

The discussion recounts the point in time when the Fluxus community first became self-consciously aware of itself during the early European concert tours and provides insights into the identification of criteria by which aspects of European and American Fluxus performances can be delineated. In addition, topics addressed include the use of chance procedure by members of the group, their debts to John Cage and the relationship between the composer/performer of Fluxus event works and his or her audience.

*Road Shows,
Street Events,
and Fluxus People;*

*A Conversation with
Lison Knowles*

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EM: I know that there is a great deal of contention these days about who was a Fluxus artist and when. For example, some people will insist that Nam June Paik was always Fluxus, but that Joseph Beuys and Milan Knizak were never more than tangentially related to the group. Conversely, others will state that when Beuys and Knizak were Fluxus, they were “very Fluxus” whereas Paik was always Paik. In the tradition of the late George Maciunas, everyone seems to be keeping their own lists. Was it easier to figure out in the early sixties? You were part of the very beginning, the birthing of the community, as it were. You were there in Europe, during that 1962–63 concert tour when the group identity was first established. How did members of the group determine which of their pieces were suitable for presentation as Fluxus works...which of the events were Fluxus events?

AK: Well, we were billed as a “Fluxus Concert.” That’s how our event pieces were presented. If these same events had been performed in another context, we would not have called them “Fluxus event pieces,” but just an “event by George Brecht,” for example. We selected which pieces were to be performed at Wiesbaden together. George Maciunas did a final shape up, but since we each managed our own pieces we had a lot to say about what each concert would contain. What should be mentioned here is the pressure we were under to come up with one concert after another. We were, so to speak, brought together from the outside. I am sure there is a tropic name for it but, if you have two hundred people waiting for a Fluxus concert from one city to another, you are jolly well going to get a concert together. It looks now as if we were of a piece; that we agreed about a lot of things which we never in fact spoke about. You can’t imagine what disparate people we were. We were not a homogeneous group, nor were we seasoned performers, but once we had done the concert in Wiesbaden it became like a road show; it was like something that happened to Janis Joplin, except within an art context. Sometimes it seemed as if the only reason that we came to any agreements at all was because we had to produce a concert the next night. We knew there were a few hundred people showing up each night, so we got it together, often just before the performance. It was under this duress and excitement that I started to write my own. I started with “Make a Salad.”

Now to address what a Fluxus piece is. Fluxus events are what went on during those concerts. It all started as a kind of motley road show of event pieces pulled together into “Fluxus Concerts” and it took off. The best records of what finally happened are the *Great Bear Pamphlets*, [published by Something Else Press], Brecht’s *Water Yam* and Dick Higgins’ *Jefferson’s Birthday/Postface*.

EM: I have the “by Alison Knowles” pamphlet in the Alternative [Traditions in the Contemporary Arts] Collection. Your performance scores/recipes are quite wonderful. But what about the objects...not

the event-based objects, “the fan, the ladder, and the apple,” but the published object works that we identify with Fluxus. To be more specific, what about the multiples, the “Fluxus Editions” for example? How do they fit in?

AK: There you must give credit to George [Maciunas] who loved objects and graphics. The object making, the little plastic boxes from Canal Street, kept New York Fluxus going. George would go downstairs to the plastic store on Canal Street and buy a gross of the little sectioned boxes. They were linked as much to books as to art objects, I think. They were hand-held book-boxes. Canal Street in those days abounded in job lot sales. That’s any overproduced item that has been “jobbed” out for quick sale. These small objects in barrels were multiples in themselves. They fascinated me – five hundred plastic watch straps, all one color and each selling for under a nickel. So, I’d say the plastic box editions that George loved to make up were directly linked to the fortuitous positioning of Fluxus and George Maciunas at Green Street and Canal. Anything can, after all, become art, particularly (George might say) if it’s worthless or separated from its practical context (like half a pair of scissors).

