

This animated conversation ranges from discussion of the overt questioning of understanding, meaning and the validity of the art situation to the conscious, recurrent renewal of "crisis" as a catalyst for the arts. Topics addressed include: the requirements of culturing, the relationship between randomness and the unavoidable reconstitution of meaning as well as the frustrated expectations of the spectator within a deliberately "non-structured" art situation.

On Open Structures and the Crisis of Meaning, a Dialogue:

Eric Andersen, Stephen C. Foster, and Estera Milman

Estera Milman and Stephen C. Foster, pp. 133–142
Visible Language, 26:1/2
© *Visible Language*, 1992
Rhode Island School of Design
Providence, RI 02903

SF: I think that most often, when people talk about Fluxus, they have a kind of abbreviated account to give of Fluxus, and then basically go on to talk about their own work. This strikes me as reasonable, if we can give a reasonable account for why that should happen.

EA: I think there are very good reasons for that.

SF: Well, exactly, but that's what I'd like to ask you about.

EA: Because, apart from George Maciunas, nobody considered himself to be a Fluxus artist. There are a few exceptions later on, of course. But by then just to call yourself a Fluxus artist provided some advantages.

EM: You're suggesting that there was no sense of community at the outset.

EA: We were, of course, involved in events called Fluxus and provided work that could be published by George Maciunas in what he named Fluxus editions and so on; but we did not consider ourselves to be Fluxus artists. That was especially true of the situation in Europe when we all met in '62. We did not even consider ourselves to be doing the same kind of work.

SF: Could you have used any word to indicate just a mere recurrence of the gathering of the same kind of people – you could have called it “ajax” – or you could have called it anything?

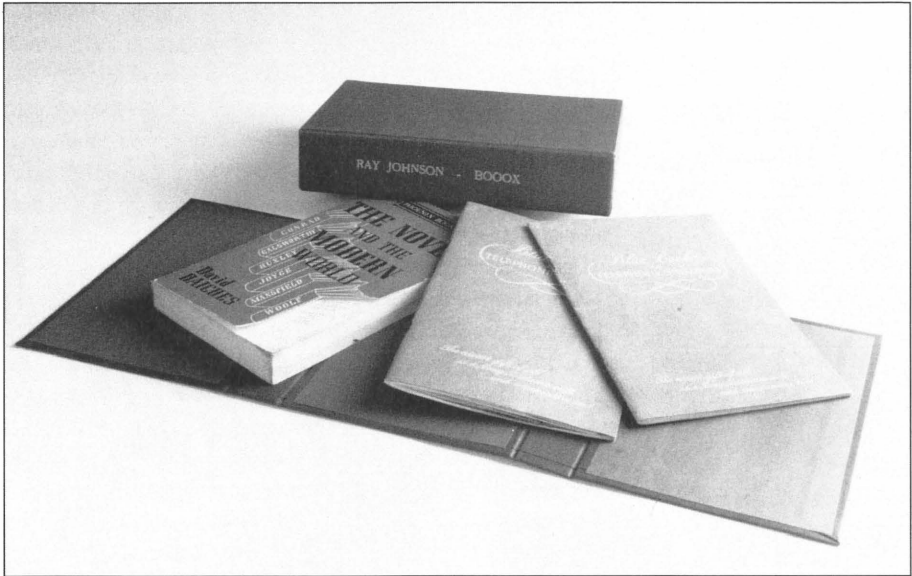
EA: We could have. It could have been any word. But Fluxus was a very appropriate term. Because the meaning of Fluxus is of course flux.

SF: Well can I ask you another question? Is it a mistake to refer to Fluxus as a movement because it's misleading; is it a mistake for scholars and critics to pursue it as though it were something real? In other words, if a person trains their vision onto Fluxus are they quite simply making a mistake – are they deceiving themselves about there being an actual object of study present?

