

The essay briefly outlines some of the uncanny coincidences between the birth of Dada and the birth of Fluxus, charts the adoption of similar ahistorical strategies by members of both movements as they attempted to position themselves historically and questions our assumption that democratization of the arts is the natural result of artistic actions that purportedly attempt to break down the line of demarcation between art and life. In the process, the article provides introductions to both the World War I movement and its post-World War II successor.

*Historical Precedents,
Trans-historical Strategies,
and the Myth of Democratization*

Estera Milman

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Rhode Island School of Design
Providence, RI 02903

Of all the many stories that Fluxus has generated, perhaps the one that is most often repeated is the recounting of the tale that describes how, during one of the early 1960s concerts in Europe, the *hausmeister*, the individual who cleaned the concert hall, responded so well to the performance that he brought his whole family to subsequent concerts. Of all artistic movements¹ that came into being in the second half of our century, there were few that were more overtly concerned with the need to reposition the art experience within the domain of the common man and woman than was Fluxus. There were fewer still that looked so directly to Dada for their historical precedent or that so successfully generated a trans-historical myth that ran parallel to the powerful fiction that informed our perception of the World War I movement. Suggesting that these attributes are correlative is the primary intention of the following.²

Historical Dada came into being in Zurich, Switzerland, sometime in the Spring/Summer of 1916. The stage for the movement's debut was set by the brilliant, unstable expressionist poet, dramatist, and frustrated proponent of "total theatre," Hugo Ball, and his collaborator, the singer, performer poet and part time puppeteer, Emmy Hennings. Ball and Hennings had relocated from war torn Germany to neutral Switzerland the previous Spring and, having toured for some time with Swiss variety troops and worked in Zurich's amusement quarter, the two disenfranchised German citizens decided to attempt to make a better, more stable living by operating an "international" literary and artistic cabaret. Ball described the founding of this nightclub, a small bar in a less than reputable section of Zurich, which became the breeding ground for both historical Dada and its powerful ahistorical myth in his editor's preface to *Cabaret Voltaire*, a proto-Dadaist publication realized by what we were subsequently to identify as the Zurich Dada group (and which shares certain characteristics with the proto-Fluxus publication *An Anthology*). Ball's introduction closes with the following statement:

The present booklet is published by us with the support of our friends in France, Italy and Russia. It is intended to present to the Public the activities and interests of the Cabaret Voltaire, which has as its sole purpose to draw attention, across the barriers of war and nationalism, to the few independent spirits who live for other ideals. The next objective of the artists who are assembled here is the publication of a *revue internationale*. *La revue paraîtra à Zurich et portera le nom "Dada" ("Dada")*. Dada Dada Dada Dada.

Zurich, 15.Mai 1916³

As is also the case for Fluxus, it is difficult to ascertain the point in time at which we can be reasonably confident that historical Dada became aware of itself, that is to say, that it began its existence as a movement. As Ball's preface indicates, the Cabaret Voltaire opened on the 5th of February, 1916. The retrospective description of its founding is dated May 15th, 1916 and appeared in print in June of that year. Ball is very careful throughout his statement to historically position himself as the founder of the nightclub around which a group of artists had assembled.

He thanks individual members of the group for their “assistance” but makes little or no reference to the existence of a coalescent avant-garde community.

It could be convincingly argued that the loose knit cluster of individuals circumstantially assembled in Zurich could not be transformed into a coherent community prior to the existence of the word “Dada,” the banner around which their activities appear to have coalesced and under which both historical Dada and the Dada myth were propagated internationally. Scholars often date the coming into existence of the word to March or April, 1916, and cite the preface to the review *Cabaret Voltaire* as the first public appearance of the term in print. Some will argue that Tristan Tzara was responsible for its choice, and others that Ball and Richard Huelsenbeck should be credited with its selection. It has been suggested that Dada was initially to serve as the stage name for a singer in the cabaret. It has also been argued that it was originally chosen, as Ball explains in his editorial preface (and as coincidentally was also the case for Fluxus), as the proposed title for an international review. Regardless of which of these accounts is true, I would posit that the historical movement could not have existed until such time as the word came to serve as the rubric for the Zurich group’s activities. Furthermore, I would insist that a shared self-conscious awareness, among members of the group, of their participation in an historical avant-garde movement, that is to say, in a community collectively involved in a series of acts and events designed to facilitate change, was a further prerequisite to historical Dada’s existence.

As it migrated throughout war torn and post-war Europe and briefly touched upon America’s post-war shores, historical Dada became a response to a series of specific contexts. Its inherent flexibility allowed it to speak to each of these contexts in kind. For most of us, however, Dada, as a historical reality, can not easily be separated from the ahistorical myth that it has concurrently generated, a myth which pervades our consciousness far more effectively than does its historical counterpart and which, separated though it is from the accomplishments of movement as historical realities, invites us to say that a particular activity or work of our own present, “is very Dada.” We do not say as much, or as little, of Cubism, Futurism, Expressionism, or Constructivism. Although we certainly participate in its perpetuation, the Dada myth is not of our own making. Nor, do I believe, was it a deliberate construct of the Dadaists who generated it, at least not in the beginning. The myth of Dada came into being by accident. Like historical Dada, its birth was a response to a specific set of circumstances; it came to life as a side effect of Dada’s attempt to position itself within the tradition of the avant-garde, a tradition that by definition is concerned with the mechanics of the making of history.

