

The

# FLUXUS

Reader

EDITED BY KEN FRIEDMAN

**AE** ACADEMY EDITIONS

# THE FLUXUS READER

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Edited by KEN FRIEDMAN

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Several collections are central to the research on Fluxus. Three major collections are now readily accessible. Hanns Sohm's Archiv Sohm is now located at Stadtsgalerie Stuttgart and Jean Brown's collection has become The Jean Brown Archive at the Getty Center for the History of the Arts and Humanities. The collections and archives of Fluxus West and my own papers have been distributed among several museums and universities. The largest body of material is located at Alternative Traditions in Contemporary Art at University of Iowa, the Tate Gallery Archives in London and the Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth College. Substantial holdings that once belonged to Fluxus West are now part of the Museum of Modern Art's Franklin Furnace Archive Collection, the Museum of Modern Art's Performance Art Archives, the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art, the Ken Friedman Collection at the University of California at San Diego and the Henie Onstad Art Center in Oslo. All of these holdings are available for research, publication and exhibition under the normal conditions of research archives and museum collections. A number of important private collections are available under restricted access or by special appointment. Most notable among these are the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Foundation in New York and Detroit, Archivio Conz in Verona, and MuDiMa in Milan.

The documentation section was edited by Owen Smith. I developed the first versions of the documentation at Fluxus West in 1966 and supported improved versions over the years since. Project scholars and editors included Nancy McElroy, Kimberley Ruhe, Matthew Hogan, Judith Hoffberg, Giorgio Zanchetti, and James Lewes. Hoseon Cheon, Dick

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Here, I thank also Ditte Mauritzon Friedman. Canon and deacon of Lund Cathedral, psychotherapist-in-training, and wife, Ditte has enriched my perspective on Fluxus and on life. And I thank Oliver Mauritzon, walking companion, philosopher and the first taster of whatever I happen to be cooking for Ditte.

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## THE CONTRIBUTORS

The scholarly content of *The Fluxus Reader* has been the product of a laboratory of ideas, a virtual colloquium. It has been my pleasure here to work with a number of the leading scholars now writing on Fluxus. The authors of the history chapters wrote doctoral dissertations on various aspects of Fluxus. **Owen Smith** is associate professor of art history at the University of Maine. He wrote on George Maciunas at University of Washington. Simon Anderson is head of art history, theory and criticism at the School of the Art Institute Chicago. He wrote on Fluxshoe and British Fluxus at the Royal College of Art. **Hannah Higgins** is assistant professor of art history at University of Illinois at Chicago. She wrote on the interpretation and reception of early Fluxus at University of Chicago.

The authors of the theory chapters have specialized in different aspects of intermedia. **Ina Blom** is doctoral research fellow in art history at the University of Oslo. She has written extensively on Fluxus and intermedia. Craig Saper is assistant professor of criticism at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. He has written on intermedia, multimedia, artist publishing and visual poetry. **David Doris** is a doctoral fellow in art history at Yale University. The chapter on Fluxus and Zen was adapted from his award-winning master's thesis at City University of New York.

The chapters on critical and historical perspectives have been written by three internationally renowned scholars in art history, art theory and literary theory. **Stephen Foster** is professor of art history at University of Iowa and director of the Fine Arts Dada Archive. **Estera Milman** is associate professor of art history at the University of Iowa and founding director of Alternative Traditions in Contemporary Art. **Nicholas Zurbrugg** is professor of English and head of the department of English, Media and Culture Studies at De Montfort University.

The section titled 'Three Fluxus Voices' is the result of two unique collaborations. The first is an extensive interview between Fluxus artist **Larry Miller** and Fluxus co-founder George Maciunas. Made just before Maciunas's death in 1978, it sheds important light on Maciunas' view of Fluxus. The second is the only known interview with Maciunas' wife, Billie. This interview was recorded by **Susan Jarosi**, doctoral candidate in art history at Duke University. The section ends with Larry Miller's own thoughts on what it is to think about Fluxus. Here, I beg the reader's indulgence. There could have been, perhaps there should have been any number of other views, other chapters. Time and space limit every book. I selected these three voices because they are unique and because they form a conceptually elegant triad. If there is a clear message in the sections on history, theory, critical and historical perspectives, it is that there no way to encapsulate Fluxus in any neat paradigm. On another occasion, and for other reasons, I will present other voices: here, time, a page limit and circumstance dictate a useful choice that makes available an interview with ideas that have never before been published.

The section titled 'Two Fluxus Theories' makes available the thoughts of two Fluxus artists who have attempted to theorize Fluxus and place it in a larger intellectual and cultural framework. The first is by **Dick Higgins**, Fluxus co-founder and legendary publisher of Something Else Press. The second is my own: as editor of this book, I feel obliged to put my thoughts on the table here, too.

## FLUXUS READER WEB SITE

The World Wide Web is making a vital difference to many fields of human endeavor. The arts and scholarship have been particularly well served by this medium.

One of the most important developments for research and writing on Fluxus is a consortium of five major universities and museums with a key focus on Fluxus and intermedia. These five are developing a Web-based series of virtual resources for scholarship and reflection on contemporary art. University of Iowa's Alternative Traditions in Contemporary Art, the University of California Museum of Art at Berkeley, Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth, Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and Franklin Furnace in New York maintain the site. ATCA at University of Iowa will be hosting a wide variety of scholarly and pictorial materials that dovetail with the material in this book, and a portion of the site will be dedicated to expanding and reflecting on the specific chapters presented here.

The URL is: <<http://www.lib.uiowa.edu/spec-coll/resources/atca.html>>. Please visit the site.

