

The dialogue addresses the context to which Paris based artists of the 1960s responded, culminating in the 1968 workers and student strikes in May of 1968. In addition, insights are provided into the community structure of the New York based Fluxus circle and evidence is presented which illustrates that this “art culture” served as a support mechanism for an international group of artists who shared similar convictions about the function of the art experience and the responsibilities of the art maker.

Circles of Friends: A Conversation with Alice Hutchins

Estera Milman

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EM: I would like to talk about the transition/ transformation of your work from painting to object making and situation initiating. We should probably begin in 1960 or so when you first met Jean Dupuy through whom you began your acquaintance with a number of poet/painters in France whom you call your circle of friends. It was an informal grouping, of people that you felt comfortable with, people who were working with language, performance and the visual arts and attempting to integrate these media – to break down boundaries.

AH: And to find something new. Many of us were reading books on Zen. There was a lot of innovation. One night in my studio there was a performance in which simultaneously Bernard Heidsieck recited his poetry, Paul Gette drew insects on large sheets of paper, a dancer danced and three firemen performed acrobatics – it was great. There were other evenings – mostly of poets. John Giorno was one.

EM: It was through Dupuy that you met Bernard Heidsieck and Françoise Janicot and during the *soirées* at their house that you became familiar with Chopin, Emmett Williams, [Robert] Filliou, Carolee Schneemann...

AH: Carolee was a visitor. She had just performed *Meat Joy*. Anytime visiting artists came, Bernard and Francois would host parties.

EM: Was the relationship to [John] Cage a direct one?

AH: Not for most of us. We just knew his work. He gave a number of concerts in Europe. I think he might have been better known in Europe than in America, at that time.

EM: You said, when we spoke last, that Cage had served as a model for the group.

AH: It wasn't really a group. We were friends. It was very loose – much more loose than Fluxus here. There was no organizer. I don't think Cage served as a model in a formal way.

EM: But curiously enough, we have Williams, Brecht and Filliou in this circle.

AH: But they came as guests to Bernard's parties. I met them there on a social basis. Or there were performances, and I'd go.

EM: So these people were just passing through. Why did you pick them out of the crowd? Why is it important to you to identify these people as particular guests at those parties?

AH: All right, that's fair. They were people who interested me – their ideas were liberating. Filliou very often was living in Paris. Emmett passed through. Brecht was there for a while.

EM: Of the group of friends who became your community in Paris, Chopin and Dupuy were primary friends.

AH: And [Paul] Gette, the Heidsiecks, Renée Baslon and Jean Degottex.

EM: Williams and Brecht and Schneeman just passed through your life, and retroactively you can pull out those occasions when you met them as having been important. But Brecht was special, would you say?

AH: I only met him once or twice in Paris and then in Ville Franche. Some of my work was on sale at *La Cédille qui Sourit*. But he was impressive. The work we heard about and that influenced me a lot were the Happenings. Jim Dine's and [Allen] Kaprow's. *Art News* had very graphic descriptions of these events and I was translating some of the articles for a friend. If anything, I think my work with magnets take off from the Happenings. But back to my Paris friends – what was so special was the friendly relations we had with each other and the interest we took in each other's work – the sharing of experience – the cooperation – for instance when Paul Gette started to make up small inexpensive editions of bound paper, works that he circulated in non-traditional ways, he asked different ones of us to contribute a page. This was in the mid-60s. We had more time then.

EM: This was a distribution mechanism for new works, in the same way that *An Anthology* was (and some of the Fluxus publications), a kind of strategy for distributing the work and also a strategy for connecting the people. When you put a bunch of people between covers, you, in a sense, make a community.

AH: That's right. And it was friends that you asked, or friends of friends. It was like an alternative gallery. These often weren't sold to people, they were just sent out.

EM: When you started working on the multiples – filling and stacking those found objects – you started being concerned with other people, with interactivity. You have told me before that interactivity was an extension of your interest in happenings; that you were converting that concept into small and personal kinds of things.

AH: Yes, exactly. I like the word personal.

EM: What interactivity assumes is that you have an audience, or at least an individual receiver. Your work can not help but take the process of

communication for granted. You want a person to become involved in an active fashion in this situation that you've initiated and you assume as you conceive the work that someone is going to come toward it and do so.

AH: This idea of sharing an experience with someone else gave me a lot of pleasure. I began to give away those things as gifts – the idea of play came in. I very much wanted closer relationships.

EM: And these objects were mechanisms for human contact...

AH: Exactly. I was propelled by isolation and was definitely attempting to reach out directly to other people.

EM: So the works became transactional devices – things that could initiate a relationship between you and someone else. It wasn't the artist/-public thing; it was just you and some other person – very personal.

AH: Yes.

EM: You've talked about the coincidence between your interactive objects and what was happening in France in the late 1960s. You've said that the form which this work took coincided with the climate of revolution; the climate of the strikes; the challenging of the social and economic structure of France by the students and the workers.

