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Special issue edited by *Ken Friedman and Owen Smith*, 'Part 1: Fluxus and Legacy'

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Two special issues of the journal *Visible Language*, guest edited by Ken Friedman and Owen Smith, explore some of the old and new polemics concerning Fluxus, an international grouping of artists who came together in the early 1960s, but still remains marginal to most accounts of contemporary art from the 1960s to today. In the context of an increasing, if delayed, interest in Fluxus, these publications provide a most welcome starting point for an updated appraisal of this elusive movement. Broadly speaking, the first of these issues – which I will refer to as 'Part 1' – focuses on Fluxus scholarship, the second – 'Part 2' – addresses the legacies of Fluxus in contemporary practices today; the two, as we will see, are intricately linked.

Fluxus Historiography

To some extent, the recurring debates surrounding Fluxus echo those encountered in studies of dada and surrealism. The main issue concerns the definition of Fluxus itself: while some see it as a movement, which ended with the death of its impresario George Maciunas in 1978, others conceive Fluxus, like dada and surrealism before it, as an ongoing 'way of doing things,' or even more generally a 'way of life and death' (Dick Higgins, quoted in Part 1, 214). The ensuing disagreements between historians and partisans of a 'way of life' will be familiar to scholars of dada and surrealism. That many Fluxus artists are alive and writing their own accounts and definitions only serves as a reminder that once upon a time, dada and surrealist artists also tried to shape the reception of their work through exhibitions, anthologies and retrospective accounts. As soon as an artistic tendency is conceived as a 'way of life' as much as the rationale for the grouping of various artists, personal anecdotes and testimonies from the artists and their friends become as important as their actual production. It is perhaps less surprising in this context that Hannah Higgins, daughter of Fluxus artists Alison Knowles and Dick Higgins, has chosen to gather the personal recollections of other 'Flux-kids' as her contribution to Part 1. Hannah Higgins's central role in the new wave of scholarship on Fluxus alerts us to the multi-layered nature of these retrospective accounts: like many Fluxus artists, she was not only personally involved in the group's collective projects, but, as an academic, she also adopts a scholarly approach to it.¹ Indeed, while Fluxus artists and friends encourage critical studies, many of them understandably retain their claims to a first-hand engagement with Fluxus, and researchers can only ignore them at their own scholarly peril. Perhaps more than dada and surrealist artists before them, Fluxus artists and friends have played an important role in the critical reception of their work,



whether managing the resources and information required to study Fluxus, or sanctioning the literature by new generations of scholars.

Of course, things would generally be easier if Fluxus artists themselves agreed on the historical facts and features of this 'way of doing things.' It has been suggested that there are as many definitions of Fluxus as there were Fluxus artists, but the very number and identity of Fluxus artists is itself a controversial topic. Very broadly, there are two rival groups: the one, led by Jon Hendricks, that believes that Fluxus was defined by George Maciunas's activities, and the other, led by Ken Friedman, that does not. For the former, Fluxus artists are those who, at some point, had direct contact with Maciunas (whose prolific correspondence thus serves as a kind of biblical reference point). Maciunas, it turns out, liaised with dozens of artists working across the world over a period of twenty years, and if one follows Friedman's more inclusive definition of Fluxus as an ongoing project exceeding the limits of Maciunas's remit, then the network expands even more frighteningly. In both cases, the art historian will be likely to experience a brief moment of scholarly panic as she realises that the very qualities of openness and flux that make Fluxus so appealing present considerable methodological problems. At this moment, it will become clear that studying Fluxus will inevitably involve developing new interpretative tools. Owen Smith's discussion of the pedagogy of Fluxus and Ken Friedman's essay on the historiography of Fluxus in Part 1 both address some of these challenges. Significantly, both draw on the concept of experience, which has also been developed by Hannah Higgins in her book on Fluxus. The experiential learning described by Smith certainly echoes current trends in teaching at British universities (I personally was very happy to find out that the Fluxus concerts that I had been organising with my students were wholeheartedly encouraged by my 'Teaching and Learning' course tutor at the University of Manchester). Friedman's comparison between Fluxus historiography and New Historicism seems equally relevant today. The 'continual use of anecdote,' which according to Stephen Greenblatt and Catherine Gallagher (cited by Friedman, Part 1, 315) constitutes one of the features of New Historicism, has recently featured in studies that have sought to redefine the methods of art history itself. Both Amelia Jones's study of New York dada and Gavin Butt's analysis of 'queer disclosures in the New York art world' of the 1950s have suggested new ways of countering 'rationalising kinds of art history,' which may indeed turn out to be relevant for studies of Fluxus.² Most importantly, Jones and Butt have sought to situate the very notion of experience in a historical context. Similarly, there is a clear need to reconcile such contextualising approaches with the definition of Fluxus as a 'way of life' resisting periodisation.