## INFORMATION AND IDEAS

I welcome queries and idea on any of the subjects covered in this book. If you have questions or thoughts you would like to pursue, please contact me at:

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 <<http://hdl.handle.net/1959.3/42234>>



## KEN FRIEDMAN: INTRODUCTION: A TRANSFORMATIVE VISION OF FLUXUS

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A little more than thirty years ago, George Maciunas asked me to write a history of Fluxus. It was the autumn of 1966. I was sixteen then and living in New York after dropping out of college for a term. George had enrolled me in Fluxus that August. Perhaps he saw me as a scholar, perhaps simply as someone with enough energy to undertake and complete such a project.

Not long after, I grew tired of New York and I was ready to move back to California. That was when George appointed me director of Fluxus West. Originally intended to represent Fluxus activities in the western United States, Fluxus West became many things. It became a centre for spreading Fluxus ideas, a forum for Fluxus projects across North America – outside New York – as well as parts of Europe and the Pacific, a travelling exhibition centre, a studio in a Volkswagen bus, a publishing house and a research programme. These last two aspects of our work led George to ask me once again to take on a comprehensive, official history of Fluxus. I agreed to do it. I didn't know what I was getting into.

This history project was never completed. In part, I lacked the documentation, and despite gathering documents and material for years, I never did accumulate the material I should have done to carry out the job. Moreover, I found that it was the ideas in Fluxus that interested me most, far more than the specific deeds and doings of a specific group of artists. While I am a scholar in addition to being an artist, my interest in Fluxus does not focus on documentation or archival work.

The documents and works I did collect have not gone to waste. They found homes in museums, universities and archives, where they are available to scholars who do want to write the history of Fluxus, as well as to scholars, critics, curators and artists who want to examine Fluxus from other perspectives. The history that I never finished gave rise to several projects and publications that shed light on Fluxus in many ways. This book is one of them.

The key issue here is explaining a 'how' and 'why' of Fluxus. Emmett Williams once wrote a short poem on that how and why, writing 'Fluxus is what Fluxus does – but no one knows whodunit.' What is it that Fluxus does? Dick Higgins offered one answer when he wrote, 'Fluxus is not a moment in history, or an art movement. Fluxus is a way of doing things, a tradition, and a way of life and death.' For Dick, as for George, Fluxus is more important as an idea and a potential for social change than as a specific group of people or collection of objects.

As I see it, Fluxus has been a laboratory, a grand project summed up by George

Maciunas' notion of the 'learning machines'. The Fluxus research programme has been characterised by twelve ideas: globalism, the unity of art and life, intermedia, experimentalism, chance, playfulness, simplicity, implicativeness, exemplativism, specificity, presence in time and musicality. (These twelve ideas are elaborated in the chapter titled 'Fluxus and Company'.) These ideas are not a prescription for how to be a Fluxus artist. Rather they form a description of the qualities and issues that characterise the work of Fluxus. Each idea describes a 'way of doing things'. Taken together, these twelve ideas form a picture of what Fluxus is and does.

The implications of some ideas have been more interesting – and occasionally more startling – than they may at first have seemed. Fluxus has been a complex system of practices and relationships. The fact that the art world can sometimes be a forum for philosophical practice has made it possible for Fluxus to develop and demonstrate ideas that would later be seen in such frameworks as multimedia, telecommunications, hypertext, industrial design, urban planning, architecture, publishing, philosophy, and even management theory. That is what makes Fluxus so lively, so engaging and so difficult to describe.

We can grasp the phenomenon through the lens of several disciplines. One such discipline is history, and there is a history of Fluxus to be told. While the core issues in Fluxus are ideas, Fluxus ideas were first summarised and exemplified in the work of a specific group of people. This group pioneered these ideas at a time when their thoughts and practices were distinct and different from many of the thoughts and practices in the world around them, distinct from the art world and different from the world of other disciplines in which Fluxus would come to play a role. To understand the how and why of Fluxus, what it is and does, it is important to understand 'whodunit', to know what Fluxus was and did. History therefore offers a useful perspective.

Fluxus, however, is more than a matter of *art* history. Literature, music, dance, typography, social structure, architecture, mathematics, politics ... they all play a role. Fluxus is, indeed, the name of a way of doing things. It is an active philosophy of experience that only sometimes takes the form of art. It stretches across the arts and even across the areas between them. Fluxus is a way of viewing society and life, a way of creating social action and life activity. In this book, historians and critics offer critical and historical perspectives. Other writers frame the central issues in other ways.

The ideal book would be three times as long as this one is and impossible to publish. I therefore chose to focus on issues to open a dialogue with the Fluxus idea. Rather than teaching the reader everything there is to know about Fluxus, this book lays out a map, a cognitive structure filled with tools, markers and links to ideas and history both.

Fluxus has now become a symbol for much more than itself. That companies in the knowledge industry and creative enterprise use the name Fluxus suggests that something is happening, both in terms of real influence and in terms of fame, the occasional shadow of true influence. Advertising agencies, record stores, performance groups, publishers and even young artists now apply the word Fluxus to what they do. It is difficult to know whether we should be pleased, annoyed, or merely puzzled.

Tim Porges once wrote that the value of writing and publishing on Fluxus rests not on what Fluxus has been but on 'what it may still do'. If one thread binds the chapters in this book, it is the idea of a transformative description that opens a new discourse. A new and

appropriately subtle understanding of Fluxus leaves open the question of what it may still do. That's good enough for me.

