

The

FLUXUS

Reader

EDITED BY KEN FRIEDMAN

AE ACADEMY EDITIONS

THE FLUXUS READER

Edited by KEN FRIEDMAN

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Much Fluxus research has been made possible by four individuals who have been responsible for publishing the three largest series of publications of Fluxus material: objects, scores, and multiples, books and catalogues. George Maciunas' Fluxus editions launched Fluxus publishing as an organized phenomenon. Dick Higgins' Something Else Press books brought Fluxus to the larger world. Gilbert Silverman and Jon Hendricks are responsible for the catalogues that have become the largest series of Fluxus research documents.

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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The Norwegian School of Management has been generous with resources, time and freedom for research and publishing. The poetic and playful dimensions of Fluxus often involve intensely practical phenomena. We wanted to work with industry. Our experiments in media and industrial production, successes and failures both, led me to doctoral work in leadership and human behavior. Our ideas on design, manufacturing and marketing took me to Finland and then to Norway. This is the place to thank Lisa Gabriellson and Esa Kolehmainen who brought Fluxus into a working industrial organization at Arabia in Helsinki, and this is the place to thank John Bjørnbye, Ole Henrik Moe and Per Hovdenakk, who brought me to Norway, together with the American Scandinavian Foundation, which funded a year of research.

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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.

Another wise man made this book possible in many ways. He was the secret patron of Fluxus West. The Fluxus West projects in San Diego, San Francisco and around the world did more than anyone thought possible on limited resources and money. As creative and resourceful as it was possible to be, however, money often ran out. That was when our patron stepped in. He made it possible for me to follow my passion for knowledge. He helped me to organize and preserve the collections that are now housed in museums and archives around the world. He was profoundly generous, the more profound considering that he was a patron of the arts on a college professor's salary. I dedicate this book to an outstanding human being: advisor and patron, friend and father, Abraham M Friedman.

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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KEN FRIEDMAN: INTRODUCTION: A TRANSFORMATIVE VISION OF FLUXUS

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

STEPHEN C FOSTER: HISTORICAL DESIGN AND SOCIAL PURPOSE: A NOTE ON THE RELATIONSHIP OF FLUXUS TO MODERNISM

What interested me about Fluxus was that it had a sharp, crisp approach to culture.¹

Ken Friedman

I would like to venture that Fluxus can be, and frequently has been, successfully understood for what it was, what it became, the metamorphosis by which it successively became, and its means of becoming all these things. Scarcely a shocking proposition, what appears to be its logic (the logic of 'it') has become a truism in the literature on modern art and reflects, in the curve of its development, the historical or, more accurately, the historiographic, momentum of the avant-garde. What a thing was, although liberally discounted as 'absolute' truth, nevertheless defines the base upon which one analyses what it became and the characteristics and historical parameters guiding what it successively became. How it became what it was is typically imputed to the actions and intentions of those responsible for what it became or successively became. Seen as a whole, these propositions describe the directionality of an overarching historical design for the progress of modernism of which the avant-garde becomes a specific case.

Fluxus had made lasting contributions to our thinking about art and culture ... had enduring value.² *Jean Sellem*

The aims of Fluxus, as set out in the Manifesto of 1963, are extraordinary, but connect with the radical ideas fermenting at the time.³ *Clive Phillpot*

Fluxus had its antecedents in those enlightened, earlier twentieth-century artists who wanted to release art from the moribund constraints of formalism.⁴ *Jon Hendricks*

The purpose of this chapter is to pose some questions concerning the relationship of Fluxus to this scheme of things; its alteration of the scheme, acceptance of it or rejection of it. In posing the questions, the point is not to determine the correct answer (Fluxus is avant-garde, modern or whatever) so much as it is to formulate sensible means for answering the questions; that is, how can we know if Fluxus is modern, avant-garde or whatever?

Now, of course, there are and have always been enormous problems with this modernist scheme, but none of an order that has prevented it from working (at least until very recently) for approximately two centuries. Even recently, criticism of it has been more probing than effective. It would be easy to level well-warranted criticism at those proposing that Fluxus be understood as a 'real' thing, to dismiss its successive 'realities' as illusions of an illusion and to convincingly demonstrate that 'how' it became should not imply 'what' it became. Yet, since the model has been, and surprisingly enough remains, operational, it is not altogether clear what purpose the criticism would serve. As Arnold Isenberg noted long ago concerning normative models of criticism, its internal contradictions not only failed to prohibit its use, but had no significant bearing on its effectiveness as a means of analysing critical communication.⁵ I would say much the same for the question under consideration here.

