

The New York-based Fluxus movement began an extended period of dissemination, and in some senses dissolution, around 1967. At the same time the “fluxist” sensibility began to manifest itself in New York art beyond Fluxus’ own specific artistic practice – and, as New York still dominated American artistic discourse at this time, the fluxist inflection in New York art inevitably entered art elsewhere in America as well, adding to the limited but growing influence of established regional Fluxus pockets. The essay addresses various phenomena that abetted the “fluxizing” of American art.

FLUXUS Fallout: New York in the wake of the new sensibility

Peter Frank

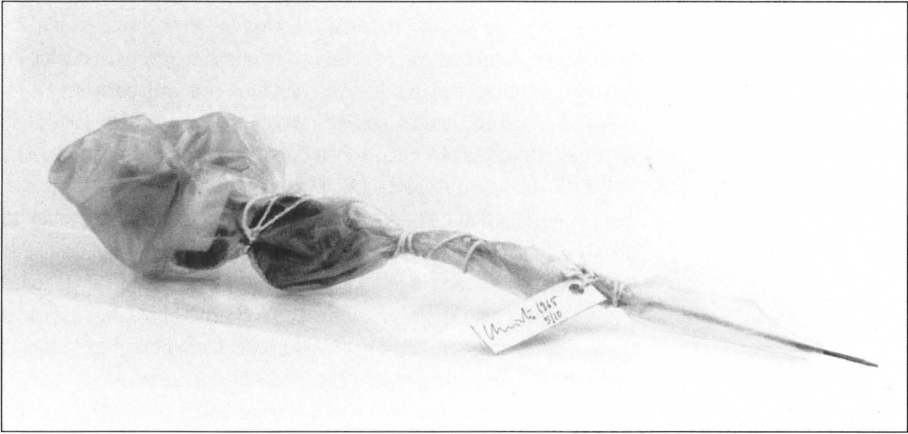
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Around 1967, the Fluxus movement – by then securely centered in New York – began an extended period of dissemination, and in some senses dissolution. During this time, for various personal, artistic and broader social reasons, the close camaraderie and sense of collaboration among Fluxus' principal participants weakened. Leaving the Fluxus orbit, however, did not mean abandoning allegiance to the sensibility associated with the movement. In fact, the loosening of Fluxus artists' roots in New York helped spread Fluxus contact and practice throughout the rest of the country, adding to the limited but growing influence of established regional Fluxus pockets (e.g. Ken Friedman's Fluxus West in California, the Fluxus "cell" at the University of Indiana). Also abetting this spread was the fact that the "fluxist" sensibility began to manifest itself in New York art beyond Fluxus' own specific artistic practice; as New York still dominated American artistic discourse at this time, any fluxist influence in New York would inevitably inflect art elsewhere in America.

We can cite the dispersion of the original Fluxus group, notably to Europe, upstate New York, New England and California (where Fluxus artists were briefly, but importantly involved in the early years of the California Institute of the Arts outside Los Angeles) as the factor most directly responsible for the "fluxification" of vanguard Western art in the late 1960s and early '70s. Fluxus had as profound an impact on the avant-garde in New York itself, but the general nature and specific manifestations of this localized impact were more diffuse and less acknowledged in Fluxus' "home town." Two secondary documents testify to the seminal, yet oblique, mark Fluxus left on late-1960s vanguard practice in New York.¹ In his controversial article historicizing Conceptual Art,² Benjamin Buchloh attributes the coining of the term "Concept Art" to Henry Flynt in 1961, but cautions that:

[a]s is usual with stylistic formation in the history of art, the origin and the name of the movement are heavily contested by its major participants. [Robert] Barry, [Joseph] Kosuth, and [Lawrence] Weiner, for example, vehemently denied in recent conversations with the author any historical connection to or even knowledge of the Fluxus movement of the early 1960s. Nevertheless, at least with regard to the invention of the *term*, it seems correct when Henry Flynt claims that he is "the originator of concept art, the most influential contemporary art trend. In 1961 I authored (and copyrighted) the phrase 'concept art,' the rationale for it and the first compositions labeled 'concept art.' My document was first printed in *An Anthology*, ed. La Monte Young, New York, 1962." (La Monte Young's *An Anthology* was in fact published in 1963)...³