Owen Smith and I were discussing this book one afternoon. We reached the conclusion that it is as much a beginning as a summation. If, as George Brecht said in the 1980s, 'Fluxus has Fluxed', one can equally well say what someone – Dick? Emmett? – said a few years later: 'Fluxus has not yet begun.' There is an on-line discussion group called Fluxlist where the question of what lies between those two points has been the subject of much recent dialogue. One of the interesting aspects of the conversation has been the philosophical subtlety underlying the several positions. Those who believe there is a Fluxus of ideas and attitudes more than of objects feel that there is, indeed, a future Fluxus. This Fluxus intersects with and moves beyond the Fluxus of artefacts and objects. This vision of Fluxus distinguishes between a specific Fluxus of specific artists acting in time and space and what René Block termed 'Fluxism', an idea exemplified in the work and action of the historic Fluxus artists.

Beginning or summation, this book offers a broad view of Fluxus. It is a corrective to the hard-edged and ill-informed debates on Fluxus that diminish what we set out to do by locating us in a mythic moment of time that never really existed. Fluxus was created to transcend the boundaries of the art world, to shape a discourse of our own. A debate that ends Fluxus with the death of George Maciunas is a debate that diminishes George's idea of Fluxus as an ongoing social practice. It also diminishes the rest of us, leaving many of the original Fluxus artists disenfranchised and alienated from the body of work to which they gave birth. In the moments that people attempt to victimise us with false boundaries, I am drawn to two moments in history.

The first moment occurred in sixth-century Chinese Zen. It reflects the debates around Fluxus in an oddly apt way, and not merely because Fluxus is often compared with Zen. It involved the alleged split between the Northern and Southern schools of Zen. The real facts of the split seem not to have involved the two masters who succeeded the Sixth Patriarch, one in the North and one in the South, Shen-hsiu and Hui-neng. The long and tangled stories of schism seem rooted, rather, in the actions of Hui-neng's disciple Shen-hui and those who followed him. It has little to do with the main protagonists who respected and admired each other to the point that the supposedly jealous patriarch Shen-hsiu in fact recommended Hui-neng to the imperial court where he, himself, was already held in high renown. This is like much of the argument around Fluxus. It seems that the protagonists of one view or another, the adherents of one kind of work or another, those who need to establish a monetary value for one body of objects or another, seem to feel the need to do so by discounting, discrediting or disenfranchising everyone else. That makes no sense in a laboratory, let alone a laboratory of ideas and social practice.

The other moment I consider took place a few years ago, when Marcel Duchamp declared that the true artist of the future would go underground. To the degree that Fluxus is a body of ideas and practices, we are visible and we remain so. To the degree that Fluxus is or may be an art form, it may well have gone underground already. If this is true, who can possibly say that Fluxus is or isn't dead? We don't know 'whodunit', we don't know who does it and we certainly don't know who may do it in the future.

PART III  
CRITICAL AND HISTORICAL  
PERSPECTIVES

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# ESTERA MILMAN: FLUXUS HISTORY AND TRANS-HISTORY: COMPETING STRATEGIES FOR EMPOWERMENT

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Dada belongs to everybody. Like the idea of God or the toothbrush . . . Dada existed before us (the Holy Virgin) but one cannot deny its magical power to add to this already existing spirit.

Tristan Tzara, 'Authorisation, New York Dada', New York, 1921.

Long long ago, back when the world was young . . . Fluxus was like a baby whose mother and father couldn't agree on what to call it . . . Fluxus has a life of its own . . . When you grow up, do you want to be a part of Fluxus? I do.

Dick Higgins, 'A Child's History of Fluxus', New York, 1979.

Of the many strategies for empowerment and historical positioning that Fluxus shared with Dada, one of its self-proclaimed grandparents, the one that has the most consequential ramifications for our own present is the recurrent insistence that each had identified a trans-historical constant, or 'tendency', that stretched back through history and forward into the future. For the Romanian Poet Tristan Tzara – Dada's most active impresario – the existence of an ahistorical 'Dada state of mind', or 'spirit', facilitated the appropriation of like-minded individuals, the most notable of whom was probably Marcel Duchamp, into the movement and concurrently positioned a collective of dislocated war resisters within the mainstream of the avant-garde tradition.

When Tzara authored his New York 'Authorisation', he was still actively involved in the construction of an art culture – an activity endemic to all twentieth-century avant-gardes. However, by the second half of our century (and after the close of the second 'war to end all wars'), Tzara and the rest of his surviving co-participants in international Dada were retroactively attempting to dismantle this ahistorical aspect of the Dada myth; that is to say, to recontextualise their activities within the historical realities of the First World War period. For the most part, participants in the historical Fluxus have yet to follow suit.

In his 1921 mock authorisation of New York Dada, Tzara insisted that Dada was 'not a dogma or a school, but rather a constellation of individuals and of free facets'<sup>1</sup> – yet another strategy persistently employed by the Fluxus people, most of whom are adamant in their insistence that Fluxus was not a 'movement'. Conversely, many participants willingly describe Fluxus as an overtly utopian cultural space that facilitated the enactment of multiple artistic agendas. For example, according to Wolf Vostell (orchestrator of 'De-Coll/Age

Happenings', sometimes active participant in Fluxus, and fellow traveller alongside Allan Kaprow within the anti-Pop, overtly political, New York-based 'NO! art' or 'Doom' collective), 'the positivity of Fluxus [gave us] the possibility of meeting each other and staying together. Individually artists existed before and after, but for a few years they had the same ideals, though not the same opinions.'<sup>2</sup>

As was the case for Dada, historical Fluxus served as a banner around which numerous artistic, and sometimes activist, communities briefly coalesced. Milan Knizak (a founder member of the Prague-based group *Aktual*, whose arrest in Czechoslovakia incited an international roster of Fluxus participants to petition for his release) noted in 1977:

It was not the work of Fluxus that ... we needed, but its very existence. When *Aktual*-activity started ... we were completely isolated ... but knowing that somewhere [there was] someone who was similar to us ... helped us a lot during that period.<sup>3</sup>

