

Editorial: Fluxus perspectives

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Fluxus Perspectives

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Fluxus Perspectives

Martin Patrick and Dorothee Richter

Although the Fluxus art (non-)movement is often read as a historical phenomenon, the breadth of its innovations and complexities actively thwarts linear and circumscribed viewpoints. The notion of Fluxus incorporates contradiction in challenging and enduringly generative ways. More than five decades after its emergence, this special issue of *OnCurating* entitled *Fluxus Perspectives* seeks to re-examine the influence, roles, and effects of Fluxus via a wide range of scholarly perspectives. The editors asked notable writers from different locations, generations, and viewpoints, all of whom having written about Fluxus before, to offer their thoughts on its significance, particularly in relation to contemporary artmaking and strategies of curating today.

FLUXUS—Artists as Organizers

The 1960s witnessed a growing number of artist groups, including Fluxus, Viennese Actionism, the Situationists, the Affichistes, the Destruction Art Group, the Art Workers' Coalition, the Guerrilla Art Action Group, Nouveau Réalisme, the Letterist International, Happenings, and the Gutai and Zaj groups. Each movement developed under specific social and historical conditions.

In the German-speaking world, Fluxus and the Viennese Actionists became especially well known, as did Happenings, which were, however, not strictly distinguished from the other movements. The reformulations introduced by these revolutionary art movements implied an altered positioning of art towards politics, and of the private sphere towards the public. They exploded genre boundaries, questioned the author's function, and radically changed the production, distribution, and reception of visual arts.

Artist groups organized their own opportunities for public appearances. Their scores were performed jointly and differently in each revival; they took charge of distribution, of publishing newsletters and newspapers, and of establishing publishing houses and galleries. Audiences were now directly involved and subjected to provocative modes of address. The inversion of terms instituted by Fluxus, via mapping their methods of composing music onto all aspects of the visual, made it possible to consider everything as material and as a basis for composition. They challenged hitherto prevailing cultural hegemony and anticipated on a symbolic level the 1968 student riots and protest movements.

The role of the “chairman” of Fluxus was, of course, contested, and different artists claimed to be the most important node in the network, especially during the lively New York scene of the 1960s.

Nevertheless, in retrospect, Maciunas's role as organizer, arranger, presenter, funds procurer, and public relations agent bears a remarkable resemblance to that of the independent curator, emerging as a new role within the cultural field during the 1970s and '80s. In his capacity as Fluxus organizer (and chief ideologist), Maciunas anticipated not only the attribution of creativity, the meaning-giving acts of establishing connections and recontextualization, but also the authoritative gesture of inscriptions and exclusions. Also, his attempts to subsume as a meta-artist the works of other artists under a single label (“Fluxus”) recall the role of a contemporary curator.

Just as in today's independent scene, producing exhibitions and events depends not only on large venues and funds, but also other kinds of interpersonal relations. Friendships, networks, group affiliations, and individual positionings within the field all account for the social capital that allows one to operate in the arts. These networks represent social and cultural capital, which may also be translated into economic capital. (Not that this worked for Maciunas). Thus, Maciunas's role transgressed the established roles in the field of art and anticipated new structures and modes of operation. While the Fluxus images indicate no hierarchical relations among the group of artists, including Asian and Black artists, and some women, the group is predominantly male.

In 1972 at *documenta 5*, Harald Szeemann's staging as the main curator, however, partly adopted and established a hierarchical relation between gestures and stances, suggesting an anarchic, liberated image of the artist, but a group of artists beheaded by a powerful curator. The curator was now not only the "warden," but above all the figure subsuming the exhibition under one single heading. He prescribed a certain reading of the works, the title becoming the most distinct (succinct) version of a program, and his name emerged as the discursive frame. Szeemann had thus wrested the naming strategy and labeling from the hands of artist groups and had successfully transferred the exhibition into the economic sphere. For visitors, the title "Individual Mythologies" blended with the individual works and thus predetermined meaning—with the works forming small parts of a greater mythological narrative.

In many aspects, Fluxus resonates as an important historical precursor for a radical curatorial practice, for new ways of publishing, for experimental filmmaking, and, last but not least, for a collective way of working. Collectivity in particular is now a new turn in contemporary curating, as one can see from the appointment of the Indonesian collective *ruangrupa* as the curators of *documenta 15*, and the nomination of five collectives for the Turner Prize: Array Collective, Black Obsidian Sound System, Cooking Sections, Gentle/Radical, and Project Art Works. Collectivity as the new spirit in curating?

To introduce the issue, we have included co-editor **Dorothee Richter's** essay discussing aspects of her film entitled *Flux Us Now: Fluxus Explored with a Camera* (2013) (made in collaboration with **Ronald Kolb**) which featured contemporary interviews and footage of Fluxus artists. Following this are a number of essays that explore Fluxus in terms of intermedia, scores, and materiality. **Natilee Harren's** "The Fluxus Virtual, Actually" examines the notion that, rather than viewed as simply analogous to the dispersed virtual networks of today, Fluxus's very material, analog presence is crucial to its power. **Hannah B Higgins**, in her "Intermedial Perception or Fluxing Across the Sensory," a seminal article from 2002, discusses Fluxus and its relation to the embodied and sensorial, also invoking the notion of "intermedia" in its original form via the influential writings of her father, Fluxus artist Dick Higgins. **Julia Robinson** writes on the multiple and diverse methods and approaches that Fluxus artists used with reference to the score in "Parsing Scores: Applications in Fluxus." **Hanna B. Hölling**, in her essay "Unpacking the Score: Notes on the Material Legacy of Intermediality," writes on the enduring potentialities of the event score when housed within museological and archival contexts.