Although the Dada myth appears to be deliberately trans-historical, there were few early twentieth century avant-garde movements more overtly concerned with their historical positioning within an avant-garde

tradition than was Dada. One evidence of this preoccupation is the proliferation of early histories of Dada written by participants in the movement. One such account is Tristan Tzara's "Zurich Chronicle 1915–1919,"⁴ which originally appeared in the 1920, Berlin based, *Dada Almanach*. It was later reprinted in Robert Motherwell's influential *The Dada Painters and Poets* (1951) and as an appendix to Hans Richter's *DADA Art and Anti-Art* (1964).

Although Tzara briefly makes reference to the word Dada in the third entry of his retrospective chronology (February 26th, 1916), the term is defined as the "latest novelty," and has little to do with either the development of a plan of action or the identification of an avant-garde community.⁵ His fourth entry (June, 1916) describes the preliminary stages of the establishment of a community of artists, who "took an oath of friendship on the new transmutation that signifies nothing."⁶ However, according to Tzara, it was not until July 14, 1916, that the first official Dada evening took place, an event that occurred, not at the *Cabaret Voltaire* but rather, at Zurich's Waag Hall. The fifth entry to his Zurich Chronicle is quite specific: "July 14, 1916 For the first time anywhere at the Waag Hall: First Dada Evening (Music, dances theories, manifestos, poems, paintings, costumes, masks)..."⁷

Perusal of Tzara's description of this event provides evidence that the thrust of his rhetoric has taken a most drastic turn. Words such as "demonstrate, demand, shouting, fighting, protest," and "demolish" have replaced his earlier references to "ascendancy of New Art, music, singing," and "recitation." This obvious shift implies that, by 1920, Tzara wanted his readers to believe that historical Dada came into being at an extremely specific moment of time. Whether or not his particular recollection can be validated as the identification of the point in time when the movement was established is not here at issue. Far more important is his insistence that the distinction between proto-Dada and the historical movement be made, for Tzara was the individual most responsible for propagating Dada's deliberately ahistorical myth, a system of ideas that has effectively convinced us, even against our better judgment, that the movement was capable of encompassing events that preceded its historical birth and that succeeded its demise.

Tzara's chronicle lists two distinct entries under the repeated date, "July 1917." It is the only instance in the retrospective account that its author chooses to do so. The first reads, "July 1917 Mysterious creation! Magic Revolver! The Dada Movement is launched."; the second opens with the announcement, "July 1917 Appearance of *Dada* No. 1, a review of art and literature..."⁹ The implication inherent in this presentation is, that for Tzara, despite the fact that Dada had been active in Zurich for at least a year, the historical movement did not begin to fulfill its true mission until an international review, published under the Dada masthead, appeared, the very periodical to which Ball spoke at the

close of his editorial preface to *Cabaret Voltaire*. That such was the case is understandable in view of the fact that, throughout the early twentieth century, the literary and artistic review was the primary means by which avant-garde communities communicated with one another, kept abreast of each other's activities, and, for all intents and purposes, positioned themselves historically within their own tradition. It is also worth noting that it was Tzara who served as the sole editor of the "official" little review.

"Zurich Chronicle 1915–1919" inadvertently provides us with evidence of the process by which the Dada movement came to capture the imagination of contemporaneous art communities. In succeeding entries to the piece, Tzara welcomes parallel periodicals and parallel spirits into the Dada community. Examples of such networking include his reference, under the heading "February 1919," to the American based periodical, *The Blind Man* (April and May, 1917), and to Marcel Duchamp;¹⁰ and, under the heading "May 1919," to the New York based, *TNT* (March 1919),¹¹ none of which had any direct affiliation with historical Dada, at that time. However, I would posit that the identification of such kindred spirits was one of the primary objectives of the Zurich group and thus, that Tzara's inclusion of these individuals and publications was fully in keeping with his concern for the propagation of the *historical* movement.

Such acts of appropriation undeniably also served to propagate the schema of imagination which Dada inadvertently generated and which has since attained mythical status. Evidence of such strategy is available in Tzara's insistence, under his entry for the December 1918, that "Dschouang-Dsi [was] the first Dadaist,"¹² for it is through its ability to encompass and appropriate a spirit that stretches back through history and forward into the present that the myth of Dada ascended to power. Furthermore, it is through this trans-historical act of assimilation that Dada continues to capture the imagination of subsequent generations of artists.

Tzara succeeded in his attempt to enter the mainstream and carried Dada to Paris where it temporarily served as a conscience for the war weary French avant-garde. He was even more successful in his ongoing commitment to the propagation of Dada's trans-historical myth. In April, 1921, he authored a mock authorization giving Duchamp and Man Ray the right to publish their own review under the Dada masthead. The statement is included in *New York Dada*, the only American based little magazine specific to Dada. In his authorization, Tzara claimed credit for the choice of the word Dada as the title of *his own* Zurich/Paris based review and, in the spirit of democratization, insisted that Dada belonged to everyone. He explained that the movement itself was neither "a dogma or a school, but rather a constellation of individuals and free facets,"¹³ and, once again calling upon Dada's burgeoning myth, goes

on to state that, "Dada existed before us (the Holy Virgin) but one cannot deny its magical power to add to this already existing spirit..."¹⁴

In his "Lecture on Dada 1922," originally published in the Hannover based review, *Merz* (Vol.2, No.7, January, 1924), and reproduced in translation in Motherwell, Tzara attempts to describe Dada as being anti-historical by making reference to what had since become its full fledged ahistorical myth.