Much earlier than Buchloh's essay (originally written for the 1989 exhibition *L'art conceptuel: une perspective* at the *Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris*), Lucy Lippard cites Fluxus several times at the outset of



Christo, *Package*. Blue plastic rose wrapped in transparent polyethylene with twine, New York, Fluxus Edition, 6.3 x 47.9 x 14 cm., 1965. Ellsworth Snyder Collection. This copy was found in Maciunas' archives after his death in 1978. Photograph by Angela Webster, Courtesy of Madison Art Center.

the chronology comprising the bulk of her *Six Years: the dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972*. Indeed, the very first entry is:

BOOKS

Brecht, George. *Chance-Imagery*. New York, 1966. Independently and in association with the Fluxus group, Brecht has been making "events" that anticipate a stricter "conceptual art" since around 1960...⁴

Fluxus is thus identified as a distinct precursor of Conceptual Art, but not a true source for it. With the important exception of Robert Morris (who can be identified as a progenitor as well as an early "fellow traveler," of Fluxus), the artists Buchloh discusses evince little contact with Fluxus art and activity. The early work of such artists as Sol LeWitt, Dan Graham and Mel Bochner take their cues from – and in reaction to – the proto-Minimalism of Don Judd and Ad Reinhardt and the philosophical constructs (from Wittgenstein to Kubler to Barthes) that impelled these artists' inquiries into the nature of experience. The ends of the "orthodox" Conceptualists, who emerged in the mid-1960s, were clearly distinct from those of the Fluxus artists, much as the ends towards which the post-Cubist rationalists strove, were fundamentally different from the Dadaists'. But, just as the Dadaists and the artists of De Stijl, the Bauhaus and Russian constructivist groups all derived their stylistic

means from an admixture of Cubist form, Expressionist social idealism and Futurist hyper-modernity, the Fluxus artists shared a generalized approach – one rejecting standard studio practice, engaging extra-visual concerns about perception and behavior and superimposing and even fusing many disparate disciplines – with their Conceptualist near-contemporaries. The artistic models which gave the Conceptualists the “permission” to dematerialize artwork into phenomenological postulates and arguments were precisely those who provided such permission – as well as spiritual and intellectual inspiration – to Fluxus artists. In 1960s New York, Marcel Duchamp and John Cage were everyone’s (grand)dadas.

Even in its “heyday” (1962–66), Fluxus rarely manifested itself in a manner designed to garner specifically art-world attention. The intimate, private, often introspective nature of the particular sensibility identified with Fluxus gave even the most overt of the movement’s presentations a shy and diffident air. Public performances and exhibitions were not widely advertised, and were often not really public. More often Fluxus events took place either in semi-private circumstances or, unheralded, out in public, witnessed for the most part by unsuspecting passersby. Formal presentations, whether at uptown recital halls or downtown galleries, were announced through very selected mailings and hardly thorough bill postings, and of course gained little mass-media attention.

By themselves, however, Fluxus artists were not nearly as shy and secretive; and, integrated into other, larger contexts, Fluxus and Fluxus-associated objects and gestures enjoyed at least decent exposure. Those Fluxus artists not self-limited to George Maciunas’ infra-mince sensibility – notably New York-based Fluxists such as Dick Higgins and Carolee Schneemann and visitors such as Wolf Vostell and Milan Knížák – proved adept at mounting attention-getting spectacles, often identified (correctly or not) as Happenings. Certain Fluxus participants specifically oriented towards the infra-mince approach (Yoko Ono, for example) were also good at putting their objects and their actions in front of the public (which remained mystified, if no longer oblivious). The highest-profile spectacle in which Fluxus artists were involved, of course, was Charlotte Moorman’s Avant-Garde Festival, which grew from a series of evening concerts in a midtown recital hall into a one-day blowout of the vanguard arts located in some public venue (Central Park, Grand Central Station, Shea Stadium and the 69th Regiment Armory, among others). This annual event was one of the most eagerly anticipated of each art season throughout the 1960s and ’70s. Maciunas and Flynt boycotted the Festival almost from its inception, but most other New York Fluxus artists – and many from abroad – participated regularly. Nam June Paik made his 1964 American debut in the context of the Festival; also he began his ongoing collaboration with Moorman at that time.