Not only did Fluxus briefly unite a number of context-specific international constellations of individuals, it briefly provided them with a fictive country whose geography was a figment of the communal imagination. During a 1985 conversation, I suggested as much to Alison Knowles. In response to my speculation that Fluxus was a kind of conceptual country that 'granted short-term citizenship to an international community of self proclaimed cosmopolites [and] provided them with a nationality,'<sup>4</sup> the artist enthusiastically replied:

And do you know another idea that's linked to that? I love it. It's Bob Watts' idea that Fluxus could overtake existing institutions, the churches, the grocery store and of course George's minesweeper; all of Fluxus gets on the minesweeper and goes around the world. Alison pulverises the fish to make bread, someone else has the role of getting the flags up to guide the ship. In a funny way it was a world of people. We had our mothers and fathers aboard in a sense. We were a kind of Fluxus family ... That's absolutely right. The world of Fluxus did exist somewhere.<sup>5</sup>

As was the case for historical Dada, Fluxus served as an interface among subsets of geographically dispersed international art cultures. Despite their aggressively anti-art personae, both the Dada collective and its paradigmatic neo-Dada counterpart was distinguishable from majority culture communities because of their (sometimes veiled, yet recurrent) self-identification as alternative art cultures. As a result, it can be convincingly argued that not only were both fully fledged movements (albeit of the anarchic variety), but that both were heir to a number of other primary defining principles of the twentieth-century avant-garde.

The modernist concept of a cultural avant-garde was optimistically prophesied in 1825 by the French writer and diplomat Saint-Simon during a period of utopian progressivism. The artist was originally positioned within a cultural committee of socially conscious individuals whose charge, mandated by the heirs of the Enlightenment, entailed a collaborative attempt to move culture ahead to a better future. The artist was not only to take his or her place alongside the scientist and the philosopher, but was understood, by a society governed by idealism, to be particularly well-qualified to make substantial contributions to the dissemination of the value structures of this new world.

By the early twentieth century, having long since become specific to literary and artistic actions, the concept 'avant-garde' had come to be inseparable from the aesthetic basis of community building and culturing. Thus, despite George Maciunas' oft-cited (and strategically confrontational) 'rear-garde' posturing, in their critique of the institution of

art and of larger cultural constructs, as well as in their recurrent commitment to the processes of culturing, participants in historical Fluxus fulfilled a number of the same fundamental prerequisites for membership in this venerated tradition of artistic activism as did their First World War precursors in Dada. In view of the fact that the utopian concept of a cultural avant-garde and the modern discipline of history (understood as a socially progressive branch of knowledge) were birthed one alongside the other, in their strategic attempts to position themselves historically both Dada and Fluxus fulfilled yet another.

Although conventional wisdom dictates that the avant-garde is by definition adamantly anti-historical, both Dada and Fluxus repeatedly assumed responsibility for the authorship of their respective histories. For the most part, the numerous narrative histories penned by the in-house historians of both movements were not dependent upon analytical, theoretical or philosophical historiographic armatures. Positioned outside the active art-historical discourse, these chroniclers of the marginalised often adopted modes of authorship more closely aligned with the personal narrative, diary, genealogy, chronology or tale. Nonetheless, through the composition and self-publication of these often transparently agenda-bound testaments, these vernacular historians (perhaps inadvertently) challenge still widely held assumptions about realistic history. Many of these well-authored historiographic fictions further evidence the avant-garde's recurrent strategic preoccupation with its own historical self-empowerment.

Tristan Tzara's *Zurich Chronicle, 1915–1919* first appeared in print in Richard Huelsenbecks' *Dada Almanach* (Berlin, 1920) and was later reproduced, in English translation, in both Robert Motherwell's pivotal anthology, *The Dada Painters and Poets* (1951) and in Hans Richter's 1965 edition of *Dada Art and Anti-Art*. Although the poet/publisher's strategic 1919/20 account of purportedly 'historical' facts and events is arranged in chronological order, the document serves multiple purposes as a nonsense poem and manifesto. Interestingly enough, under the heading 'July 1917' Tzara asserts: 'Mysterious creation! Magic Revolver! The Dada Movement is launched' (emphasis mine).<sup>6</sup> The chronicle welcomes Francis Picabia, 'the antipainter just arrived from New York',<sup>7</sup> into the ranks of the Zurich Dada circle and strategically affiliates Tzara's own Dada publishing activities in Zurich with Marcel Duchamp's parallel, yet independent, New York-based iconoclasm. In its celebration of 'Dschouang-Dsi [as] the first Dadaist',<sup>8</sup> the *Zurich Chronicle* concurrently references what was to become one of Dada's most impactful strategies for historical empowerment – the trans-historical constant we have come to identify as the Dada spirit or state of mind

In keeping with its author's role as one of historical Dada's most active publicist/networkers, the chronicle closes with the (tongue-in-cheek) recounting that 'Up to October 15 [1919], 8590 articles on Dadaism have appeared in the newspapers and magazines of: Barcelona, St Gall, New York, Rapperswill, Berlin, Warsaw, Mannheim, Prague, Rorschach, Vienna, Bordeaux, Hamburg, Bologna, Nuremberg, Chaux-de-fonds, Colmar, Jassy, Bari, Copenhagen, Bucharest, Geneva, Boston, Frankfurt, Budapest, Madrid, Zurich, Lyon, Basle, Christiania, Berne, Naples, Cologne, Seville, Munich, Rome, Horgen, Paris, Effretikon, London, Innsbruck, Amsterdam, Santa-Cruz, Leizig, Lausanne, Chemnitz, Rotterdam, Brussels, Dresden, Santiago, Stockholm, Hanover, Florence, Venice, Washington, etc. etc.'<sup>9</sup>

Dick Higgins penned his child's history of Fluxus some seventeen and a half years after the



'Fluxus Festival of New Music' in Wiesbaden, a point in time when, having successfully captured the imagination of the German mass media, the fledgling Fluxus community inadvertently coalesced around this new banner. For some of this co-participants in the historical collective, Fluxus had already 'fluxed'. For others, the purported existence of a mythical 'fluxattitude' provided a mechanism through which to enact ongoing strategies for historical positioning. Adopting the presentational format of a bedtime story of folk tale, Higgins' narrative is both an activist reiteration of Fluxus' challenge to normative hierarchical pretensions of the art world and a blatantly agenda-specific attempt to mythify an ahistorical Fluxus spirit – a fictional constant which, by virtue of its ability to stretch back to a time when 'the world was young', might also carry Fluxus forward into the art-historical future.