We are well aware that people in the costumes of the Renaissance were pretty much the same as the people of today, and that *Chouang-Dsi* was just as *Dada* as we are [emphasis mine]. You are mistaken if you take Dada for a modern school, or even for a reaction against the schools of today. Several of my statements have struck you as old and natural, what better proof that you are Dadaists without knowing it, *perhaps even before the birth of Dada* [emphasis added].

You will often hear that *Dada is a state of mind* [emphasis mine]. You may be gay, sad, afflicted, joyous, melancholy or Dada...Slowly but surely, a Dada character is forming.¹⁵

Later in the essay, Tzara reiterates, "Dada is a state of mind. That is why it transforms itself according to races and events."¹⁶

It is important to remember that, by 1922, Dada, as a historical reality, had undeniably ceased to be an effective force in Paris and having peaked had left in its wake a powerful ahistorical myth, a schema of the imagination that the poet had long been instrumental in propagating.

By 1951, an older, more reflective Tzara overtly shifted his strategies and openly attempted to distinguish between the Dada myth and the movement as a historical reality. Tzara opens his essay, "An Introduction to Dada," (a statement that was originally circulated as an insert to the first edition of Motherwell's, *The Dada Painters and Poets* and which subsequently appeared as an appendix to the text's second printing) with the statement, "From the point of view of poetry, or of art in general, the influence of Dada on the modern sensibility consisted in the formulation of a *human constant* which it distilled and brought to life."¹⁷ Despite this preliminary reference to the very life blood of the Dada myth, the author quickly shifts gears and begins a clear and concise description of the context to which Dada responded and the intentions and convictions shared by participants in the historical movement.

When I say "we," I have in mind that generation which, during the war of 1914–1918, suffered in the very flesh of its pure adolescence suddenly exposed to life, at seeing the truth ridiculed, clothed in cast off vanity or base class interest. This war was not our war; to us it was a war of false emotions and feeble justifications. Such was *the state of mind* [emphasis mine] among the youth when Dada was born in Switzerland thirty years ago.¹⁸

In the essay's penultimate paragraph, its author reiterates:

Dada was a brief explosion in the history of literature, but it was powerful and had far reaching repercussions. It lay in the very nature of Dada to put a term

to its existence... For Dada, a literary school, was above all a moral *movement* [emphasis mine]. It was individualistic, anarchic in certain respects, and it expressed the turbulence of youth of all times. A product of disgust aroused by the war, Dada could not maintain itself on the dizzy heights it had chosen to inhabit, and in 1922 it put an end to its existence.¹⁹

Dick Higgins opens his essay, "A Child's History of Fluxus," with statements that can be read almost as a manifesto for the democratization of the arts.

Long long ago, back when the world was young – that is, sometime around the year 1958 – a lot of artists and composers and other people who wanted to do beautiful things began to look at the world around them in a new way (for them).

They said: "Hey – coffee cups can be more beautiful than fancy sculptures. A kiss in the morning can be more dramatic than a drama by Mr. Fancypants. The sloshing of my foot in wet boots sounds more beautiful than fancy organ music."

And when they saw that, it turned their minds on. And they began to ask questions. One question was: "Why does everything I see that's beautiful like cups and kisses and sloshing feet have to be made into just a part of something fancier and bigger? Why can't I just use it for its own sake?"

When they asked questions like that, they were inventing Fluxus: but this they didn't know yet, because Fluxus was like a baby whose mother and father couldn't agree on what to call it – they knew it was there, but it didn't have a name.

Well, these people were scattered all over the world. In America there were George [George Brecht] and Dick [Dick Higgins] and La Monte [La Monte Young] and Jackson [Jackson Mac Low] and plenty of others. In Germany there were Wolf [Wolf Vostell] and Ben and Emmett [Ben Patterson and Emmett Williams] who were visiting there from America, and there was another visitor in Germany too from a very little country on the other side of the world, from Korea – his name was Nam June Paik. Oh there were more too, there and in other countries also.

They did "concerts" of everyday living; and they gave exhibitions of what they found, where they shared the things that they liked best with whoever would come. Everything was itself, it wasn't part of something bigger and fancier. And the fancy people didn't like this, because it was all cheap and simple, and nobody could make much money out of it.

But these people were scattered all over the world. They sometimes knew about each other, but they didn't see each other much or often. And they spoke different languages and had different names for what they were doing, even when they were doing the same thing. It was all mixed up.²⁰

He then goes on to briefly speak of the compilation of La Monte Young and George Maciunas' [sic] proto-Fluxus, *An Anthology*, which was not entitled, "A Fluxus Anthology," because Fluxus things weren't

named yet,” and which Higgins describes as “a beautiful book [composed of] beautiful, simple things...ideas and piles of words and ways for making your own life more wonderful.”²¹ “A Child’s History of Fluxus” then proceeds to explain how George Maciunas planned to execute a sequel to this publication, “something like a book and something like a magazine – it would be printed every so often, and it would always change, always be different, always be really itself. It needed a name. So George Maciunas chose a very funny word for ‘change’ – Fluxus.”²² The essay then describes the European concerts, originally designed to publicize the planned Fluxus anthology but during which the term Fluxus came to be associated with the activities of the international group of artists who were to come to be known as the Fluxus group. Higgins speaks of the press and the electronic mass media’s response to these concerts; recounts the tale of the *hausmeister* (“The janitor at the museum where the Fluxus concerts were happening liked them so well that he came to every performance with his wife and children.”²³); very briefly chronicles some of the events that occurred between this point in time and Maciunas’ death in 1978; and closes his retrospective history of Fluxus with the following reference to the trans-historical Fluxus spirit.

