

George Maciunas' pivotal contributions to the renaissance of SoHo, the burgeoning New York City community south of Houston Street, are discussed. The essay recounts the establishment of Fluxus cooperatives, the history of the Film-Makers' Cinematheque (the precursor to the Anthology Film Archives), Maciunas' long and active struggle with the Attorney General's Office and closes with a description of the February 1978 erotic Flux New Year's Cabaret and Maciunas' marriage to Billie Hutching. In addition, Melton's photographs of the wedding and of Maciunas' and Hutching's piece, *Black and White*, are reproduced.

# Notes on SoHo and a Reminiscence

Hollis Melton

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Rhode Island School of Design  
Providence, RI 02903

The determination of his individual dwelling lies, as it has with the residential housing throughout history, on his financial means, technical know-how, and personal whim. Only in this way can we open the way to the essential quality of organic diversity within the urban environment which has been the natural outcome of human settlement in the past. This diversity is an imponderable no architect can foresee, only the inhabitants and time can create. The architect provides construction whose relationships suggest a certain way of life; the people make of those shells a city.

—Roger Katan, Architect<sup>1</sup>

The 43 block area bounded by Houston Street on the north, Lafayette Street on the east, Canal Street on the south and West Broadway on the west was designated as a landmark for cast iron architecture. The style of the cast iron buildings is called "palazzo," an American adaptation of the Renaissance palace for nineteenth century business. These statuesque buildings line Broadway, Mercer Street, Broome Street, Greene Street, Spring Street, Wooster Street, West Broadway, Crosby Street and Lafayette Street. What used to be called "The Valley" by the city planners, or "Hell's Hundred Acres" by the Fire Department (because there were so many fires caused by violations in the buildings) is now called SoHo, the name taken from the City Planners' map of New York: So. Ho. (South of Houston Street).

The remaining businesses and artists co-exist side by side in SoHo, surrounded by NYU to the north, by Little Italy to the east, the south Village to the west and Tribeca to the south (an extended version of SoHo, with artists' lofts, non-profit performance spaces, galleries, restaurants, bars, etc). To walk through SoHo on a Saturday is to see hundreds of tourists flocking to the galleries, the chic boutiques, the bars and restaurants. The streets are alive with musicians, mime artists, magicians, trick dog acts, cookie vendors, etc. To walk through SoHo on a Monday morning is to see big trucks, textile workers, factory owners, supers, plumbers, electricians, carpenters, painters, welders, window washers. On Sundays, Broadway becomes a shopping carnival. The factory outlet clothing shops are open, street vendors are selling barbecued meat on sticks, hot dogs, clothes and shoes. Cars line the street with people lounging on them, a portable living room away from the home. Hasidic men in beaver hats, with long *peyas*, black suits and white shirts, scurry in and out of dark shops, and the air is filled with the sound of children's voices, big radios. Spanish-speaking women bustle in and out of numerous shops carrying large bags of merchandise, newly purchased with the previous week's hard earned wages. Some thirty years ago this area was considered a commercial slum, destined to be demolished.

### **The History**

The history of SoHo's survival and renaissance is related to the history of artists in search of economical living/working spaces. After World War II artists started moving into commercial buildings in lower

Manhattan – on Broadway just south of 14th Street (De Kooning, Jasper Johns, Franz Klein, Jackson Pollack and Mark Rothko), on the Bowery (Robert Frank), in the East Village, and further downtown in places like Coenties Slip, which was demolished in the Sixties and now serves as the location for the downtown branch of the Whitney Museum of American Art (Ellsworth Kelly, Agnes Martin, James Rosenquist). The artists lived in the commercial buildings illegally and their occupancy was tenuous. They could rent the raw space very cheaply, renovate it and then the landlord could refuse to renew the lease in order to rent the improved space (improved at no cost to the landlord) to another tenant at double the rent.

In 1961 the Artists Tenants Association was formed; about nine-hundred artists threatened to strike the City by refusing to exhibit in City art galleries, if the City did not amend its multiple dwelling laws to accommodate their housing needs. In 1963, the City instituted the A.I.R. concept (Artist-in-Residence), and amended the multiple dwelling laws to permit artists to live in loft buildings.

