship with leftist ideology and forms. The collective clearly needed a spokesman, to be what a commissar was supposed to be in the USSR but seldom was. Maciunas was not really an artist but a graphic designer, and, as editor of the magazine, seemed the best suited of us to be the commissar of Fluxus, a role he assumed and held until his dying day. In this there was a parallel to the role of André Breton in Surrealism – less monolithic and more ceremonial, of course. We never accepted Maciunas' right to 'read people out of the movement', as Breton did. Occasionally he tried to do this, but the others did not follow him here – we would continue to work with the artist who was banned by Maciunas until, eventually, Maciunas usually got over his own impulse to ban and accepted the artist back into the group. Surrealism without Breton is inconceivable, but valuable though Maciunas' contributions were, Fluxus can and did and does exist without him, in one or another sense.

Thus, to sum up this part of the discussion, we saw Futurism as important, but as having no strong or direct relationship with us in any direct sense. Dada works we admired, but the negative side of it – its rejections and the social dynamic of its members, splitting and feuding – we did not wish to emulate. Surrealism had, perhaps, minimal influence on us so far as form, style and content were concerned, but its group dynamic seemed suitable for our use, subject only to the limitations on Maciunas' authority which lay in our nature as having already been a group with some aspects of our work in common before Maciunas ever arrived on the scene.

Fluxus was (and is) therefore:

- 1 *A series of publications produced and designed by George Maciunas;*
- 2 *The name of our group of artists;*
- 3 *The kind of works associated with these publications, artists and performances which we did (and do) together;*

4 Any other activities which were in the lineage or tradition which was built up, over a period of time, that are associated with the publications, artists or performances (such as Fluxfeasts).

Fluxus was not a movement; it has no stated, consistent programme or manifesto which the work must match, and it did not propose to move art or our awareness of art from point A to point B. The very name, *Fluxus*, suggests change, being in a state of flux. The idea was that it would always reflect the most exciting avant-garde tendencies of a given time or moment – the Fluxattitude – and it would always be open for new people to ‘join’. All they had to do was to produce works which were in some way similar to what other Fluxus artists were doing. Thus, the original core group expanded to include, in its second wave (after Wiesbaden), Ben Vautier, Eric Andersen, Tomas Schmit and Willem de Ridder; in the third wave (by 1966), Geoffrey Hendricks and Ken Friedman; and, in the later waves (after 1970), Yoshimasa Wada, Jean Dupuy, Larry Miller, and others. It was thought of as something that would exist parallel to other developments, providing a rostrum for its members and a purist model for the most technically innovative and spiritually challenging work of its changing time(s). Theoretically, therefore, even though Maciunas died years ago, a new artist could become a Fluxus artist even today, according to that formula. Why he or she might want to or not want to is a different matter, of course, but theoretically it could happen. It would simply require assent among all who were concerned – the other Fluxus artists and the new artist.

Before we leave this matter of antecedents and basic definition, it would be well to mention some individual artists who are sometimes reckoned among the forefathers of Fluxus, and a few of those who are thought of as Fluxus but who are not.

When Ben Vautier speaks of Fluxus, he usually evokes the names of John Cage and Marcel Duchamp so repeatedly that one might well wonder if he had ever heard of any other artists at all. Nor is he the only person of whom this is true.

Well, the fact is, both Cage and Duchamp *are* much admired by us Fluxus artists. Duchamp is admired largely for the interpenetration of art and life in his corpus of works; the ‘art/life dichotomy’, as we used to call it in the early 1960s, is resolved in his works by the interpenetration of the one into the other. In 1919, as is well known, Duchamp exhibited a men’s urinal as an art work – a simple, white and pristine object, classical in form, when one separates it from its traditional function. Since many Fluxus pieces (most notably the performance ones), are often characterised by their taking of a very ordinary event from daily life, and their being framed as art by being presented on a stage in a performance situation, there is a clear connection between such Fluxus pieces and Duchamp’s urinal. For example, one often-performed Fluxus piece is Mieko, formerly ‘Chieko’, Shiomi’s *Disappearing Event*, in which the performer(s) come on stage and smile, gradually relaxing their faces until the smile disappears. This is something which often happens in daily life, and it is refreshing to think of an art performance which is both daily and uninsulated from one’s diurnal, non-art existence – unlike most art works.

Nevertheless, apart from a handful of musical experiments, Duchamp never did a performance work, nor did he have any great interest in them. At Allan Kaprow’s seminal *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*, the first happening presented in New York (in which I performed, and which has some oblique relationship with Fluxus), he was in the audience and I watched

him; he seemed quite uninterested in what he was seeing, and I do not recall that he even stayed through the entire performance. It seems doubtful that he saw any particular connection between the performance that he was watching and his own work. Nor, later, when he knew some of us and our work, did he see such a connection then either. It was always his effort to make life visually elegant; we, on the other hand, chose to leave life alone, to observe it as a biological phenomenon, to watch it come and recede again, and to comment on it and enrich it in or with our works. When one sees a Duchamp work, one knows whether it is sculpture or painting or whatever; with a Fluxus work, there is a conceptual fusion – ‘intermedia’ is the term I chose for such fusions, picking it up from Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who had used it in 1812. Virtually all Fluxus works are intermedial by their very nature: visual poetry, poetic visions, action music and musical actions, happenings and events that are bounded, conceptually, by music, literature and visual art, and whose heart lies in the middle ground among these. Duchamp was an extreme purist; we were not, are not. He therefore makes an awkward ancestor for us, much as we may admire his integrity and his *geste*.

Cage is rather a different matter. Some of us (myself, Brecht, Maxfield, Hansen and others) had studied with Cage. But in his case, like Duchamp, he strove towards ‘nobility’. This, for him, meant the impersonal or the transpersonal – often obtained by means of systems employing chance, in order to transcend his own taste. Mac Low, Brecht, Maxfield and myself used chance systems – ‘aleatoric structures’ – but few of the other Fluxus artists did, at least with any frequency. As for Cage, he seemed to find Fluxus works simplistic when he first saw them. They did (and do) often employ some extreme minimalism which was not one of his concerns. Fluxus pieces can also be quite personal, and this would place them beyond Cage’s pale. His own work is seldom intermedial. Although he writes poems and composes music, one tends to know which is which. They are multimedial, like operas.

