

Abstract

Legacy involves difficulties, for those who inherit and for those who do not. The history that is a gift and a burden when it involves art is equally problematic when it involves the Fluxus intermedia forms that hover between art and life. This article explores the challenging questions of Fluxus legacy: the right to participate in a discourse network, canon formation, literature development, the work and feelings of younger artists toward a heritage that some demand and others reject. These issues particularly vex the Fluxus legacy. An invisible college of artists, composers, designers and architects created Fluxus. It functioned as a laboratory of experimental ideas. The Fluxus challenge to art and the art world took place on political and economic grounds and involved artistic means and philosophical principle. The shift of Fluxus discourse from outsider status to historical standing is bound up with and transformed in meaning by the institutions that collect, preserve and interpret historical artifacts and documents. These artifacts and documents once tried to tell different versions of the Fluxus story to a relatively uninterested world. Today, they tell a complex and often misunderstood story to a world that seems to be interested in Fluxus for precisely wrong reasons, a situation that defeats Fluxus with the trappings of success. This article explores the dialectical and hermeneutical work of recovery, to address the challenge of legacy by examining its many aspects.

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Legacy

The question of legacy is always beset with difficulties. Whether legacies involve art, politics or medieval duchies, groups of artists or family firms, the same questions emerge.

Who inherits? Who has the right to inherit? What is the heritage? What rights does legacy confer? What obligations does legacy entail?

The word “legacy” suggests the questions. Going back to a Middle English word meaning both the office of a legate and a bequest, the word came from older Anglo-French and Latin words meaning legate, deputy or emissary, and the Latin verb *legare* meant to deputize, to send as emissary or to bequeath.

A legacy is a bequest. In legal terms, a legacy is the gift of money or property bequeathed by a will. Donors transmit legal legacies through a will or testament, often bound with conditions or a contract. Few bequests come without obligations, and most legacies imply responsibilities. For those who bequeath it, a legacy entails deputation and it transmits wishes.

In the larger sense of the word, a legacy is something transmitted by ancestors or predecessors on one side, and something received from them on the other. In another large sense, a legacy is any transmission we receive from the past. Such gifts always come with the responsibilities of “ownership” and a necessity to continue the viability of the property or lineage.

This is the second of two special issues of *Visible Language*. Both address the problem of legacy, each in a different way.

In the first issue — *Fluxus and Legacy*¹ — four art historians addressed the question of legacy in historical context. One must place the historians in context as well, since two of them — Bertrand Clavez and Owen Smith² — practice art. The third is Ina Blom, who has also been a music critic. Hannah Higgins³ is the fourth. She was a rock musician and she took an active part in Fluxus exhibitions and concerts. Moreover, Higgins is a “Fluxkid,” the daughter of two Fluxus artists, and her contribution brought together seven of her fellow Fluxkids, each of whom shared his or her reflections on a life in Fluxus and a role in the Fluxus legacy. The fifth author, Ken Friedman, works as a scholar for his “day job.” He, too, lives a second life as an artist active in Fluxus since the 1960s.

This is the second special issue of *Visible Language* to address the Fluxus legacy — here, we explore the way that several artists see the Fluxus legacy and their role in it. Perhaps, from another perspective, we explore the way that several younger artists see the Fluxus legacy in their lives and work.

Ann Klefstad addresses two issues. One is the question of legacy in Fluxus, and the difficult relationship between the artists long known as Fluxus artists and younger artists who consciously work in the tradition that these Fluxus artists established. The other is the question of how these artists themselves see and pursue their work. Lisa Moren addresses the same problematic in a completely different way. Assembling a composition of event scores, old and new, she creates a conversation across generations of artists and among bodies of work. Celia Pearce addresses a body of work rather than a legacy, considering the heritage of games in the current digital world, a heritage that goes back to Duchamp, moving into the contemporary art world via Fluxus before taking a radical new turn that often bears no relationship to what might once have been seen as its roots. A legacy is a past and future joined, and they are joined in a conversation. To highlight some contemporary views on this interaction, we requested twelve artists who have described their work in terms of a Fluxus legacy to consider the relationship between their work and the work and ideas historically associated with Fluxus. This segment presents a statement or response and a selection of works. While this collection is intended as a reference to forms and directions that Fluxus has inspired, our selection is neither comprehensive nor intended to serve as a guide limiting other possibilities. The last contributions to this issue are a bibliographic essay by Ken Friedman on one of the key repositories of that conversation, the literature of Fluxus. The essay and the selected bibliography by Friedman and Owen Smith that follow allow each reader to enter the conversation, as he or she will.

