

The paper discusses the Fluxus revolution in literary expression during which the tradition of letters was challenged through erasure of the separation of the verbal from other forms of expression and through the rejection of the passive role of the reader. In the process of describing Fluxus' reinterpretation of the concept of "literature," the author provides a means through which to distinguish Fluxus works from Concrete Poetry, one of their direct precursors, through the latter's dependence on verbal text as starting point of the poetic experience and the former's inherent contingency and provisionality.

F L U X U S and Literature

Roy F. Allen

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Rhode Island School of Design
Providence, RI 02903

Radical transmutations crisscross our century and are symptomatic of profound changes in the material and intellectual environment of the arts. They are attempts to find forms of expression more compatible with and appropriate to an unstable, volatile, dynamic environment of constantly evolving modes of manufacture, trade, transportation, habitation and communication. Fluxus is their culmination, bringing us to the threshold of the eclectic distancings that dominate our post-avant-garde era.¹ And Fluxus was one of the first of recent tendencies to provide some of the decisive redefinitions of traditional boundaries: between order and chaos, clarity and confusion, seriousness and frivolity, melody and cacophony, meaning and meaninglessness, art and non-art.

Fluxus begins with the argument that medium and function in all the arts of our time are in a state of continual transformation and fusion ("flux").² This position is the basis of Fluxus' program and the determining principle in its artistic manifestations. Most of the noise of Fluxus focused, of course, on musical, theatrical and artistic events or happenings. But a quiet revolution also took place in literary expression. Fluxus challenged the tradition of letters in two major ways: it erased the neat and tidy separations of the verbal from other forms of expression and rejected the passive role of the reader. Most Fluxus objects even call the bluff of the whole concept of "text." For example, George Maciunas' innocuously titled *Fluxus Paper Events* (1976) is actually a powerful statement which destabilizes the solidly entrenched concept of book: the Fluxus version is a bound volume of paper sheets, each of which is altered in a way different from the others, being wrinkled, folded, stapled, etc. The sheets bear no printed words or letters; they have no superimposed (Fluxus term: "illusionist") message.³ Yet, this book is also to be "read" – not, obviously, in the sense of page + language = meaning, rather as neutral, uncircumscribed image.

New Criticism was a final, exaggerated stage of the 18th century tradition of literature and its reception. It wanted to convince us of the hermetic self-containment of the work of art by requiring that its interpreter render, through scrupulous deciphering servilely devoted to the letter of the text, a meticulously fashioned rendition of the author's precise intent. Postmodernist theory – itself an instance of the same tendencies represented by Fluxus – posits a counter theory which defines art as a totally open form of expression: its meanings adjust to the orientation of its particular audience. All responses to artistic expression are seen now as autonomous imaging: the artist's signs merely trigger memories of analogous experiences in the respondent's mind. "Reading" is thus composing autobiography along the guideposts laid by the artist.

Within these new parameters of interpretation Fluxus attempts both to enhance the expressive capacities of art and articulate a new interpretive theory. Maciunas' concept of "Concretism," which he touted at the very beginning of Fluxus as the key to the new epistemology, involves a fundamental revision of the relationship of medium and function in art.⁴ Form is traditionally determined functionally by content: a