However, in 1962, the City Club had published a study called “The Wastelands of New York City,” which listed Spring, Broome, Mercer and Greene streets as commercial slum area No. 1 and recommended demolition and rebuilding. “The analysis clearly showed,” said the study, “that there are no buildings worth saving.”<sup>2</sup> The developers were ready to move in with bulldozers and the area south of Houston Street would have been demolished and built up into high-rise dwellings for the middle class had it not been for the Rapkin Report. Chester Rapkin, a city planner, made a city financed study in 1963 to determine the value of the area south of Houston Street to the City. The study revealed that some of the industries in the area recycled wastes – rags into paper, newspaper waste into paper boxes. These and other industries in the area employed thousands of minority workers, many of whom did not speak English and would have been otherwise unemployable. There were also many small manufacturers who were just starting their businesses and could not afford a higher rent area. The City Planning Commission followed the recommendation of the study and decided to protect the industries by forbidding any form of residency in the area.

This move perpetuated the history of artists' evictions and harassments by the City. Ironically those who had registered as A.I.R.'s with the Department of Cultural Affairs were the first to be evicted, while those who had ignored the law requiring artist certification often went unnoticed. But artists continued to move into the area despite the illegality of loft living; there were many unoccupied lofts; even whole buildings had been abandoned as the industries shut down or moved away, seeking better alternatives. The landlords were happy to rent to artists who would improve the space, and who could then be easily evicted since they had no legal protection.

The general consensus is that the major influx of artists to SoHo was in 1966, and again the general consensus attributes this factor to the

vision of the late George Maciunas, founder of Fluxus, who introduced the concept of artist owned and run cooperative buildings.

The first successful Fluxhouse Cooperative to be organized was 80 Wooster Street. Maciunas purchased the empty loft building for the cooperative in 1967, with loans from the Kaplan Foundation and the National Foundation of the Arts. Among those invited to join the cooperative venture was Jonas Mekas. Mekas had been looking for a permanent home for the Film-Makers' Cinematheque since 1961. Prior to this, the group had been screening films in rented spaces, often being chased from one space to the next, and never had the security of a permanent home. The price of renting commercial space was too great for a non-profit organization and the screening conditions were inadequate. The dream of the Cinematheque was to design and construct its own theater suitable to the needs of the independent-avant-garde cinema.

This will be our experimental showcase open to anyone who has a film or mixed media show, happenings, events, etc. with no strict "quality" control over the programming. The audiences will have to take chances with new artists and with new works of established artists. This will be our workshop, our testing ground where anything goes. It will premiere all new Coop works [Film-Makers' Cooperative].<sup>3</sup>

The Buildings Department refused to issue the Film-Makers' Cinematheque a Certificate of Occupancy, and then refused to issue them a theater license because there was no Certificate of Occupancy. The Cinematheque was presented with a list of thirty-seven violations, the major one of which was that artists, fellow cooperative members, were living illegally on the floors above the Cinematheque. Mekas wanted the neighborhood to organize itself and push for the legalization of loft living and called a meeting of artists from the neighborhood on April 22, 1969. Out of this meeting came the SoHo Artists Association (SAA). The group published a newsletter, met periodically with members of the City Planning Commission, and along with the Artists against the Expressway, helped to save SoHo from the Broome Street Expressway.

The SAA sponsored the first SoHo Artists Street Festival in May 1970; its opening coincided with the Kent State Massacre. In lieu of cancelling the festival, the SAA draped the fire escapes of the Greene Street Cooperative buildings in black crepe and Yvonne Rainer led a procession of mourning for the dead at Kent State. Thousands of tourists came. The festival received attention from the media and John Lindsay and Nelson Rockefeller publicly recognized SoHo as a healthy entity. The artists succeeded in drawing attention to their fight to legalize loft living, and finally in September 1970, the City Planning Commission passed a resolution permitting artists to live in SoHo lofts whose size did not exceed 3,600 square feet. Buildings owned cooperatively would be legalized regardless of size.