The larger Fluxus conversation raises puzzling challenges. There is wide agreement that Fluxus poses (or posed) a challenge to the art world and to its practices. This leads to a conflict between the work itself and an attempt to

1 Friedman, Ken and Owen Smith, editors. 2005. *Fluxus and Legacy*. *Visible Language*, 39-3.

2 Smith, Owen. 1999. *Fluxus: the History of an Attitude*. San Diego: San Diego State University Press.

3 Higgins, Hannah. 2002. *Fluxus Experience*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

preserve the work in the institutions designated by society to preserve such artifacts—museums, libraries, special collections, foundations. This conflict is exacerbated by the tendency of private collectors, gallerists and their markets to follow the museums in collecting. There follows with this a second difficulty: the perpetual struggle of artists to make a living while creating, a struggle that leads people to seek the support and temptations of the market while avoiding the market forces that tempt and occasionally support them.

There are apparently no exemptions to the function of the art markets. Those who study the sociology and economics of art in an effort to find better ways to further the ideas and issues embodied in works of art are generally disappointed. The art market and arts institutions have a reasonable logic. This logic is difficult to escape. The fact that this logic often subverts the energy of the work is a separate and distinct problem. One can escape at a price: the price requires distance from the art world whose institutions and institutional culture form a well structured whole. This distance means, in turn, that the work of those who escape takes place outside a culture that cannot, in turn, focus on or receive the ideas and issues contained in the work, let alone embrace it or be influenced by it at a fundamental cultural level.

These issues and problems constitute a second set of dialectical tensions, compounding and compounded by the dialectics of legacy. When it comes to Fluxus, the story becomes a labyrinth. We will enter the maze more deeply in the future.

This special issue reminds us of a conversation we had one afternoon long ago, in the run-up to *The Fluxus Reader*.⁴ We concluded that every viable conversation on Fluxus is both a beginning and a summation. Back in the 1980s, George Brecht wrote, "Fluxus has fluxed." A few years later, Emmett Williams said, "Fluxus has not yet begun." They were both right.

Those who believe that Fluxus involves ideas and attitudes more than objects feel that there is a future Fluxus that intersects with and moves beyond the Fluxus of artifacts and objects. This question is the focus of our two issues of *Visible Language*, first *Fluxus and Legacy* and now *Fluxus after Fluxus*.

People today are attracted to Fluxus because it is perceived as open, inviting and fun. It gives permission and it is permissive. Nevertheless, this permission carries a responsibility with it. That responsibility is at the core of debates surrounding the Fluxus legacy. What is given? What are the resulting responsibilities?

The question of legacy highlights the different stresses and fault lines in the struggle to take command and possession over a Fluxus that is either (or both) a proposal and a process, or—now—an unwilling stakeholder in an art market that Fluxus never intended to enter.

The fault lines involve more than protagonists of one view or another, adherents of one kind of work or another. Now these issues involve a demand,

⁴ Friedman, Ken, editor. 1998. *The Fluxus Reader*. London: Academy Press, John Wiley and Sons.

a claim over the entire history, the right to interpret the meaning of a body of work and a network of bodies of work. Others seek to establish monetary or talismanic value for one body of objects or another. They seem to discount, discredit or disenfranchise the other possibilities of Fluxus. That makes no sense in a laboratory, let alone a laboratory of ideas and social practice.

Nevertheless, those who seek to maintain a living tradition also make problematic demands. Ann Klefstad probes some of these questions in discussing the notion of canonicity. The concept of a canon is one of the deepest and most problematic concepts in the conversation of any living process. Once a canon is sealed, the closure this entails effectively seals the living transmission of a process or tradition. From the moment of closure on, the legacy involves a backward look to a remembered past rather than existential engagement with a potential and growing future. Another issue comes into play as well. This is the normative force of any canon within a community. Canon becomes doctrine. Doctrine becomes dogma. Finally, dogma becomes a driving force demanding an orthodox response. In canonical communities, canon often develops into a system built on authority. We wonder, in a profound sense, whether one can even speak of a Fluxus canon if we are to speak of a genuine Fluxus legacy.