table's shape acquires meaning as a place at which to eat, write, confer, etc; sounds assume significance in a tightly structured sequence of alternation and repetition; language serves as symbols of established images or ideas. In concrete art, on the other hand, form and content are unified: a musical note is pure sound; a physical object is pure form; language is typological design and sound. No adventive function/meaning is superimposed. In Maciunas' words: the Concretist conceives of a rotten tomato as a rotten tomato [not, say, as lost food].⁵ The ultimate aim of Fluxus epistemology is, as Maciunas maintained, to revolutionize the whole purpose of art and the art object. On the ideological level, it is a desire to "divert" to "socially constructive ends" the energies of the artist from the creation of objects which in meaning are separated from other human labors and made to live functionally gratuitous lives in museums, theaters, libraries, etc.⁶ Fluxus was consistently very conscious of its debts for ideas to predecessors, such as Futurism, Dada, Surrealism, Lettrism; and it usually gave fair acknowledgement of sources.⁷ The debt to Futurist bridge-burning is evident in Maciunas' latter precept, as is also Dada's demystification of creativity. But Fluxus went a step further: taking a cue from the artists around Vladimir Mayakovsky's LEF in Russia in the 1920s, it wanted to eliminate the whole business of the "fine arts," the concept which has planted the most obstructive snags for reform. By definition, the notion "fine arts" is elitist, exclusivist: it sponsors and sanctions the creation of art which, regardless even of any social message it might want to communicate, is to be sold and appreciated as a separate entity, a self-sufficient object whose main economic function is to sustain the artist as a professional.⁸ Fluxus opposes art as a "nonfunctional commodity"; it is thus "antiprofessional": the Fluxist is supposed to earn his bread by participating in the general, utilitarian labors of society. And because the artist must consider function when he labors, there is no space for solipsistic message or other "personal intrusion on the part of the artist."⁹ For Fluxus, the heretofore almost unquestioned tradition of the uninhibitedly self-absorbed, self-revelatory Renaissance artist is to be avoided.

Fluxus is also anti-individualistic. Maciunas spells all this out most straightforwardly in a letter addressed to Tomas Schmit in January, 1964. Schmit had written expressing interest in joining Fluxus. As Maciunas advises Schmit regarding this intention near the end of his let-

ter, he breaks with the till then rarely offended tradition of the avidly protected permanency of art by explaining Fluxus as only a “transitional” phase in the developments he supports:

Fluxus objectives are social (not aesthetic). They are connected to the LEF group of 1929 in Soviet Union (ideologically) and concern itself with: *Gradual elimination of fine arts* (music, theater, poetry, fiction, painting, sculpt- [sic] etc., etc.). This is motivated by desire to stop the waste of material and human resources (like yourself) and divert it to *socially constructive ends*. Such as applied arts would be (industrial design, journalism, architecture, engineering, graphic-typographic arts, printing, etc.). – these are all most closely related fields to fine arts and offer best alternative profession to fine artists....

Thus Fluxus is definitely against art-object as nonfunctional commodity – to be sold & to make livelihood for an artist. It could temporarily have the pedagogical function of teaching people the needlessness of art including the eventual needlessness of itself. It should not be therefore permanent....

Fluxus therefore is ANTI PROFESSIONAL (against professional art or artists making livelihood from art or artists spending their full time, their life on art).

Secondly Fluxus is against art as medium or vehicle promoting artists ego, since applied art should express the objective problem to be solved not artists' personality or his ego. Fluxus therefore should tend towards collective spirit, anonymity and ANTHINDIVIDUALISM – also ANTI-EUROPEANISM (Europe being the place supporting most strongly – & evenly originating the idea of – professional artist, art-for art ideology, expression of artist's ego through art, etc., etc.).

These Fluxus concerts, publications, etc. – are at best transitional (a few years) & temporary until such time when fine art can be totally eliminated (or at least its institutional forms) and artists find other employment. It is very important therefore that you find a profession from which you could make a living.¹⁰

The program Maciunas lays out here applies to all the arts. In verbal genres it introduces a reinterpretation of the concept of “literature.” Most attempts to revise literature have focused mainly on language and theme; Fluxus directs the main thrust of its efforts at changing the essential role and relationship of author and reader in communication through a text. Message in a conventional literary text is deeply enmeshed in language; it must be extracted by the reader through cautious, highly attentive linear deciphering. The author guides response directly through continuous, specific, interconnected verbal cues whose denotations and connotations are largely determined by consensus usage. The reader is thus for the most part a passive observer; the author is allowed maximum control and space, as Maciunas would argue, to exercise at will the full force of his ego.