I think Ken Friedman implies as much when he claims, 'When the work being done on Fluxus by trained historians – art historians, cultural historians, anthropologists – is more complete, you'll see the diversity of views brought forward in much greater clarity than the unity implicit in Jon's [or other existing] books'.⁶ In our particular case, and in specific reference to Fluxus, one might reasonably maintain that understanding and criticism of traditions as movements, historically substructured as 'real' things, although fraught with hopeless historical, theoretical, moral, ethical and other problems, continued to work. This is true in spite of the group's denial of modernism and the avant-garde, and in spite of the group's clear recognition of their reasons for rejecting them:

There's certainly interest in it [Fluxus] as an historical movement, but many of the artists themselves don't want to look at it historically.⁷ *Bruce Altschuler*

Promote living art, anti-art ...⁸ *George Maciunas*

Definitions, especially the definitions of art history, seem to work the best on dead subjects. It's easier to bury Fluxus and to set up a three-sentence epitaph on our headstone than to understand what Fluxus is or was.⁹ *Jean Dupuy*

Fluxus objective are social (not aesthetic) ... and concern [themselves] with: Gradual elimination of fine arts ...¹⁰ *George Maciunas*

Having said this, however, it is nevertheless true that some Fluxus artists invoked these schemes again and again:

On one hand, Fluxus appears to be an iconoclastic art movement, somewhat in the lineage of the other such movements in our century – Futurism, Dada, Surrealism, etc. And, indeed, the relationship with these is a real and valid one.¹¹ *Dick Higgins*

Fluxus is a permanent state of improvisation – it doesn't matter what, it doesn't matter how, it doesn't matter where and, most important of all, no-one should really know what it is is an error.¹² *Marcel Fleiss*

To the extent that any contemporary group would continue to use this modernist scheme, as I maintain that Fluxus did, at least in certain important ways, an explanation is demanded. That is, why would a group maintain the historiographic structures of modernism, modernistically refute its content, and still consider itself detached from modernism? I believe that Fluxus, to a significant degree, behaved in these ways and for what I think are fairly definable purposes.

Highly self-conscious historically, and sophisticated in its manipulation of history's use, Fluxus tried to eclectically organise itself around the advantages of existing strategies at the same time that it attempted to avoid their abuses. Fluxus was committed to social purpose but opposed the authoritarian means by which it was historically achieved. It denied the metaphysics of the avant-garde's 'progress' although it embraced its means for organising a group. It rejected the dominant culture's popularisation of the avant-garde but embraced its myth of the 'masses'. It communicated with 'Everyman', but warranted itself with the captive audiences for the avant-garde in the university and the market-place. It rejected 'art' where the rejection rested largely on nothing more than a counter-definition of the establishment's concept of art, and identified its sources as those parts of modernism that defined themselves against the tradition. It competed for artistic influence by not competing with art and competed for social influence by competing with art ('Purge the world of bourgeois sickness, "intellectual," professional & commercialised culture, PURGE the world of dead art ...'¹³ It veiled belief in experience, community in coalition, and art in environmental metaphors.

Looked at individually, none of their points strikes us as particularly surprising or new. We are more likely to be impressed by the fact that Fluxus seemed to adopt, more or less indiscriminately, all of them in ways that frequently seem to be contradictory and internally illogical. Yet, it must be said that none of these postures lay outside positive or negative assessments of the modernist and avant-garde debate – a debate that, of course, belongs to modernism. It is tempting to conclude that Fluxus is better defined through its 'use' of modernism and the avant-garde than it is through any rejection of them. As Milman notes, 'That the phenomenon appears to resist definition is based, in part, on the fact that Fluxus changed its public face to suit its intentions, its specific context and the purposes of its many diverse practitioners'.¹⁴

Interestingly enough, the whole question of definition does not settle the question of whether Fluxus is modern, avant-garde, or whatever. That we can define Fluxus through these terms carries no particular weight; nor does the fact that Fluxus might have defined itself through these terms, since the definition might well be better understood as something motivated by strategy rather than theory.