The undecided, open quality of Fluxus often seems to bother the young more than it irritates the old, and some artists in recent years have attempted to enter the canon, sealing it with their entry while claiming a living heritage. This presents an odd dilemma, and there is a self-serving quality to this position. While arguing for inclusion of current work in the canon, they neglect the history of others who have worked over the four decades since Fluxus was born. Many younger artists in the Fluxus ambit demand recognition for an individual current history without acknowledging the equally deserving histories of many others, past and present. The dialectical tension for many artists who demand entry to the canon is generally a tension between the immediate demands of their work and the history of the 1960s, rather than a demand for attention to the three hundred or so artists who have been part of the Fluxus circle in different ways since 1962.⁵

Another tension involves the effort to speak for George Maciunas, claiming his work, conflating all of Fluxus to his specific body of work and interpreting his legacy as an attempt to define and interpret all of Fluxus.

Still another problem has two faces, if not more. This problem involves an issue that Bertrand Clavez took up in his contribution to the first of our two special issues. Clavez described the problematic nature of a legacy that is so common yet so commonly misunderstood that many artists who work in traditions established by Fluxus never think of their work in relation to Fluxus.⁶ Fluxus established an early program of research and practice in rela-

5 Friedman, Ken with James Lewes. 1992. "Fluxus: Global Community, Human Dimensions." In Milman, Estera, guest editor. Fluxus: A Conceptual Country. *Visible Language*, 26.1&2, 154-179.

6 Clavez, Bertrand. 2005. "Fluxus—reference or paradigm for young contemporary artists?" *Visible Language*, 39.3, 234-249.

tion to many themes that are now central to contemporary art. For many reasons, however, these probes were neglected at the time, often deliberately ignored as coming from outsiders to the art world. Despite the fact that the ideas had outsider status in the late 1950s and early 1960s, they were seminal to conceptual art, process art and the wide range of artistic ideas that Dick Higgins labeled intermedia—a range of art practices that have become the background heritage of much contemporary art.

These ideas and issues shaped the context of much art practice today despite the fact that those who first theorized and developed this kind of work received little credit at the time. In many cases, influential works vanished from the history of art while the works they influenced were acknowledged as important. Many of these later works were also important and original contributions. In most fields, seminal thinkers and creators make original contributions to a developing conversation that are original while remaining related to contributions before and after.

This is how science works, this is how philosophy works and this is how thinking and theory develop in many fields. This is also the case in art, but market forces and special interests govern the documentation of the conversation to a greater degree than is the case in other fields. Confusion on the nature of creativity and originality impels many artists to claim to have developed their work without any influence, to disavow influences or else to acknowledge only specific high status influences while neglecting others. For many reasons, the early gaps in attention surrounding Fluxus were reinforced by market forces, shaping a hole in cultural history often rendered visible by its gravitational force on the world around it rather than by any direct account.

At the same time that visible and acknowledged artists share a legacy they don't acknowledge, the artists who do acknowledge Fluxus have their own problems. Outsider status is but one of these. Another is the fact that much of the frame around Fluxus is now shaped by people who seek to control the legacy for reasons governed more by special interests than philosophical inquiry. This leads us to many paradoxes. While Robert Filliou notably criticized the idea that there is any distinction between good art and bad, many who use Filliou's contribution in an attempt to discuss Fluxus use their reading of Filliou's ideas to discriminate against some work as good and some as bad. Filliou's open agenda becomes a form of special pleading. Filliou is permitted his vision because he is Filliou, while others may not use the Filliou philosophy simply because they are not Filliou.

Then there is the paradox of the missing conversation: artists who claim the Fluxus legacy while arguing against history. They want to share the Fluxus conversation, or at least to share in the Fluxus aura, without acknowledging any other speakers, past or present.

This is a difficult labyrinth indeed.