The artists won a victory, but the Cinematheque, which was the first public non-profit performing arts and screening space in SoHo never succeeded in obtaining a license to screen films. In 1968 the Buildings



*figure 2.* (left) Billie Hutching, (right) George Maciunas, Fluxus Wedding. Photograph by Hollis Melton.



*figure 3.* Jonas Mekas, Fluxus Wedding, Feb. 25, 1978.  
Photograph by Hollis Melton.

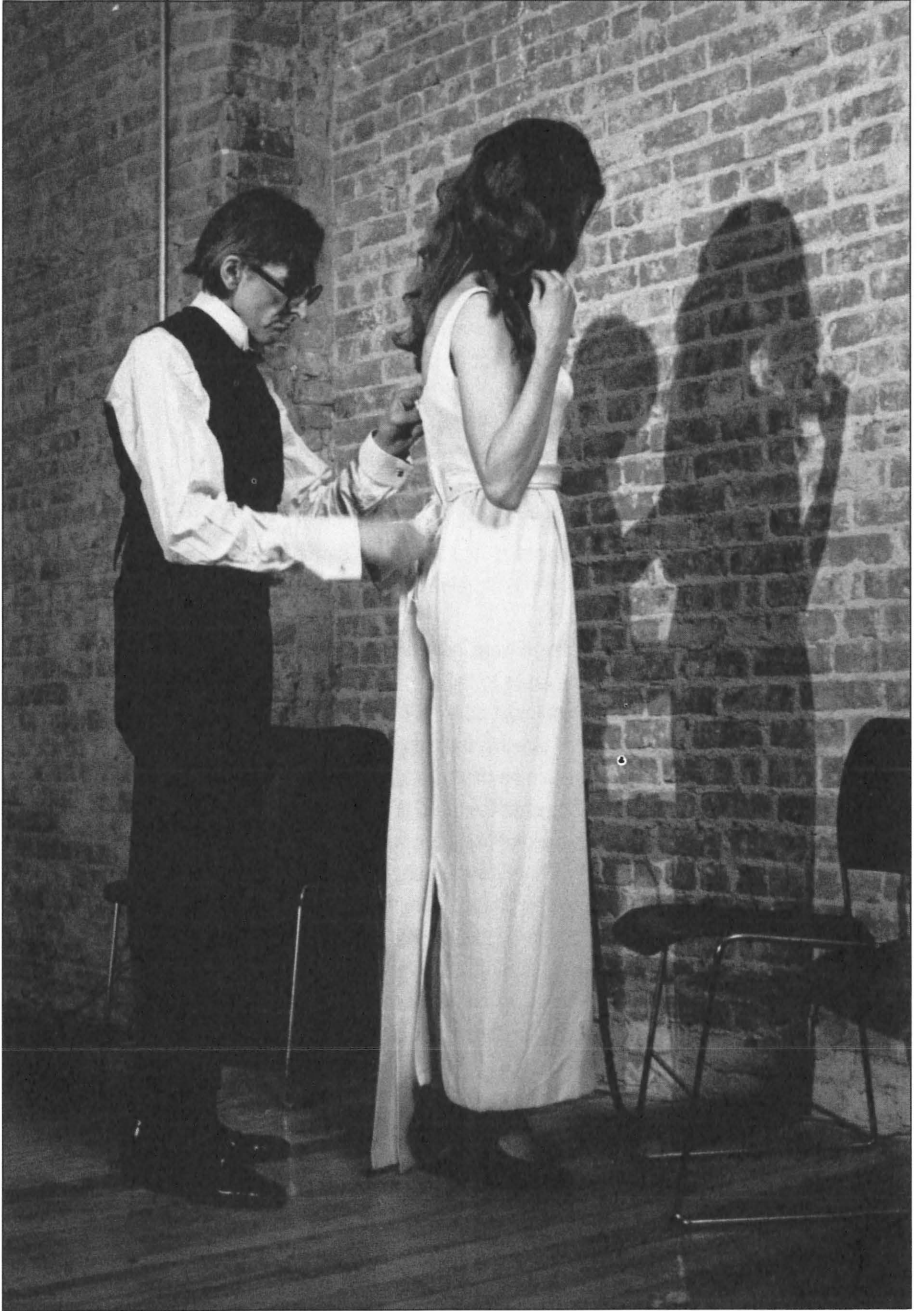
Department forbade all screenings, but Richard Foreman performed his first play, *Angelface*, there in 1968. Hermann Nitsch had an action there, his first in New York. Phil Glass, La Monte Young and Archie Shepp had concerts there, and interspersed with these activities were Fluxus New Years' events and concerts.