It should be noted that despite the movement's recurrent attempts to break down the line of demarcation between art and life and to democratise the art experience (strategies employed by most twentieth-century avant-gardes), until the very recent past Fluxus had, for the most part, spoken most directly to itself and to other generations of like-minded artists. However, as the numerous, highly visible exhibitions of a few years ago indicated, both historical Fluxus and the Fluxus spirit have undeniably captured the imagination of our own present. It is the former that served as a subject of the exhibition 'Fluxus: A Conceptual Country', which I organised in 1992/93; it was the latter that was lauded in the Walker Art Centre's concurrent celebration, aptly entitled 'In the Spirit of Fluxus'.

'Fluxus: A Conceptual Country' was composed of a broad cross-section of works that sit firmly within the so-called Fluxus canon. It also very deliberately attempted to chart links between proto-Fluxus in New York and concurrent radical artistic activities – between North American Fluxus and the Czech Aktual group, De-Coll/age Happenings, the Spanish-based Zaj Collective, the Japanese-based High Red Centre group, and Fluxus in Holland, Denmark and France among others; and between Fluxus and the Underground Press Syndicate, and the California-based East Side and West Bay [neo] Dadaists. In a *New York Times* review of the exhibition, Holland Cotter noted:

[With most of the original artists represented], the superbly mounted *Fluxus: A Conceptual Country* ... gives a clear multi-textured look at the movement's early days ... There's a fair share of Dada whimsy ... There is also a distinct if sporadic political edge ... reminders that the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement provided the historical context in which Fluxus artists worked.

Cotter's immediate association of Dada with the whimsical makes direct reference to one unfortunate side-effect of the process of decontextualisation prerequisite to the ascendancy of the ahistorical construct – the 'Dada state of mind'. Although scholars of Dada have long been aware that historical Dada was one of our century's most sophisticated, art-based, anti-war movements, the lay public continues to respond to the 'magical power' of Dada's purportedly trans-historical spirit. The consequence of the continued pervasiveness of this myth (originated by the Dadaists themselves as a strategy for historical positioning) is that the historical accomplishments of the movement have consistently been historiographically disempowered. Leaving the potential ramifications of the parallel construct the 'Fluxattitude' upon our understanding of historical Fluxus aside for the moment, let us turn instead to Cotter's statement concerning the current exhibition's 'sporadic' reference to historical Fluxus' political context.

While not all participants in Fluxus held pride of place in the roster of activist and overtly politically engaged artists of the period, most regularly assumed the long-standing avant-garde responsibility to integrate art-making with cultural and socio-political criticism. I would further like to posit that Fluxus' recurrent response to the political realities of its present was by no means sporadic. Rather than cite numerous examples of activist works realised by individuals centrally involved in the Fluxus circle I would rather turn, for a moment, to one particular piece, responsibility for which falls to a collective of individuals who can, within the current discussion, be best described as participants in the Fluxus orbit. *Bloodbath* was an Action carried out in the lobby of the Museum of Modern Art by the Guerilla Art Action Group (an affiliate of the Art Workers Coalition and one of the most radical art activist groups of the Vietnam era), and publicised in Dieter Albrecht's *Flug/Flux Blattzeitung* #12. The collective's manifesto of 10 November 1969, which was distributed during this Action, was directed against 'people who use art as a disguise, a cover for brutal involvement' in the war machine. The document served as an indictment of David Rockefeller, Chairman of the Board of Trustees at MoMA, for his participation in the production of napalm and for his position of power as Chairman of the Board of Chase Manhattan Bank, a corporation purportedly collaborating with the Pentagon; and of the Rockefeller brothers for their involvement in aircraft corporations and chemical and biological warfare research. That the issues at stake were also art specific and responded to traditional avant-garde utopian assumptions about the role of the artist as cultural critic is evidenced in the following statement included in the manifesto:

Those people have been in actual control of the Museum's policies since its founding. With this power they have been able to manipulate artists' ideas; sterilise art from any form of social protest and indictment of the oppressive forces in society; and therefore render art totally irrelevant to existing crisis.

Interestingly enough, despite *Bloodbath's* disruptive and unmistakably confrontational presentational format, the museum public who witnessed the Action remained aware that this particular event was distinguishable from the anti-war protests then taking place in the streets. That the 'audience' remained conscious that they were instead positioned within a culturally sanctified (that is to say, protected) artistic arena is evidenced in a brief statement included in the Guerilla Art Action Group's Communiqué of 18 November which explains that at the close of the event, and just prior to the late arrival of the police, the 'crowd spontaneously applauded, as if for a theatre piece'.

