

This paper explores why Fluxus' ambiguous affirmations and denials of modernism are not contradictory but part of a self-conscious strategy designed to manipulate the operational apparatus of modernism without submitting to its agenda. Aware that the canons of modernism rest less in the specifics of its terms than in their organization, Fluxus dislocated traditional means and ends relationships endemic to modernist objectives and dismantled the dependent relationships that account for modernism's legibility as "historical movement." Capable of expanding in an indefinite number of opposite, but mutually inclusive directions, Fluxus submitted to everything. Yet, in its separation of means and ends, Fluxus lost the authority to author itself, became the subject of a traditional modernist debate and the unwitting victim of modernist historical subjugation.

H istorical Design and Social Purpose

A Note on the Relationship
of F L U X U S to Modernism

Stephen C. Foster

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Rhode Island School of Design
Providence, RI 02903

What interested me about Fluxus was that
it had a sharp, crisp approach to culture.

—Kenneth Friedman¹

I would like to venture that Fluxus can be, and frequently has been, successfully understood for what *it* was, what *it* became, the metamorphosis by which *it* successively became, and *its* means of becoming all these things. Scarcely a shocking proposition, what appears to be its logic (the logic of “it”) has become truistic in the literature on modern art and reflects, in the curve of its development, the historical, or more accurately the historiographic momentum of the avant-garde. What a thing was, although liberally discounted as “absolute” truth, nevertheless defines the base upon which one analyzes what it became and the characteristics and historical parameters guiding what it successively became. How it became what it was is typically imputed to the actions and intentions of those responsible for what it became or successively became. Seen as a whole, these propositions describe the directionality of an overarching historical design for the progress of modernism of which the avant-garde becomes a specific case.

Fluxus had made lasting contributions to our thinking about art and culture...had enduring value.

—Jean Sellem²

The aims of Fluxus, as set out in the *Manifesto of 1963*, are extraordinary, but connect with the radical ideas fermenting at the time.

—Clive Phillpot³

Fluxus had its antecedents in those enlightened, earlier twentieth-century artists *who wanted to release art from the moribund constraints of formalism*.

—Jon Hendricks⁴

The purpose of this paper is to pose some questions concerning the relationship of Fluxus to this scheme of things; its alteration of the scheme, acceptance of it or rejection of it. In posing the questions, the point is not to determine the correct answer (Fluxus is avant-garde, modern or whatever) so much as it is to formulate a sensible means for answering the questions; that is, how can we know if Fluxus is modern, avant-garde or whatever?

Now, of course, there are and have always been enormous problems with this modernist scheme, but none of an order that has prevented it from working (at least until very recently) for approximately two centuries. Even recently, criticism of it has been more probing than effective. It would be easy to level well warranted criticism at those proposing that Fluxus be understood as a “real” thing, to dismiss its successive “realities” as illusions of an illusion and to convincingly demonstrate that “how” it became should not imply “what” it became. Yet, since the model has been, and surprisingly enough remains, operational, it is not altogether clear what purpose the criticism would serve. As Arnold Isenberg noted long ago concerning normative models of criticism, their internal contradictions not only failed to prohibit their use,



Davi Det Hompson, *Thanks Again for Everything*, Photomontage, 27.5 x 35 cm., 1972.
Alternative Traditions in the Contemporary Arts, The University of Iowa, Fluxus West
Collection. Photograph by Barbara Bremner.

but they had no significant bearing as an effective means of analyzing critical communication.⁵ I would say much the same for the question under consideration here. I think Kenneth Friedman implies as much when he claims: "When the work being done on Fluxus by trained historians – art historians, cultural historians, anthropologists – is more complete, you'll see the diversity of views brought forward in much greater clarity than the unity implicit in Jon's [or other existing] books."⁶ In our particular case, and in specific reference to Fluxus, one might reasonably maintain that understanding and criticism of traditions as movements, historically substructured as "real" things, although fraught with hopeless historical, theoretical, moral, ethical and other problems, continues to work. This is true in spite of the group's denial of modernism and the avant-garde, and in spite of the group's clear recognition of their reasons for rejecting them.