EA: Yes – yes and no. It has too limited a scope, especially in this country. In Europe it's not such a big problem because nobody takes the term seriously. But in this country the scope of Fluxus is too limited; it is seen as a movement. But that has one advantage in that people can discuss what then could be called “Fluxus” work.

EM: Are you talking about American Fluxus works or Fluxus works in general?

EA: The work in general. The kind of work that was done in Europe in '62 and '63 provided a completely new approach to making art at that



Ray Johnson, *Booox*. Boxed set of three altered books, *Admonition of Kwanzan Kosushi as Interpreted by Uncle Ray Johnson (The Novel and the Modern World, by David Daiches); Blue Book of Telephone Numbers with Cut Out Cats (cats to Higgins, Knowles et al.); Blue Book of Telephone Numbers with Collage Drawings*, 18.7 x 14 x 4.1 cm., early 1960s. Ellsworth Snyder Collection. Photograph by Angela Webster, Courtesy of Madison Art Center.

time, and if you try to define these traits – this way of understanding these activities, the way to see yourself as an artist – if we call these Fluxus works, then it makes good sense. I would define a Fluxus work as a completely open piece...

SF: But not one that shares any other particular attributes with other works?

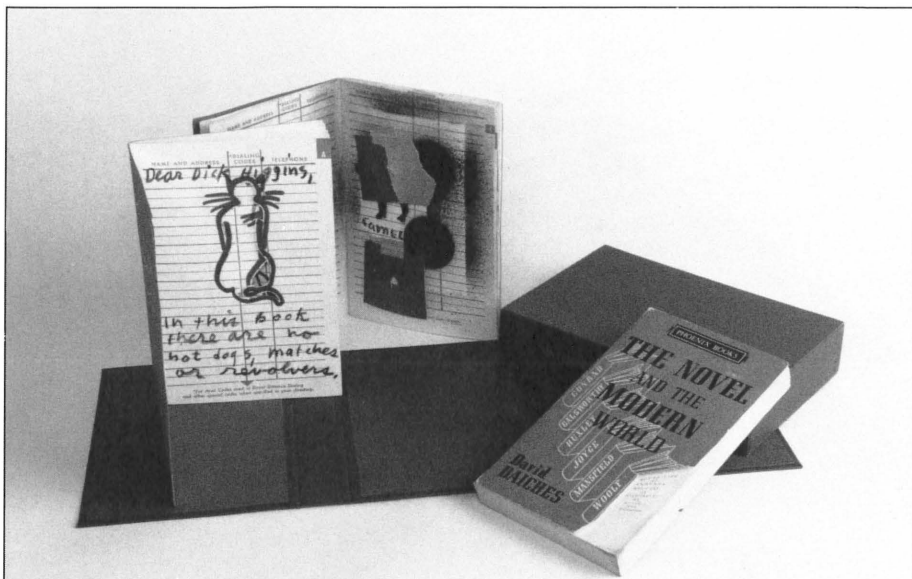
EA: No.

SF: What you're suggesting is that Fluxus indicates a certain kind of historical benchmark where the nature of thinking about how to make art shifted from one place to another.

EA: That is true, if we add that this kind of work was actually done by most of us before we met at the festivals in Europe in '62 and '63. The Fluxus festivals became a meeting point; the first major platform for these works.

EM: And you're saying that it had a two year life span – this benchmark – that it lasted for two years.

EA: It lasted for two years, yes. It changed completely when George came back here and kind of formed his own court around him, and, you



Ray Johnson, *Boox*. Boxed set of three altered books, *Admonition of Kwanzan Kosushi as Interpreted by Uncle Ray Johnson* (*The Novel and the Modern World*, by David Daiches); *Blue Book of Telephone Numbers with Cut Out Cats* (cats to Higgins, Knowles et al.); *Blue Book of Telephone Numbers with Collage Drawings*, 18.7 x 14 x 4.1 cm., early 1960s. Ellsworth Snyder Collection. Photograph by Angela Webster, Courtesy of Madison Art Center.

know about all the disagreements that George and Dick [Higgins] had and the disagreements with Emmett [Williams], and so on and so on. I would prefer to use the term to describe those works done during this period in Europe.

