

**Abstract**

This essay examines issues that typify Fluxus work and thinking through reflections on historiography, hermeneutics and historicism. Because Fluxus actively engenders possibilities and futures, it activates the question of legacy. Generating futures entails a dialog with the past. This dialog with history requires historiography, articulate reflection on how we make and write history—and articulate reflection on how we understand it. While such an understanding is necessary for historians who seek to understand the past of a phenomenon such as Fluxus, it was of central import to the artists, architects, composers and designers who created Fluxus and to those who desire to actively continue the Fluxus traditions. This conversation transcends the art world to embrace larger social and cultural aspirations. This key to understanding Fluxus has often been overlooked, and it partly explains the failure of mainstream art historians to understand Fluxus. The first developments that became Fluxus reveal a community of artists, architects, composers and designers with an articulate awareness of history in all its many dimensions. Throughout its history, Fluxus has continued this multidimensional dialog between the past, present and future.

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STORY, *historiography,* & legacy

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1. Legacy

THE QUESTION OF LEGACY IS A FUNDAMENTAL problem for any group that works within a paradigm of change and change agency. Those who consciously generate a future must enter into dialogue with the past. This is dialogue with history, and a serious dialogue requires historiography—articulate reflection on how we make and write history, and articulate reflection on how we understand it. This dialogue is one key to understanding Fluxus, and it has often been overlooked.

When Sean Cubitt describes Fluxus as “the last of the revolutionary vanguards,”¹ he captures an important distinction by

¹ Cubitt, Sean. 2005. “The Wealth and Poverty of Networks.” *At A Distance: Precursors to Internet Art and Activism*. Annemarie Chandler and Norie Neumark, editors. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 428-429.

² Merriam-Webster, Inc. 1990. *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*. Springfield, MA, p. 1303.

³ Merriam-Webster, Inc. 1990. *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*. Springfield, MA, p. 119.

choosing the term “vanguard” in place of the more common “avant-garde.” The term vanguard refers to troops at the head of an army or to individuals at the cutting edge of an action or movement.² It is an active, outgoing role, contrasted with the restricted, inward sense of an avant-garde as a group of intellectuals developing new concepts for the arts.³ It may be uncommon to describe avant-gardes as restricted, but the attempt to adopt the avant-garde position within an acknowledged art world necessarily restricts the avant-garde to the boundaries of that world. The concept of an avant-garde originates in the concept of the vanguard, but the notion of the avant-garde shrinks that concept to fit the size of the art world. The concept of the vanguard embraces larger social and cultural aspirations.

The idea of the vanguard dates to the 15th century, a time of global change. This was a time when the printing revolution and the spread of a knowledge economy collided with an early phase of the industrial revolution in renaissance and reformation. The idea of the avant-garde dates to the early 20th century. This, too, was a time of global economic and social change. Nevertheless, most artists who aspired to engagement in great social causes actually lived in a world of private patronage where they conflated art and social change. The reason, perhaps, was a failure to understand the complex relations between the symbols or symbolic representations that artists create and the social or physical worlds that lie beyond or outside those symbols.

As with other groups that are often allied with the tradition of the avant-garde, Fluxus is self-aware. This involves a self-awareness of history in general, along with a specific attentiveness to its own place in the cultural and social structures of its own time. What often differentiates Fluxus from the practices and ideologies of the other forms of the avant-garde, however, is the playful exploration of a belief in the fragmented, discontinuous and contradictory nature of reality. This is combined in Fluxus with a persistent use of deconstructive engagements and intermedia interpretations of cultural materials of all kinds to establish a paradigm of textuality in which on-going exploration and recombination is permitted and even necessary.

Some Fluxus artists rejected the notion of an artistic avant-garde as one more predictable face of the art world, a predictable, constraining force that substitutes illusion for development. Others accepted and welcomed engagement with art, while refusing to be constrained by the art world. For others still, art was a convenient framework in a world where it was easier to make a living by playing with art than it was to make a living simply by playing. While the perspective of each group differs, a twinned sense of engagement and irony makes history significant for each.

With the possible exception of those few artists who have been totally detached from the world, most Fluxus artists have been interested in their own work, the work of their colleagues, and what might flow from it. This

flowing was an outpouring or—to use the name that Maciunas and Higgins coined—a Fluxus. In some deep sense, the nature of time and history means that no one can cross the same river twice. It is nevertheless possible to swim, and some swimmers contribute to the stream. Those who are concerned consciously with their contribution—the question of legacy—are aware of their actions against the past and future of historical time.