Fluxists have identified some of the forces which have undermined this tradition. First of all, the transformation of our culture from a word-oriented to a visually-oriented one has begun to challenge the traditional separation of media. As Dick Higgins puts it in the essay “Structural

Researches" (1968), traditional "distinctions that characterized our compartmentalized word-oriented approach to the world seem to be breaking down."¹¹ What appears involved in Higgins' assessment is the awareness of the great burden of a long history of various artistic forms and genres whose restrictions on expressive possibilities are being increasingly resisted by artists aware of the inability of these forms to express adequately a new, drastically altered physical and social reality. Higgins cites the example of the novel:

A novel is expected to gain its identity from its identifiability with the tradition of the novel, and this creates a pressure on the writer to conform to the classical models rather than allow his work to determine its own form (and possibly lose its identifiability in developing its unique identity). The writer sets out to write a novel and to this extent, makes himself alienated from what might be more direct needs for his work.¹²

Of course, Fluxus' opposition to the "fine arts" in general would be well served by abandoning the separations of the media which the older tradition had protected self-servingly for so long. Also, a more fully participatory, active or dynamic reader and a more extroverted author would be more compatible with Fluxus' announced "social objectives" and its corollary opposition to egoistic individualism in artistry. Bici Hendricks, in a small prospectus for the Black Thumb Press (1966), talks therefore of requiring the reader of the new literature which her press will sponsor to do the actual "assembling" and "integrating" of the work:

We hope to deliver the materiel [sic] of a new art form which the reader will assemble, integrate, and use himself. Walt Whitman said the reader must do something for himself, and that it is he, or she, who needs to be the complete thing, rather than the book. We agree. It is not a passive philosophy, but we think Basho and Gertrude Stein would approve.¹³

Finally, Higgins, this time in his *Exemplativist Manifesto* (1976), points to a determinant in the postmodern condition. The postmodern individual, he argues, is more open and flexible intellectually, less cognitively oriented ("post-cognitive," as he terms it), and assumes more roles in our society than his antecedents. The new art, which Higgins calls "exemplative," accommodates this change by granting the audience greater freedom in its response. A work of art thus is no longer "an end in itself," but "a communication of the entire range of possibilities of an aspect of reality":

The audience constructs, by means of the notation and the work, an image of the set of possibilities intended by the artist. Any realization of such a set will necessarily be to some extent arbitrary, and is therefore an example rather than a fixity. For this reason, such art can be called exemplative.¹⁴

Higgins' comment might explain what is in part behind a report by Bici Hendricks that the contemporary audience lacks the time required for concentrated attention by the reading of traditional literature.¹⁵ The pur-

ported lack of time is no doubt rather impatience with forms which restrict response too much and are too much bound to tradition to be able to articulate well the present human condition.

Fluxus, then, like traditional art, wants to induce in its audience a response, or what Bici Hendricks calls "reverberations"; the Fluxist difference is in the nature of the response.¹⁶ By mixing conventionally separated media, Fluxus utilizes more of the faculties of the respondent; and, by requiring the respondent to complete the work, i.e., to provide most of the extrapolations of basic signs normally provided by the artist and to synthesize in a more substantial way all the parts, Fluxus guarantees more active participation.¹⁷ The result, the Fluxist claims, is that the artist and the audience share in "a richer experience."¹⁸

As I suggested earlier, in implementing this program Fluxus borrowed heavily from precursors. Concrete Poetry is a special instance of this. It was an experiment originally launched in the mid-1950s by Europeans and Brazilians which itself drew, in turn, on earlier linguistic innovators. It was still active, however, when Fluxus appeared, and was quickly adopted by the newer group. Dick Higgins later made their affiliation with Fluxus formal by publishing one of the major anthologies of Concrete Poetry under the editorship of a leading practitioner (Emmett Williams) in his Something Else Press, which he had established in 1964 as a Fluxus forum.¹⁹ Although Concrete Poetry itself has to be considered proto-Fluxist because it falls short of fully realizing what became some of the most essential precepts of the group's later program, it, nonetheless, provided one of the important models for Fluxus in literature.