Another approach to the question of the relationship between Fluxus and the avant-garde might posit that the group provided an alternative to modernism and the avant-garde without implying a positive or negative critique. But this will not do. The fact that all the terms are too familiar is burdened further by the fact that nothing suggesting an alternative language is available in the group's publications or works. Furthermore, Fluxus continually condemned the avant-garde, or parts of it ('Fluxus art-amusement is the rear-garde ...', (wrote Maciunas),¹⁵ but made extremely liberal use of historical precedents such as Dada. One might go further and maintain (correctly, I believe) that alternatives were available and that Fluxus opted, knowingly or otherwise, not to use them.

This brings me closer to my thesis – that Fluxus was basically a reconfiguration of the modernist or avant-garde paradigms. Its use of typically modernist and avant-garde terms might superficially seem to make Fluxus a maverick modernism. Or one might speculate that the group kept the modernist model and adjusted, or even ditched, the content. Regardless of the truth of the latter, it strikes me that what is more important is the group's reorganisation of modernism's terms. The importance of this resides in the fact that the canon of modernism

or the avant-garde rests not in the specifics of the terms but precisely in their organisation. That Fluxus is modern or not rests less on the use of the specific terms than the specific use of the terms. As the use of modernism's terms struck or strike confirmed modernists as illogical, it would seem that this could only be accounted for by comparison with the modernist canon as it was conventionally organised; for a number of reasons, however, even this is not altogether clear.

The problem concerns whether modernism would have assessed Fluxus' use of its terms as illogical, or merely idiosyncratic or misunderstood. The source of the organisation of terms that constituted the modernist canon were located in its concept of history. To the degree that Fluxus maintained that concept, there was a misunderstanding of sorts. But it must also be said that it was a misunderstanding of rather little consequence since modernism easily tolerated minor abuses of this sort and would have viewed it as little or no threat to the fundamental basis of its historical design. 'It is to falsify history to describe Fluxus as an art movement', wrote Eric Andersen.¹⁶ Because of Fluxus' acceptance of the history, the canon was never fully raised to a level of visibility as a question.

If Fluxus rejected anything, it would seem to be the system or structure of the modernist programme or project, but in a way that required saving modernism's programme, in part, for maintaining the group's operational objectives (a point I will return to later), objectives that should not be confused with the more straightforwardly transactional basis of the historical work Fluxus so often claimed as part of its genealogy (Dada and Constructivism, for example).

This gets us somewhat further because it implies that in Fluxus there was a separation of means and ends untypical of modernism and the avant-garde as we normally understand them – considerations that bring us closer to identifying their substantial rather than polemical separation from modernism and the avant-garde. Fluxus seems to dislocate traditional 'means and ends' relationships that are endemic to modernism and the avant-garde and that account, in large part, for their curve as it was represented at the beginning of this essay. If Fluxus wished to accomplish something, it was not embodied in the ends implied in its means. I would suggest, in fact, that Fluxus represents a unique situation where both 'means' and 'ends' serve equally as objectives or goals – objectives that were historically, within the context of modernism, reserved only for ends. Nominally anti-art, and part of the late-modern resistance to the 'art object', Fluxus sought appreciation and engagement in its means. Self-conscious of its historical place, it sought its significance and position in its ends. The importance of this lay in the non-dependent relationship between the means and ends and the respective audiences that supported the objectives attached to each. Position was no longer contingent on appreciation; significance on engagement, and so on. Engagement and significance, for example, could be equally achieved, but in totally unrelated ways.