2. Aspects of History

TWO ASPECTS OF THE FLUXUS ENGAGEMENT WITH HISTORY REQUIRE PARTICULAR consideration. The first involves history and historical knowledge as a foundation for current practice. The second involves history as knowledge of the past.

The artists, architects, composers and designers active in Fluxus always had an articulate awareness of history. The Fluxus people themselves wrote the first histories of Fluxus and they have continually been active in compiling historical research and documentation. One reason for this is the long, dry era when art historians and art critics had little awareness of Fluxus and even less interest. Some historians still fail to understand Fluxus and its significance in the cultural history of the 20th century. The situation was worse four decades ago. As a result, Fluxus participants took on the role for themselves.

More important, however, Fluxus practice involves an awareness of the role that history plays in change. This awareness is embedded in Fluxus itself, and in the many activities that embody an historical dialectic. These activities are explicitly set against the background of social, cultural and economic history. They are framed in the context of a changing future, a context that requires past history along with future histories.

The large-scale social, cultural and economic concerns of Dick Higgins, George Maciunas or Nam June Paik, for example, entail a sense of history. Maciunas's historical charts and diagrams challenge the multiple streams of art and culture while locating his concerns within them.⁴ From early works such as *Postface* or the famed intermedia essay to late essays on Fluxus reception or the arts in society, Higgins's books and essays pursued a rich stream of inquiry sited in historical frames.⁵ In playful works and carefully developed studies, Paik developed a forceful critique of technology, proposing new media and cultural strategies that require history as background and as future.⁶

Other Fluxus people addressed issues in the specific frames of art history, music history, or the histories of the different media. Some had formal training in art history, Geoffrey Hendricks, Milan Knizak, George Maciunas and Robert Watts among them. Many had rich foundations in music and musicology, including Giuseppe Chiari, Henning Christiansen, Nam June Paik, Ben Patterson, Mieko Shiomi and La Monte Young. Several worked in film, such as

4 Schmidt-Burkhardt, Astrit. 2003. *Maciunas' Learning Machines*. From *Art History to a Chronology of Fluxus*. Detroit and Berlin: The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Foundation and Vice Versa Verlag.

5 Higgins, Dick. 1964. *Postface/Jefferon's Birthday*. New York: Something Else Press; Higgins, Dick. 1982. *Postface* [reprint] *The Word and Beyond. Four Literary Cosmologists*, New York: Smith; Higgins, Dick. 1978. *A Dialectic of Centuries. Notes Towards a Theory of the New Arts*. New York: Printed Editions; Higgins, Dick. 1997. *Modernism Since Postmodernism: Essays on Intermedia*. San Diego: San Diego State University Press; Higgins, Dick. 1998. "Fluxus Theory and Reception." *The Fluxus Reader*. Ken Friedman, editor. London: Academy Editions, pp. 217-236.

6 Paik, Nam June. 1964. "Utopian Laser Television." In *Manifestoes*. New York: Something Else Press; Paik, Nam June. 1976. *Media Planning for the Post-Industrial Society*. (Reprinted in *The Electronic Superhighway*. Nam June Paik and Kenworth W. Moffett, editors. New York, Seoul, and Fort Lauderdale: Holly Solomon Gallery, Hyundai Gallery, and the Fort Lauderdale Museum of Art, 1995, pp. 39-47.)

Jonas Mekas and Paul Sharits. Others worked in literature and poetry, including Jackson Mac Low and Emmett Williams, and more.

While Fluxus today is seen in terms of art, music, architecture and design, a significant number of Fluxus people came to Fluxus from far different backgrounds. Robert Filliou was an economist, for example, Henry Flynt a mathematician, George Brecht a chemist and Robert Watts an engineer. These diverse backgrounds often helped to define the work these artists did along with making art: printing and typography for Dick Higgins as a publisher and designer, social science and human behavior for Ken Friedman as an entrepreneur and management professor, architecture for George Maciunas as a graphic designer and real estate developer, folklore for Bengt af Klintberg as an author and professor. At the same time, these engagements visibly shaped the Fluxus projects of these artists.

Wide interests and active research went deeper than an attempt to cover a territory abandoned by mainstream historians and critics. The role of Fluxus artists, composers and poets in recording and writing their own histories is one cause. The other is philosophical.