In his essay 'Fluxus Theory and Reception', Dick Higgins attempts to disassociate the early historical accomplishments of the collective from what he remembers to have been the pejorative connotations of the then widely applied rubric 'neo-Dada'. He writes:

In the 1950s, the journalistic image of Dada was considered to be the limit of the extremely crazy in art . . . Thus, early happenings and fluxus (like the works of [Robert] Rauschenberg and [Jasper] Johns) were often dismissed as 'neo-Dada.' This was, of course, extremely annoying for those of us who knew what Dada was or had been.<sup>10</sup>

In the early 1960s Andy Warhol was counted among the select group of neo-Dadaists to have been singled out for membership in the newly delineated (and soon to be canonised) North American Pop Art consortium. When asked in 1963 if 'pop was a bad name', Warhol (who

was to continue to maintain his affiliation with the underground through his loose-knit association with some of the Fluxus people) replied:

The name sounds so awful. Dada must have something to do with Pop – it's so funny, the names are really synonyms. Does anyone know what they're supposed to mean? ... Johns and Rauschenberg – Neo-Dada for all those years, and everyone calling them derivative and unable to transform the things they use – are now called the progenitors of Pop.<sup>11</sup>

George Maciunas (Fluxus' primary impresario and master of ceremonies) opened his 1962 manifesto 'Neo-Dada in Music, Theatre, Poetry, Art' with the observation that 'neo dada, its equivalent, or what appears to be neo-dada, manifests itself in very wide fields of creativity.'<sup>12</sup> For Maciunas, what appeared to be neo-Dada was 'bound with the concept Concretism, [the extreme conclusion of which] is beyond the limits of art, and therefore sometimes referred to as anti-art, or art-nihilism'.<sup>13</sup> In a 1992 letter to me addressing my reference in print to the choice of the title 'Neo-Dada in der Musik' for one of the earliest Fluxus-related European concerts, Higgins insisted that it was only because the proto-Fluxus community had no name, that they 'used Neo-Dada *faut de mieux*, though [they] knew it was inaccurate.'<sup>14</sup>

It is generally acknowledged that the resurgence of interest in Dada during mid-century was responsible for a shared conviction among groups of artists that art activity must be withdrawn from its special status as rarefied experience and resituated within the larger realm of everyday experience. While it is true that by the early 1960s the rubric was regularly evoked as a pejorative term by some formalist critics, what is rarely discussed is that neo-Dada was concurrently considered to be coterminous with cultural and socio-political artistic activism by other members of the art world.<sup>15</sup> By 1963 such art writers as Barbara Rose felt compelled to correct what they understood to be 'popular misconceptions that the new Dada [was] an art of social protest [and that it was] anti-art.'<sup>16</sup> Rose would also concur with many of her colleagues who insisted that John Cage had provided a 'common origin [for diverse practitioners of] the new dada.'<sup>17</sup>

In the late 1940s Cage had served as new music spokesman for the proto-Abstract Expressionist circle. At the time the composer (who later served as mentor, not only for Rauschenberg and Johns, but also for many of the North American participants in Fluxus, including Higgins) was accused, by some of his more conservative contemporaries, of being a 'neo-Futurist'.<sup>18</sup> By the early 1960s the venerated composer felt it necessary to respond to a new set of pejorative assumptions about his dependency upon historical precedents. In the process he described Dada as a free-floating, inherently malleable trans-historical constant, the essence of which was embodied in Marcel Duchamp. On the one hand, Cage insisted that the Dada spirit remained capable of invigorating action in response to shifting contexts and presents. He concurrently let slip that, for him, the historical movement did not come into being until after it had migrated to Paris:

Critics frequently cry 'Dada' after attending one of my concerts or hearing one of my lectures. Others bemoan my interest in Zen. One of the liveliest lectures I ever heard was ... called 'Zen Buddhism and Dada' ... but neither Dada nor Zen is a fixed tangible. They change; and in quite different ways in different places and times, they invigorate action. What was Dada in the 1920's [sic] is now, with the exception of the work of Marcel Duchamp, just art.<sup>19</sup>

On 13 December 1962 the Museum of Modern Art organised 'A Symposium on Pop Art'. Although this event served as a pivotal moment in the art world's process of identification and codification of an appropriate set of prerequisite defining terms for what has come to be known as North American Pop Art, at this point in time the lines of demarcation among those artists who were about to be canonised and those who were to remain outside mainstream art-historical discourse had as yet not been set. In his introductory comments, Peter Selz (MoMA's 'curator of painting and sculpture exhibitions') attempts to explain why 'Pop Art' was chosen over 'New Realism' as a descriptive term for the new phenomenon that had recently spread from coast to coast. Selz further recounts that 'the term neo-Dada was rejected because it was originally coined in the pejorative and because the work in question bears only superficial resemblance to Dada [which] was a revolutionary movement primarily intended to change life itself.'<sup>20</sup> Contrary to Higgins' aforementioned assertion in 'Fluxus Theory and Reception', a number of the MoMA panelists were in agreement that (unlike the new art), historical Dada had mounted a conscious attack against conformity and the bourgeoisie. They further concurred that, motivated by social passion, the movement had launched a sophisticated attack on a society held culpable for the First World War I. Although Cage is credited on more than one occasion as precursor to the new art, the transcript for the 1963 session includes less than laudatory reference to Duchamp, who served, in turn, as the composer's own mentor.