Cage and Duchamp should therefore be thought of more as uncles of Fluxus rather than as direct progenitors or father figures. Fluxus, it seems, is a mongrel art, with no distinct parentage or pedigree. There is a relationship to Cage and to Duchamp, but it is mostly by affinity and the example of integrity, rather than developing out of their work in any specific way.

The way I like to sum up this part of the history of ‘it all’ is as follows:

- 1 *Once upon a time there was collage, a technique. Collage could be used in art, not just in visual art.*
- 2 *When collage began to project off the two-dimensional surface, it became the combine (Rauschenberg’s term?).*
- 3 *When the combine began to envelop the spectator it became the environment. I don’t know who coined that term, but it is still a current one.*
- 4 *When the environment began to include live performance, it became the happening (Allan Kaprow’s term, usually capitalised in order to distinguish it from just **anything** that happens).*

5 *When happenings were broken up into their minimal constituent parts, they became events. I first heard that term from Henry Cowell, a composer with whom both John Cage, and, many years later, I myself studied. Any art work can be looked at as a collation of events, but for works that tend to fissure and split into atomised elements, this approach by event seems particularly appropriate.*

6 *When events were minimal, but had maximum implications, they became one of the key things which Fluxus artists typically did (and do) in their performances. That is, I think, the real lineage of Fluxus.*

A further digression into language seems in order here. In Fluxus one often speaks of Fluxfestivals, Fluxconcerts, Fluxpeople, Fluxartists, Fluxevents; I'm afraid I'm to blame for that one. Maciunas was very much interested in the odd byways of Baroque art. I told him about the work of the German Baroque poet, Quirinus Kühlmann (1644–88), who was a messianic sort who was eventually burnt at the stake in Moscow, where he had gone in an effort to persuade the Tsar that he was a reincarnation of Christ. Kühlmann wrote various exciting books of poetry using 'protean' forms and other unconventional means, among which is the *Kühlpsalter*. This includes Kühlpсалms, evidently to be performed on Kühldays by Kühlpeople, and so on. Maciunas was delighted by this, and thenceforth made parallel constructions of his own that were based on it, as mentioned, 'Fluxfests' or 'Fluxfestivals', to be performed by 'Fluxfriends' who were also 'Fluxartists', wearing 'Fluxclothes' and eating 'Fluxfood', and so on. This dissociated such artists, festivals, from regular ones; one was not an 'artist' or even an 'anti-artist' (as many observers accused us of being) but a 'Fluxartist', which was presumably something quite different.

But, to summarise the discussion so far, the better one knows the Fluxworks, the less they resemble Futurism, Dada, Surrealism, Duchamp or Cage.

IS THERE A FLUXUS PROGRAMME?

Fluxus is not a movement. Nonetheless, if Fluxus is to be a useful category for considering work, it must have more of a meaning than simply as the name of Maciunas' proposed publications or the artists associated with it. That is to say, there must be certain points in common among each work in a body of works; they must hang together by more than mere *Zeitgeist*. This means that the works will have some aspects of a movement, though not all of them.

Usually a movement in the arts begins with a group of artists coming together with some common feeling that something needs doing – that is, they believe that the arts have to be moved from point A to point B. A kind of imagery has been neglected and needs to be introduced: Pop Art. Art has become too cold and it must be warmed up, with an appeal to the transrational: romanticism. In other words, there is a programme – whether or not that programme is ever actually written out in a prescriptive manifesto – describing what is to be done and by whom and how, or whether or not the discovery is made by a critic that certain artists have something in common and constitute a group of some sort. Naturally, the world is full of pseudo-movements – works with something or other in common, which some

ambitious critic then claims as a movement or tendency in the hopes of earning professional credits. But if these points are too artificial, if there is no natural grouping which enforces the feeling that these works belong together, it will soon be forgotten as a grouping. But with a real movement, the life of the movement continues to take place until the programme has been achieved; at that point the movement dies a natural death, and the artists if they are still active, go on to do something else.

Fluxus had (and has) no prescriptive programme. Its constituent works were never intended to change the world of cultural artefacts which surrounded them, though it might affect how they were to be seen. Fluxus did not so much attack its surrounding art context as ignore it. Nevertheless, there are some points in common among most Fluxworks: 1 internationalism, 2 experimentalism and iconoclasm, 3 intermedia, 4 minimalism or concentration, 5 an attempted resolution of the art/life dichotomy, 6 implicativeness, 7 play or gags, 8 ephemerality, and 9 specificity. These nine points – they are almost criteria – can be taken up one by one.

Fluxus arose more or less spontaneously in various countries. In Europe there were, in the beginning (others joined shortly afterwards), Wolf Vostell, Nam June Paik, Emmett Williams and Ben Patterson, among others. In the United States there were, besides myself, Alison Knowles, George Brecht, Robert Watts, and the others I have already named; also La Monte Young, Philip Corner, Ay-O and still others. In Japan there were Takehisa Kosugi and Mieko Shiomi and more. Probably there were about two dozen of us in six countries, with little besides our intentions in common (for one thing, not all of us had studied with Cage). Thus, Fluxus was not, for example, the creature of the New York art scene, the West German art scene, the Parisian one or anything else of that sort. It was, from its outset, *international*. At one point Maciunas tried, in structuring his proposed Fluxus collections, to re-nationalise it, but it simply did not work.

It was a coming together of *experimental* artists, that is, of artists who were not interested in doing what all the other artists were doing at the time; they mostly took an iconoclastic attitude towards the conventions of the art establishments of their various countries, and many have since paid the price of doing so, which is obscurity and poverty. This took the form in all cases, however, of experimentation with form rather than content as such. There was the assumption that new content requires new forms, that new forms enable works to have new content leading on to new experiences. In many cases this experimentalism led the artists into intermedia – to visual poetry, some varieties of Happenings, sound poetry and so on.