Concrete Poetry is "a poetry of material."²⁰ It attempts to subvert the traditional poetic equation word = symbol = idea/image by drawing attention to the essential substance of poetry: the configurations of letters on the page which form words and the orienting space that surrounds and divides them.²¹ In its simplest form, the concrete poem is ideogrammatic: it attempts to force the reader to receive letter configurations in a context which highlights the physicality, the "material," which its traditional reference denotes. Concrete Poetry often triggers associations which are subjective, apperceptive, autonomous and autobiographical. The reader is forced to become actively involved in the creation of the total poem; to complete the poem in a way the author normally does.²² In the traditional response to poetry, the reader is able to elaborate autonomously on an image only within the contextual restrictions established by the author; in the concrete poem, such elaborations constitute the very essence of the poem, i.e., are in fact the actual poem.

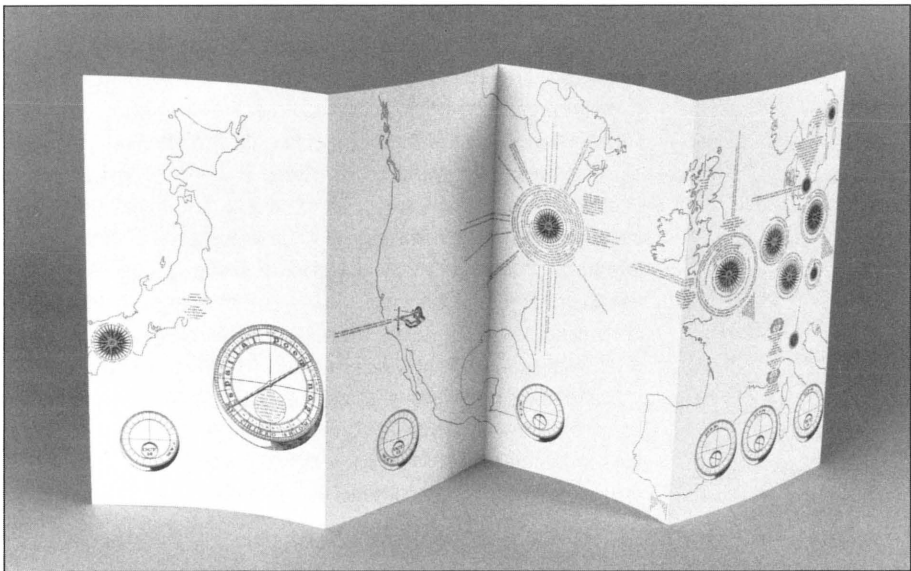
Concrete Poetry also often transports the reader into a world of intangibles and waxes philosophical. Again, in these instances, the author imposes limited interpretive guidance on the reader, granting him considerable freedom to supply the philosophical deliberations elicited by the poem, say, on the nature of reality or existence – creating in the course of this act the actual poem itself.

Where Concrete Poetry typically falls short of becoming full-fledged Fluxus is in its dependence on verbal text as the starting point of the poetic experience; it fails thereby to shed itself as fully as it might of decisive burdens of literary and linguistic tradition. Joseph Byrd's "poem for readers" entitled "Homage to Jackson Mac Low" exemplifies Fluxus' ability to provide for a more completely liberated reading experience.²³ Byrd accomplishes the feat by eliminating written text altogether and adding the dimensions of event and indeterminacy. His own text consists only of directions for creating the poem referred to in the subtitle; they, in turn, simultaneously furnish the vocabulary of which it is to be constructed (the reader must select five words for the poem at will from the directions). Since the vocabulary thus selected is extracted from its native environment, its original context is indeterminant. To inhibit the generation of a conventional stabilized text, Byrd requires that the poem created by the reader's choices be read aloud, not written; and to enhance free association in response to it, he stipulates that the words of the poem be read as sounds, not signs. Byrd's own composition is thus an open framework in which the reader makes his own interpretative decisions with maximal freedom.