For us, the most interesting bodies of work involve networks of conversation within and across generations. These bodies of work tend to be the most difficult, often eccentric, frequently involving works that cannot be framed as art—let alone as historical art. That is the quality that made Fluxus so interesting and difficult in the 1960s and why Fluxus artists were so often labeled as misfits.

To understand this conversation requires a critical hermeneutic that opens shafts in past, present and future, rather than declaring a canon.

Debates on the past, present and even the future of Fluxus make clear that Fluxus matters to many people. It is even clearer that it matters to different people for very different reasons. These different concerns often obscure a key aspect of Fluxus. This is the fact that there was never one single version of Fluxus. From the first, Fluxus involved difference, divergence and variability, and most (if not all) of the Fluxus artists openly celebrated these qualities.

The flux that is part of the Fluxus name is no different now than it has ever been. What has changed is the fact that time and change have conspired to impose an historical frame around Fluxus. What is different now as contrasted with the past is the way that this frame has become a measure of the Fluxus's existence and even a measure of its nature. It is particularly a measure of Fluxus's continued existence as anything other than a period of history. Nevertheless, this view is blind to the realities of Fluxus. The historical has had good effects along with bad effects, and some of the bad effects have been very bad indeed.

Nevertheless, Fluxus has a history and a philosophical view. Despite this, it is neither a style nor a movement. There were many Fluxuses and there still are. Fluxus means many things to many people. That is how it should be.

We end where Fluxus begins. In 1975, Don Boyd became director of Fluxus West. When he took on the title, he took with it the right to develop the work of Fluxus West as he deemed fit. He did many of the things the previous director did, but his life circumstances made it difficult for him to travel as much, so he was not able to work across as wide a geographic territory. What also differed is that even though he worked remotely (and sometimes visited with) other members of the original group, most did not consider him a Fluxus artist in the same sense that they consider each other to be Fluxus artists. He has been even more remote from the normative art world than Fluxus artists. Despite their sometimes-in, sometimes-out status, many of the original Fluxus artists have had options that Don did not have. Quite clearly, the ability to reject the art world from a position of voluntary rejection bestowed an insider standing and cognitive authority on many, however conflicted they may be about their involvement in a social and economic world they question. The fact that Don Boyd had no similar standing in comparison with the others is a difference any anthropologist would immediately note in studying this network of human beings in its larger landscape. Some might argue that this difference influenced not merely the

response of a larger world toward Don and his work, but the response and relations of others within the Fluxus community, both artists and those who work with them in curatorial and publishing roles. This made no difference to Don.

For thirty years, Don Boyd has been sharing Fluxus work and actions for the best and most simple of reasons: he loves the work and the ideas this body of work conveys, he respects the artists and their achievement. He participates in a living tradition. This is Fluxus after Fluxus.

Emmett Williams says, "Fluxus has not yet begun." This may well be true. If Fluxus is ever to begin, Don Boyd and those like him will be responsible. It is difficult to know whether it will be art, but it will be, above all else, a human contribution. We dedicate this issue of *Visible Language* to his generous achievement.

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Design at the Norwegian School of Management and at Denmark's Design School. Friedman's research concentrates on organization, culture and design in the knowledge economy. He has worked with intermedia and concept art since 1966 when Dick Higgins and George Maciunas enrolled him in Fluxus. He also worked as director of Fluxus West and manager of Something Else Press. In 1998, he edited *The Fluxus Reader* for Academy Press.

OWEN SMITH IS PROFESSOR OF ART HISTORY AND DIGITAL

Art at the University of Maine in Orono, and director of the New Media Program. As a specialist in alternative art forms, he has an interest in all aspects of Fluxus. In 1998, San Diego State University Press published his book, *Fluxus: the History of an Attitude*, the first comprehensive monograph on the history of Fluxus. In 2002, he co-edited a special issue of *Performance Research* devoted to Fluxus. He is also an artist whose work has been exhibited widely. Smith's art can be seen on line at <http://www.ofsmith.com>

A MODERN CHUSHINGURA (OR) LOYAL TO FLUXUS

All living Fluxus artists gather in the garden of the Museum of Modern Art. They commit ritual suicide together by seppuku (hara-kiri).

KEN FRIEDMAN

1981

Only Ken Friedman was willing to perform this event.
The others declined.