For some, historiographic inquiry into Fluxus is part of understanding Fluxus itself. The kinds of questions that historiographers ask became a way to approach Fluxus as well as a tool for considering the history of Fluxus and Fluxus history. While most scholars use historiographic research to analyze the work of historians rather than the subject of study, historiography serves both ends.

3. Historiography

HISTORIOGRAPHY IS THE EXPLICIT STUDY OF HOW HISTORY IS CONCEIVED and written, involving its theories and methods, the assumptions on which history is based, and the principles of historical research and writing. Conal Furay and Michael J. Salevouris define historiography as “the study of the way history has been and is written—the history of historical writing.” Historiography does not study past events. It studies “the changing interpretations of those events in the works of individual historians.”⁷

Historiography entails many kinds of useful questions. Some questions help us to understand the historic inquiry. Is the source authentic? What is its authority? What biases and interests does the source entail? Is it intelligible?

Some questions help us to understand the authors. Who wrote the text? What was this person like? What theoretical orientation does the text reflect? What or who was the intended audience?

Still other questions shed light on background and context. What sources does the narrative privilege or ignore? What streams of work does this work engage? What method did the author use in compiling and organizing evidence? In what historical context was the work of history itself written?

⁷ Furay, Conal, and Michael J. Salevouris. 1998. *The Methods and Skills of History: A Practical Guide*. Arlington Heights, IL: H. Davidson, p. 223. Compare this with Webster's definition of historiography as “the writing of history; especially: the writing of history based on the critical examination of sources, the selection of particulars from the authentic materials, and the synthesis of particulars into a narrative that will stand the test of critical methods, b: the principles, theory, and history of historical writing <a course in historiography>, 2: the product of historical writing; a body of historical literature.” Merriam-Webster, Inc. 1990. *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, p. 537.

These questions take on a new light when authorship and artistry collapse the separable distinction between the subject and the object of historical consideration.

This parallels similar discourse traditions in which the practitioners of process or action were simultaneously the creators of an intellectual discipline for inquiry. It also parallels the plural meanings and dialectical progressions that emerge in the hermeneutical and exegetical traditions. The classical tradition of exegetical hermeneutics examines four senses of meaning. The first sense involves the literal meanings embedded in history. The second engages the interpretive meanings embedded in metaphor and allegory that extend and transpose history into a new key. The third examines the moral and ethical applications of the ideas and issues disclosed by the first two senses. Finally, there are the forms of meaning that create and encompass a future in which meaning is consummated. These four senses of medieval exegesis date back to St. Augustine's theology, developing in the writings of Gregory the Great and the later medieval scholars who use the four-fold senses of history, allegory, tropology, and anagogy. This leads to the eighteenth and nineteenth century traditions of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey on to the twentieth century hermeneutics of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer. In the late 1970s, Dick Higgins explicitly brings Gadamer's hermeneutics into the discourse of Fluxus and intermedia with his analysis of intermedia in which works imply the fusion of intermedia horizons. The unfolding development of Higgins's nine—later eleven—criteria of Fluxus⁸ and Ken Friedman's twelve criteria⁹ imply hermeneutical engagement.

One useful parallel would take us beyond the boundaries of this article to the exegetical traditions of theology. We will not develop this beyond suggesting that attention to the distinctions raised by the traditions known as lower criticism and higher criticism would be useful in understanding Fluxus, particularly among those who hope to understand the issues that animated Fluxus as a productive community.

The lower criticism is a textual or archival criticism rooted in the details of text. The lower criticism seeks to identify and authenticate textual sources, to determine accurate and inaccurate documents and to establish reliable versions and meanings. The higher criticism involves historical and historiographic awareness. This is seen in source criticism, form criticism, tradition criticism and redaction criticism. Source criticism investigates the sources on which the text is based and the development or derivation of ideas from one source to the next. Form criticism examines text genres and locates their meaning in the social life of a community. Form criticism seeks an understanding of the rooted life experience, the *sitz-im-leben* that gives rise to the text or to the oral transmission and to the social customs on which the text is based. Tradition criticism examines the life context more closely, tracing

8 Higgins, Dick. 1997. "Fluxus: Theory and Reception." *Modernism Since Postmodernism: Essays on Intermedia*. San Diego: San Diego State University Press, pp. 160-198, esp. 174-175, and 225; Higgins, Dick. 1998. "Fluxus: Theory and Reception." *The Fluxus Reader*. Ken Friedman, editor. London: Academy Editions, pp. 218-234, esp. 224.