Having accused the new art of appearing to be about the real world, while at the same time remaining dependent upon its sanctification through its 'fraudulent relationship [with the] tradition of Dada', Hilton Kramer (then art critic for *The Nation*) continued:

But pop art does, of course have its connections with art history. Behind its pretensions looms the legendary presence of the most overrated figure in modern art: Mr. Marcel Duchamp. It is Duchamp's celebrated silence, his disavowal, his abandonment of art, which has here – in pop art – been invaded, colonised and exploited.<sup>21</sup>

As had been the case for Kramer in the early 1960s, in his much-used introductory art-history textbook, Norbert Lynton also felt compelled to adamantly defend 'art' against contemporary iconoclasts. Toward that end, he offers his readers one seemingly eccentric observation that perhaps inadvertently bears an uncanny stylistic resemblance to Higgins' 'A Child's History of Fluxus'. In keeping with his normative role as custodian of the formalist cannon, Lynton suddenly inserts the following cryptic repudiation into his otherwise unemotional (and purportedly realistic) narrative history of our century:

Whatever infection Robert Motherwell's book on Dada generated in obscure places, it was received in 1951 as an exceptionally interesting piece of history, an account of strange, often nonsensical, and sometimes foolish things done a long time ago when the world was very different.<sup>22</sup>

Motherwell had been quite happy to concur that to 'love art [was] a most anti-Dada attitude'.<sup>23</sup> He also admitted that his editorship of *The Dada Painters and Poets* was initially undertaken in an effort to 'teach himself Surrealism [for which] Dada was the older brother'.<sup>24</sup> However, regardless of Motherwell's initial intentions, it was Surrealism's 'older brother' which would capture the imagination of the next generation of art-makers. Contrary to Lynton's assertion, the impact of Motherwell's anthology cannot be overestimated. By the

late 1950s and early 1960s the term neo-Dada had come to encompass the production of Cage and his disciples Johns and Rauschenberg, the soon-to-be canonised American Pop Art circle, Happenings, New Realism, 'Common Object Art', the overtly political, anti-Pop 'NO!' art' group and the Fluxus collective, among others.

From an historiographic perspective, it is important to remember that, as a result, the contemporary art world of the late 1950s and 1960s was effected not so much by historical Dada as by the end results of long-standing strategies for historical positioning employed by members of the movement as they repeatedly attempted to write their own histories (another strategy persistently adopted by Fluxus people). Thus, in my essay 'Historical Precedents, Trans-historical Strategies, and the Myth of Democratisation', which appeared in the exhibition catalogue *Fluxus: A Conceptual Country*, I deliberately chose to concentrate on excerpts from the myriad personal narrative histories of Dada that appeared in Motherwell's anthology. In so doing, I was provided with a rare occasion to investigate the extent to which a particular historical subject had accrued verifiable access to one of its self-proclaimed historical paradigms. In the process I was able to chart some of the uncanny coincidences between the birth of historical Dada and the birth of Fluxus and the shared characteristics of the deliberately trans-historical constructs of the Dada myth and its mid-century counterpart, the Fluxattitude. In his response to one of the sessions during the February 1993 Fluxus Symposium at the AA Center, Higgins confirmed that my methodological approach had indeed been appropriate.

Dada was not widely discussed until the 1950s, thirty-five years after its inception; without [people like] Robert Motherwell (whose *Dada Painters and Poets* was seminal to most of us) we would have had a hard time indeed figuring out just what the Dadaists had done, what they had achieved and what they had not managed.<sup>25</sup>

In a statement that was originally circulated as an insert to the 1951 edition of Motherwell's anthology, Tristan Tzara, who had been one of the individuals most responsible for perpetuating Dada's trans-historical myth, adamantly attempted, with all of his poetic prowess, to recontextualise the First World War movement, and thus to distinguish what he then perceived to be historical realities from historiographic illusions:

When I say 'we,' I have in mind that generation which, during the war of 1914-18, suffered in the very flesh of its pure adolescence suddenly exposed to life, at seeing the truth ridiculed, clothed in cast off vanity or base class interest. This war was not our war; to us it was a war of false emotions and feeble justifications. Such was the state of mind among the youth when Dada was born in Switzerland thirty years ago ... A product of disgust aroused by the war, Dada could not maintain itself on the dizzy heights it had chosen to inhabit, and in 1922 put an end to its existence.

Contemporary cultural historians have posited that the romantic revolution of the 1960s represents the legacy of early twentieth-century utopian anarchic radicalism, which in turn encompassed a loose-knit international collective of contemporaneous cultural avant-gardes then associated with anarco-individualism. It has further been suggested that at that point in time, artistic activism and political radicalism were understood to be two sides of the same coin. In much the same way that historical Dada embodied all prerequisite characteristics for membership in this early-twentieth-century utopian consortium, it could convincingly be argued that historical Fluxus served as one paradigmatic example of its

legacy. In his 1988 introduction to Jon Hendricks' *Fluxus Codex*, Robert Pincus-Witten argues that Fluxus' iconoclastic agenda was offered as a critique of an imperialistic, Vietnam-era value system, and that the collective's achievements 'were inflected by an idealistic anarchy [that evokes] a political history reaching back to the Wobblies, the Patterson Strike, and the Feminist model of Emma Goldman...'<sup>26</sup> In his foreword to the *Codex*, Hendricks (one of the founder members of the Guerilla Art Action Group and a fellow traveller in Fluxus) attempts to contextualise the historical movement by describing it as successor to a subversive counter-culture initiated in response to the McCarthyist 1950s<sup>27</sup> and lists what he understands to have been Fluxus' historical precursors. After allocating equal credit to Futurism, Dada and Russian Constructivism, Hendricks posits that these historical models were particularly appropriate because 'the essence of each remained taboo in the late 1950s and early 1960s'.<sup>28</sup>

Of the three early-twentieth-century avant-gardes cited by Hendricks, it is Dada that has recently been singled out for the most thorough historiographic reassessment. Furthermore, as our century draws to a close, cultural historians have identified Dada as one of the most appropriate sites from which to establish a genealogy of twentieth-century artistic radicalism. As one of historical Dada's most direct descendents (and having, in its own right, captured the imagination of our present), perhaps it is time for Fluxus to rethink its initial anxiety about openly acknowledging its familial relationship to its venerated progenitor.