EM: Well you just began to define that period by saying that “open works” were produced. What else would you add? Because, after all, the production of open works went on well beyond '62 and '63.

EA: Yes, they went well beyond, but that kind of work emerged in the art scene at that time. You hadn't seen that kind of work to the same notable extent before. You never saw that work with the Dadaists or the Futurists – not anywhere. It was a new understanding of art.

EM: What do you mean by an open work then? Let's be very specific.

EA: First of all there's no substance and there's no core in the work. There's no united concept. That's why Fluxus differed tremendously from later Conceptual Art. What you set up is a kind of procedure. But this procedure has no meaning specific to the work itself. So that's why it lacks structure – there is no structure to the work; there is a procedure, a rough design, and this sets off the piece. Then the piece takes place in a way that is really unpredictable. Of course from psychological perspectives you can predict a piece. You can say, “if you set up this kind

of procedure then it's most likely that this and that will happen," but not based on aesthetic considerations. As far as aesthetic considerations are concerned, there are not limits. It's just a way to start up somewhere and construct an environment for the piece, but it's not the piece itself.

SF: But don't you think that when you set up that kind of structure, no matter how loose it is, then one thing you are doing is providing cues, or clues to something?

EA: Yes, whatever you do will provide such cues and clues.

SF: I mean you're focusing perception, at least on certain kinds of parameters.

EA: Of course you are, but if the clues are contradictory or can be understood in many ways – if they are undefinable by the nature of...

SF: You mean only undefinable ahead of time; because when any single individual goes into that situation, he's going to construe it in such a way that it seeks parity with some of his own structures. The work is concretized in individual cases, and that these don't coincide doesn't matter.

EA: No, it doesn't matter.

SF: But they are concretized based on the perceptions of these cues.

EA: Yes. And it becomes a weakness if the person who set up the procedure performs the piece as a solo. It is much better when other artists perform the pieces based on suggestions or proposals. And that did take place – it was typical of '62 and '63 – we did mostly perform pieces other than our own.

SF: Was it part of the intention of the work to make the performer aware of his performance of "a thing?" Was it, in a sense, a way of making that person perceive himself or herself in the process of performing? I mean, was there that kind of self-reflexiveness built into the work?

EA: Yes, in the sense that...yes, it is self-reflexiveness, but not in the sense that you gain any kind of understanding of yourself by doing this, apart from the awareness that you are doing it.

EM: How did the pieces function then? What was the purpose of the thing in the first place? Why did the whole thing happen?

EA: Why?

EM: What were your intentions?

EA: Why did Fluxus happen in 1962 and '63?

EM: Why did those sort of open, amorphous kinds of events take place; what was the purpose; what was the intention?

EA: There was no intention other than establishing a new understanding of aesthetics. An understanding based on the observance that an aesthetic need not deal with form and structure.

SF: But, I think that what Estera's getting at is that when you say that it's made to promote a new understanding, that requires that somebody understand it – on some level and at some point.

EA: That is mainly a problem of logic.

SF: Well you know that I am not really trying to present a logical problem. All I'm saying is that I think that when one says that something is intended to promote a new understanding of the arts, the implication is that someone understands something anew, from some place, whether it's the artist or spectator or both; not necessarily understanding in any single way. I would hazard, for example, that it may be the question of *understanding* itself that's at stake, not of anything in particular or any kind of understanding structure, but that the very facts and nature of understanding itself may have been at question.

EA: I agree with that. The basic position is the experimental approach; to pull and push categories, to question understanding and meaning, and to make no sense. If that is actually what you're saying.

EM: It seems to me that the dangerous little precipice that you stand on, you as a spokesperson, at present, is that when you talk about pushing an art situation, or the perception that an art situation is being enacted – when you push it (or pushed it in '62) to those extremes, what you are basically doing is questioning the whole validity of an art situation to begin with.