EM: There is one particular object, a booklet, as a matter of fact, that provided me with my first real insight into Fluxus. It’s the piece called *Visa TouristE: Passport to the State of Flux* that Ken Friedman conceived in the sixties and Maciunas realized in the seventies. When I first saw it I thought that, more than anything else, Fluxus was a kind of conceptual country that granted short-term citizenship to an international community of self proclaimed cosmopolites. It provided them with a nationality. Then later I saw Nam June Paik’s *Fluxus Island in a Dé-colage Ocean* and Chieko Shiomi’s *Spatial Poem/Fluxatlas* and I knew that I was right.

AK: And do you know another idea that’s linked to that, I love it, it’s Bob Watts’ idea that Fluxus could overtake the existing institutions, the churches, the grocery store and of course George’s minesweeper; all of Fluxus gets on the minesweeper and goes around the world. Alison pulverizes the fish to make bread, someone else has the role of getting the flags up to guide the ship. In a funny way it was a world of people. We had our mothers and fathers aboard in some sense. We were a kind of grand Fluxus family – Emmett Williams as story-teller/Papa and George as eccentric uncle. That’s absolutely right. The world of Fluxus did exist somewhere, you know, a world of fluxus weather, fluxus books, fluxus people, fluxus art...

EM: ...and Fluxus events. Let’s talk about the events again; the European events and their American counterparts. We’ve already spoken of the fact that the community was defined in Europe during the first

concert tour. What happened when those of you who were based in New York came back in 1963, having become the “Fluxus people” while you were abroad?

AK: I think that the Fluxus street event delineates differences between European and American Fluxus very well. The only significant street event that happened in Europe was in Amsterdam. It was the most exciting, violent, and scandalous Fluxus that we had...kind of *New York Post* headline material. When we got back to New York, we had no concert halls, we had no audience at all. How were we going to keep together? What had held us together in Europe was the people on the outside who responded to our work for all kinds of political, artistic and personal reasons. The pieces often made people angry. We were helping them say, “Yes, the *hausmeister* (the man who shuts down the hall and cleans up) should have a seat in the hall.” Those issues were terribly important there, but they weren’t in America. America was, you know, patting itself on the back. It already had its new art form going [Abstract Expressionism], but we could have the street. We opened a little store front. We’d sell the objects that George was always madly making; or we had Canal Street Open Saturday Nights. We did a series in a jazz club called the Cafe au Go Go which drew a small public. The street evenings involved four, five people, seven, maybe ten people – Barbara Moore and Peter, Joe Jones, Ay-o, Dick and myself, maybe George Brecht. It was like the family getting together over chicken dinner, once a week to see if we had any new material. I can remember an ear-stroking piece, sitting at two tables...two people stroking each others’ ears. I think we were ten people that evening. When the Europeans would visit, they would ask, “Well, where’s the concert?” and we’d answer, “there isn’t one; it’s only working among ourselves; we’re doing objects, we’re active.” When Ben [Vautier] came we did events on the streets, often on the loading docks. We set a chair out there and did *Alison Knowles String Piece*. I tied him to the loading dock using the fire hydrants. We held up signs to announce the pieces to passersby, who, of course, took little notice...We were shocked to discover that we didn’t have an audience in New York. At the same time, we did such interesting street work. I don’t do it myself anymore, but I loved the street as an arena for those simple performances. They fit in so perfectly with George Maciunas’ values; no cost, no waste, and lots of surprises.

EM: Were those street event “Fluxus works” merely because a number of Fluxus people got together or was there something about those



Alison Knowles, *Big Book*. Installation shot of non-extant work, 1967. Courtesy of the artist.

events that was particular to fluxus rather than to any other kind of street performance that was going on at the time?

AK: Well, those event pieces did have particular qualities I've mentioned: no cost, no fuss. Let's add that they had a single idea and a limited time duration. We could say they were minimal.

EM: Let's talk about that a little more. I'm interested in "the single idea" concept.

AK: All right. "Draw a straight line and follow it." "Make a salad." "Within one minute, within one clock minute, make any sound." "Put a child on the stage and see how long the child will stay there."

EM: Why was that an important concept for the group?