In order to state such forms in a very concentrated way, a great measure of purity was necessary, so that the nature of the form would be clear. One could not have too many extraneous or diverse elements in a work. This led, inevitably, to a stress on brevity, since there would, by keeping a work short or small, be less time for extraneous elements to enter in and to interfere. This brevity constituted a specific sort of *minimalism*, with as much concentration in a work as possible. La Monte Young wrote a musical piece that could last forever, using just two pitches. In 1982 Wolf Vostell composed a Fluxus opera using just three words from the Bible for his libretto. George Brecht wrote many Fluxus events in his 'Water Yam' series, using just a very few words – three in one event, twenty in another, two in a third, and so on.

Working so close to the minimum possible made the Fluxus artists intensely conscious of the possibility that what they did would not be art at all in any acceptable sense. Yet there was also the sense that most art work was unsatisfying anyway, that life was far more interesting. Thus there was a great deal of attention given to the resolutions of the *art/life dichotomy*, which has already been mentioned.

There was a sense that working with these materials implied an avoidance of the personal expression which was so characteristic of the arts in the period just before Fluxus began, in the early and mid-1950s. But the personal, as a genre, was by no means rejected out of hand in Fluxus if it could be presented in a way that was not overly subjective, which would be limited in relevance. Thus, Alison Knowles performed with her infant daughter, for example.

There was also the danger that working with such minimal material would lead to facile meanderings, to Fluxartists grinding out endless mountains of minimalist pieces which had no real *raison d'être*. Thus a very important criterion for avoiding this danger came to be the notion that a Fluxpiece, whether an object or a performance, should be as *implicative* as possible, that it should imply a maximum of intellectual, sensuous or emotional content within its minimum of material.

In the period just before Fluxus began, the dominant style in visual art had been Abstract Expressionism and in music had been post-Webernite Serialism. Both of these were apt to be extremely solemn and tendentious affairs indeed, and, in fact, seriousness tended to be equated with solemnity. Fluxus tended often to react against this by moving in the direction of humour and gags, introducing a much-needed *spirit of play* into the arts. This also fitted well with the iconoclastic side of Fluxus.

There was also the sense that if Fluxus were to incorporate some element of on-going change – flux – that the individual works should change. Many of the Fluxus objects therefore were made of rather *ephemeral* materials, such as paper or light plastic, so that as time went by the work would either disappear or would physically alter itself. A masterpiece in this context was a work that made a strong statement rather than a work that would last throughout the ages in some treasure vault. Also, most of the Fluxartists were (and are) very poor, and so they could not afford to work with fine and costly materials. Many of Robert Filliou's works have disappeared into the air, for example, though other Fluxworks are, in fact, made of standard materials and will perhaps last (for example, works by Vostell or myself).

Maciunas' background, as I have already mentioned, was in graphic and industrial design. The design approach is usually to design *specific* solutions to specific problems. Designers characteristically distrust universals and vague generalities. Generalisations are used in Fluxus works only when they are handled with all the precision of specific categories and necessities. They must not be vague. This was, typically, Maciunas' approach and it remains typical for us now that he is gone.

Clearly not every work is likely to reflect all nine of these characteristics or criteria, but the more of them a work reflects, the more typically and characteristically Fluxus it is. Similarly, not every work by a Fluxartist is a Fluxwork; typically Fluxartists do other sorts of work as well, just as a collagist might also print, or a composer of piano music might try his hand at writing something for an orchestra. In this way also Fluxus differs from music. *All* the work of a Surrealist was expected to be surrealist. An Abstract Expressionist would be unlikely to

produce a hard-edged geometrical abstraction. But a Vostell would do such a performance piece as *Kleenex* (1962), which he performed at many of the early festivals, while at the same time he was also making his 'décoll/age' paintings and Happenings, which had nothing to do with his Fluxus work except for their frequent intermedial nature. Maciunas used to like to call Fluxus not a movement but a *tendency*; the term is apt here, when one is relating a kind of work to its historical matrix.

Returning to intermedia, not all intermedial works are Fluxus, of course. The large-scale happenings of Kaprow (or Vostell) are not Fluxworks. Nor are most sound or concrete poems. These usually have *only* their intermedial nature in common with Fluxworks, and Fluxus was certainly not the beginning of *intermedia*. Consider, for example, the concrete poetry intermedium of the 1950s and 1960s: it was an immediate predecessor of Fluxus. Furthermore, the visual impulse in poetry is usually present, even if only subtly. Nevertheless, visual poems have been made; that is, poems which are both visual and literary art, since at least the second millennium before Christ, and they are found in Chinese, Vietnamese, Sanskrit, Gujarati, Hindi, Tamil, Turkish, Greek, Latin, Russian, Ukrainian, Polish, Spanish, Portuguese, French, English, Welsh and a dozen or so other literatures. These pieces existed well before 1912 when Guillaume Apollinaire made his *Calligrammes* and so focused the eyes of the poetry world on the potentials of this intermedium. But, with concentration enough – and the other criteria I have mentioned – a visual poem could indeed be a Fluxwork.

Similarly, many intermedial performance works existed before Fluxus. For example, in his anthology *Technicians of the Sacred*, Jerome Rothenberg presented an enormous number of rituals and 'performance poems' from so-called primitive people that, when taken out of their usually sacred context, are so close to Fluxus pieces as to be nearly indistinguishable from them. Even had there been no immediate precedent of Futurist performance pieces, no Dada or Surrealism, Fluxus might still have developed out of the materials of folklore. This point was not lost on Rothenberg, who included several examples of Fluxus performance pieces in his book.