There's certainly interest in it [Fluxus] as an historical movement, but many of the artists themselves don't want to look at it historically.

—Bruce Altshuler⁷

Promote living art, anti-art...

—George Maciunas⁸

Definitions, especially the definitions of art history, seem to work the best on dead subjects. It's easier to bury Fluxus and to set up a three-sentence epitaph on our headstone than to understand what Fluxus is or was.

—Jean Dupuy⁹

Fluxus objectives are social (not aesthetic)...and concern [themselves] with: Gradual elimination of fine arts...

—George Maciunas¹⁰

Having said this, however, it is nevertheless true that some Fluxus artists invoked these schemes again and again.

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

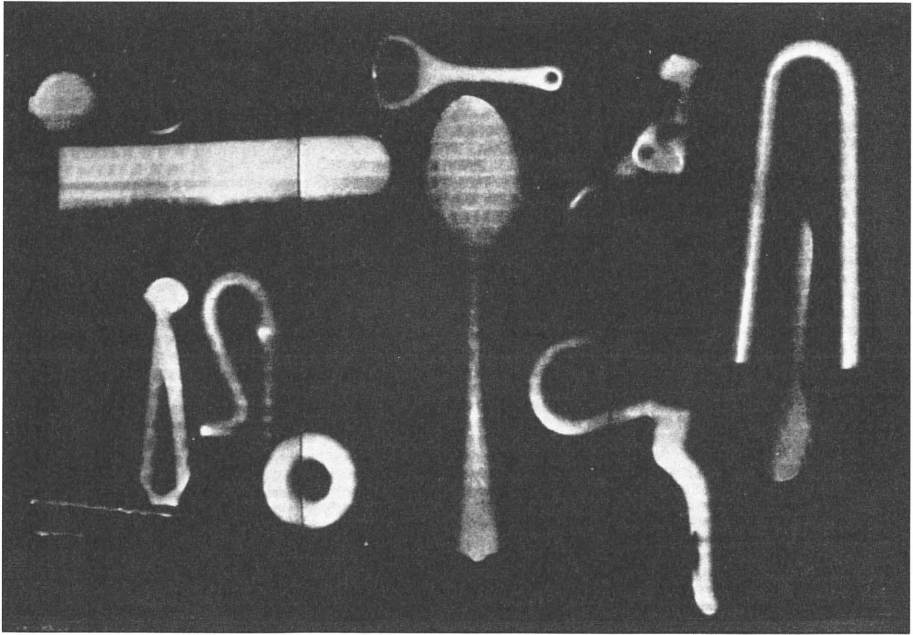
—Dick Higgins¹¹

Fluxus is a permanent state of improvisation – it doesn't matter what, it doesn't matter how, it doesn't matter where and, most important of all, no-one should really know what it is is an error.

—Marcel Fleiss¹²

To the extent that any contemporary group would continue to use this modernist scheme, as I maintain that Fluxus did, at least in certain important ways, requires an explanation. That is, why would a group maintain the historiographic structures of modernism, modernistically refute its content, and still consider itself detached from modernism? I believe that Fluxus, to a significant degree, behaved in these ways and for what I think are fairly definable purposes.

Highly self-conscious historically, and sophisticated in its manipulation of history's use, Fluxus tried to eclectically organize itself around the advantages of existing strategies at the same time that it attempted to avoid their abuses. Fluxus was committed to social purpose, but



Albert M. Fine, *Untitled*. Black spray paint on corrugated cardboard, 31.7 x 43.8 cm., ca. 1972. Courtesy Emily Harvey Gallery.

opposed the authoritarian means by which it was historically achieved; denied the metaphysic of the avant-garde's "progress," although it embraced its means for organizing a group; rejected the dominant culture's popularization of the avant-garde, but embraced its myth of the "masses"; communicated with "everyman," but warranted itself with the captive audiences for the avant-garde in the university and the marketplace; rejected "art," where the rejection rested largely on nothing more than a counter-definition of the establishment's concept of art; identified their sources as those parts of modernism defining themselves against the tradition; competed for artistic influence by not competing with art, and competed for social influence by competing with art ("Purge the world of bourgeois sickness, intellectual, professional & commercialized culture, PURGE the world of dead art...", (George Maciunas)¹³; veiled belief in experience, community in coalition, and art in environmental metaphors.