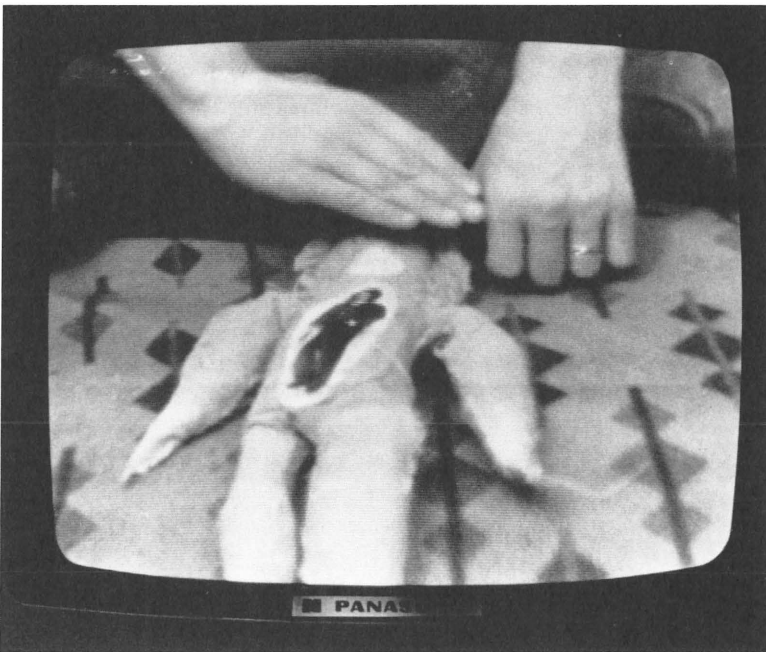
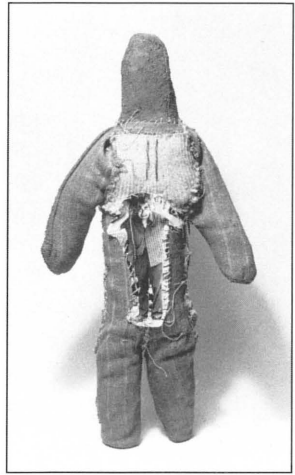
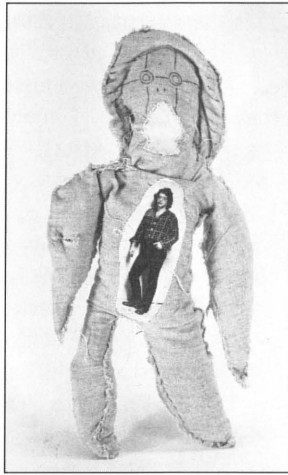
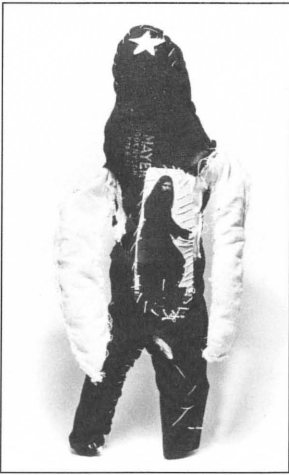
And though Fluxus is almost twenty years old now – or maybe more than twenty, depending on when you want to say it began – there are still new Fluxus people coming along, joining the group. Why? Because Fluxus has a life of its own, apart from the old people in it. It is simple things, taking things for themselves and not just as part of bigger things. It is something that many of us must do, at least part of the time. So Fluxus is inside you, is part of how you are. It isn’t just a bunch of things and dramas, but is part of how you live. It is beyond words.

When you grow up, do you want to be a part of Fluxus? I do.

New York City
7 April, 1979²⁴

Despite its deliberately youthful tone, Higgins does not take this essay lightly and speaks of it, in a subsequent article entitled, “Fluxus: theory and reception,” as one of his attempts “to explain what Fluxus is and was and where it came from.”²⁵ In the later essay, Higgins begins by discussing the relationships between Futurism, Dada and Surrealism, and Fluxus. He describes Futurism as “A goddess, nineteenth century style, with one leg on the future and one in the conventional past and not too much on the present...[as a movement that] falls a little flat in the evolution of modern sensibility...as a starter and a precursor [that has generated works that] have only moderately intrinsic interest as works.”²⁶ Dada is described as appearing “more unique than it is.”²⁷ Higgins goes on to write:

In the 1950s, the journalistic image of 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



Larry Miller, *The Art of Influence*. Effigies of Jeffrey Lew, George Maciunas, Willoughby Sharp, sewn clothing, hair, fingernails, blood, straw, photographs, each approximately 33–27.9 cm. high and videotape document of psychic healer applying energies to the effigy of Jeffrey Lew. Courtesy of the artist. Photographs by Larry Miller.

as “neo-Dada.” This was, of course, extremely annoying and embarrassing to those of us who knew what Dada was or had been.²⁸

The author then explains that he personally knew a number of the “old Dadaists” and recounts his publication, as director of Something Else Press, of a facsimile edition of the 1920 Berlin based, *Dada Almanach*, which, it should be stressed, included, among its contributions, Tristan Tzara’s “Zurich Chronicle 1915–1919,” wherein the invention of the word Dada, its effect toward the consolidation of the Zurich group, and the relevance of the appearance in print of the first review bearing the Dada masthead are duly noted. Surrealism is at first described as a historical outgrowth of Dada which was, however, “quite self-consciously, a ‘movement,’ unlike Dada, which was more unruly, spontaneous perhaps, and undirected.”²⁹ Higgins proceeds to discuss the autocratic nature of André Breton’s directorship of the movement: describes what he defines as the first stage of historical Surrealism (the period from the mid-1920s through the late thirties); and briefly speaks of the influence of the movement upon the post-World War II American art scene.