9 Friedman, Ken. 1998. "Fluxus and Company." *The Fluxus Reader*. Ken Friedman, editor. London: Academy Editions, pp. 237-253, esp. 244-251.

the development of themes in social life and exploring how they shape texts and ideas. Finally, redaction criticism examines the work of interpreters and writers, exploring their choice and use of source and material in shaping a narrative.

The writings and work of some Fluxus artists demonstrate an implicit and explicit awareness of these issues that few art historians or critics brought to the consideration of Fluxus until the late 1990s. This is especially the case with theorist-editor-publishers such as Higgins or Friedman, historically trained scholars such as Knizak or Maciunas or a folklorist such as Klintberg.

4. The Open Dialectic

WHEN YOUNGER ARTISTS APPROACH FLUXUS, SOME ARE OUTRAGED TO DISCOVER the deep interest of Fluxus artists in history and philosophy. They argue that Fluxus is a free and open source, available to everyone on equal terms. Some go even further. They argue that an interest in history is the self-serving attempt of once-radical artists and composers who have turned to history in their old age in an effort to replace their lost creativity while using history to consolidate and maintain positions in the art world. How valid is this claim?

The general view that Fluxus offers something to anyone who is interested is true. A deeper truth is that Fluxus requires openness, commitment and, most particularly, study.

Fluxus seems simple. Few restrictions prevent an artist from presenting almost anything under the Fluxus rubric. It may perhaps be that there are no barriers at all, but the case is not as simple as it seems.

The premises and works associated with Fluxus are simple, but they are not simplistic. Neither are they ungrounded. Fluxus is the product of artists who thought—and think—deeply about art, culture and society. Their works are a manifestation of this cognitive engagement.

Whether they present these works under their own names or under the Fluxus rubric, the works demonstrate a nature that is unified by several central themes. Often profoundly simple in form, they are based in creatively rich complex awareness. The best Fluxus work leads to surprising results, results that may be more complex than the works themselves.

The philosophical constitution of Fluxus suggests an open arena that anyone may enter to somehow become “Fluxus.” Nevertheless, becoming Fluxus in a meaningful way requires work, and sometime requires thinking in ways that seem—on the surface—antithetical to the Fluxus spirit. To fully understand Fluxus and its implications requires a firm knowledge of its history and its theoretical premises, together with an ability to think and act beyond them. There is a visible parallel to this in Zen, where the simplicity of Zen activity and Zen practice are balanced by the subtle and often difficult disciplines of Buddhist psychology and philosophy.¹⁰

¹⁰ For a deeper consideration of the relationship and parallels between Fluxus and Zen, see: Doris, David T. 1998. “Zen Vaudeville. A Medi(t)ation in the Margins of Fluxus.” *The Fluxus Reader*. Ken Friedman, editor. London: Academy Editions, pp. 91–135.

In any game, the real masters are those who know the rules so deeply and the history so fully that they no longer seem to think of the specific rules or history at a first level of consciousness. Some no longer seem to be aware of them. Fluxus is no different.

It is precisely this nature of mastery that Fluxus requires. This is a form of mastery in which history is not insignificant, but fundamental.

The earliest publications and works of the Fluxus artists, designers, composers and architects demonstrate a rich engagement in history and historical issues. History and a sense of historiographic issues emerge as a central concern in the work of Maciunas, Mac Low, Young, Higgins and others,

Over the four decades of its history Fluxus has continued to develop because it has embraced dialogue and transformation in the context of its own history. Fluxus has been born and reborn several times, each time in different ways. Historical self-awareness makes this possible.

This knowledge is an active force for change. It is a fluid understanding of Fluxus's own history and meaning. Fluxus reflects a central insistence on social creativity and discourse rather than on objects and artifacts. This perspective has enabled Fluxus to remain historically aware and dynamically alive at one and the same time. This has been true even when Fluxus has been declared dead. Perhaps it has been most true when Fluxus has been declared dead.

The historical dialectic is an aspect of the social memory that enables communities and cultures to survive.¹¹

5. Historicism and Fluxus

SCHOLAR STEPHEN GREENBLATT DESCRIBES SEVERAL ENABLING ASSUMPTIONS behind what is known as the New Historicism. A useful paraphrase of two such assumptions sheds light on the issues we discuss here.