We are pleased to include a selection of remembrances, documents, and interviews from Fluxus artists and participants. **Emmett Williams'** memoir entitled *My Life in Flux--And Vice Versa* (1992) remains a fascinating and entertaining read, as the artist and raconteur offers his insights on a Fluxus life well lived. Artist **Ann Noël** has kept journals that become artworks in themselves, including vivid drawings, photographs, and ephemera. She has kindly allowed us to include pages from this engaging material. Poet **Billie Maciunas** was a key witness and active participant in the final period of George Maciunas's life, as his confidant and partner. Her memoir, *The Eve of Fluxus*, lends a glimpse of George Maciunas not only as an artist but a specific, and often fragile, human being. Filmmaker **Jeffrey Perkins** has been active in Fluxus circles for decades. In this interview, artist **Weronika Trojanska** speaks with Perkins and collaborator **Jessie Stead** about the making of *George: The Story of George Maciunas and Fluxus* (2018), their engaging documentary. **Ken Friedman** has been a Fluxus artist since the mid-1960s when he met Maciunas, who encouraged Friedman to run "Fluxus West" in California. While Friedman has written extensively about Fluxus over the years and edited the anthology *The Fluxus Reader* (1998), here he paints a simultaneously informal and informative picture of the struggles he encountered circulating Fluxus artworks in an era when its receptive audience was very limited.

In the next group of essays, a number of writers discuss specific Fluxus artists and Fluxus notions with particular attention paid to Fluxus's contemporary impact. Curator **Jordan Carter** provides a detailed discussion of the installation of a large-scale work by artist Benjamin Patterson entitled *When Elephants Fight, It Is the Frogs That Suffer—A Sonic Graffiti* at the Art Institute of Chicago. Carter also contextualizes the intricate subtleties of Patterson's approach, with specific attention paid to the layering of identity. Scholar and curator **Kevin Concannon**, who has frequently written on the art of Yoko Ono, here turns his focus toward the various sonic, textual, and visual iterations of Ono's *Touch Piece* over the period 1960-2009. **Martin Patrick** writes on the relations between Buddhist philosophy and Fluxus artworks as enacted in works by artists including Geoff Hendricks, Nam June Paik, Robert Filliou, and Alison Knowles. **Peter van der Meijden** offers an in-depth consideration of Knud Pedersen, one of many Fluxus friends who hasn't been frequently discussed. Van der Meijden also engages with the entangled discourse around Fluxus and how Pedersen's work relates to more contemporary projects dealing with economic realities. **Natasha Lushetich**, in her wide-ranging essay "Whatever Happened to the Judo Throw? Fluxus and the Digital Gimmick," addresses the complexities and contradictions of avant-gardist actions emerging within the post-industrial capitalist period and considers ways of (re-)thinking: "the production of experience in a (global) culture that has appropriated many Fluxus features: performativity, interactivity, and ready-made-tization."

The final section of the issue focuses more directly on Fluxus-related publications, mail art, and correspondence. **Henar Rivière** critically analyzes and interprets from a historiographical perspective shifts and emphases in artist Wolf Vostell's *décoll/age* magazine, which during its existence included works by both Fluxus and Happenings practitioners (and their contemporaries). Historian of mail art **John Held, Jr.'s** "Harboring Hidden Histories: Mail Art's Reception in United States Institutional Archives" discusses the intricacies of historicizing and archiving precarious and ephemeral materials. **Simon Anderson's** contribution involves a selection of works from a Mail Art exhibition that he curated in 1982. This grouping features many dedicated mail artists from that era, along with Simon's retrospective account contextualizing the project. **Owen Smith**, author of the ground-breaking book *Fluxus: The History of an Attitude* (1998), here collates and annotates a thematic selection of

correspondence between Fluxus artists and associates. Smith's text is an apt one to finish the issue, leaving conclusions open, and offering an archival treasure trove of Fluxus camaraderie and contentiousness.

This anthology of Fluxus scholarship has been in planning since 2018, and in the process has once again brought together a global (eternal) network of writers, artists, and curators. The editorial process was certainly extended due to the unanticipated global pandemic. The editors bridged a distance of 18,000 kilometers through their shared interest in Fluxus, digital correspondence, and burgeoning friendship. And we extend our sincerest thanks to all the contributors to and readers of the issue.

Martin Patrick, an art critic, historian, and writer, is an Associate Professor of Art at Massey University in Wellington, New Zealand. A regular contributor to and reviewer for many international publications, his book *Across the Art/Life Divide: Performance, Subjectivity, and Social Practice in Contemporary Art* was published in 2018 by Intellect Books/University of Chicago Press. He contributed the chapter "Exploring Posthuman Masquerade and Becoming" to *Animism in Art and Performance* (C. Braddock, ed., Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2017). He has presented his research as a keynote speaker, chair, and panelist at public galleries and museums, conferences, and symposia. He is a member of the advisory boards for several arts organizations and publications. He is currently compiling an anthology of his selected art criticism.

Dorothee Richter is Professor in Contemporary Curating at the University of Reading, UK, and head of the Postgraduate Programme in Curating, CAS/MAS Curating at the Zurich University of the Arts, Switzerland; She is director of the PhD in Practice in Curating Programme, a cooperation of the Zurich University of the Arts and the University of Reading. Richter has worked extensively as a curator: she was initiator of Curating Degree Zero Archive, Curator of Kuenstlerhaus Bremen, at which she curated different symposia on feminist issues in contemporary arts and an archive on feminist practices, Materialien/Materials; recently she directed, together with Ronald Kolb, a film on Fluxus: *Flux Us Now, Fluxus Explored with a Camera*. She is executive editor of OnCurating.org.