EA: Yes, sure, we were conscious of that.

EM: The point is that you succeeded in questioning the validity of an art situation in 1962–63, but then you persisted – each of you, on your own, or as a group that got together for a dinner now and again – you persisted in repeatedly re-negotiating this questioning of an art situation which you, in a sense, purportedly invalidated in the very beginning. It seems to me that this process is kind of questionable, that, in fact, you repeatedly *reconstituted* the myth of art rather than dismantle it.

EA: It is a good point. It's important to see the works as situations of invalidization.

EM: Are the works themselves invalid?

EA: Yes, they are invalid as art, as we understood art until the second half of this century.

SF: It's the renewing of a crisis or renewing of a question, or the renewing of a position...

EA: The questions are recurring anyway whether we deal with them or not. What we are talking about are recurring questions and we said, "let's keep this on the surface – let's be aware of this all the time." I don't think that we were attempting to arrive at a sort of solution, or completion or to provide answers or anything.

EM: You spoke earlier of Dada and Futurism. Some of us, who look at peculiar aspects of the twentieth century as something almost like a continuum of sorts, are conscious of the fact that earlier in the century, when people attempted to push aesthetic boundaries, they were often concerned with more than simple innovation within the arts. When they attacked "structure" they were looking for new structures. There was a sense of responsibility to culture-at-large that, in a sense, served to validate what was being attempted from within the arts. When Tzara tore apart his pieces of language and put them in a paper bag, he wasn't simply saying, "I'm questioning an art situation." He was attacking what for him was the very basis of culture itself. His actions were informed by utopian convictions about change, in the large sense. What you are suggesting is that, between the teens and the sixties, concepts such as the inter-relationship between artistic innovation and cultural revisionism were lost – that what was left revolved around aesthetic considerations. We can not help but look at Tzara as having been somewhat overly optimistic, but once you give up belief in the convictions that informed his actions, what's left?

EA: I think that's a very interesting matter. It has for milleniums been fundamental to Western civilization that it is in permanent crisis. I think we stopped being too concerned about the actual crises and began dealing with what crises are as such.

SF: Well, I was going to say that in the early part of the twentieth century, there was conviction, that even if problems, questions couldn't be solved, you nevertheless go ahead and attempt to solve them. And con-

sequently, Tzara could say at the very beginning of the movement that Dada pisses in different colors – that the world was defunct – but that Dada was shit too.

EA: Okay.

SF: Yet, you know there's always an allowance for that kind of succession as a group attempts to come to terms with its problems. They make an assumption that the resolution of these problems and questions into some place – into some positive place – is a requirement of culture. It's how culture works. And you're saying in a way, if I understand you correctly, that you refuse to take that step – and that you constantly pose the question, but that you refuse, in a sense, to attempt to resolve it in any kind of single assumption.

EA: I think it is too simplistic to attempt anything specific.

SF: But you know damn well that everybody else is going to attempt to resolve it some place. So isn't that, in a sense, sort of side-stepping the issues?

EA: Of course we wouldn't prevent anybody else from attempting to resolve anything. We have this culture of permanent crises, I would say, and we are participating in that culture, those crises, ourselves. That is the opposite of side-stepping.

SF: So you're going to be a conscience, in a sense, to whatever kinds of solutions or resolutions other people make to these questions. Is that right? If you keep the questions – make them question the nature of their enterprise – on the surface, and allow them to work with/towards solutions or whatever...

EA: Yes, the questions are plenty. We don't need the answers.

SF: You'd mentioned the word meaning. Can you tell me how you, yourself, or how you perceive other Fluxus artists looked at the the concept of meaning?

EA: For myself I always tried to avoid anything in a work that could assemble itself into meaning or could be understood as meaning, or sense, or logic. I hope my works achieve that, that they appear and remain completely meaningless; that they cannot be put into a context of understanding – at least not a fixed context of understanding. But I know other people have a completely different view. Dick [Higgins], for example, has another view of meaning.