In 1971 the Cinematheque moved its screening activities to the Shakespeare Theater on Lafayette Street, where it opened as Anthology Film Archives. Pressed by rising rents and expenses Anthology Film Archives returned to 80 Wooster Street in November 1974, where it reopened after spending \$75,000 renovating the ground floor and basement spaces under the supervision of George Maciunas. In May 1978 it was again shut down by the Buildings Department for operating without a theater license.<sup>4</sup>

Maciunas organized fifteen co-ops between 1966 and 1975 without ever filing a prospectus.<sup>5</sup> This brashness infuriated the Attorney General's Office; a warrant was sent out for his arrest in 1974. Maciunas' response to the warrant was characteristic; he designed a series of elaborate disguises for wearing out in the street, kept right on with the business of forming co-ops and renovating lofts, and made a Fluxus kit of disguises for the A.G.'s office.

The cooperative owners were safe. There were increasing numbers of them; they were homeowners, paying taxes to the city; the status of ownership gave them greater stability and clout politically. Maciunas, who had studied architecture and whose father was an engineer, was always very forthright with those with whom he dealt; he knew the building code inside and out and knew exactly what the structural problems of each building were. He never recommended fixing anything that wasn't necessary to the safety of the building and the people living there. His methods were unorthodox and his financial manipulations were staggering to a normal person, but he was never dishonest and his vision was so far reaching that one could forgive his transgressions, provided one could appreciate his particular vision. Many couldn't. Many of his initial cooperative buyers revolted against his iron rule and forced him out of their co-ops.

At that time he lived rent free in the basement of 80 Wooster Street. His room was filled with five or six big Norfolk pine trees and some huge rubber tree plants, which he put outside in summer. Tools were hanging up along the wall and from the ceiling beams, there was a white harpsichord that he had put together himself and a metal table with glass top and white metal chairs around it. The chairs weren't very comfortable. Though neat, the room always seemed to be bursting with its contents. Full length windows looked outside to the courtyard where he had built a tiled garden. He slept on a cot in a tiny room off the main room and had built a secret escape tunnel to the film editing room of Anthology Film Archives. From there he had cut a hole in the ceiling that led to the ground floor and gave access to the street, just in case he needed to escape from inside to get away from the A.G.'s men. He had fortified



*figures 4–13.* George Maciunas, Billie Hutching, "Black and White," performance piece, Feb. 25, 1978. Photographs by Hollis Melton.



figure 5.



figure 6.



figure 7.



figure 8.



figure 9.