The Surrealists constituted the nucleus of the then avant-garde. Some of us who later did fluxus works were very conscious of this. I, for example, attended school with Breton’s daughter Aubee (“Obie,” to us) and, being curious what her father wrote, acquired a couple of his books – that was my entre into Surrealism as a place to visit. Furthermore, from time to time there would be Surrealist “manifestations,” and some of these things 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.³⁰

The following page in “Fluxus; theory and reception” is broken into three parts: the first briefly discusses Futurism and Fluxus and the third briefly touches upon the relationship between Fluxus and Surrealism. It is the second, to which most of the page is consigned, that is of direct interest to the present discussion and, as such, is worthy of quoting in its entirety. So doing is particularly important in view of the fact that the statement identifies the specific point in time when members of the group became self-consciously aware that their activities had coalesced under a new banner.

Fluxus seems to be like Dada – at least like the popular image of Dada – in being, well 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 wee hours of the morning, trying to determine what would be the theoretical nature of this *tendency* [emphasis mine] to which we were giving birth, which we were participating in. Maciunas was intensely aware of

To K.F.

**DOWN
WITH DULL
DADA!**

Nicola Vanzetti



Buster Cleveland. *Untitled*. Paste up for *NYCS Weekly Breeder*, selected pages, each 28 x 21.5 cm., n.d. Alternative Traditions in the Contemporary Arts, The University of Iowa. The Buster Cleveland Collection. Includes works on paper and rubber stamp images by Joseph Beuys, Fluxus West, Ray Johnson, Daniel Spoerri among others. Photograph by Barbara Bremner.

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 the thing. We did not want to confine tomorrow’s possibilities by what we thought today. That manifesto is, then, Maciunas’ manifesto, not a manifesto of Fluxus.³¹

My decision to devote so much space to a reiteration of Dick Higgins’ perspective on Fluxus was not an idle one. Higgins was one of the most prolific participants in the Fluxus movement and has since attained position, with the group’s sanction, as Fluxus’ theoretician. His publishing house, Something Else Press, Inc., although often described as a Fluxus offshoot, was one of the most influential underground publishing organs of the period and probably, in its own right, far surpassed Fluxus in its impact upon the period. However, it is important to keep in mind that Higgins is maintaining an insider’s position when he speaks of Fluxus. Let us catch our breath, for a moment, and step back to the outside.

One point that Higgins has chosen not to mention in the above is that the festival, or series of concerts, during which Fluxus came to capture the imagination of the European public was overtly related to neo-Dada.

Prior to the September 1962 concert in Wiesbaden, in which Higgins, Alison Knowles,³² and George Maciunas participated (and which was billed as the *Fluxus International Festival of New Music*), a concert entitled *Neo-Dada in der Musik (Neo-Dada in Music)* had taken place in Dusseldorf (June 16, 1962). The program for the Neo-Dada festival lists, among its participants, Maciunas and Higgins, as well as a number of other composers who were to become members of Fluxus. There is little question then, that Dada should well have been one of the topics of discussion during “those long nights at Ehlhalten-am Taunus.” Having thus been given direct access back to the World War I era, let us look for a moment at the manifesto that is sometimes referred to as the “First Dada Manifesto,” and sometimes as “Hugo Ball’s Manifesto,” presented at the first public Dada evening at Zurich’s Waag Hall (July 14, 1916).

Dada is a new *tendency* [emphasis mine] in art. One can tell from the fact that until now nobody knew anything about it, and tomorrow everyone in Zurich will be talking about it. Dada comes from the dictionary. It is terribly simple. In French it means “hobby horse.” In German it means “good-bye.” “Get off my back.” “Be seeing you sometime.” In Romanian: “yes, indeed, you are right, that’s it.” But of course, yes, definitely right, and so forth.

An international word. Just a word, and the word a movement. Very easy to understand. Quite terribly simple. To make of it an artistic tendency must mean that one is anticipating complications.³³

In his diaries, Ball refers to this manifesto as a “thinly disguised break with friends.”³⁴ The points of contention between Ball and other members of the Zurich Dada circle revolved around his opposition to the association of the concept “art” with the activities of the group, on the one hand, and his unwillingness to mount an artistic school, on the other. Earlier in his diaries, Ball had written:

11.IV [1916]

There are plans for a “Voltaire Society” and an international exhibition. The proceeds of the soirées will go toward an anthology to be published soon. H. [Huelsenbeck] speaks against “organization”; people have had enough of it, he says. I think so too. One should not turn a whim into an artistic school.³⁵

Ball’s entry for March 18, 1916, often referred to as the earliest evidence that the word Dada existed, once again makes reference to the planned anthology of which he spoke above:

[Tristan] Tzara keeps on worrying about the periodical. My proposal to call it “Dada” is accepted. We could take turns at editing, and a general editorial staff could assign one member the job of selecting a layout for each issue. Dada is “yes, yes” in Rumanian, “rocking horse” and “hobby horse” in French. For Germans it is a sign of foolish naiveté, joy in procreation, and preoccupation with the baby carriage.³⁶