From a Fluxus perspective, it could be argued that Byrd's piece is still bound to tradition by being word-based: his starting point is still language laden with meaning largely pre-established by consensus. Mieko (Chieko) Shiomi's "Spatial Poems" (1965–1975) cast this last vestige

figure 1.

Mieko (Chieko) Shiomi, *Spatial Poem No. 2 (a Fluxatlas)*. Concept work, New York, Fluxus Edition, 36.8 x 82.6 cm., 1966. *Alternative Traditions in the Contemporary Arts*, The University of Iowa, Fluxus West Collection. Photograph by Barbara Bremner.



aside by being event-based. Nine such poems were completed between March, 1965, and June, 1975, and subtitled "event."²⁴ They are all precisely dated, something typical of Fluxus works and appropriate to the group's strong sense of temporality (see Maciunas' statement on this in his letter to Tomas Schmit cited earlier).²⁵ Such temporality is, of course, the nature of events, which occur at specific points in time as well as in space (as alluded to in the poems' main titles). All of the poems were executed according to the same compositional scheme, so "Spatial Poem No.2: Direction Event" (figure 1) will serve as an example of the whole.

Shiomi began the work by sending out instructions to the participants: each was asked to record the direction in which he was facing or moving at 10:00 p.m. on October 15, 1965 (time adjusted for different geographical divisions of the Greenwich time standard). With the response, Shiomi composed a lithographic map, marking the geographical location of each participant and briefly describing his action on it. The spatiality of the event was concretized both by the map and a series of compasses distributed across it; its temporality by a series of clock images indicating the equivalent Greenwich hour. The reader is thus prompted by a very generalized sense of an individual acting in time and space to proffer the amplificatory associations and images from his own autonomous and personal store of experience. Shiomi's work, like Byrd's, is thus a mere skeletal outline which must be completed and synthesized by the reader to become a poem, i.e., a work, to use Bici Hendricks' phrasing again, which induces the reverberations in the reader typical of a response to artistic expression.

The individual respondent must, in the end, decide whether Fluxus successfully achieves the desired effect and whether it makes a valuable contribution to our culture. What cannot be disputed, I think, is the boldness of Fluxus' challenge to conventional thinking about the forms which artistic expression should assume. It is also evident that Fluxus is better able, than traditional or even modernist modes, to render effectively the present condition. Such modes have failed to harmonize, either convincingly or with lasting success, the complexities, contradictions, and ambiguities which have surfaced in our post-industrial era. Postmodernist thinking therefore rejects any further attempts at centering or totalizing and embraces instead the relativity and tentativeness of all efforts. Shunning all visions of utopias or similarly facile solutions to human problems and dilemmas, postmodernism favors open-endedness, plurality and distancing. The instability of language and the discontinuity in the development of human history which can no longer be explained away have made apparent the illusory nature of history and rung the deathknell of notions of originality, authenticity and authority of the human personality. One major artistic correlative of the postmodernist position is, without question, the art of Fluxus with its inherent

contingency and provisionality. At the least, Fluxus challenges us in the present intellectual climate more forcefully than most other innovations to rethink several hundred years of complacent artistic practice and its critical assessment.

Notes

I wish here to acknowledge the generous assistance of several individuals who put the materials in two major Fluxus collections at my disposal and helped me to find my way through them in preparation for the writing of this essay: of the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Elizabeth Armstrong, Siri Engberg, Rosemary Furtak, Susan Lambert, Joan Rothfuss; of The University of Iowa Department of Art and Art History, Estera Milman, James Lewes.

¹ Friedman, Ken, "The Birth of Fluxus," *Fluxus subjektiv* (Vienna, 1990), 1f.