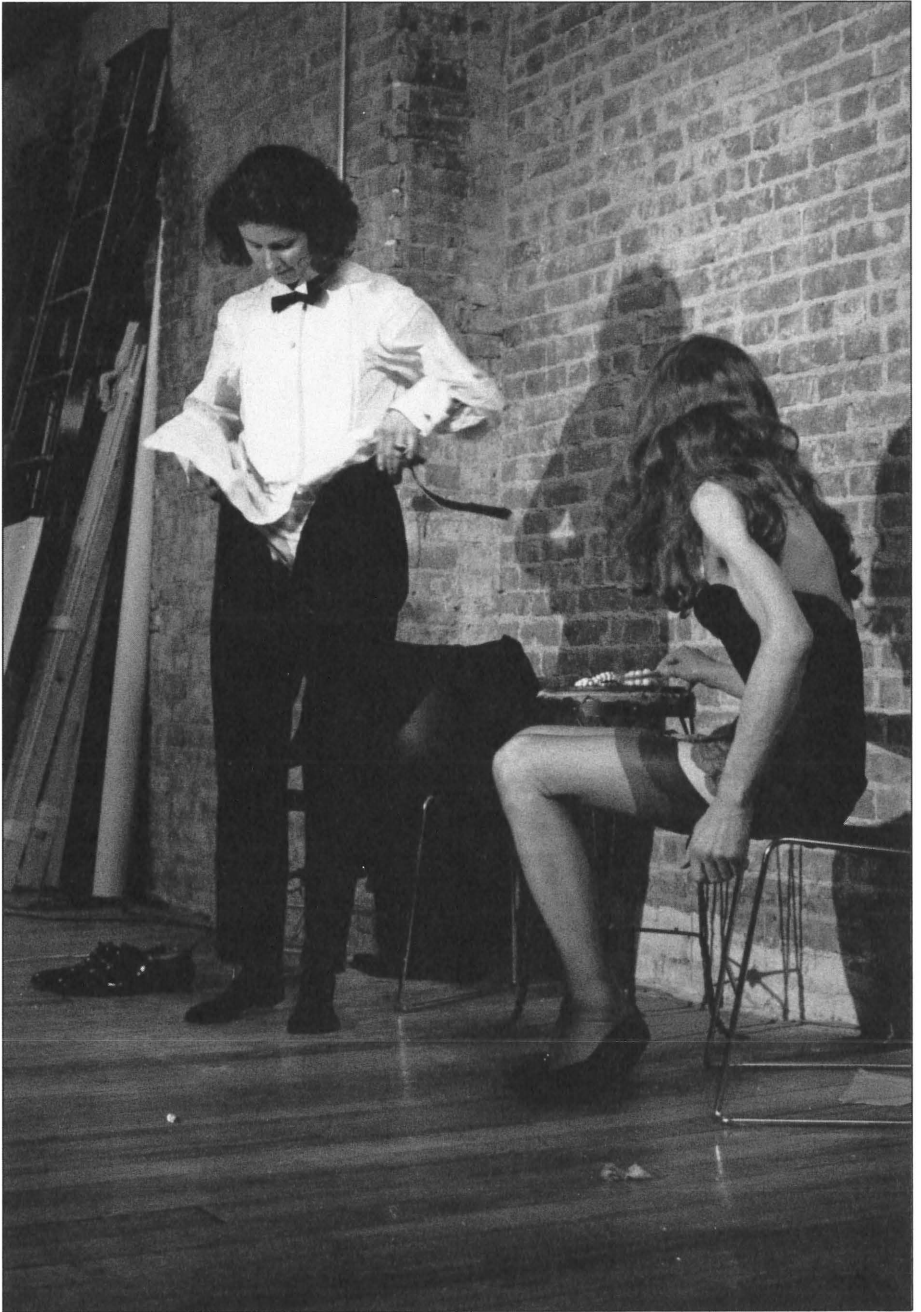


figure 10.