What Hannah Higgins's Fluxkids' testimonies demonstrate is precisely the fragmentary, subjective, partial nature of experience. The role of individual particularities lay at the heart of crucial debates among Fluxus artists themselves. 'I notice with disappointment your GROWING MEGALOMANIA,' complained Maciunas in a 1963 letter to Ben Vautier.³ 'Curb & eliminate your ego entirely,' he advised, '(if you can) don't sign anything – don't attribute anything to yourself – depersonalise yourself! That's in true Fluxus collective spirit.' It is this very issue that Ina Blom analyses in depth in her study of Ben Vautier's avowedly megalomaniac work (in Part 1). As she rightly points out, Ben's obsessive



dramatisation of the impossibility of originality is the most visible symptom of Fluxus's anxieties about its avant-garde status and appropriation of the everyday as art. If Fluxus historiography, according to Friedman, should privilege 'individualising approaches' rather than 'generalising schemas' (Part 1, 316), then Fluxus's ambivalence regarding the role of the individual artist as original creator certainly needs to be addressed. Perhaps paradoxically, this may only be fully explored by following Blom's monographic focus. Julia Robinson's study of George Brecht confirms that studies of single artists can contribute to our broader understanding of Fluxus.⁴ Studying Fluxus as a whole involves walking a tightrope between the singular and the general, between individual works and collective ideals. Friedman's claim that 'those who write on Fluxus must address the full scope of Fluxus and the subtle realities that made it what it is' (Part 2, 112) is a tall order indeed: Fluxus scholars according to him must consult all available archives and published writings by Fluxus artists even before they can figure out what Fluxus is, let alone provide new insights in the movement or place it within a historical context. This reminds me of an animated conversation about the 'accomplished woman' in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. According to Mr. Darcy, the truly accomplished woman 'must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages' as well as possessing 'a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions.' The Fluxus scholar, it seems, must also have a thorough knowledge of art and music (not to mention 'film, design, urban planning' as Friedman points out, 112), and speak a great number of modern languages in order to be able to engage with the cultural specificities of its individual members scattered across the world. Moreover, she must be ready to travel around Europe and North America to research different archives, while retaining 'a certain something' that would allow her to engage with the personal experiences of each individual Fluxus artist and reflect about her own experiences in the process. Consequently, it would be tempting to exclaim, like Elizabeth Bennett: 'I am no longer surprised at your knowing only six accomplished women [or Fluxus scholars]. I rather wonder now at your knowing any.' The irony, of course, is that Fluxus itself rejected all traditional signs of talent or 'accomplishment' in its bid to convince viewers that they too could be artists (Maciunas went so far as to posit the disappearance of artists as the ultimate goal of Fluxus.)

Fluxus Legacies

Following Thierry de Duve's definition of Duchamp as 'definitively unfinished',⁵ it is thus tempting to describe the study of Fluxus as 'definitively incomplete.' Like Duchamp, Fluxus poses inherent challenges to art historians; and, like Duchamp, its very 'unfinished' nature makes it a fertile ground for numerous legacies. Few contemporary artists, however, have acknowledged an influence of Fluxus, and Part 2, which is dedicated to Fluxus legacies, is one of the first attempts to trace such lineages directly. The very methods developed for this purpose already raise significant problems. To start with, the utility of collecting testimonies by contemporary artists about their interest in Fluxus is undermined by the fact that their works are little known, and readers would require more than a few illustrations to be able to grasp the nature of their relation to Fluxus. Conversely, in Lisa Moren's compendium of Fluxus works and contemporary practices (Part 2, 28-45), the narrative of influence is lost as the works are detached from their context and no information is provided about the contemporary artists



referred to. Here again, the question of Fluxus's specificities emerges as the broader issue running through the very definition of Fluxus legacies. For example, one of the premises of Celia Pearce's essay about video-game-based art (in Part 2) is that these contemporary practices share with Fluxus an interest in play. This may indeed be the case, but does this justify a claim that they constitute a legacy of Fluxus? After all, Fluxus does not hold the monopoly over themes of games and play.