Thematic group exhibits in which Fluxus artists participated did not normally identify those artists as Fluxus, but could not hide – indeed, often emphasized – the extreme eccentricity of what Fluxus artwork was included. Robert Watts, Geoffrey Hendricks and Ay-O, among oth-

ers, frequently contributed distinctly Fluxus work to non-Fluxus exhibits. The Fluxus connection was more likely to be cited when such artists held one-person shows in commercial galleries (e.g. Smolin, Thibaut, Bianchini). But Fluxus-associated artists were generally less active in commercial galleries after 1966 than they were before. Fluxus artists opted early on to exhibit in non-commercial situations (the gallery in the basement of the Judson Church, for example, where Hendricks and his wife Bici Forbes created several collaborative shows). Thus, in the mid-1960s, Fluxus artists prefigured the general disenchantment with the established gallery situation and the creation of "alternative spaces."

The alternative-space boom of the mid-1970s – which in New York spawned such now-established organizations as Artists Space, the Institute for Art and Urban Resources, White Columns (née 112 Greene Street) and Franklin Furnace – evolved directly out of early-'70s anti-gallery sentiment, early-'60s co-op galleries and individual and group initiatives of the mid- and late-'60s. Among the latter must be counted Maciunas' own Canal Street Fluxshop (1964–66) and Dick Higgins' Something Else Gallery (occupying the ground floor of his brownstone on West 22nd Street between 1966 and '68). The latter space, at least, received some critical notice.

So did the Gallery's parent organization, Higgins' Something Else Press,⁶ a 1964 outgrowth of Maciunas' own publication and edition activities. [See Dick Higgins, "Two Sides of a Coin: Fluxus and Something Else Press," in this volume.] Something Else Press publications were available in most Manhattan bookstores featuring new literature – this at a time when such outlets were flourishing and even proliferating, thanks in great part to the post-Beat explosion in experimentalist writing and self-publishing (what Higgins, writing back then in his Something Else Newsletter, called "the mimeograph revolution"). The books of the Press attracted favorable review in art publications as well as in underground periodicals, and could not entirely have escaped the attention of even the orthodox Conceptualists. The Conceptual artists may have professed to Buchloh no contact with Fluxus, but – as the Press made Fluxus and Fluxus-related material available without identifying it as such – they may well have had such exposure without knowing it.⁷ It is interesting to note in this context how the dissemination strategies of Seth Siegelaub, principle agent for the Conceptualists in the late '60s, straddled those of Maciunas and of Higgins. The books Siegelaub published were not standardized, nor were they distributed to general book stores, but they could be found in art book stores, and were sent out to a fairly extensive mailing list. Likewise, exhibitions Siegelaub arranged, in New York and elsewhere, were one-shot guerrilla affairs, not quite as secretive as Maciunas' but less regular in schedule or locale than those of the Something Else Gallery.