² Two major versions of a definition of the concept "Fluxus" were issued: *Fluxus* (prospectus for the Fluxus yearboxes distributed at the public debut of the group in the Galerie Parnass, Wuppertal, Germany, June 9, 1962) (n.d., n.p.), [1]; *Manifesto* (thrown to the audience at the Festum Fluxorum Fluxus in the Art Academy, Düsseldorf, Germany, February, 1963). These two statements are reproduced in Jon Hendricks, *Fluxus Codex*, (New York, 1988), pp. 24, 91, 104. See Dick Higgins' similar definitions in Higgins, Dick, "Something Else about Fluxus," *Art and Artists* 7, no. 7(1972), p. 16; Higgins, Dick *Postface/Jefferson's Birthday* (New York, 1964), p. 83.

³ George Maciunas, *Fluxus Paper Events* (Berlin: Edition Hundertmark, 1976). See Maciunas' outline for this work in a letter to its publisher, Armin Hundertmark, in *Fluxus etc./Addenda II*, ed. Jon Hendricks (Pasadena, 1983), p. 227. The transvaluation of the concept "book" was a preoccupation of Maciunas. See, e.g., also his rebinding of the Manhattan Yellow Pages index for 1964 as a readymade with the new spine title *Encyclopedia of World Art*. On the term "illusionist" in the Fluxus sense, see Maciunas, George, "Neo-Dada in den Vereinigten Staaten" (manifesto read to the audience by Arthur C. Caspari at the Fluxus concert Après John Cage, Wuppertal, Germany, June 9, 1962), reproduced in *Happenings: Fluxus, Pop Art, Nouveau Réalisme*, ed. Jürgen Becker and Wolf Vostell (Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1965), pp. 192–195; trans. into English in *Fluxus: Selections from the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection*, ed. Clive Phillpot and Jon Hendricks (New York, 1988), pp. 25–27.

⁴ *Fluxus: Selections*, pp. 25–27. See also Higgins, "Something Else about Fluxus," p. 16. Maciunas' use of "concrete" is not without its precedents. See similar

thinking behind Hans Arp's use of the term: "creations" for sculptures he produced in the 1930s in the "Abstraction-Création" group and in his essays from the 1940s on "Concret Art": Arp, Hans, *Arp on Arp: Poems, Essays, Memories*, ed. Marcel Jean (New York: Viking, 1972), pp. 139–140, 244; Max Bill's theories of geometrical art spelled out in connection with the exhibition "Konkrete Kunst" in Basel in 1944; Pierre Schaeffer's concept of "musique concrète" in France in the late 1940s; and Theo van Doesburg's program for the journal *Art Concret* (April, 1929): Joost Baljeu, *Theo van Doesburg* (New York, 1974), pp. 97–100.

⁵ Maciunas, "Neo-Dada," p. 165. See also La Monte Young's similar comments on music in La Monte Young, "Lecture 1960," *Tulane Drama Review* 10, no. 2 (1965), pp. 80–81.

⁶ Maciunas, George, Letter to Tomas Schmit, dated January, 1964, reproduced in *Fluxus etc./Addenda II*, ed. Jon Hendricks (Pasadena, 1983), p. 165. See also *Fluxus Broadside Manifesto* (ca. September, 1962) which opposes the traditional artist's "professional, parasitic and elite status in society" and advocates for him a "nonprofessional status in society" and an art which is "unlimited, massproduced, obtainable by all and eventually produced by all." This manifesto is reproduced in *Codex*, p. 26.