AK: I think that Fluxus stood forcefully against anything theatrical. That was the aesthetic. If you're making a piece of a theater you're not just going to say, "make a salad," you're going to say, "let's have a green drape, let's have the hostess in a red robe to contrast with the green." "Let's have a banquet table and I'd like to have six spoons left on the left." You provide a theatrical construct for the event to fit into. But when you're getting into a new town and the performance is in two hours, you have to make it minimal, simple; you have to be able to apply it to perhaps no media, no microphones or lighting at all; you have to find the materials right there. In the case of the salad event, we collected bushels of vegetables from the market near the Nikolai Kirche and sent the tab to the music conservatory. Eric Andersen somehow got that bill cleared up before he "resigned" from the academy.

EM: You aren't speaking to the New York events now. You've already said that you didn't have an audience there. You're speaking of the European Fluxus concerts now. But what about the audience that was available to you in European concerts; what did you expect back from that audience through the repetition of the "single idea" concept? In other words, once you established the "single idea" as a formal principle, as a working boundary of sorts, what kind of relationship did you attempt to establish with your audience, that group of receivers/out-siders, that could walk in and out of your pieces at will.

AK: Why would they come back? In Europe the concerts were a kind of antidote to traditional art. In America? Well as I said, the audiences were small and devoted. Most of the people who came were having some trouble swallowing Expressionism. The non-theatricality of those pieces encouraged people to find art within their own lives. These were the most ordinary and accessible materials made magical with simple ideas. There was a print and type teacher named Bob Forman who

would make the trip in from Long Island to see us. He had no background in art, but we obviously brought something into his life.

EM: You've talked about what you wanted to give your audience – of your roles as artist/teachers (I suppose Beuys would have said “artist/priests”) – but what did you want back from them?

AK: Now you're asking me about the content of my own pieces. I don't know what other people wanted. It's nice when people can relax and be attentive, watchful...empty; not so much eager but more a stance of waiting and noticing. Those early pieces we're speaking of and what I do now ask the same thing: that the audience be unencumbered and quiet...oh yes, and patient as well. I find myself allied a little bit to La Monte Young in my early pieces. A kind of moral fiber is evident, almost a kind of didactic thing. “Draw a straight line and follow it.” Now for me, the implications of that piece are very refreshing and stabilizing for whatever you are doing in your life. It took many hours with a plumb line to draw that line and then we could walk it. These works are not expressionistic and indulgent. I think that many of the pieces are just simple refreshment pieces done for whatever day's work you have to do, supporting occurrences in life. It gives members of the audience the ball; they can make their own salad differently, even if they are doing it for their family. It supports those very daily events as being relevant for your art, like the “Identical Lunch.” Whatever it is you have to touch and work with, you can make a kind of performance of it, but it has to be stripped of the hangings and accoutrements of theater. What happens is that kind of revelation, no an *emptiness*, opens up. Members of the audience are watching almost nothing going on. The action must be done exactly, precisely and modestly to allow the emptiness to appear – say pouring water from a ladder into a pan to make music – a quality inhabits the room. People often feel awkward with this quality and laugh. That's fine.

EM: There's an awareness that the audience has, and that the performer or performers have, of participating in a situation that stands outside everyday experience.

AK: Yes, there is. It's hard to define that ingredient, but it's what made the making of a salad in London absolutely amazing. Everybody handles lettuce and cucumbers, carrots, and blue cheese. And yet it was...you could just hear every crack of the knife; there were six of us mixing it in a big huge pickle barrel borrowed from the Cross and Blackwell Co. and rolled through the streets of London to the hall. People finally realized it was going to go on for a while, and they got angry and left. Some came back after a while. There was an extraordinary event in Denmark which left Eric Andersen standing in front of an angry audience for an hour or more. He was waiting for Emmett Williams to move from under the bap-

tistry. The piece stated that one could not leave the stage until a pre-decided action (one you yourself had decided upon) had happened. Both of these people had decided that the other had to make an exit. Each held to it and stood out there; Eric on stage facing his countrymen, if you will, Emmett crammed under the baptistry. From an ostensibly simple direction in the score an amazing situation arose. Finally Emmett had to use the toilet. When he left the stage that ended the piece. Eric was free to leave the stage also. Such an occurrence could never be planned without the audience sensing it. The audience, none the less, stayed for the duration, jeering and hooting. This audience you see, had no idea why they stayed, but there must have been some reason why they didn't leave. Just what was the audience looking for? Maybe the simpler events like these allow for unforeseen occurrence. It's why we preferred the live event to recorded music. The nature of the performer can easily obstruct these "mysteries," I mean the performer has to allow the audience to see these things for themselves, to feel them (by "them" I mean the sometimes very small actions, gestures, and inflections that happen in the act of doing something). It is an attitude we were after of not promoting anything within the action. That's why Zen is mentioned in terms of Fluxus event performing. The action is directed and precise with nothing added.