Exhibitions that have brought together Fluxus works and contemporary practices are plagued by similar problems. Authors in the catalogue for the ambitious exhibition *40 Jahre: Fluxus und die Folgen* in Wiesbaden in 2002, seem unable to pin down what exactly is Fluxus about the contemporary works included in the show.⁶ The use of found objects and readymades, or an interest in the 'public space'⁷ to which they refer can be found in many twentieth-century practices, from dada and surrealism to conceptual art. Even more ambitiously, Lisa Moren's juxtapositions of verbal instructions rely on thematic links between Fluxus and contemporary works, which suggest that references to anything from ice and food to pianos and dreams can in themselves be aligned with a Fluxus tradition. This not only conjures a comical image of a successful colonisation by Fluxus of the entire world of everyday objects and activities; it risks obscuring some very crucial distinctions among the practices gathered together. Mathew Barney's instruction to fill a grand piano with concrete may at first sight bear a resemblance with Philip Corner's *Piano Activities*, which famously ended in the destruction of the instrument at one of the very first Fluxus concerts in 1962 (Part 2, 37). That Barney actually specifies that the piano should be made of 'mother-of-pearl, Honduras mahogany, lacewood, walnut, burl, Chilean laurel maqutal and sterling silver,' however, surely places this work in a whole other aesthetic field. It will take more than a juxtaposition to convince me that Barney's precious-looking fetishes have anything in common with Fluxus's celebration of the everyday.

Even Bertrand Clavez's sophisticated analysis of the Fluxus legacies in contemporary art (in Part 1) is vulnerable to such criticism. Clavez's argument, that contemporary artists are in fact all influenced by Fluxus without actually realising it, must be praised for its ingenuity. Fluxus, according to him, can be posited as the model for contemporary practices because it anticipated the global flows of capitalism and exchange. While I agree with Clavez that Nicolas Bourriaud should have acknowledged the importance of Fluxus in his 1998 book on *Relational Aesthetics* to a much greater extent, I am wary of tracing back contemporary artists' preoccupations with production and distribution systematically to Fluxus. The model of the 'business firm,' for example, was explored in Andy Warhol's factory as well as in the small publishing enterprises started by Fluxus artists. Only once the specificities of each have been fully understood will it be possible to evaluate their impact on contemporary practices.

Once again, then, we find ourselves invited to define Fluxus and situate it further in its historical context. This is probably the most fruitful lesson to be gained from comparisons between Fluxus and other more recent practices. A striking point of interest to emerge from both *Fluxus und die Folgen* and Moren's compilation of scores is the relation between Fluxus and conceptual art. While the rather surprising inclusion, in the former, of works by conceptual artists such as Michael Craig-Martin, Terry



Fox and Cildo Meireles seems to suggest affinities between Fluxus and other practices evolving in the late 1960s and early 1970s, conceptual art often appears to be the missing link in the juxtapositions made by Moren between Fluxus scores and recent works. Andy Goldsworthy may share with Bengt af Klintberg an interest in ice as an artistic material (Part 2, 40), but it is difficult to imagine that the Fluxus artist could be more influential for Goldsworthy than Land artists such as Richard Long. Performances involving the activity of washing the floor by Janine Antoni or Lyne Lapointe & Martha Fleming certainly evoke Ben Vautier's *Audience Piece no.4*, which invites performers to 'clean the theatre very thoroughly' once the audience is seated (Part 2, 34), but Mierle Laderman Ukeles's feminist explorations of domestic work seems to be a more obvious point of comparison for contemporary women artists. What these questions demonstrate, then, is the need for further investigations concerning the relation between Fluxus and conceptual art. Fluxus's relation to feminism also often emerges as an unspoken question. Ben Patterson's 'lick piece' (Part 2, 31) has always sounded embarrassingly old-fashioned to me in its invitation to 'cover a shapely female with whipped cream,' but perhaps its juxtaposition with Janine Antoni's instructions for *Lick* ('Lick a chocolate bust of yourself') could complicate misogynistic/feminist polarities? It is precisely because they are unexpected, and at times downright far-fetched, that Moren's juxtapositions can bring these issues to the fore.