Also, in the nineteenth century, there was a tradition of parlour games which are sometimes very close to Fluxus. My Something Else Press, a publishing project which was in some respect a Fluxus enterprise, published a collection of such games by one William Brisbane Dick, *Dick's One Hundred Amusements* (note, please, it is the author's last name that is referred to in the title, not my first one). Fluxus might well have developed out of this popular cultural tradition as well. In fact, a few of the pieces from both the Rothenberg and Dick collections have been included in Fluxperformances with no noticeable incongruity.

So, supposing one sees a work and wants to know if it is Fluxus or not (whether or not it happens to be by a Fluxartist is not the issue here), all one need do is match it against the nine criteria. The more it matches, the more Fluxus it is, logically enough. Perhaps there are other such criteria, but these nine are sufficient.

Every so often there is a new upsurge of interest in Fluxus. At such times those who were not in the original Fluxus group will present themselves as Fluxartists. The best way of verifying their claims is, of course, to match them against the criteria. The more criteria they match, the more right they have to be included as Fluxartists in projects. This is a much better method of evaluating their claims than simply matching them against a master list of,

let us say, everyone whom Maciunas published in his lifetime. In any case, Maciunas published other works besides pure Fluxus ones, even in that most quintessential of Fluxupublications, the occasional newspaper *CC V TRE*, so such a list would not be very useful except as a beginning. New artists, even those who have never heard of Fluxus or Maciunas may very well do Fluxworks inadvertently if they match the nine criteria.

And if the works in question do *not* match the criteria, then they are not Fluxworks, even if the artist claims they are. What they do may be very interesting, of course. But it is not Fluxus. For example, some museum shows of Fluxus include pieces that do not reflect these criteria. The pieces tend to look rather incongruous in context, and they reflect ill upon the museum director's intelligence more than anything else. The inclusion of big names may be good for the attendance at a show, but it tends to obfuscate or vulgarise something that should be perfectly clear. For example, in 1981 there was an exhibition at Wuppertal in the Federal Republic of Germany, 'Fluxus: Aspekt eines Phänomens' ('Fluxus: Aspects of a Phenomenon'). It was, in the main, a good show, but it showed clearly the question of inclusion. Works were included by Al Hansen. Indeed some of Hansen's performance pieces were, in fact, included in some of the early Fluxus performance festivals. But Hansen did not get along with Maciunas personally, and so he never belonged to the group as such. Nevertheless, his pieces in the show matched most of the criteria, and so in this exhibition they looked fully in place. Surely they were, in fact, Fluxworks. On the other hand, there were also some pieces by Mauricio Kagel, Mary Bauermeister and Dieter Rot – all three of them excellent artists. But their pieces did not match the criteria and they looked rather incongruous in the Fluxus context.

There are some other non-criteria which are worth mentioning in this discussion. These are more in the way of Fluxtraditions, by no means criteria, but relevant to a Fluxdiscussion.

Usually Fluxus performances have been done in costume. Either one wears all white, or one wears a tailcoat, tuxedo or formal evening dress. The former reflects the desire for visual homogeneity, which Maciunas, as a designer, tended to prize. The latter reflects his fondness for the deliberately archaic, formal and obsolescent being presented in a new way. One sees a similar current in his use, in his publications, of extremely ornamental type faces, such as *Romantique*, for the headings, box covers or titles. These contrast with *IBM News Gothic*, the extremely austere type which he used in most of his setting of the body texts in Fluxupublications. This was the version of the sans-serif *News Gothic* which was on the *IBM* typesetter which he used most of the time in the early days of Fluxus. There is no reason in particular why either of these traditions should be preserved; they are not integral to Fluxus. Perhaps it is one of the few areas in Fluxus in which there is room for sentimentality that both traditions have been carried on in Maciunas' absence.

Another typical involvement in Fluxus which is not, *per se*, a criterion, is the emphasis on events that centre around food. Many art works and groups of artists have dealt with food, but in Fluxus it becomes one of the main areas of involvement, perhaps because of its closeness to the art/life dichotomy. There were not only pieces themselves, using apples, glasses of water on pianos, beans, salads, messes made of butter and eggs, eggs alone, loaves of bread and jars of jam or honey, to name just a few that come immediately to mind, but there were also innumerable Fluxfeasts of various sorts: concerts or events which used the feast as a matrix. No doubt these will continue as long as many of the original Fluxpeople are

alive. One might speculate that the reason for this is the typical concern with food on the part of poor or hungry artists. But that seems secondary to the art/life element, and for me it demonstrates that for works which are so much on the border of art and life, art and non-art as Fluxpieces, the convention of a concert is not always suitable. For casual occasions with small audiences, feasts using food art are the equivalent of chamber-music concerts. Feasts have included such non-delicacies as totally flavourless gelatine 'Jello', side by side with delicious loaves of bread in the form of genitals, chocolate bars cast in equally startling shapes, blue soups and so on. Whether or not such foods are totally satisfying from an aesthetic point of view is not the question. The point is, rather, that there are non-determinative but nevertheless typical involvements of Fluxus, side by side with the determinative criteria.

BUT WHAT OF QUALITY? HOW DO WE JUDGE THESE WORKS?

Clearly, with Fluxus the normal theoretical positions do not apply. Fluxus works are simply not intended to do the same things as a Sophoclean tragedy, a Chopin mazurka, or a Jackson Pollock painting, and it is absolutely pointless to make the effort to fit Fluxus into a system to do this. Fluxus may have its thrills, but it is qualitatively different from almost all other art, occidental or oriental – at least with respect to its teleology, its purposes, its ends.

First of all, what is it *not*? It is not mimetic. It does not imitate nature in any narrative way, though it may be 'natural' in the sense of imitating nature in its manner of operation – its craziness, the kinds of patterns that it evokes and that kind of thing. This is only to say that Fluxus could, in its own way, be realistic – very much so. There could be a genre of the Fluxstory, but it would have to be extremely generalised, stripped down to a bare minimum. A kiss – that might be a Fluxstory. But we don't usually think of that as mimesis.