AH: While I was doing these things, I wasn't looking at them in this way. It's when I looked back that I realized what I had done. It was absolutely afterwards that I said, "It's the demythification of the artist, it's democratization, it's participatory." But this was following the uprising of 1968.

EM: But this was also after you came back from New York. You had become involved with another community of people in Manhattan – one that was very consciously a community; a group of people doing kinds of things that were similar, in certain respects, to your own work. You came back to France, taking with you the knowledge that this community existed for you, experienced in 1968 uprising, and then put it together.

AH: I did that. And at that time, the group in Paris sort of separated. We went our different ways. Dupuy was in New York. We all got busy. I had shows. They had shows. We didn't see each other as often.

EM: When you were working on the multiples, did you carry the concept "art" with you?

AH: Never. That's what was wonderful. I may have offended people. For example, Martha Wilson, introduced me as a sculptor five or six years ago; and I more or less blew up. I shouldn't have. I wrote a letter of apology.

EM: What are you?

AH: I like to say that I make magnetic objects. Ay-O came to see me once in Paris. It was after the Fluxshoe in London. He was looking at the work and he said, "oh, very nice sculpture." And I was upset.

EM: When you met George Maciunas did you share those opinions with him?

AH: Well, I didn't have those opinions then. I was just making little games. It never concerned me. We just laughed. I opened up my box of things, and he showed me everything he had in his place and gave me lots of gifts. I don't think there was any question of art or not. We weren't thinking in those terms.

EM: Let's talk about your interaction with the Fluxus community. When you were going to New York, you wanted to know if there were people you should get in touch with. Was it Paul Gette...

AH: Paul Gette certainly told me that I should get in touch with Maciunas. He said, "There's this strange guy in New York putting things in boxes."

EM: This was based, in part, on the little stackables that you were doing. You got in touch with Maciunas in December of 1967. Had you met Dick Higgins yet?

AH: He's the first person I met. I came to New York wanting to make contact with New York artists and, for some reason, I found Something Else Press in the phone book. (Maybe Brecht had told me about the Press.) So I called and we had a conversation. I told him I knew Filliou and Brecht and was a good friend of Chopin; and Dick was very warm and he said, "Oh yes, those are good friends and friends of those people are friends of mine. We're very busy, but why don't you come over and see us at 10:00 tonight." So I went over and helped Alison [Knowles]. She was working in her studio on the top floor after the twins went to bed. I remember Ben Patterson came in. She was doing some silkscreening. That became a real friendship; we made exchanges. Mind you, Dick was my daughter's age.

EM: The Something Else Gallery was on the main floor and the Press on the second.

AH: Alison had the top floor, and there was a living space on the lower level.

EM: And your interactive show at the Gallery took place in 1968.

AH: In February. It was a weekend show. Dick made bread. There was champagne; it was a party.

EM: Talk a little bit about your meeting with Maciunas.

AH: I finally made contact with George through the Goodman Gallery. (They were showing a few of my multiples.) I went to his apartment. It was small and there were interesting things around. We got along immediately. I had taken some objects in a valise and spread them around, and he liked it. We made some funny jokes, and he told some funny stories. He sent me out with a lot of Fluxus objects. The telephone kept ringing and he said, "Do you want to buy a loft?" And I ended up buying this loft. He told me about things to see. He said, "Go down to the Cinematheque. Henry Flynt is very interesting; you should go down and see him." And I did; as I remember, I was the only person in the audience. Another time I went to hear Jackson Mac Low after a terrible snow storm and was again the only member of the audience. What they were doing interested me. It was challenging. I liked that; I had found a place where I felt I belonged.

EM: I am particularly interested in the process by which members of the Fluxus community networked. You're talking about how you were welcomed into a community and provided with exactly what you were looking for. It wasn't what it had been like when you were hanging out with Dupuy and Chopin in Paris. There you had a kind of support mechanism but not the sense of belonging to an active community. But there was in New York.

AH: So much was going on – everyone was working hard and so committed. People told me where to go for materials. Alison sent me down to Canal Street (everyone seemed to know Canal Street), and I bought up a lot of material. When I went to see George I had it with me and he said, "Let's do a Jewelry Kit."

EM: He called it a jewelry kit? He named it.

AH: Yes. I wasn't doing jewelry. I just had this material; the bells, the rings. He put it together.

EM: Do you think of the kit as a collaboration with George?

AH: Yes and he did too. He said "Let's do a Jewelry Kit."

EM: So he responded to the work you were doing, suggested the collaboration, physically constructed the Kit, and put *your* name on the label.

AH: Weren't the other boxes like that too?

EM: I would think many of them were. But that raises interesting questions about his own intentional loss of self in the process. I mean, he wasn't interested in co-signing your box.