There is, of course, an easier way to trace Fluxus legacies in contemporary art: to look for direct references to Fluxus by contemporary artists. Whether in their statements or in their works, artists today seem to reflect the problematic mediation of Fluxus through its museologisation. 'When I saw all the Fluxus objects in vitrines, I was terribly sad,' recalls Gabriel Orozco. 'They had become relics of past life.'⁸ Rirkrit Tiravanija, who was included in *Fluxus und die Folgen* as well as the exhibition *FluxAttitudes* ten years earlier,⁹ complained for his part that Fluxus had been 'completely contained and completely preserved,' a trend which 'undermines everything they were undermining.'¹⁰ Reflecting a generalised shift in contemporary practice, Tiravanija and Orozco both seem to conclude that working with museums directly is the only way to 'undermine the situation before it undermines you.' It is certainly worth asking whether these two international artists' pragmatic dialogue with the museum is reconcilable with the other features that their work shares with Fluxus practices.

A more positive engagement with the museologisation of Fluxus was quite literally enacted by Christian Marclay, who was also included in *Fluxus und die Folgen*. In a 2004 work entitled *Shake Rattle and Roll (fluxmix)*, sixteen video monitors placed in a circle each show Marclay handling a succession of Fluxus objects from the collection of Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. Viewers are immediately made aware that the sounds emanating from each operation are what constitute the main focus of the installation, as the shapes and textures of each object produce a wide range of noises, often unrelated to the object's primary function. By turning Fluxus objects into unexpected musical instruments, Marclay wittily brings the archived 'relics' to life by reminding us that Fluxus's pioneering appeal to spectator participation is grounded in its conception of artworks as music to be performed. Marclay is not, however, reproducing past concerts, but appropriating Fluxus for his own purposes. If



Fluxus, like dada or surrealism before it, operates like a virus that can take different forms in different places at different times, then Marclay certainly seems to have voluntarily chosen to be infected. Other artists may have been infected without knowing it, and, like scientists, we need to understand the virus itself in order to develop new techniques to detect its multifarious symptoms. In a true laboratory spirit, Friedman and Smith have started an investigation which needs to be carried out by other researchers. If you experience signs of mirth or puzzlement when exposed to certain forms of contemporary art, please be cautious and contact a Fluxus doctor immediately.

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¹ Cf. Hannah Higgins, *Fluxus Experience*, Berkeley, 2002.

² Amelia Jones, *Irrational Modernism: A Neurasthenic History of New York Dada*, Cambridge, Mass. and London, 2004, 30. Gavin Butt, *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World, 1948-1963*, Durham and London, 2005.

³ George Maciunas, letter to Ben Vautier, September 23, 1963. Archives of the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Foundation, New York.

⁴ Cf. Alfred Fischer and Julia Robinson (eds), *George Brecht Events: A Heterospective*, exh. cat. Cologne: Museum Ludwig, 2005, and my review of the exhibition in *Papers of Surrealism*, issue 4.

⁵ Thierry de Duve ed., *The Definitely Unfinished Marcel Duchamp*, Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1991.

⁶ René Block and Regina Bärthel (eds), *40 Jahre: Fluxus und die Folgen*, exh. cat., Wiesbaden: Kulturamt der Landeshauptstadt Wiesbaden, 2002.

⁷ Regina Bärthel, 'No pushing around: Zugriffe aufs Alltägliche,' in *40 Jahre: Fluxus und die Folgen*, 33-35.

⁸ 'Gabriel Orozco' (2003) in Hans-Ulrich Obrist, *Interviews*, vol. 1, Milan, 2003, 655.

⁹ Cornelia Lauf and Susan Hapgood (eds), *FluxAttitudes*, exh. cat., Buffalo: Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center, 1991.

¹⁰ Richard Flood and Rochelle Steiner, 'En Route,' *Parkett*, no. 44, 1995, 117.