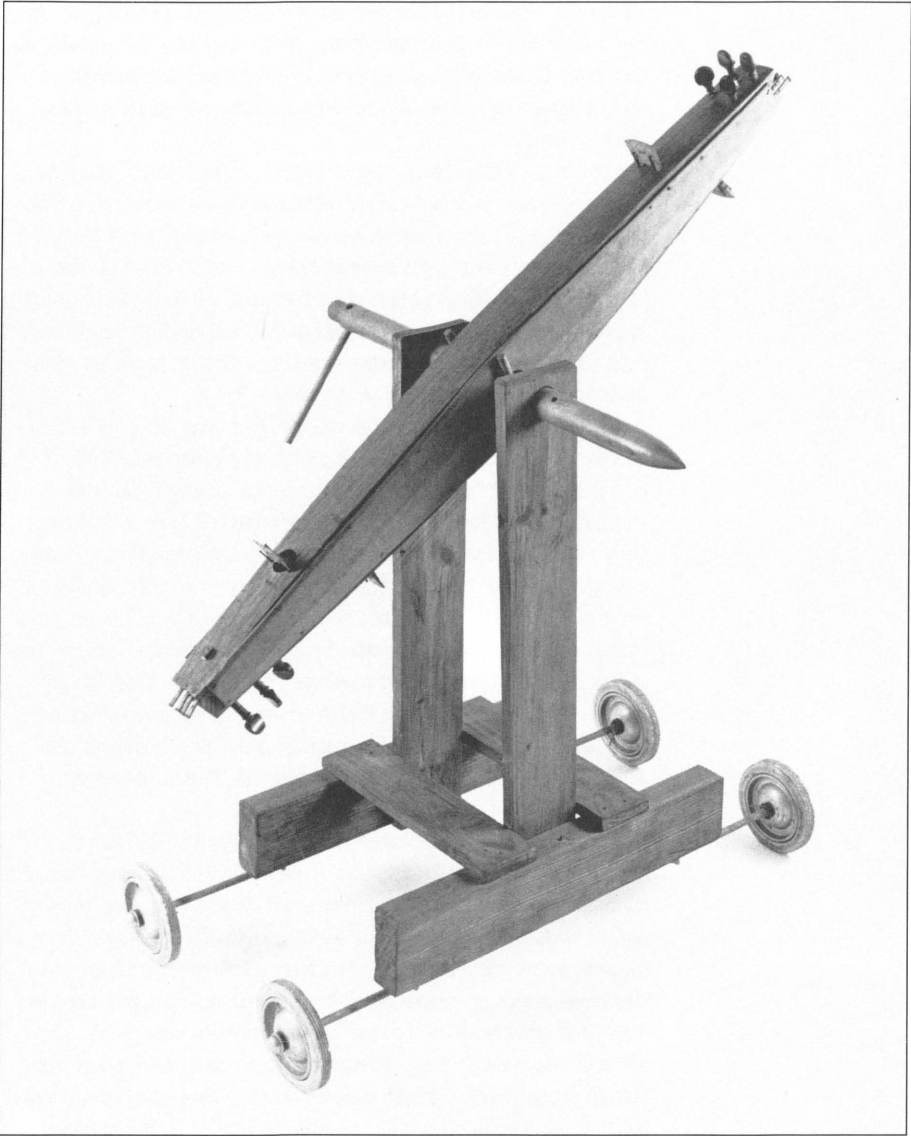
In 1967 and '68, Higgins was visited several times by a young poet researching Fluxus and intermedia. This poet, Vito Acconci, was already beginning to publish an experimental conceptually-oriented magazine,

0 to 9, and was interested in familiarizing himself with the various ways the conceptualist impulse was manifesting itself. The relative catholicity of conceptualist practice displayed by issues of *0 to 9* not only anticipated the richly various artwork created by Acconci himself, but prefigured all the post-conceptualist tendencies of the 1970s – as, in other (if often similar) ways, did Fluxus and the Something Else Press themselves. The deliberately straightforward, inelegant, even scruffy format of Acconci's magazine embodied the anti-object sentiment of early-'70s vanguardism. But Higgins' and Maciunas' high production values were also in evidence at this time, such as in the informational periodical *Avalanche*. As the number of artists involved in producing books grew throughout the decade, the Press (which disbanded in 1974) and Fluxus were rediscovered and their methods as well as messages emulated.

As an experimental writer, Acconci had gravitated to the lively "scene" at the St. Marks Church, headquarters for the second (and third, and nth) generation of New York School poets. There, he figured importantly in a group of especially adventurous writers who, through contact with visual artists, theater people, filmmakers, musicians and dancers, evolved their work into performance, often entirely devoid of the spoken or written word. In 1968 this loosely defined, unnamed group began presenting performance group shows in various indoor – and, occasionally, outdoor – spaces, emulating the poetry reading in format, but also recalling the chamber concert, the drama-class solo sequence and especially the evenings of solo dance pieces which were then proliferating in the wake of the choreographic revolution set in motion by the Judson Dance Theater. Of course, the idea of presenting simple gestural events in a concert context was pure Fluxus – as was the "Streetworks" format, in which the participants simultaneously realized their events in a specific geographical location (a particular city block, for example) during a specified time period.