AH: No, I think that's very true. He was very much opposed to the idea of the artist as star.

EM: But you and he never talked about that.

AH: No, we'd just laugh about how engineers could do technology-art better than artists could. We just had kinds of chats. It was a lot of fun.

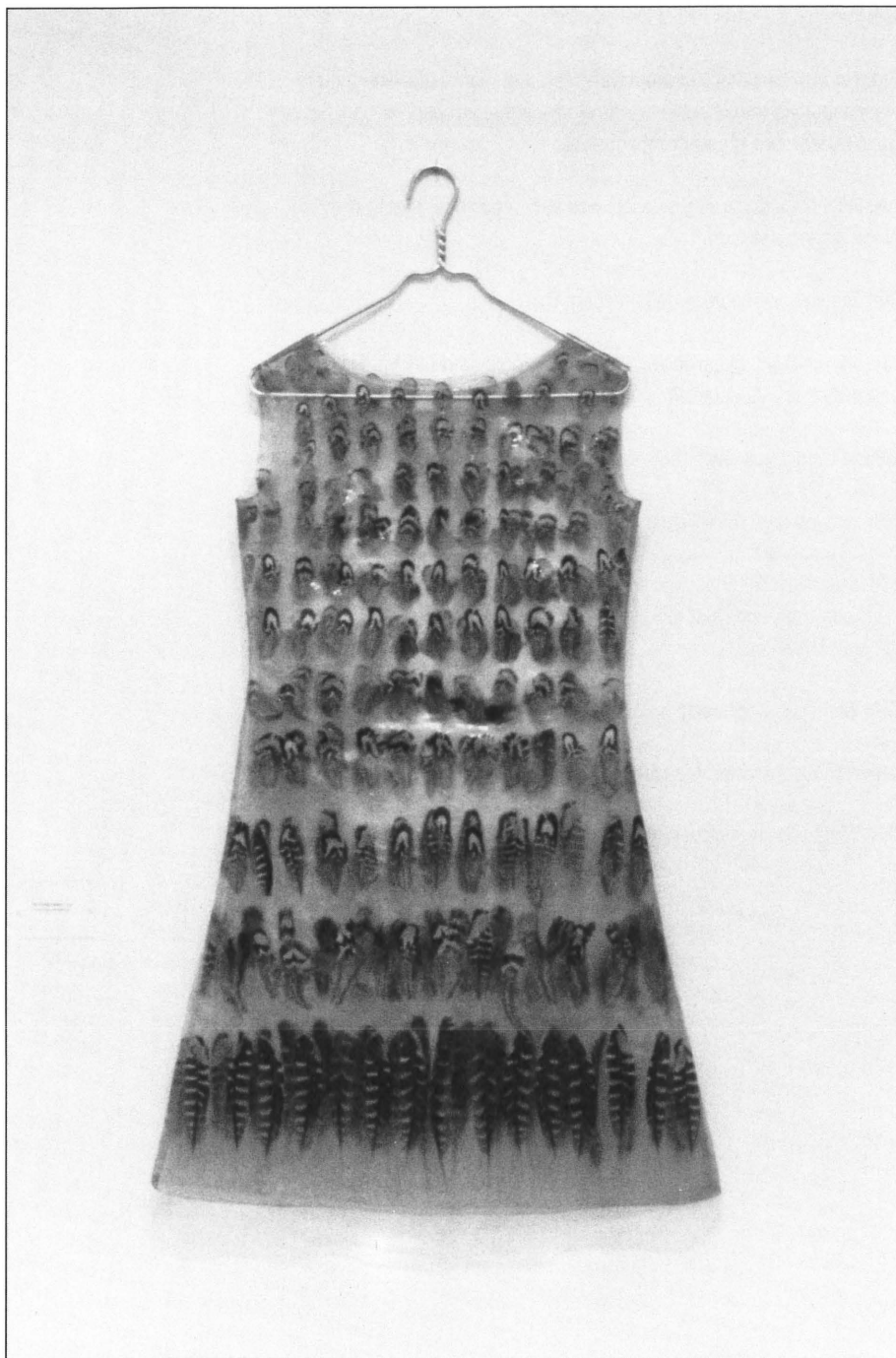
EM: When did you leave New York?

AH: I stayed here from September through April, and then I went home. I was supposed to stay longer, but when the death of Martin Luther King occurred, I just felt that I had had enough of the city. Bobby Kennedy had been shot, and I just thought I should go. I got home just in time for the May 1968 events.

EM: When you went back to Paris did you keep up with Dick and Alison?

AH: Yes. We remained friends.

This conversation took place in New York City, in March of 1992.



Robert Watts, *Feather Dress*. Feathers encased in clear vinyl, 96.5 x 64.8 x 1.3 cm., 1965. Courtesy Larry Miller and Sara Seagull. Photograph by Larry Miller.