EM: You've called your pieces recipes. You do not obfuscate the structure of the works; you don't deliberately mystify.

AK: No, no, not to intentionally mystify but I do take a kind of magical view, finally, about a good event piece. You can know all about it; how it's different or what's gone into it, and still the reasons for its success, its working, are quite difficult to put into words. And I think that if you try to make things intentionally mysterious and don't reveal their structure, then the audience misses the pleasure of the process of having it happen *with* them. I feel very close to my audience, and I feel that if they know what I'm trying to do that they also are, in a sense doing it with me. I state in the recipe exactly what is going to happen, e.g. *Make a Salad*. After that the rest is up to the performer. So, these pieces allow for mystery, emptiness; things not easily verbalized but felt by everyone.

EM: Would you say that, for the most part, Fluxus performance works were about access to structure (the sharing of an experience with the audience) or about the intentional mystification of that public (a kind of, "I have a secret, and if you're going to be a part of this art situation then you have to trust me," posture)?

AK: I can't easily answer that question. Emmett Williams, for example, loves tight structure. He loves patterns of all sorts, but he's not afraid, as you say, to expose them to the audience, and he'll hold up a four-

directional song of doubt, with the different colored circles, and you're a circle red and you're a circle blue and you make the sound, you just never quite know, to the baton. And then he'll turn it around so the audience can see it. Again, maybe more or less my position, the mystery in the piece is even more wonderful if they know all about it. Robert Filliou, in his performance pieces, I think, took a more aloof position. Dick [Higgins] works within a very tight structure. But he doesn't feel the need to explain or talk about the structure much in his pieces. Dick's work has sort of a wonderful "crazy" quality. I think of him when I read Kwakiutl Indian events. It's always in his work (even when students do it in Berlin), a kind of crazy element. Dick's work is eclectic, (one piece can cross various language structures, or whatever). It's all sort of crammed into a tight structure, yet it comes off as sort of magical.

EM: Let's talk for a couple of minutes about chance. The twentieth century seems to have generated an ongoing dialogue among artists about chance, procedure, not just as a means by which to get a good piece together, but as a device for cultural criticism – an utopian alternative to "unnatural" cultural constructs, for example. I have always felt that [Tristan] Tzara's manifesto, "To make a Dadaist Poem," has provided contemporary artists with their most powerful paradigm and with their greatest stumbling block, at one and the same time. (I suppose that all paradigms serve as stumbling blocks once they have attained status as such.) You know his recipe for the interaction among a newspaper, some scissors, a paper bag, and chance procedure that results in a poem that "resembles you."

AK: Yes, the importance of the Tzara self-portrait...I think that for the whole Fluxus group, 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.

EM: Much earlier in the century, the Zurich Dadaist Hans Arp used the terms "Laws of Chance" and "Natural Order" to describe the end result of his own experience with chance – structures unearthed through chance procedure that provided an alternative to man-made cultural constructs. [Marcel] Duchamp, of course, made use of chance regularly (and overtly). Were some of the Fluxus people thinking of the mystical quality of chance procedure and others concerned with breaking down

cultural norms, or was everyone just excited about the liberation that Tzara offered with his paper bag and his pieces of newspaper?

AK: I don't think that we can talk about Fluxus and chance without talking about Cage. I think that the influence of his class at the New School [for Social Research] can not be overestimated. I was just on the fringe of it, just getting to know the people. They talked about what was going on in that class. Those introductions and experiments with chance affected all the participants in that class, and through them it moved into other avenues.

EM: You spoke earlier of the Kwakiutl Indian events. Have they been particularly influential on your own event pieces?