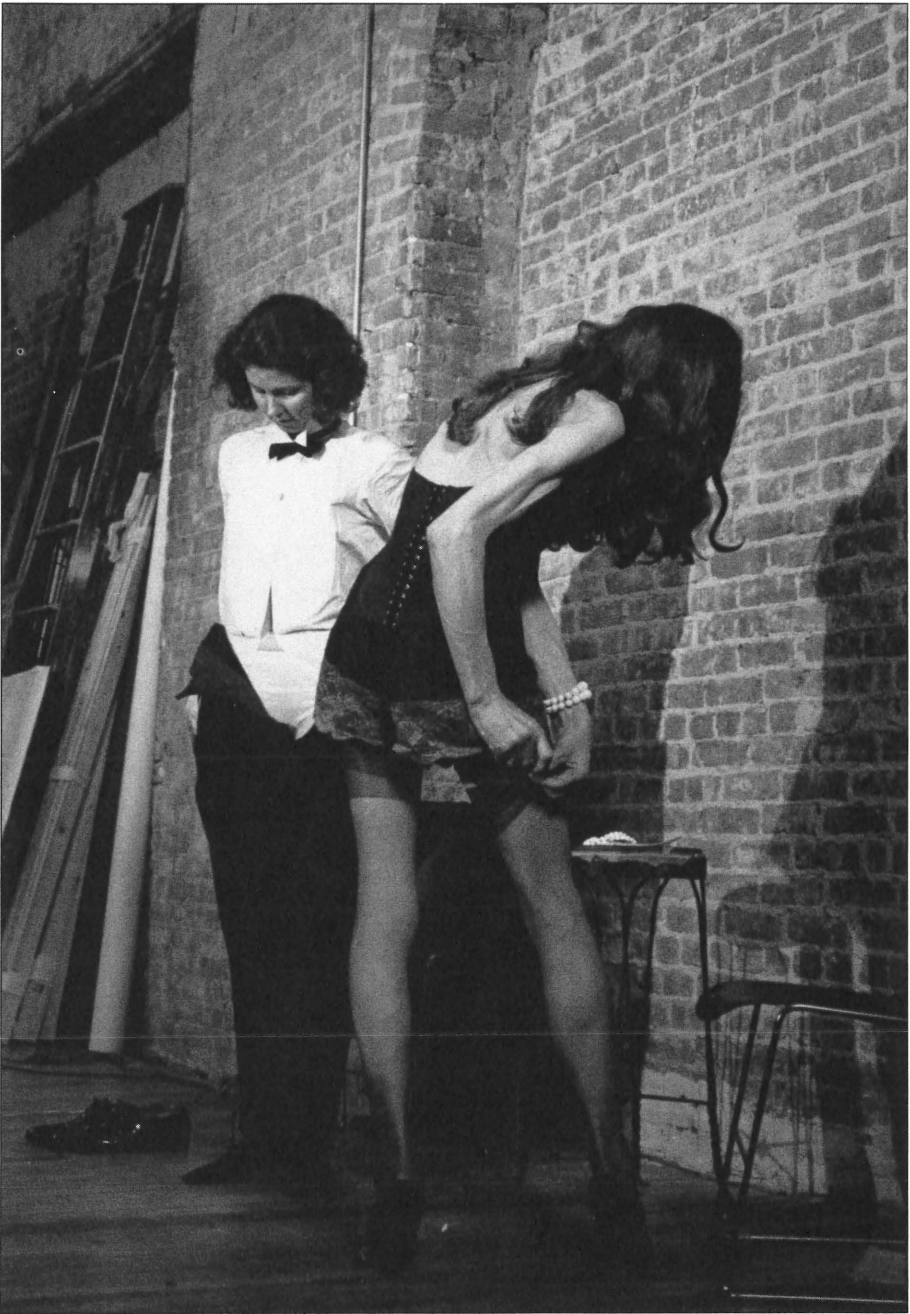


figure 11.



figure 12.



figure 13.

the door to his room with an extra panel, and in between the panel and the door he had installed rows of very sharp blades. The Fire Department had forced him to cover the blades with the panel, to protect innocent visitors. A sign on the door warned visitors of the blades behind the panel. To gain entrance in those days one had to know the secret knock and then announce oneself in a clear voice that was not a shout.