Looked at individually, none of their points strikes us as particularly surprising or new. We are more likely to be impressed by the fact that Fluxus seemed to adopt, more or less indiscriminately, all of them in ways that frequently seem to be contradictory and internally illogical. Yet, it must be said that none of these postures lay outside positive or negative assessments of the modernist and avant-garde debate, a debate that, of course, belongs to modernism. It is tempting to conclude that Fluxus is better defined through its "use" of modernism and



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 avant-garde than it is through any rejection of them. As Estera Milman notes, "That the phenomenon appears to resist definition is based, in part, on the fact that Fluxus changed its public face to suit its intentions, its specific context and the purposes of its many diverse practitioners."¹⁴

Interestingly enough, the whole question of definition does not settle the question of whether Fluxus is modern, avant-garde or whatever. That we can define Fluxus through these terms carries no particular weight; nor does the fact that Fluxus might have defined *itself* through these terms, since the definition might well be better understood as something motivated by strategy rather than theory.

Another approach to the question of the relationship between Fluxus and the avant-garde might posit that the group provided an alternative to modernism and the avant-garde without implying a positive or negative critique. But this won't do. The fact that all the terms are too familiar is burdened further by the fact that nothing suggesting an alternative language is available in the group's publications or works. Furthermore, Fluxus continually condemned the avant-garde, or parts of it; "Fluxus art-amusement is the rear-garde...", (George Maciunas),¹⁵ but made extremely liberal use of historical precedents such as Dada (see Milman's essay in this collection).¹⁶ One might go further and maintain

(correctly, I believe) that alternatives were available and that Fluxus opted, knowingly or otherwise, not to use them.

This brings me closer to my thesis; that Fluxus was basically a reconfiguration of the modernist or avant-garde paradigms. Its use of typically modernist and avant-garde terms might superficially seem to make Fluxus a maverick modernism. Or, one might speculate that the group kept the modernist model and adjusted, or even ditched the content. Regardless of the truth of the latter, it strikes me that what is more important is the group's reorganization of modernism's terms. *The importance of this resides in the fact that the canon of modernism or the avant-garde rests not in the specifics of the terms but precisely in their organization.* That Fluxus is modern or not rests less on the use of the specific terms than the specific use of the terms. As the use of modernism's terms strike confirmed modernists as illogical, it would seem that this could only be accounted for in comparison with that modernist canon as it was conventionally organized; for a number of reasons, however, even this is not altogether clear.

The problem concerns whether modernism would have assessed Fluxus' use of its terms as illogical or merely idiosyncratic or misunderstood. The source of the organization of terms that constituted the modernist canon were located in its concept of history. To the degree that Fluxus maintained that concept, there was a misunderstanding of sorts. But it must also be said that it was a misunderstanding of rather little consequence, since modernism easily tolerated minor abuses of this sort and would have viewed it as little or no threat to the fundamental basis of its historical design.

It is to falsify history to describe Fluxus as an art movement.

—Eric Anderson¹⁷

Because of Fluxus' acceptance of the history, the canon was never fully raised to a level of visibility as a question.

If Fluxus rejected anything, it would seem to be the system or structure of the modernist program or project, but in a way that required saving modernism's program, in part, for maintaining the group's *operational* objectives (a point I will return to later in the paper), objectives that should not be confused with the more straightforwardly *transactional* basis of the historical work Fluxus so often claimed as part of its genealogy (Dada, Constructivism, etc.).