As was the case for historical Dada, Fluxus consciously and repeatedly attempted to author its own history. That such should be the case is not surprising in view of the fact that the modernist construct, the avant-garde, and the modern discipline of history were birthed one alongside the other. Participants in the movement concurrently adopted a deliberately ahistorical posture dependent upon the purported existence of a universal Fluxattitude. Although originally invented as a strategy for historical positioning, it could easily be argued that the trans-historical construct has successfully pervaded our contemporary consciousness far more effectively than has any awareness of its historical counterpart. For example, included in the packet of mementoes generated upon the occasion of the Walker Art Centre's celebration of the 'Spirit of Fluxus' were three buttons. One proclaimed that 'Art is easy', the second lauded an 'Art you can lick' and the third bore the instruction: 'Demolish serious culture.' Under the sub-heading 'Demolish serious culture', the calendar for the Walker celebration (upon which these buttons were affixed) announced that a Reflux watch with a 'Fluxus Aztec logo, gold-tone hands and case, a leather strap, quartz movement, and a stainless steel back' was available for purchase in the Walker Centre bookshop. One could argue that such marketing strategies confirm what Alison Knowles has described as Robert Watts' idea that Fluxus could overtake existing institutions, the churches, the grocery store, etc. However it is far more plausible that, by helping us forget that the initial charge to demolish serious culture was a strategic and context-specific response to then-in-place historical imperatives, such evocations of an ahistorical state of mind undermine the collective's hard won (and long overdue) rightful inclusion in our century's historical roster of venerated activist utopian art cultures. The Fluxus spirit is a well-written fiction authored by participants in historical Fluxus. Perhaps it is time for the Fluxus people to adopt yet another strategy assumed by their Dada precursors and to accept the full implications of the fact that when historical accomplishments are consistently decontextualised they become

reasonable candidates for recontextualisation into any new reality that a particular present deems appropriate.

## NOTES

- 1 Tristan Tzara, 'New York Dada', in Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray, eds, *New York Dada* (April 1921) A facsimile of this little magazine appears in Robert Motherwell, ed, *The Dada Painters and Poets*, New York, Wittenborn, Schultz, Inc, and Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, pp 214–18.
- 2 Wolf Vostell interviewed by Giancarlo Politi, *Flash Art*, nos 72–3 (March–April 1977); reprinted in *Flash Art*, no.149 (Nov–Dec 1989), p 102.
- 3 'Interview with Milan Knížák.' *Flash Art*, nos 72–3 (March–April 1977) reprinted in *Flash Art*, no. 149 (Nov–Dec 1989), p 104.
- 4 Estera Milman, 'Road Shows, Street Events, and Fluxus People: A Conversation with Alison Knowles', in Milman, ed, *Fluxus: A Conceptual Country*, Rhode Island, Visible Language, 1992, no. 98. This author's definition of Fluxus as a conceptual country was precipitated by Ken Friedman and George Maciunas' *Visa TouristE: Passport to the State of Flux* – a piece first proposed by Friedman in 1966 and realised by Maciunas in 1977.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Tristan Tzara, 'Zurich Chronicle, 1915 – 1919', in Hans Richter, *Dada Art and Anti-Art*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1965, p 226. Tzara is referring to the appearance in print of the first issue of the little review *Dada*, for which he served as editor.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid., p 227.
- 9 Ibid., p 228.
- 10 Dick Higgins, 'Fluxus Theory and Reception', paper presented during 'Fluxus: A Workshop Series. The University of Iowa's Alternative Traditions in the Contemporary Arts' (April 1985), unpaginated. Although this essay has appeared in print, I have chosen to refer to the manuscript that the author sent me.
- 11 Andy Warhol, 'What is Pop Art? Interviews with GR Swenson', *Art News*, vol 62, no. 7 (Nov 1963), p 61.
- 12 George Maciunas, 'Neo-Dada in Music, Theatre, Poetry, Art', (c1962), reproduced in Clive Phillpot and Jon Hendricks, eds, *Fluxus: Selections from the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection*, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1988, p 27. The manifesto was presented by Artus C Caspari in Wuppertal, on 9 June 1962.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Dick Higgins to the author, '4 October 1992, Buster Keaton's Birthday [1898]'.  
15 See, for example, Edward T Kelly, 'Neo-Dada: A Critique of Pop Art', *Art Journal*, vol 22, no. 3 (Spring 1964).
- 16 Barbara Rose, 'Dada Then and Now', *Art International*, vol 7, no.1 (Jan 1963) p 24.
- 17 Ibid., p 27.
- 18 See Estera Milman, 'Futurism as a Submerged Paradigm for Artistic Activism and Practical Anarchism', *South Central Review: A Journal of the South Central Modern Language Association*, vol 13, no. 2 – 3 (Summer/Fall 1996), pp 157–79.
- 19 John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, Middletown, Wesleyan University Press, 1961, p xi.
- 20 'A Symposium on Pop Art', *Arts Magazine*, vol 37, no. 7 (April 1963), p 36.
- 21 Ibid., p 38.
- 22 Norbert Lynton, *The Story of Modern Art*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice-Hall, 1980, p 319.

- 23 Max Kosloff, 'An Interview with Robert Motherwell', *Artforum*, vol 4, no. 1 (Sept 1965), p 37.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Dick Higgins, Respondent's statement, 'Flux-Forum Symposium', Walker Art Centre, 13–14 February 1993, manuscript version, unpaginated.
- 26 Robert Pincus-Witten, 'Fluxus and the Silvermans: An Introduction', in Jon Hendricks, *Fluxus Codex*, New York, Abrams, 1988, p 16.
- 27 Hendricks, *Fluxus Codex*, p 22.
- 28 Ibid.