### **A Reminiscence: George Maciunas**

I used to visit George a lot in 1975. As President and Treasurer of the co-op he had organized for us, I needed a lot of help, which he was always willing to give. He showed me how to keep books, how to organize all of the bills, how to pay the real estate taxes with a certified check so that the building would have an instant receipt to show the Mortgagee. He passed to me all of the summonses made out in his name for violations on the building, and when I went to the court to straighten these out, the woman clerk couldn't believe George was walking around free with so many warrants out for his arrest. He always stressed that we should learn to run the building ourselves, and gradually I became more confident and began to enjoy doing work for the co-op. We had some terrible arguments, but I could never remain angry with George for long; he had a quick temper that would erupt and then everything would be calm as if there had been no outburst. He said his quick temper came from taking cortisone injections everyday for his asthma and the outbursts were the result of cortisone in his system. I came to respect and trust his judgment; he had an incredible purity and singularity of vision. Sometimes he reminded me of Don Quixote. He used to say that lawyers and artists were parasites and used to make jokes about them. He said he thought home-making was the greatest art. He was always willing to help anyone who had a plan or a dream and was always encouraging people to make up Fluxus games or jokes. He had a dream of buying a big ship and going around the world, everyone on the ship would be a useful expert – doctor, nurse, botanist, engineer, fisherman, mechanic, biologist, sailor, navigator, etc. He spent long hours making a tape anthology of his favorite music – Monteverdi, Schuetz, Machault, Adam de la Halle, Couperin – he didn't like anything classical after the Baroque period, but he liked Bob Dylan. He would sell the records he had taped for his selected anthology to friends at big discounts. He liked to cook: Borsht, Mousaka, Beef Bourguignon. Whenever he came to visit he would bring a big bottle of semi-sweet German white wine. He knew all about the history of food and machines and he was working on a map of the world which would encapsulate the history of art and civilization. He greatly admired the culture of Burgundy in the fourteenth century. Sometimes he spoke of going to Japan to study the art of archery.

On November 8, 1975 (his birthday) two men lured him to a vacant loft on Mercer Street, under the pretense of being prospective buyers. They beat him up with metal pipes – they broke two ribs, collapsed a

lung and damaged his left eye so that he lost the sight. He said they were from the electricians union. He owed them money; they beat him up because he told them they would have to wait for the money. It was a bad time. He was trying to raise \$130,000 to meet the balloon mortgage payment on the co-op at 141 Wooster Street. The other shareholders were beginning to turn against him and threatened to sabotage the deal because they did not want George to remain a controlling factor in the co-op, then known as Good Deal Realty (a typical Maciunas corporate name). The balloon payment was met, though at a great cost to George's health. Soon after that he found a forty-acre farm in New Marlborough, Massachusetts, which was formerly owned by a family who bred race horses. There were many barns and outlying structures on the property. George persuaded his sister, Nijole Valaitis, and his partner, Robert Watts, to put up money to purchase the farm. He slowly began moving his belongings (an enormous collection of odds and ends salvaged from empty lofts he had renovated – boxes full of ribbon, mannequins' heads, artificial roses, etc. – all the things he had collected during his fifteen year stay in SoHo. The move to the farm coincided with his withdrawal from the real estate business. "Too risky," he said. He didn't want to lose his other eye. Getting away from the city and the pressures of the A.G.'s office and the SoHo real estate business transformed him. He worked on the renovation of the farm, spent more time making Fluxus objects, and helped Jean Brown, an important Fluxus collector, organize a Flux archive in her home in Tyringham, Massachusetts. By the second summer the farm was like a resort. Friends came and rented rooms and George dreamed of making the farm into a school, patterned after the Black Mountain School.

During the fall of 1976 Maciunas participated in a large show entitled, "New York – Downtown Manhattan: SoHo," sponsored by the *Akademie der Kunst* and the *Berliner Festwochen*, in Berlin, to commemorate the American Bicentennial. He designed a Flux-Labyrinth and participated as a performer. The catalogue for the show is over four-hundred pages, with illustrations, biographies of the participating artists and articles about SoHo by Rene Block, Lawrence Alloway, Peter Frank, Lucy Lippard, Douglas Davis, Stephen Reichard and Joan La Barbara.

In the summer of 1977, Maciunas organized a big Fluxus exhibition which was sponsored by the city of Seattle. He came back very elated with anecdotes and jokes, but was very thin and complained of pains in his stomach. He joked and said he was losing weight so he could fit into the antique clothes he found in a trunk on the farm. Throughout the fall he kept losing more weight and his doctor gave him morphine to kill the pain. He was planning to organize a Flux New Year's Cabaret in which everyone would have to perform an erotic Cabaret act or bring an erotic dish for an erotic Flux feast. His health kept deteriorating and he decided to enter the hospital for tests right after Christmas. The tests revealed nothing, but exploratory surgery revealed a tumor in his pancreas. The cancer had spread to the liver. But George kept making

plans. He decided to get married and have a Fluxus wedding combined with the erotic Flux Cabaret (*figure 1*). All the time he was actively investigating cures for cancer. His energy was phenomenal; he would come thundering into the city in his high riding boots and riding pants, wearing an orange leather coat and leather captain's cap and race around buying up toys, and odds and ends from Canal Street and Job Lot, the raw materials for Fluxus objects.