AK: I love the Indian Kwakiutl events, and I've studied them a lot. I did a piece called *Gift Event*, which is directly based on Kwakiutl events. It's a piece with no audience necessarily. One finds things in the street and makes an object that then one attempts to give away to some passerby. The piece has nothing to do with usual gift giving because usually gifts are beautiful. We recognize them as coming from a store (and being blue because your mother likes blue). All these aspects of gift giving are shattered by the piece. You have this nameless object, made of a collection of things you found in the street and you have to, in some way, sell it to a stranger. When you say, "excuse me, but I have something I want to give you here in my hand, isn't it beautiful? Look at how the coffee works for that piece of gum," you immediately have a situation where that stranger and you and the thing have an art experience.

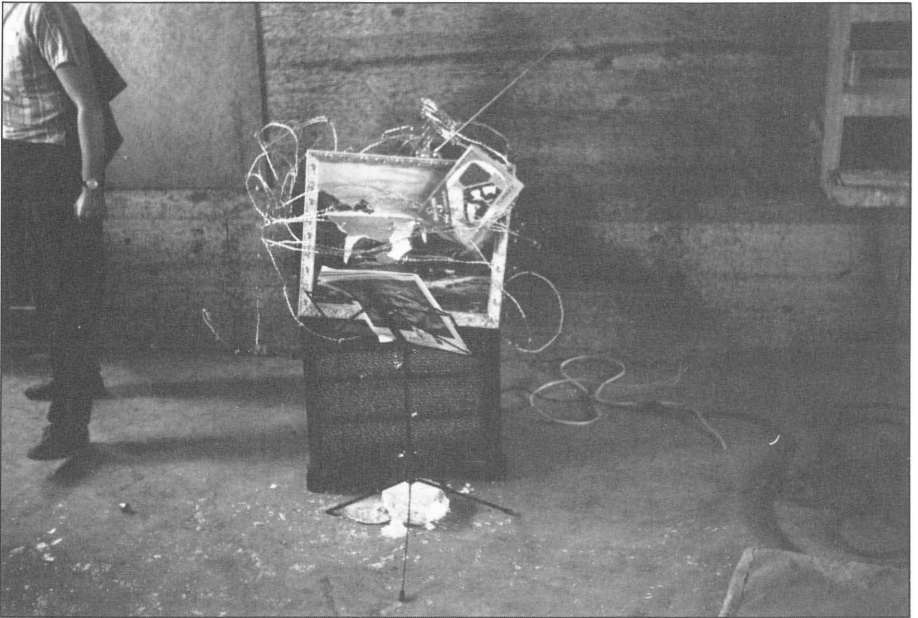
EM: What makes that an art experience?

AK: It's preconceived. It somehow has to do with the performer pushing through his or her own fears; transforming that garbage; putting it together to make something. In *Gift Event* the performers have sort of pushed out regular life, dragging with them all those "normal" materials, whatever they could find. They are using everyday materials, but they are no longer everyday, they are doing a performance. The attitude of the performer is so important. It may be jocular or droll, but it is very serious also. Can you imagine presenting five bottle caps to a passerby as a serious gift and having it received. The hardest part of the event is getting the passerby to accept the gift.

EM: You've reminded me of something that came to mind earlier when we spoke of the found-objectness of the things used in Fluxus performances (the pickle barrel, for example), and now we've talked about the found-objectness of the "gift." Does the residue of the everyday, the residuum of functional, non-art based cultural usage that these rejected objects make reference to have something to do with it?

AK: Yes it does. The artifacts and objects tied together and dusted off should certainly come from the vicinity of the performance. They do carry a “residuum of non-art culture,” as you suggested. The situation asks for ingenuity from both the giver and receiver. With the *Gift Event* the performers are out there on their own, in this very lonely, exciting place, looking for something. You have to make a whole new world in a moment with this stuff. And what’s more, you even have to try to convince someone else that they have something in their hand.

This conversation took place in Iowa City in the Spring of 1985 during *FLUXUS: A Workshop Series*.



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figure 1. Scene from Wolf Vostell's performance TV Dé-collage at the Yam Festival organized by the Smolin Gallery in New Brunswick, New Jersey, May 19, 1963.