Neither does it fit into the normative romantic/classic or Apollonian/Dionysian dichotomies. Perhaps it has something in common with the romanticism of Novalis and the Schlegel brothers in German Romanticism; but it does attempt the same thing as either romantic or classical art – a world transformed by the imagination or by feeling. It is not visionary, quite the opposite, in fact. In terms of its assumed effects, it does not attempt to move the listener, or viewer, or reader emotionally or in any other way. Neither does it attempt to express the artist emotionally or intellectually. Thus one would not call it expressive in the normal meaning of the term. The Fluxartist does not even *begin* to reveal him- or herself through the work. Perhaps the viewer or listener will reveal him- or herself by experiencing it, at least to him- or herself, but that is a different matter, and we shall return to it later. The important thing here is that the artist is as far away from the assumed eye or ear of the viewer or listener as is possible in an art work. Any expression is objectivised and depersonalised to the point of becoming transpersonal. One does not, as one does in so many works of art, see through the work to the artist. There may be an individual style (most Fluxartists have those), but that, too, is a different matter, more akin to having one's own idiolect than to presenting a subjective vision of something.

Neither are Fluxworks, in the main, pragmatic. That is, they teach nothing except, perhaps, by example. They do not convey moral principles, nor do they present 'correct' political or social views. They may be political, but this is apt to be in a symbolic way – for

example, all the elements of a performance behave democratically, none dominates the others. But this is more to do with the sort of thing that the artist thinks about than anything a viewer is concerned with.

Nor could they be called 'objective' in the T S Eliot sense. They are not simply objects to contemplate; they are too minimal for that, and, often, too active as well – they imply too much. Actually, a few Fluxworks do belong in this vein, but it is not typical.

Neither is the Freudian or symbolic analysis of a Fluxpiece apt to be very rewarding or extensive. One does not have enough materials to work on. Ninety-eight percent of Fluxus pieces have no symbolic content. Their psychological processes are too far and few between. Since the artist is not making a statement of any personal or psychological nature, an analysis of this sort would make very little sense.

A political analysis, Marxist or otherwise, might be interesting, but it would more likely satisfy the critic than the reader of the criticism, since Fluxus is only metaphorically political.

Since meaning is not the point and the conveyors of the meaning are so incidental that only a few patterns can be detected, the semiotics of a Fluxpiece are so minimal as to be problematic or even irrelevant. Of course there are some such conveyors, but these require only the simplest of identifications. No patterns of communication would be likely.

The same holds true of structuralist analysis. The linguistics of Fluxus would be a mental exercise, not that Fluxus lacks its overall grammar, but the typical is only sixty per cent of the corpus, with the rest being exceptions of some kind or another. The whole analysis, rather than developing a meaningful critique or picture, would devolve into hairsplitting distinctions of *langue* and *parole*. Few patterns would be revealed. One might analyse a concert as a whole, but the concert as a work is a fairly arbitrary unit, and each concert tends to be quite different from other concerts (within certain limits), so that a structuralist analysis of recurring patterns would be rather pointless.

And yet a person who attends a Fluxconcert, after the first shock, typically gets caught up in the spirit of it and begins to enjoy it, without consciously knowing why. Perhaps there isn't even any shock. What is happening? To get to the answer for this will take a moment.

There is one critical approach that works – hermeneutics, the methodology of interpretation, both with regard to the artist and to the recipient (the viewer, hearer or reader). This approach, pioneered in recent times (it has an earlier history too) by Martin Heidegger, Ugo Betti, Hans-Georg Gadamer and others in philosophy, can be used to discover the workings of Fluxpieces fairly well. Usually the relationship between the recipient and the work is described in terms of a hermeneutic circle – idea of work, leading to manifestation of work, leading to recipient, leading to recipient's own thought processes, leading to new idea of work, leading to further thought processes, leading to modified perception of work being manifested, leading back to altered perception of the idea of work. In other words, what the recipient sees is coloured by his or her perception of it – and this is an implied part of the piece, even though it may be quite different from what the artist thought of it or how it was manifested by the performer.

In practice, going through the whole hermeneutic circle is a terribly cumbersome process to consider. My own preference is to streamline it by borrowing the horizon metaphor from Gadamer. Taking performance as the standard, for the moment:

The performer performs the work. He or she establishes a horizon of experience – what is done, its implications and whatever style the performer uses are all aspects of this horizon.

The viewer has his or her own horizon of experience. He or she watches the performance, and the horizons are matched up together. To some extent there is a fusion of these horizons (Horizontverschmelzung). When the horizons fuse, wholly or in part, they are bent, warped, displaced, altered. The performance ends, and the horizons are no longer actively fused. The viewer examines his or her horizon. It is changed, for the better or for the worse. The best piece is the one that permanently affects the recipient's horizon, and the worst is the piece which the recipient, acting in good faith, cannot accept at all.

The key processes here are: being conscious of the two horizons, completing the fusion process (by paying close attention to the performance), and then the discovery of the alterations in one's own horizon – as one notices that, for example, the performance has affected how one has been thinking about beans, butter, smiles or eggs. Such criticism focuses a great deal, of course, on the viewer. It more or less, in performance work, ignores the original Fluxcomposer, who may or may not be the same as the performer. But this is only true as far as the viewer is concerned. Why?

Because there is a similar fusion of horizons taking place between the composer and the performer. The composer makes the piece. The performer looks at the performance area and available materials, and only then decides just how to do the piece under the specific conditions of the performance. The performer next matches the horizon which he or she has built up with the horizon of the original piece as he or she sees it. Even if the performer is performing his own work, there will still be something of such a fusion of horizons between X-as-composer and X-as-performer, because X adapts his or her own piece, takes the responsibility of making slight changes – and, if a piece is performed many years after it was written, X has changed and the interaction with the piece suggests different significances. The piece is viewed from many different angles, and different aspects are revealed by each.

Now we can see why the viewer can enjoy the concert without knowing why – instinctively he or she is matching horizons, comparing expectations, participating in the process; the more actively he or she does so, the more likely he or she will be able to enjoy the experience.