⁷ See, e.g., Maciunas' charts graphing the historical development of the avant-garde through Fluxus: Maciunas, George, *Diagram of Historical Development of Fluxus and other 4 Dimensional, Aural, Optic, Olfactory, Epithelial and Tactile Art Forms* (ca. 1973); Maciunas, George, *Fluxus Diagram* (1962); Maciunas, George, *Fluxus: Its Historical Development and Relationship to Avant-Garde Movements* (ca. 1966); the former and the latter of which are reproduced in *Codex*, pp. 329–337 and 350, respectively; Higgins, Dick,

"Fluxus 25 Years," in *Fluxus 25 Years* (Williamstown, 1987); Friedman, "Birth," 2ff.

⁸ Maciunas, "Neo-Dada," 165. On LEF's espousal of a deaestheticized, functional art, see, e.g., Christian Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven, 1983), 105–108; Edward J. Brown, *Mayakovsky: A Poet in the Revolution* (New Jersey, 1973), pp. 209–218.

⁹ Higgins describes this tendency in Fluxus as "almost a cult" or "fetish, carried far beyond any rational or explainable level which idealized the most direct relationship with 'reality,' specifically objective reality." Higgins, "Something Else about Fluxus," p. 17.

¹⁰ Maciunas, Letter to Tomas Schmit, p. 165.

¹¹ Higgins, Dick, "Structural Researches," in *The Something Else Newsletter* 1, no. 8 (April, 1968), p. 2. Higgins offered the term "intermedia" for new art that falls between the traditional media, in "the grey lands between music and action painting, the visual arts and daily activities." See Higgins, "Intermedia," *The Something Else Newsletter* 1, no.1 (February, 1966); Higgins, "Something Else about Fluxus," p. 17.

¹² Higgins, "Structural," p. 2.

¹³ Hendricks, Bici, *Statement of Aims and Purposes of the Black Thumb Press* (New York, 1966), [3–4]. See also the *Fluxus Broadside Manifesto* which advocates the "selfsufficiency of the audience," and Higgins, Dick, *An Exemplativist Manifesto* (New York, 1976), which theorizes that "the audience constructs" the ultimate work in Fluxus art.

¹⁴ Higgins, *Exemplativist Manifesto*.

¹⁵ Hendricks, *Statement*, [4].

¹⁶ Hendricks, *Statement*, [4].

¹⁷ Becker, *Happenings*, pp. 12–14, describes this as the aim of Fluxus happenings also.

¹⁸ Hendricks, *Statement*, [4].

¹⁹ The major anthologies of Concrete Poetry are: *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry*, ed. Emmett Williams (New York, 1967); *Anthology of Concretism*, ed. Eugene Wildman (Chicago, 1969, 1970); *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, ed. Mary Ellen Solt (Bloomington, 1970); *Konkrete Poesie*, ed. Eugen Gomringer (Stuttgart, 1972, 1991.)

²⁰ Michelson, Peter, "Introduction," *Anthology of Concretism*, viii. See also Solt, *Concrete Poetry*, pp. 7–8.

²¹ Many concrete poets use the term "constellation" to describe the arrangement of letters on a page so as to

make use of the space that surrounds them as an integral part of the poetic utterance. See, e.g., Gomringer, Eugen, "definitionen zur visuellen poesie," and Mon, Franz. "buchstabenkonstellationen," both in *Poesie*, pp. 165 and 175, respectively.

²² Kathleen McCullough speaks of the reader thus playing a "more dynamic role in concrete poetry than in conventional," which grants the reader thereby greater freedom than he is used to. See McCullough, Kathleen, "Introduction," in *Concrete Poetry: An Annotated International Bibliography, with an Index of Poets and Poems* (Troy, 1989), pp. vii–viii.

²³ *An Anthology*, ed. La Monte Young and Jackson Mac Low (Munich, 1970), n.p.

²⁴ The original versions of the poems were issued as lithographs; they were finally collected and published in book form in Mieko Shiomi, *Spatial Poem* (Osaka, 1976); however, the book versions differ substantially from the lithographic.

²⁵ Friedman: "Time, the great condition of human existence, is a central issue in Fluxus and in the work that artists in the Fluxus circle create." "Birth," 9.