I have attempted, through reference to but a few Dada memoirs and the writings of one Fluxus member, to briefly outline the uncanny coinci-

dence between the birth of Dada and the birth of Fluxus. One need not rely on Tristan Tzara's "Zurich Chronicle 1915–1919," or on Hugo Ball's diaries to prove such a point, nor need one depend upon the essays of Dick Higgins. Writings by various Fluxus members are replete with such information. Throughout my discussion of the relationship between historical Dada and the movement's trans-historical myth, I deliberately choose to concentrate on statements by Dadaists which were easily accessible to the general public, for it is through the general public's response to a concept that myths come into existence. Thus many of my references were borrowed from Robert Motherwell's *The Dada Painters and Poets*, an anthology published in New York in 1951 which provided the American avant-garde with easy access to the Dada myth and to certain historical aspects of the movement. Adopting a formal device employed by both the Dadaist and the *Fluxus Leute* (the Fluxus people), and opening the *Painters and Poets*, at random, I find the following statement by Tristan Tzara:

Dada is a state of mind. That is why it transforms itself according to races and events. Dada applies itself to everything, and yet it is nothing, it is the point where the yes and the no and all the opposites meet, not solemnly in the castles of human philosophies, but very simply at street corners, like dogs and grasshoppers.³⁷

Higgins is the individual credited with being responsible for defining Fluxus as a "tendency" rather than a "movement." In "Fluxus: theory and reception," he makes reference to the Fluxus state of mind and its own trans-historical intentions while attempting to explain why the movement was not a movement, another position that Tzara maintains in many of his early Dada writings that are reproduced in Motherwell.

Fluxus was not, then, a movement; it had no stated consistent program or manifesto which the work must match, and it did not propose to move 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 *fluxatitide* – 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.³⁸

Fluxus member, Alison Knowles also maintains that Fluxus was not a movement, as do a great many, if not most, of the Fluxus participants. In a personal interview with the artist, (see "Road Shows, Street Events, and Fluxus People: A Conversation with Alison Knowles," in this volume) she described Fluxus as a chance grouping of disparate people who agreed upon very little. There is one point in the discussion, however, when Knowles does speak of one perspective that was shared by the group as a whole. As it is the only instance that I am aware of, where such a characteristic has been identified by a participating member of the collective, it is worth quoting the entry in its entirety. In response to

my reference to Tristan Tzara's manifesto, "To Make a Dadaist Poem," the artist replied:

AK: Yes, the importance of the Tzara self-portrait...I think that *for the whole Fluxus group*, [emphasis mine] the key to the Tzara portrait was that it's your nature. When you paste it down, it looks like you; you have touched those pieces of paper and they have taken on form. When [John] Cage brought the use of chance to symphony you could tell right away that it was a Cage symphony. Now that is magical. Why would your use of chance, or mine, be different from anyone else's use of chance? Somehow the act of using what one would think was a very abstract structural base becomes very definable, in terms of the nature of what you can get.³⁹

A little later in the interview, Knowles explains that one can not speak about Fluxus and chance procedure without talking about John Cage with whom many of the participants in Fluxus studied prior to their involvement with the group. Since Marcel Duchamp was Cage's own mentor, we are once again brought, full circle, back to the early twentieth century. One of Duchamp's experiments with chance procedure comes immediately to mind in response to the above: his *3 Standard Stoppages* (Paris, 1913–14), of which the artist spoke as an experiment designed to preserve and imprison forms obtained through the workings of his "own" chance. By the early 1950s, Cage was using chance procedure, for example, systems of coin tossing derived from the I Ching or random number tables, to determine the structure of his symphonies. Although Cage's works were composed of everyday sounds and silences, the pieces themselves tended to be so complex that these everyday occurrences were lost within the structure of his symphonies. His students, who were to compose a sizable portion of the original Fluxus community, tended through their own use of chance, to isolate the individual incident borrowed from the everyday world, thus drawing full attention to its everydayness. Many Fluxus performance works are informed by their deliberate concentration upon a single idea that stresses duration, the latter, an awareness of the time during which something lasts, being another central characteristic of Cage's own compositions.

Knowles' statement about Tzara's manifesto, "To Make a Dadaist Poem," clearly states that, not only was the group aware of Cage's experiments with chance but that the group was thoroughly familiar with Tzara's own writings about the procedure. There is another of Tzara's statements that, although it may not have been familiar to everyone in the group, was in all probability known to some. The manifesto to which I am referring is entitled "Dada vs. Art," and appeared on the poster/exhibition catalogue of Duchamp's influential 1953 Dada exhibition at the Sidney Janis gallery, in New York.

Duchamp's exhibition presented American artists at mid-century with two hundred and twelve works by a broad cross section of poets and painters who had participated in the historical movement. It is interesting to note that, were one so inclined, the statement could be renamed,

Fluxus vs. Art, provided of course that the banner “Fluxus” was superimposed over the movement’s historical grandparent’s own rubric.

Dada vs. Art

The attitude of Dada toward art is impregnated with that equivocal spirit of which Dada cultivated the ambiguity...and it is in this very contradiction that one finds the richness of Dada’s own nature...

Dada tried to destroy, not so much art, as the idea one had of art, breaking down its rigid borders...humbling art...subordinating its values to pure movement which is also the movement of life...

Was not Art (with a capitol A) taking a privileged...position on the ladder of values, a position which made it sever all connections with human contingencies...

It should be noted – and this is a trait common to all its tendencies – that the artistic means of expression lose, with Dada, their specific character. These means are interchangeable, they may be used in any form of art and more over may employ incongruous elements – materials noble or looked down upon, verbal cliches or cliches of old magazines, bromides, publicity slogans, refuse, etc...