Nonetheless, for the viewer, the recipient, the composer is more or less an object of speculation. One wonders who Mieko Shiomi might be – does she have green horns? All one sees is the work that is being done. One does not really have any way of knowing if the performance is staying close to the Fluxcomposer's work or if the performer is taking liberties with it. What the recipient sees is the performance, no more, no less. But in the case of works as minimalist as Fluxus ones are apt to be, the more actively the performance is watched, the more likely one is to enjoy it, as noted above.

A question may well start to go through the mind at this point, a natural question in viewing any unfamiliar art work: 'What is this thing that I am seeing an example of?' That is part of discovering one's meaning for a work. We love to classify. We involve ourselves in the naming of things, frame the work in its context, investigate its taxonomy. Of course, while I am talking about performance work, *any* Fluxwork, literary or fine art, would have analogical processes. But if one goes to a concert of familiar music, this question is

minimalised, because one knows, before one sets a foot in the door, that if Chopin is on the programme, the concert is likely to include at least some romantic music with a certain kind of sound to it. Thus the taxonomy is not so important there. On the other hand, if one turns on a radio and finds oneself enjoying some unknown piece, part of the key to enjoying the piece is to recognise the question – ‘What is this an example of?’ – and to try to match it with similar experiences in one’s memory bank, and, so, enjoy the work even more.

The matter of horizons takes place in any hermeneutic art process – it is inherent in the discovery of the horizons. But in watching a Fluxperformance, examples are all the more important since they involve discovering the pattern of the performance, the what-is-being-done. Quite often this discovery, detecting the example aspect of the horizon, comes to the viewer with a striking impact; it is like ‘getting’ the point of a joke. And, in fact, the similarity between even non-humorous Fluxpieces and jokes is striking. Even when the piece is serious, one tends to react *as if* the piece were a joke, since a joke is the nearest thing on one’s horizon to many Fluxpieces. For example, one is in an audience watching the stage. A balloon appears. A second balloon comes along. A third balloon comes along. One notices that the name of the piece is *Eight*. Suddenly the pattern is clear. One laughs. Why? There is nothing inherently funny in the pattern, but it has enough in common with jokes so that each balloon, as it appears and confirms one’s anticipation that there will in fact be eight balloons, feels like a stage along the way. Perhaps the metaphor of ‘joke’ is implied by the piece. But what would happen if, in the piece, only seven balloons appeared? One would be annoyed, probably feel cheated. It would seem as if the Fluxcomposer were being overly clever. That would not be interesting. It would be like a tricky joke that dissolves into excesses of cleverness and amuses only the teller.

Some assemblages of Fluxpieces have been presented as other things besides concerts and feasts: rituals have a certain place in Fluxus too. A ritual is, basically, a ceremonial act or series of such acts, symbolically recognising a transition from one life stage or situation to another. Three notable Fluxrituals have been a Fluxmass, a Fluxdivorce and the Fluxwedding of George Maciunas himself. In this last, Maciunas and his bride cross-dressed, as did the bridesmaids and best man (Alison Knowles). The wedding ceremony was based on a traditional Anglican one, but was altered with deliberate stumblings and falterings, the substitution of ‘Fluxus’ for various of the critical words in prayers, and so on. Instead of anthems and special music, there were various special Fluxpieces which were, in one way or another, suitable for a wedding. And afterwards there was an erotic feast, including the special bread already mentioned above. According to classical theory one might expect such a reversal of the normative, with the solemn made light and the religious made profane, to seem like a satire upon marriages in general. But no, the dominant feeling was one of joy. It was not a travesty but an incorporation of the horizon of Fluxus into the horizon of marriage. The result was certainly serious: Maciunas and his bride Billie did, in fact, actually marry (including a civil service at another time). One felt that the participants were sharing the joy of the basic ceremony with their Fluxfriends – including one fifteen-year-old girl, a friend of one of my daughters, who came to the Fluxwedding without ever having seen a Fluxconcert or any other such event before. This young woman, whose horizons were thoroughly conventional, might have been expected to be shocked or offended – or at least startled by the erotic feast. But as a whole the situation was so far from the normative that

normative standards did not apply, she did not reject the fusion of horizons but entered into the situation and enjoyed herself thoroughly as one might at any other kind of wedding.

Ultimately, of course, the purpose of achieving such a fusion of horizons is to allow for the possibility of their alteration. I have not gone into Fluxobjects, Fluxboxes and Fluxbooks, but the situation is the same as with the performances – one sees the work, considers its implied horizons, matches them with one's own, and these last, if the work works well, are altered and enriched. One sees, for example, the word 'green' in wooden letters on a wooden tablet. The tablet and word are painted green. One thinks about labels, green and life, craft and its absence, simplicity and complexity. Or perhaps the tablet and word are painted red, though the word still says 'green'. In this case there is a displacement. The word says something different from what one would expect. Or perhaps there is a whole rainbow of 'green' tablets, from red to violet and brown, perhaps even including black and white. Any of such pieces would work reasonably well – the horizons would work, and the implications, while different, would follow somewhat along the same pattern: see, identify what it is, compare it with what it might be, consider, digest, anticipate the next possibility, observe the transformation of one's own horizons – and enjoy the process. Each of these pieces is *an example* of the possibilities. When one sees such a piece, one imagines its alternatives. The alternatives are implied in the piece. The work is, in this sense, *exemplative*: it does not exist, as most art does, in the most definitive and perfect form possible. It exists in a form which suggests alternatives. This is true of many recent works, not just Fluxworks but other works as well. They encourage the creativity of the viewer, listener or reader; that is, of the receiver.

Such implications are a key criterion for evaluating the quality of a Fluxwork. If it has them, if one is conscious of them on the intuitive and imaginative level (rather than forcing them through an act of will), the work is good. That is, it is achieving its potential. The extent to which it lacks implications, conversely, is the extent to which it is not good, to the extent that it fails. One can, for metaphysical reasons, reject such value judgements on the conscious level, of course; but one experiences them nonetheless, and performs an act of criticism and, hopefully, of self-enrichment when one allows one's horizons to be changed.