The wedding and cabaret were on February 25, 1978, at Jean Depuy's loft at 537 Broadway. George kept very tight control over the whole event. For the wedding both George and Billie Hutching, the woman he married, wore bridal gowns (*figure 2*). Geoff Hendricks prepared a special Fluxus ceremony and officiated as the priest. The bridesmaids, Jon Hendricks and Larry Miller, were in drag and the best man, Alison Knowles, in tails. Jonas Mekas was dressed as a San Franciscan monk and only spoke Lithuanian (*figure 3*). There was a wonderful feeling at the wedding feast but poor George couldn't eat any of the food; his digestive system had become so frail that any intake of food resulted in tremendous pain. For the Cabaret he and Billie performed a piece called "Black and White" (*figures 4 through 13*) to a recording of Monteverdi's madrigal "Zefiro Torno," a duet. George and Billie walked into the performance space dressed very elegantly; he in black tails, she in a wig, and a long white satin evening gown, with long white gloves. Very slowly, very carefully they performed an exchange of clothes. The piece had an overwhelming dignity and was very beautiful; classic.

After the Flux wedding and Cabaret, George and Billie returned to the farm. Larry Miller and Joe Jones went to help him assemble the Fluxus objects which he would give to those who had contributed money towards his cure. Unfortunately, his cancer had progressed very far. One of the doctors from Sloan-Kettering Institute told him there was no hope; his pain would get worse and he would grow weaker; he gave him two to four months to live. He went to a clinic in Jamaica that specialized in nutrition and vitamin therapy, but he kept getting weaker and weaker, bravely holding on until he died in a Boston hospital on May 9, 1978.

He left no will; he had removed his name from all property deeds because of the problems with the Attorney General, and a suit brought against him by the 141 Wooster Street co-op. The farm has been sold. The estate is in litigation. But his legacy remains; Fluxus lives on.

**NOTES**

1 *New York: Architecture, Sculpture, Painting, World Cultural Guides*, text by Dore Ashton, (New York, Chicago and San Francisco, 1972), p. 202.

2 Ada Louise Huxtable, *The New York Times*, May 24, 1970.

3 Quoted from letter from Film-Makers' Cinematheque to All Friends of Cinema, August 20, 1967.

4 In 1979 Anthology Film Archives purchased the Courthouse building on 2nd Avenue and 2nd Street. In 1988 it reopened with two theaters, a library and art gallery.

5 Jim Stratton, author of a book about lofts, *Pioneering in the Urban Wilderness* (New York, 1977), used to write a column in the *SoHo Weekly News* about lofts. In the November 28, 1974 issue he devoted the entire column to the law that requires a cooperative to file a prospectus with the A.G.'s office:

The main function of the prospectus is to increase the price of the building to the person co-oping it and to restrict the developer population to only those who can afford it. Legal fees to a good lawyer for drawing up a prospectus can run to 10,000. Then there are engineering reports, surveys, accountings and all of them cost money.

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The prospectus, therefore, assures that the developer will be monied and shrewd, out for big profits, and the lofts will go for a bundle. Then the A.G. is happy. The buyers have no more than they would have had without a prospectus, except it cost more. That's the American way.

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Curiously, most "illegal" offerings I've seen can be read like an open book by any layman who wants to dig a little and ask a few questions. A phalanx of lawyers, however, know no more about a building after reading the prospectus than they did before they opened it.

Except that now they know they can't sue [the seller].



Alice Hutchins, *Untitled*. Three small stackables containing different objects, letraset on covers, ca. 1967. *Alternative Traditions in the Contemporary Arts*, The University of Iowa, Gift of Alice Hutchins. Photograph by Barbara Bremner.