First, art — cultural production, events, etc. — is historical. It entails a social and cultural construct shaped by more than one consciousness.

Second, creative practice — art, literature, etc. — is not a distinct category of human activity. It must be considered in a dialogic relation to history, and this means a particular vision of history.¹²

Historicism and related theoretical approaches have gained considerable influence over cultural and literary considerations over the same 40 years that gave rise to Fluxus. What makes this more than mere coincidence is the fact they share many of the same ideas and beliefs.

Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt¹³ emphasize five central aspects of the New Historicism. These are: sharp focus on overlooked details, continual use of anecdotes, preoccupation with the nature of representations, interest in the body (or history of) and a skeptical relation to the function of ideology. The same issues can be said to be central aspects of much Fluxus

¹¹ Friedman, Ken. 2005. "The Wealth and Poverty of Networks." *At A Distance: Precursors to Internet Art and Activism*. Annemarie Chandler and Norie Neumark, editors. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 408-422.

¹² For more information, see: Myers, D. G. 1988. "The New Historicism in Literary Study." *Academic Questions* 2, Winter 1988-89, pp. 27-36.

¹³ Gallagher, Catherine and Stephen Greenblatt. 2000. *Practicing New Historicism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

work. While this comparative association offers intriguing possibilities, the key issue is not the specific similarities between Fluxus and New Historicism. Rather we point to these parallels to suggest that Fluxus, in focus and philosophy, parallels a form of historical practice.

Both historicism and the Fluxus ethos recognize that history is not embedded in static laws or fixed principals, but requires considering the infinite variety of particular historical instances. The traditions of historicism drawn from the 19th century further emphasize issues that are also central to Fluxus. These include the understanding that being itself rests on action; recognizing that all human ideas and ideals are subject to change; replacing generalizing schemas with individualizing approaches; and most particularly, understanding the historical nature of all human existence. At the same time, this historicist emphasis replaces an overall systematic model of history with an engagement with history that reflects the diversity of human expressions.

New Historicism stands traditional historical scholarship on its head. The first principal of historical investigation has traditionally been the recovery of the original meaning of a subject of study. New Historicism labels this as naïve at best. New Historicism instead posits a relationship between the work and history as dialectic. This dialectic argues that the subject of one's considerations—the works, or events—should be considered as both the source and the end of history.

In such a view of history, the recovery of meaning is held to be impossible, even naïve. In this view, the product and the producer are interpreted as one and the same. This leads many to criticize the approach as problematic because it elevates theory over the subjects of historical inquiry.

If, however, we selectively use some New Historicist methods to investigate Fluxus, the criticisms do not disappear, but rather become less valid. Such a process would not solely entail historical or critical methods. Instead, this becomes a productivist process that seeks to develop and engage in further work by investigating and responding to the subject. In this case, the subject is Fluxus. Rather than abandoning the source of one's supposed study—as New Historicism is said to do—this approach is both based in Fluxus practices and reflects Fluxus attitudes.

Here, the parallels among different hermeneutic approaches become illuminating, since some sense of hermeneutics seek to understand an idea of what historical facts meant in their own time by those who created, participating in and witnessed them. Even as we acknowledge that one cannot recover the past, we acknowledge that understanding entails a good-faith attempt to understand what we cannot truly recover. Fluxus requires a dialectical development that moves from history through interpretation to application and onward to the consummation that closes Gadamer's hermeneutical circle in Higgins's intermedia horizons.

As with historicism, one goal of Fluxus is to demonstrate the power of discourse in shaping the ways that dominant ideology creates the institutional and textual embodiment of the cultural constructs that govern mental and social life.¹⁴ Both suggest that art does not imitate the world, but mediates it. For Fluxus, artistic praxis becomes a metaphorical lens that brings the multiple possibilities of human experience into focus.

For this reason, learning about the history and theory of Fluxus is crucial. This is not because this understanding enables anyone to see as Fluxus artists see (or saw) their work and world. Rather, it is a way to understand how Fluxus practice was (and is) a form of mediation intended to shape rather than to reflect the potential of human experience.

¹⁴ There are parallels to the New Historicism in the exegetical tradition of narrative criticism. Narrative criticism argues the difficulty of establishing authentic text, so it focuses, instead, on entire narratives, comparing them with other narrative forms that have a beginning, middle and an end of some kind. Related to this is the school of reception criticism that focus on the role of the text in the reader's life.

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