The best Fluxworks imply a whole set of other possible Fluxworks. In terms of performance style (or style of execution as Fluxart, Fluxboxes and Fluxbooks), the best performances are therefore those which are most direct, so that one can perceive at least some of the alternative possibilities to the form in which a given work appears. This avoids what would be a problem in these works of becoming involved with noticing craftsmanship and the definitiveness of the statement in a work.

The best performance style is, therefore, that which allows the piece to be experienced with a minimum of consciousness of the performer interceding between piece and receiver. This is also true of some kinds of non-Fluxus performances – of comedy, for instance. A Charlie Chaplin presents the humour in his films in an altogether deadpan way, while a twelfth-rate jokester in a hotel bar does much of the laughing and expressing himself – and bores the audience. In such cases the horizons of 'joke' and 'audience anticipation' fail to fuse. So it is with Fluxus too. The proper style for Fluxus is the most low-key and efficient one. One does not mystify the audience – that is not the point – but one lets it have exactly enough information to discover the horizon, and then one lets the piece do the rest. It is *never*

necessary to joke about the Fluxpiece or to comment about it in an evaluative way, 'Next we will have a great piece from 1963 by Ben Vautier . . .' That would constitute an intrusion, and, far from making the piece more likeable, would detract from it.

One digression is necessary here before we leave the matter of theory and horizons; this is the matter of large works. The impression exists that *all* Fluxworks are small or minimalist. This is obviously not the case with what I have called the collation sort of Fluxus assemblage. Some patterns simply cannot be absorbed in their minimalist statement; they require time to reveal themselves effectively. The pieces are, necessarily, harder to understand for an audience; the past experience of the members of the audience usually has led them to expect more entertainment values than they are likely to get. One hears it said, 'I liked the little pieces, but the big ones went on too long'. What one hopes is that the boredom, if any, will be temporary, while the receiver fights the horizon of the piece. Boredom is, of course, not the aim of the piece; but it may be a necessary way-station on the path to liking it. Therefore, with such pieces the characteristic length is apt to have to be sufficiently long to allow the receiver to get through the boring phase and into the spirit of the event afterwards. This is why Fluxus pieces are apt either to be very short – two minutes or less – or very long – twenty minutes or more. There are rather few in the middle-length category.

There is a slight difference between European Fluxus and American Fluxus. The Europeans have tended to perform their Fluxus works in the context of festivals, while the Americans have tended to let the life situations predominate more often. Almost all the Fluxperformances in Europe have been in such concert situations, except for a few in the street; in America both of these have happened, but the feasts and the Fluxrituals have virtually all happened in America. The reason for this is not a difference in attitude, but is, rather, that the European Fluxartists are more scattered and it takes a well-financed festival to bring them together. On the other hand, in spite of the worse financial situation in America, there are more Fluxartists there, and they form one or several communities. For instance, in New York City alone there are perhaps forty Fluxpeople in residence and so to bring them together is not hard.

Also, the European Fluxworks, more typically than the American ones, come out of an expressive tradition. Since, to build up an emotional impact, one usually needs to work on a scale that is beyond the minimal, the collation sort of work is more typically European; while the minimal one is more typically American or Japanese. Besides, even if an American wanted to work on the larger scale, funding and obtaining rehearsal time would be problematic, so the economics militate against doing such pieces in America *vis-à-vis* Europe.

OTHER ASPECTS OF RECEPTION: ARTISTS, PUBLIC AND INSTITUTIONS

The reception of Fluxus, its popularity, influence, and, in general, its acceptance, vary considerably, according to who is seeing the work. The least problematic area is that of the general public. If even a relatively unsophisticated person attends a Fluxperformance or an exhibition of Fluxus works, such a person is apt to have an interesting and pleasurable experience. Even at the very beginning of Fluxus this was true. At Wiesbaden in 1962 the *Hausmeister* (janitor) of the museum, not a formally cultured man, was so delighted by the

performances that he brought his family and friends to the concerts as well. Furthermore, some of the more successful Fluxperformances have been done in the street or on boardwalks and in other public spaces. One performance by Benjamin Patterson comes to mind. It took place in New York's Times Square, on the edge of a red-light district. He stood on street corners, waiting until the lights turned green, and then simply followed the light to the next corner. Several young women – they appeared to be prostitutes – watched him do this for a while, and then they joined in. This situation was not as exceptional as one might imagine. Thus it cannot be argued that simply because it is formally unconventional, Fluxus is lacking in potential popularity. Because of the comparative simplicity of most Fluxus pieces, this is less true of Fluxus than of other avant-garde tendencies.

For most avant-garde art, one needs to know quite a considerable amount of art history and even of technical procedure in order to get one's bearings enough to be able to fuse one's horizons and experience pleasure. The difficulty of doing this is apt to become more pronounced, in fact, with the progressive intellectualism of the audience, since it has more expectations of what will or should happen. An audience with the baggage of ideas to which it feels some commitment has more to overcome than an audience without them. And it must overcome the false horizons in order to be able to fuse them and experience pleasure. An audience with a strong commitment to one or another alternative set of ideas – intellectual or derived from precedent and fashion – has to learn that these ideas are not under attack in Fluxus situations, that they are simply irrelevant to the work at hand; and this takes time.

As I have said, Fluxus performances and situations are popular with the public once the public is confronted by them. Many times 'professionals' in charge of the programmes of institutions have grossly underestimated the appeal of Fluxpieces; they devote an evening to Fluxperformances when they might have devoted several, and then they are surprised at the frustration among those who have to be turned away. They programme an exhibition, print 500 catalogues, and find that the exhibition breaks attendance records and that they must print another thousand or so catalogues. The public is, therefore, not the problem.

As for artists, few artists who do performance works can attend a Flux performance without, subsequently, including Fluxus-type elements in their own next performance. Naturally, these are usually not acknowledged, but a sensitive viewer can detect them. For example, in the 1960s, the famous Living Theatre picked up fragments of Fluxworks, especially from Jackson Mac Low and myself (we had both worked with the Living Theatre at various points) and included them in their programme, 'Shorter Pieces'.