Dada never preached, having nothing to defend; it showed truths in actions and it is as an action that what is commonly called art will henceforth have to be considered...

Dada’s scorn for modernism was based, above all, upon the idea of relativity since any dogmatic codification could only lead to a new academism. In virtue of that, Dada did fight against Futurism, Expressionism, and Cubism, declaring itself for continued change and spontaneity. Dada, wanting to be constantly in motion and transformable, preferred to disappear rather than bring about the creation of new Pompier.⁴⁰

One of George Maciunas’ manifestos presents what he believed constituted the distinctions between “Art” and “Fluxus Art Amusement.” The statement describes art as an attempt to justify the artist’s parasitic, elitist status in society, a system that attempts to convince the public of its dependency upon the artist, that insists that only the artist is capable of making art. “Fluxus Art-Amusement,” on the other hand, is defined as follows:

To establish artist’s nonprofessional status in society, he must demonstrate artist’s dispensability and inclusiveness, he must demonstrate self sufficiency of the audience, he must demonstrate that anything can be art and anyone can do it.

Therefore, art-amusement must be simple, amusing, unpretentious, concerned with insignificances, require no skill or countless rehearsals, have no commodity or institutional value.

The value of art amusement must be lowered by making it unlimited, mass produced, obtainable by all and eventually produced by all.

Fluxus art-amusement is the rear-guard without any pretension or urge to participate in the competition of "one-upmanship" with the avant-garde. It strives for the monostructural and non-theatrical qualities of simple natural event, a game, or a gag. It is the fusion of Spike Jones, Vaudeville, gag, children's games and Duchamp.⁴¹

Of the American participants in the Fluxus movement, Maciunas was among those most deeply committed to leftist ideology, and it is to his writings and manifestos that we must look for the most overtly utopian definitions of the collective's intentions. Although most surviving participants in Fluxus repeatedly insist that Maciunas was but one of the founding members of the community, it should be remembered that he coined the word Fluxus, the banner around which the activities of the group coalesced and spread internationally; that he was the one member of the group most responsible for the propagation of the movement and for the presentation of its public face; and that for many the historical movement ceased to exist soon after his death, in 1978. However, all of the participants in the movement are in agreement that Fluxus was about the relationship between everyday living and art. Ironically, despite the movement's professed intention to convince the art public of its self-sufficiency, it tended, in the long run, to speak most directly to itself and to other communities of art makers. As such, it became a kind of self-destruct system for its followers, who were, after all, being trained to liberate themselves from their privileged, elitist status within culture, that is to say, to stop being artists. With the exception of Maciunas himself, who separated his "professional" self from his Fluxus other, there were few of the Fluxus people who succeeded in convincing themselves of their own "dispensability" as artists, despite their commitment to the everyday experience. While we applaud their efforts to democratize the art experience, we are somewhat aware that concepts such as "democratization" and "the arts" may well be mutually exclusive. As was the case for the Dadaists, so was it for the participants in Fluxus: art making carried with it the unspoken assumption that the artist's own transaction of an everyday experience was somehow more intense, more valuable as an occurrence, than anyone else's relationship with the everyday. It is an assumption shared by both the art maker and his or her public – a reciprocal agreement.

In this 1921 mock authorization for the publication of *New York Dada*, a periodical that was reprinted in facsimile form in *The Dada Painters and Poets*, Tzara insists that "Dada belongs to everyone."⁴² But we know as Tzara did, that this was a fiction, and a well written one, at that. Like many of his colleagues, Maciunas often recounted the incident involving the *hausmeister*, his family, and an early Fluxus performance. We are aware, however, that the *hausmeister* was but one member of one audience. It is the fact that he was singled out from the crowd and committed to memory that speaks most eloquently of the *fluxattitude*.

Notes

¹ I am fully aware that by choosing to use the word movement I place myself in direct opposition to other individuals who have written about Fluxus. I have chosen the word quite consciously. (Scholars have long ceased to be self-conscious when applying the term to historical Dada which was, in reality, a great deal more than a “constellation of individuals and of free facets.”) I ask that the word here be understood as both an act, process, or insistence on change and a connected series of acts and events tending toward some more or less definite end. The similarities between dictionary definitions for the word flux and the word *movement* (that is to say both as a moving, shifting, or act of flowing and in reference to bodily excretions) further suggests that had the word fluxus been originally chosen to identify the activities of the group, Maciunas might well have called it the Fluxus Movement in much the same way that Marcel Duchamp intentionally chose the redundancy, *Société Anonyme, Inc.* (Incorporated, Inc.), as the title for the New York gallery that he founded with Katherine Dreier and Man Ray in the spring of 1920.

² This essay is based, in part, on “Fluxus and the Democratization of the Arts,” Estera Milman, first published in *Dada Conquers! The History, the Myth, and the Legacy* (Taipei, 1988) pp. 237–247. Sections of a companion article have been integrated into the current version. The second essay is an in-depth analysis of the process by which the Dada myth, a World War I era ahistorical construct, ascended to power. For the complete article, see Milman, “The Dada Myth,” in *Dada Conquers! The History, the Myth and the Legacy*, pp. 113–128.

³ Hugo Ball, “Editorial Preface,” in *Cabaret Voltaire*, reproduced in translation, in Hans Richter, *Dada Art and Anti Art* (New York and Toronto, 1978), p. 14.