Some of the performers in these stageworks and streetworks (e.g., Anne Waldman, Bernadette Mayer) came straight out of the bosom of St. Marks, while others (Marjorie Strider, Jon Henry) were active as visual artists and still others (Bernar Venet, Adrian Piper) were tangentially involved with Conceptual Art. But some participants, including Hannah Weiner and John Giorno, were close with Fluxus artists (notably writers such as Higgins and Jackson Mac Low) and were quite aware of, even admittedly influenced by, the Fluxus aesthetic. Comments made at the time by several stagework-streetwork artists indicated that they found Fluxus compelling as a sensibility but impenetrably and distastefully cliquish as a movement or group. In a sense, this flurry of Fluxus-like activity in 1968-70 was fluxism before the fact, an attempt to recapitulate the Fluxus approach without having to get permission from Maciunas to do so.

Fluxus methods and messages impacted various other aspects of New York art practice and artistic life as well. As early as 1963, Maciunas and Flynt, both dedicated radical socialists, had issued their



Joe Jones, *The Longest Pull-toy in the World*. Wood, wire, metal and plastic, 73.7 x 91.4 cm., 1968. Emily Harvey Collection.

own condemnations of the Vietnam War, leafletting and posting handbills – by themselves and in occasional concert with other radical groups – long before anti-war sentiment galvanized into a mass movement. [A colorful transformation by Maciunas – whose gift for innovative graphic design was a constant refining influence on Fluxus activity – of the American flag into a litany of American war statistics is regarded by cultural historians as one of the great protest posters of the '60s.] The Guerrilla Art Action Group, one of the art world's most con-

sistent and vehement sources for anti-war agitation, had strong ties to Fluxus. (The GAAG was essentially two people, Jean Toche and Geoffrey Hendricks' brother Jon; as curator of the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection, Jon Hendricks later became an important Fluxus archivist and historian.)

Maciunas' socialist ideals also led him into other areas of social discourse where his efforts, however oddly undertaken and however distant in their results from his original intentions, proved far-reaching. Maciunas was, in effect, the inventor of the SoHo loft co-op,⁸ taking both the co-op ownership-governance structure and the notion of artists' neighborhood to a previously unimaginable extent when he began working on the "Fluxhouse Cooperatives" in 1966. [See *Hollis Melton*, "Notes on Soho and a Reminiscence," in this volume.]

The first art organization to benefit from Maciunas' co-oping activity was the Filmmakers' Cinematheque, which later expanded into the Anthology Film Archives, the first public center for viewing artistic endeavor in SoHo (predating Paula Cooper, the first serious SoHo art gallery by over a year) and served not only as a screening room, but as a theater for various budding drama groups and individuals. Among these were Richard Foreman and his Ontological-Hysteric Theatre, one of the principle playwright-directors and groups associated with the "theater of images"; Stuart Sherman, whose early one-man "Spectacles" evinced the influence of Fluxus and in turn anticipated, even influenced, such performance artists-(turned-musicians) as Laurie Anderson and John Zorn; and Fluxus itself. [See *Jonas Mekas*, "Notes on George Maciunas' Work in Cinema," in this volume.]

The unravelling of coordinated Fluxus activity after 1966 can be attributed in great part to Maciunas' involvement with co-oping. Even at the beginning such an involvement diverted his attention away from producing objects and concerts; but, as things began to go awry (thanks to his unorthodox and often unwise business practices), Maciunas spent less time organizing performances and fabricating boxes and more and more time arguing with co-op members and boards, with contractors, and with municipal officials.⁹ Despite that, the charismatic, if hermetic, Maciunas continued to attract acolytes, whether Fluxus artists' students (such as Larry Miller, who studied with Watts and Hendricks at Rutgers University) or more established artists – mostly foreign – who recognized a strong affinity for Fluxus practice. Among these latter were Yoshimasa Wada and Jean Dupuy.