This gets us somewhat further, because it implies that in Fluxus there was a separation of means and ends atypical of modernism and the avant-garde as we normally understand them; considerations that bring us closer to identifying their substantial rather than polemical separation from modernism and the avant-garde. Fluxus seems to dislocate traditional "means and ends" relationships that are endemic to modernism and the avant-garde and that account, in large part, for their curve as it was represented at the beginning of this essay. If Fluxus wished to accomplish something, it was not embodied in the ends implied in its

means. I would suggest, in fact, that Fluxus represents a unique situation where both “means” and “ends” serve equally as objectives or goals; objectives which were historically, within the context of modernism, reserved only for ends. Nominally anti-art, and part of the late modern resistance to the “art object,” Fluxus sought appreciation and engagement in its means. Self-conscious of its historical place, it sought its significance and position in its ends. The importance of this lay in the non-dependent relationship between the means and ends and the respective audiences that supported the objectives attached to each. Position was no longer contingent on appreciation; significance on engagement, etc. Engagement and significance, for example could be equally achieved, but in totally unrelated ways.

What is true of its strategies is true of its works (they are more or less the same thing). They affirm modernism and the avant-garde; they deny it, manipulate it, embrace it and shun it. Most importantly, they undermine the legibility of its canons and the relationship posed between the means and ends of art.

...the creativity, the lightness, the rethinking of culture, of our approach to life are the context in which *Water Yam* takes place and from which it emerges.

—Kenneth Friedman¹⁸

[Fluxus] An attitude that does not take to the decisions made by history as the guaranteed and the guaranteeing process of the fluxes and the movements of creation.

—Achille Bonito Oliva¹⁹

All this also broke apart the normal discourse levels through which the group was approached. No longer concerned with means and ends, criticism could be conceived around either, with no loss to either.

...Fluxus encompasses opposites. Consider opposing it, supporting it, ignoring it, changing your mind.

—George Brecht²⁰

Indeed, with luck (and it was almost inevitable with the variety of critical models in service) criticism of Fluxus would be substructured variously by consideration of both means and ends and exist on what amounted to a non-competitive basis. The same was true of historical approaches. Indifferent to its location in the street, alternative space or museum, the historiographic mandates of modernism yielded to a highly permissive situation where it was difficult to be wrong. Yet, and this is important, no matter how right one was, Fluxus was always prepared to claim that it was only a half-truth. The cleverness of Fluxus, was that it was the only party to play all the possible positions simultaneously (if not by any one particular individual, at least by the group considered collectively). With means and ends unrelated, Fluxus could be *made* modern, partially modern or anti-modern. Its artists and critics could easily, and without contradiction, fill the pages of a xerox magazine, *Artforum* or an *Abrams Corpus*. They could fight among themselves, appropriate individuals into their ranks who could not have been otherwise available,

and expand in an indefinite number of future directions – all with equal impunity from the critics and historians. In the hands of the right writer, they could be, and no doubt are being, made suitable for textbook discourses. There is no threat in any of this, because there is always a way out.

What is significant in a Fluxus exhibition is the diversity of strategies and the complementary nature of the varied artists' intentions.

—Robert C. Morgan²¹

From the point of view of the modernist, the position may seem irre-sponsible. From the point of view of Fluxus, it is versatile and operational.

I think there are some interesting conclusions to be drawn from all this; that is, that Fluxus was not at all *necessarily* anti-art, anti-purpose, anti-institution or anti-modern. It could, of course, equally well be all of these. Fluxus, however, was decidedly not anti-historical, and this seems to be a position that was *not* reversible in spite of hopeful opinion to the contrary.

To push Fluxus toward the Twenty-first century means to grasp the group's anti-historicist spirit.

—Achille Bonito Oliva²²

To go towards the year Two Thousand thus means to carry out a new task, that of avoiding defeat by time.

—Achille Bonito Oliva²³

The group could reject modernism and its historical design but not its history. By that I mean that the various, weighty and contradictory options to which Fluxus willingly and happily submitted remains, without exception, historically conceived options. In the separation of means and ends, Fluxus lost the authority to convincingly author itself, or to have others author it in its own image.

By creating an absence of authorship, Fluxus has revived itself as a *significant tendency in recent art*. [emphasis mine]

—Robert C. Morgan²⁴

The relationship of Fluxus to modernism remains ambiguous only insofar as it may or may not be modern. But the “means” of being made one or the other is distinctly modern. History is a modern phenomenon, and anyone submitting to it becomes, to some extent, a subject of modernism. Since this is the case, any proposition that Fluxus radically separated itself from modernism is substantially weakened.