⁴ Tristan Tzara, “Zurich Chronicle 1915–1919,” Ralph Manheim, trans., in Richter, pp. 223–228. According to Richard Huelsenbeck, the Dada myth came into being well before the historical movement emerged within the sphere of action or fact. The author begrudgingly gave Tzara credit for the propagation of this myth: “Tristan Tzara had been one of the first to grasp the suggestive power of the word Dada. From here on he worked indefatigably as the prophet of the word which was only later filled with a concept. He wrapped, pasted, addressed, he bombarded the French and the Italians with letters: slowly he made himself the ‘focal point.’” Richard Huelsenbeck, “En Avant Dada: A History of Dadaism,” Ralph Manheim, trans., in Robert Motherwell, ed., *The Dada Painters and Poets*, (New York, 1951–67), (sec-

ond edition), p. 26. It is interesting to note that many of Maciunas’ co-participants in Fluxus would retroactively describe Fluxus’ primary impresario in a similar fashion.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 223.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 223–224.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 224.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 226. It is important to note that it was not simply to the establishment of a Dada based publishing organ to which Tzara, as prophet of the word, referred, in his entries for July 1917. The chronicle had carefully made note of the appearance, throughout 1916, of publications realized under the “Collections Dada” imprint, texts such as *The First Celestial Adventure of M. Fire-extinguisher* (July 1916), *Phantastische Gebete* (September 1916), and *Schalaben Schalomai Schalamezomai* (October 1916).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 226.

¹³ Tristan Tzara, “New York Dada,” in *New York Dada*, Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray, eds. (New York, April 1921), p. 2. A facsimile of the little magazine appears in Motherwell, pp. 214–218.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Tristan Tzara, “Lecture on Dada. 1922,” Ralph Manheim, trans., in Motherwell, pp. 249–250.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Tristan Tzara, “An Introduction to Dada,” (New York, 1951), n.p. Because Tzara and Huelsenbeck refused to have their recent statements on Dada published under one cover, the piece was originally produced in pamphlet form and inserted, alongside Huelsenbeck’s, “Dada Manifesto, 1949,” in the 1951 edition of *The Dada Painters and Poets*. Both statements subsequently appeared in the second edition. See Motherwell, pp. 394–398 and 390–394, respectively.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Dick Higgins, “A Child’s History of Fluxus,” in *Lightworks* (Number 11/12) Michigan, 1979, p. 26.

²¹ *Ibid.* It is Higgins who credits the publication to Young and Maciunas. The author makes no reference to Jackson Mac Low who served as the anthology’s co-publisher.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 27. It is interesting to note that Higgins composed this essay one year after Maciunas' death.

²⁵ Dick Higgins, "Fluxus: theory and reception," [paper presented during *Fluxus: A Workshop Series, Alternative Traditions in the Contemporary Arts*, The University of Iowa School of Art and Art History, April 1985], p. 1. Although, versions of this essay have appeared in print, I have chosen to refer to the manuscript that the author sent me.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 4.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 5.

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 6–7.

³¹ Ibid., p. 7.

³² During the first Fluxus concerts in Europe, Alison Knowles, who was still concentrating on her work as a painter, participated as a performer rather than as a composer. Knowles has spoken to me of the fact that, having performed so many of her friends' compositions, she responded to the "group spirit" and began to compose her own works. Her name does not appear on the announced programs for these concerts until *Moving Theater No. 1* took place in Amsterdam on October 5, 1962. For a carefully prepared listing of the program participants for these concerts and other Fluxus performance events, see, Jon Hendricks, *Fluxus etc.* (Cranbrook Academy Museum of Art, 1981), pp. 360–410.

³³ Hugo Ball, "Dada Manifesto," Christopher Middleton, trans., in the appendix to Hugo Ball, *Flight Out of Time: A Dada Diary*, (New York, 1974), p. 220.

³⁴ Hugo Ball, *Flight Out of Time: A Dada Diary*, Ann Raimés, trans. (New York, 1974), p. 73.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 60

³⁶ Ibid., p. 63.

³⁷ Tristan Tzara, "Lecture on Dada. 1922," Ralph Manheim, trans. Originally published in *Merz*, vol. 2, no. 7. 1924. In Motherwell, p. 251.

³⁸ Higgins, "Fluxus: theory and reception," p. 10.

³⁹ See Estera Milman, "Road Shows, Street Events, and Fluxus People: A Conversation with Alison Knowles," in this volume.

⁴⁰ Tristan Tzara, "Dada vs. Art." The manifesto is reproduced on the poster/exhibition catalogue for the show

Duchamp mounted at the Sydney Janis Gallery in New York, April 15 through May 9, 1953. Visitors to the exhibition received a copy of the catalogue in the form of a crumpled ball. Luckily, the handsome, oversized sheet also doubled as a poster and announcement for the event. Examples of the uncrumpled version have survived and have found their way into collections of both Dada and Fluxus works. In 1965, Maciunas made direct reference to Duchamp's poster when he designed *Bundle of Events* for the Japanese based Hi Red Center group. See James Lewes' annotated check list in this volume. I can not help but include yet another excerpt from Tzara's manifesto: "To the collages and objects of Max Ernst and Schwitters must be added chance introduced by Marcel Duchamp as a source of creation... and the Ready mades..."

⁴¹ The manifesto is reprinted on a 1965 Fluxus broadside, as well as on other Fluxus handouts and flyers.

⁴² Tzara, "New York Dada," p. 2. In the opinion of this author, despite the publication of this little review (hastily put together by Man Ray just prior to his relocation in Paris), the existence of an active Dada center in New York is but another well written fiction. The little magazine appears, in facsimile form, in *The Dada Painters and Poets*, pp. 214–218.