By the time he actually fell in with Maciunas and Fluxus in 1976, Dupuy had organized several controversial and well-attended installation and performance "group shows." Dupuy was aware of Fluxus while still in France, as he was strongly influenced by the models offered by Ben Vautier's Total Art activities and by Robert Filliou's (and, for a time, George Brecht's) involvement in the *Cedille qui Sourit* Fluxstore. These cunning admixtures of formal and informal organization showed Dupuy how the contributions of many artists could be coordinated into an over-

arching entirety without suppressing each artist's distinctiveness. In the early and mid-1970s, "About 405 East 13th Street," "Soup and Tart," "Chant a cappella," "Revolving Stage," "Grommets" and other group frameworks included pieces by many of New York's most innovative and ultimately influential "post-studio" artists.

However self-contained and even aloof it may have been as a circle of artists or an aesthetic practice, and however far removed it may have been from the mainstream, Fluxus was hardly removed from New York's artistic discourse. Acknowledged far more readily outside its home town than in, Fluxus flourished in semi-obscurity while helping in unusual as well as typical ways to shape the nature of New York art in the later 1960s and throughout the '70s. The current upsurge of interest in Fluxus is bringing the movement and its attendant sensibility into the limelight, for the first time in New York since Fluxus' furtive bid for attention in the early '60s. That upsurge suggests that Fluxus can once again have, and may once again be having, an impact on art and life in New York. Given the current state of art and life in New York, that impact comes not a moment too soon.

NOTES

¹ It should be reiterated that, at this time, the lion's share of immediately influential avant-garde investigation was occurring in New York. Even when not identified as such, the examples cited here were all part of New York's artistic discourse – appearing and taking place in educational forums such as the School of Visual Arts, galleries such as Lannis (run by Joseph Kosuth), Daniels (run by Dan Graham), Siegelau and Dwan, and publications ranging from *Artforum* (which moved to New York from Los Angeles in mid-1966) to *ArtLanguage* and Vito Acconci's *0 to 9* – before they were part of the worldwide discourse.

² Buchloh, Benjamin H. D., "Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October* 55 (Winter 1990), pp. 105–143.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 107. Flynt actually wrote his "Concept Art" essay in late 1960 and Young edited it into *An Anthology* in 1961. The compilation was indeed not published until 1963.

⁴ Lippard, Lucy. *Six Years: The dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972* (New York, 1973) p. 11. The entry following Brecht's, Allan Kaprow's *Assemblage, Environments and Happenings* (New York, 1966), is also rich in Fluxus material identified as such.

⁵ The Brecht book cited by Lippard was *Great Bear Pamphlet* #3.

⁶ *My Something Else Press: an annotated bibliography*

(New Paltz, New York, 1983) provides a detailed history and analysis of the Press.

⁷ To judge from his essay, Buchloh did not inquire of Weiner, Barry, Kosuth *et al.* as to their familiarity with the books of the Press. Buchloh does not directly consider the importance of books as well as periodicals in the early activities (ca. 1967–1970) of these artists; he implies, however, that those artists were prompted to consider the book format primarily, if not entirely, by the model of Edward Ruscha's self-published books. As Buchloh writes: "Among the key strategies of future Conceptual Art that were initiated by Ruscha in 1963 were the following: to choose the vernacular (e.g., architecture) as referent; to deploy photography systematically as the representational medium; and to develop a new form of distribution (e.g., the commercially produced book as opposed to the traditionally crafted "livre d'artiste." Buchloh, p. 119. Ruscha's books, however, printed in Los Angeles in initially very small editions, were available in very few New York outlets (albeit ones, such as Wittenborn's, likely frequented by the Conceptualists), far fewer than carried Something Else Press publications.

⁸ Simpson, Charles R. *SoHo: The Artist in the City* (Chicago, 1981), p. 156. Simpson's detailed sociological study chronicles Maciunas' early (1966–68) efforts at setting up his Fluxhouse Cooperatives, including his less-than-forthright managing of maintenance and development funds. (Predictably, Maciunas is ultimately portrayed not as a crook, but simply as a control freak.)

⁹ Maciunas was able to fend off the wrath of co-op members and the city with a barrage of eccentric memos, declarations and posturings, at one point barricading himself in his basement lair so that he could not be served papers. He was not so lucky with contractors; one had him attacked, and he lost an eye in the encounter.