In closing, I am left, and leave the reader, with a slightly puzzling question. How much of all this was deliberate, planned or expected? Is contemporary Fluxus a rationalization of an early misunderstanding, or is it the fruits of a sophisticated, Duchampian refusal to commit? It seems to me that the question is related to why Fluxus, as modernism (as opposed to the other options), seems to have won the day. Although it could be, and surely will be argued that Fluxus was simply assimilated, absorbed and appropriated by an insensitive, voracious artworld and its

publics (the solace of all failed radicalisms), I would maintain that Fluxus, from the beginning, was never in a position to determine its fate otherwise. Its flirtation with history firmly secured its place in modernism.

NOTES

- ¹ Jean Sellem. "Twelve Questions for Ken Friedman," in *Fluxus Research*, (Special Issue), *Lund Art Press* 2, 2, University of Lund (Sweden), 1991, p. 95.
- ² Jean Sellem. "Fluxus Research," in *Fluxus Research*, p. 5.
- ³ Clive Phillpot, "Fluxus: Magazines, Manifestos, *Multum in Parvo*," in *Fluxus: Selections from the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection*, Clive Phillpot and Jon Hendricks, eds. (New York, 1988), p. 11.
- ⁴ Jon Hendricks. "Introduction to the Exhibition," in *Fluxus: Selections*, p. 17.
- ⁵ Arnold Isenberg, "Critical Communication," in *The Philosophical Review* 58 (July 1949), pp. 330–44.
- ⁶ Jean Sellem. "Twelve Questions for Ken Friedman," in *Fluxus Research*, p. 104.
- ⁷ Bruce Altschulen, cited in Matthew Rose. "Fluxus something? Is there a Renaissance in Fluxus or Just Boredom with Everything Else? A Survey of Fluxus in America," in *Fluxus Research*, p. 15.
- ⁸ George Maciunas. "Manifesto" printed in *Fluxus: Selections...*, p. 2.
- ⁹ Jean Dupuy. "Where," in *Fluxus!* (Brisbane, 1990), p. 13.
- ¹⁰ George Maciunas, cited in Jon Hendricks. "Introduction to the Exhibition," in *Fluxus: Selections...*, p. 24.
- ¹¹ Dick Higgins, "Fluxus: Theory and Reception," in *Fluxus Research*, p. 26.
- ¹² Marcel Fleiss, "Fluxus in Paris," unpublished typescript, p. 1, no date (1989).
- ¹³ George Maciunas. "Manifesto," reproduced in *Fluxus: Selections*, Clive Phillpot and Jon Hendricks, eds., p. 2.
- ¹⁴ Estera Milman, *Fluxus and Friends: Selections from the Alternative Traditions in the Contemporary Arts Collection*, (Iowa City, 1988), unpaginated.
- ¹⁵ George Maciunas, "Manifesto," broadside, 1965, cited in Milman, *Fluxus and Friends*, unpaginated.
- ¹⁶ Estera Milman, "Historical Precedents, Trans-historical Strategies, and the Myth of Democratization," in this volume.
- ¹⁷ Jean Sellem, "About Fluxus, Intermedia and So...: An interview with Eric Anderson," in *Fluxus Research*, p. 60.
- ¹⁸ Jean Sellem "Twelve Questions for Ken Friedman," in *Fluxus Research*, p. 95
- ¹⁹ Achille Bonito Oliva, "Ubi Fluxus ibi Motus," in *Ubi Fluxus ibi motus* (Milan, 1990), p. 26.
- ²⁰ George Brecht. "Something About Fluxus," in *Ubi Fluxus...*, p. 144.
- ²¹ Robert C. Morgan. "The Fluxus Phenomenon," in *Fluxus Research*, p. 125.
- ²² Achille Bonito Oliva. "Ubi Fluxus ibi Motus," p. 26.
- ²³ Achille Bonito Oliva. "Ubi Fluxus ibi Motus," p. 27.
- ²⁴ Robert C. Morgan, "The Fluxus Phenomenon," in *Fluxus Research*, p. 125.