SF: It seems to me that you're saying that the work doesn't mean in some sense – that the work doesn't *mean* from itself to the rest of the world in some singular kind of way.

EA: I think the work doesn't mean in any sense and that...

SF: I think basically, that it would hold for just about anything. I think that's the way we think about meaning these days. But you wouldn't deny, I assume, that these works are going to acquire meaning in the course of people working them out – that they are going to accrue meaning, at least for particular individuals in particular kinds of settings.

EA: Yes. But people are aware that meaning is achieved at random or through a pre-conditioned situation that is not a part of the piece. That's okay. I'll even go further. Even if people do conceive that a piece of mine conveys a very specific meaning to their life or to a certain situation, I would accept that as a part of the piece. I would not fight it.

EM: Randomness – randomness is another sort of recurring concept throughout the twentieth century. In general it was used in such a way that new structures were developed out of random structures. There was always some kind of sense that structure would re-constitute itself...

SF: It was just an undetermined structure, one that hadn't been articulated, but that didn't mean that it wasn't a structure; it's one that simply hadn't been articulated.

EM: When you use a kind of language in your pieces – and you often do – then you can't possibly talk about the myth of "meaninglessness." Regardless of how random the breakdown of a particular language is...

EA: Of course – we use tools – you cannot have a piece appear if you don't use a tool – and that tool always has a meaning, always has its proximity to language, as you mentioned. But I don't think the fact that we use tools related to meaning is contradictory to the making of the non-structured piece.

SF: I don't think that the tools would necessarily mean anything in and of themselves. I think they are just something that has been brought to a situation. The spectator is also brought to the situation. He comes with whatever equipment or memories or anything he's got. Meaning is accrued in that kind of situation. On the other hand, it seems to me that when you set up that situation, you're making a basic assumption that that is going to happen. You do, in fact, rely on a concept of meaning. You know that's latent in the setting up of the situation. You know that this god-damned concept is present. That you sneak it in the back door doesn't matter. It's still present.

EA: Did I sneak it in the back door? I don't think so. Phantoms exist everywhere, but still we don't consider them real.

EM: What about frustrations or intentional obfuscation? What spectators do when they come to a piece that has some structure that they can identify is hope that eventually they will have access to a second structure, and it is in the awareness of having achieved that access, that the pleasure, or sense of having accomplished anything in relation to the piece, happens. If you set up as your major premise the fact that you're going to subvert that...

EA: You've not accomplished anything at all. The piece never accomplishes anything. I do not hope that people attending a performance accomplish anything. One thing that people should never have when they come to one of my performances is expectations of any kind.

SF: But they have to have some expectations. When you set up a situation that requires or invites spectators, what you're doing is inviting a spectatorial role. Just the very fact that they come with a spectatorial role means a set of expectations. They're going to adjust whatever you present them to these.

EA: This mechanism of course works if you do it in an institution, in a gallery or whatever. Many of my pieces are done in the streets and people don't even realize that something is going on, like the first *Idle Walk*.¹ Nobody knew they were taking part in it. People that know my work and what kind of person I am, certainly do not react to an invitation the same way they react to an invitation to an art show. I've considered avoiding setting up these situations – avoiding them completely – never inviting anyone to anything, never announcing that a piece is taking place and so on. But I am not convinced yet that it's necessary to take that step.²

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

Notes

¹ According to the artist, *Idle Walks* are circumambulations that “pop up and disappear without notice or by extremely enigmatic announcements...” The first *Idle Walk* took place on August 29, 1983, and was described to me as “a one hour live national broadcast from the streets of Copenhagen. Reporters interviewing pedestrians that, without their knowledge, are taking part in an *Idle Walk*.” Fifteen to twenty different *Idle Walks* have occurred since 1982. [EM]

² Upon reviewing the closing sentence of the typescript for this dialogue, Mr. Andersen stated, “I think phantoms can be accepted. To me inconsistency, in a classical sense, is a very important ingredient of an open piece.”