Another example of the absorption of Fluxus happened during the 1970s, when 'performance art' or 'art performances' became common. Typically performance art was different from Fluxus, in that it included much more narrative and subjectively personal content, usually focussing on generating a public persona for the artist. Works by Laurie Anderson are a good example of this, stressing the bright young *ingénue* in the high-tech world of New York City (not always justifiable, but usually fairly convincing in performance). The persona may be quite different from the private personality of the artist. However, the minimalist structure within which the performance takes place, the untraditional narrative matrix, the absence of most theatrical techniques, suggest a debt to Fluxus (and perhaps to Happenings). The performances of 'performance artists' match many of the Fluxus criteria given above, and, but for their knowledge of Fluxus, it is unlikely that

their work would assume the form it did without some awareness of it. Since the artists who did this work were, for the most part, younger than the Fluxus people, they naturally did not wish to present themselves as travelling in the wake of Fluxus or Happenings. They describe themselves as qualitatively new and different, although there are at least three overlaps, artists who have done major Fluxwork but who are accepted as performance artists as well – Alison Knowles (one of the original Fluxpeople), Geoffrey Hendricks, and Jean Dupuy. This legacy area can and should be explored more fully at some point.

But there are two bodies of people whose hostility towards Fluxus is profound. Maciunas thought this hostility was irreversible, and perhaps he was right. These are both groups of art professionals: those who work in art institutions (galleries and museums) and the artists who are 'good' in whatever it is that they do, but who are not good enough to be really secure in it. Of this last group, it is a truism that 'the good is ever the enemy to the best'. This means that, by their very nature, artists who are not really strong enough to create new territory must rely for their professional success on the continued attention (and therefore value) assigned to the safe ground that they are on. Such artists felt very threatened by Fluxus, which, as they see it, calls into question the validity of what they are doing by posing an alternative model. In fact, one might almost say that one way to tell the difference between a good pattern painter and a fine one, between a good photo-realist painter and a fine one, would be to ask them about Fluxus. The strong one will either be supportive or not interested; the weak one will attack it. Why? Because Fluxus is concerned with works and ideas, with a minimum of personality. It is done for the love of it – 'for its own sake', in Victor Cousin's phrase of 1816. If value comes to be attached to this – great! But it is uncommercial by its very nature. It does not take a great expert to make coffee as a performance. But commercial is exactly what most second-rate professional art is – it demands to be admired so that it can be sold. There is, thus, a real threat in this sense to this kind of professionalism on the part of Fluxworks, and the good artist who is not one of the best recognises this on the gut level intuitively.

Museum and gallery people have a somewhat similar problem with Fluxus. Fluxusworks do not lend themselves easily to becoming commodities – precious objects sold through stores, as art galleries want them to be, or beautiful fetishes to immortalise the donor of works in the local museum. But a Fluxobject is valuable not intrinsically because of the ideas which it implies and embodies. It has more the quality of a souvenir or sacred relic than of an exquisitely wrought product of fine craftsmanship. There are only a few Fluxworks (again, Vostell is perhaps an exception) which could not be duplicated by the artist, more or less exactly, without any great effort. In fact, if a Fluxobject is damaged – for example by a packer at a museum after an exhibition, who might well dismantle it without knowing what he is doing – it is often easier to remake it than to repair it. This can be exasperating to the gallery or museum person. The collector bought the object and it was damaged; normally, if it were traditional art, he would arrange for the artist to restore it, or would hire a skilled restorer to do so. On the other hand, some Fluxartists feel that when the work has passed out of their possession, it is the responsibility of the new owner to restore it or possibly even to remake it. The idea of the work is part of the work here, and the idea has been transferred along with the ownership of the object that embodies it. This is discouraging to collectors, and is therefore discouraging to those who service them as well. Normally when one goes to a great collection one is conscious of the display of wealth; one speculates on how much this or

that work or the entire collection must have cost. Such collections belong not only to the world of art, of course, but to the world of taste and fashion. One can try to ignore this feeling or inquiry, but one will seldom succeed. But a collection of Fluxus works will inevitably include some pieces which are untransformed from life (Duchamp's urinal could have been a Fluxwork). Their significance is their ability to transform the viewer's horizons; this stress threatens the assumptions of those who are commodity or craft-orientated.

Gallery operators service such collections, of course. They therefore have a vested interest in discouraging their opposites. Museums service such collections too. Both, therefore, tend to disparage Fluxus – they say 'it's over'. They have been saying this since Fluxus began. Since Fluxus is as much a form and an attitude as it is a historical tendency, even if the tendency were over the form might not be over. Is collage 'over'? Or they say 'it's all paper, meaning that there are no substantial works, which is untrue. It is the responsibility of Fluxartists, in order to bring their ideas to the people, to prove otherwise, and to endure until the larger museums, however reluctantly, feel they must give more than token attention to Fluxus, even though most of the skill in Fluxworks goes into the conception rather than the execution.

Fluxus differs from most art in being more purely conceptual. It is not just a group of people or a historic tendency so much as a class of form, with the nine characteristics which I have already mentioned. The best ingress into the work, since it does not usually offer the same experience or have to match our normative expectation for art, is via hermeneutics, via the horizon concept. Historically Fluxus has had an influence on art performance – also on artists' books (bookworks), which I have not discussed. But its real impact will probably be when new artists can take up the Fluxus format without being self-conscious about it; to make what they themselves need from the area. To appreciate this a special kind of gallery director or museum person would be needed, since it would be, at best, problematic for a traditional one to deal with Fluxus.

NOTE

- 1 This essay was written in Berlin, Germany, in March 1982 and revised in April 1985. It was published in the *Fluxus Research* issue of Lund Art Press in 1991. A recently revised version appears in Dick Higgins' new book, *Modernism since Postmodernism*, San Diego State University Press, 1997.