What is true of its strategies is true of its works (more or less the same thing). They affirm modernism and the avant-garde; they deny it, manipulate it, embrace it and shun it. Most importantly, they undermine the legibility of its canons and the relationship posed between art's means and ends:

the creativity, the lightness, the rethinking of culture, of our approach to life are the context in which Water Yam takes place and from which it emerges.¹⁷ *Ken Friedman*

[Fluxus] An attitude that does not take to the decisions made by history as the guaranteed and the guaranteeing process of the fluxes and the movements of creation.¹⁸
Achille Bonito Oliva

All this also broke apart the normal discourse levels through which the group was approached. No longer concerned with means and ends, criticism could be conceived around either, with no loss to either: 'Fluxus encompasses opposites' wrote George Brecht. 'Consider opposing it, supporting it, ignoring it, changing your mind'¹⁹ Indeed, with luck (and it was almost inevitable with the variety of critical models in service) criticism of Fluxus would be substructured variously by consideration of both means and ends and exist on what amounted to a non-competitive basis. The same was true of historical approaches. Indifferent to its location in the street, alternative space, or museum, the historiographic mandates of modernism yielded to a highly permissive situation where it was difficult to be wrong. Yet – and this is important – Fluxus was always prepared to claim that it was only a half-truth. The cleverness of Fluxus was that it was the only party to play all the possible positions simultaneously (if not by any one particular individual, at least by the group considered collectively). With means and ends unrelated, Fluxus could be made modern, partially modern or anti-modern. Its artists and critics could easily, and without contradiction, fill the pages of a xerox magazine, *Artforum*, or an Abrams Corpus. They could fight among themselves, appropriate individuals into their ranks who could not have been otherwise available, and expand in an indefinite number of future directions – all with equal impunity from the critics and historians. In the hands of the right writer, they could be, and no doubt are being, made suitable for textbook discourses. There is no threat in any of this, because there is always a way out. As Robert C Morgan has written, 'What is significant in a Fluxus exhibition is the diversity of strategies and the complementary nature of the varied artists' intentions'.²⁰ From the point of view of the modernist, the position may seem irresponsible. From the point of view of Fluxus, it is versatile and operational.

I think there are some interesting conclusions to be drawn from all this – that is, that Fluxus was not at all necessarily anti-art, anti-purpose, anti-institution or anti-modern. It could, of course, equally well be all of these. Fluxus, however, was decidedly not anti-historical, and this seems to be a position that was not reversible in spite of hopeful opinion to the contrary:

To push Fluxus toward the Twenty-first century means to grasp the group's anti-historicist spirit.²¹ *Achille Bonito Oliva*

To go towards the year Two Thousand thus means to carry out a new task, that of avoiding defeat by time.²² *Achille Bonito Oliva*

The group could reject modernism and its historical design but not its history. By that I mean that the various, weighty and contradictory options to which Fluxus willingly and happily submitted remain, without exception, historically conceived options. In the separation of means and ends, Fluxus lost the authority to convincingly author itself, or to have others author it in its own image. 'By creating an absence of authorship,' Morgan writes, 'Fluxus has revived itself as a significant tendency in recent art'.²³ The relationship of Fluxus to modernism remains ambiguous only insofar as it may or may not be modern. But the 'means' of being made one or the other is distinctly modern. History is a modern phenomenon, and anyone submitting to it becomes, to some extent, a subject of modernism. Since this is the case, any

proposition that Fluxus radically separated itself from modernism is substantially weakened.

In closing, I am left, and leave the reader, with a slightly puzzling question. How much of all this was deliberate, planned or expected? Is contemporary Fluxus a rationalisation of an early misunderstanding, or is it the fruits of a sophisticated, Duchampian refusal to commit? It seems to me that the question is related to why Fluxus, as modernism (as opposed to the other options), seems to have won the day. Although it could be, and surely will be argued, that Fluxus was simply assimilated, absorbed and appropriated by an insensitive, voracious art world and its publics (the solace of all failed radicalisms), I would maintain that Fluxus, from the beginning, was never in a position to determine its fate otherwise. Its flirtation with history firmly secured its place in modernism.

NOTES

- 1 Jean Sellem, 'Twelve Questions for Ken Friedman', in *Fluxus Research*, Special Issue of *Lund Art Press*, vol 2, no. 2, (1991). p 95.
- 2 Jean Sellem. 'Fluxus Research' in *Fluxus Research*, p. 5
- 3 Clive Philpot, 'Fluxus: Magazines, Manifestos, Multum in Parvo', in Clive Philpot and Jon Hendricks, eds, *Fluxus: Selections from the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection*, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1988, p 11.
- 4 Jon Hendricks, 'Introduction to the Exhibition', in Philpot and Hendricks, eds, *Fluxus: Selections ...*, p 17.
- 5 Arnold Isenberg, 'Critical Communication', *The Philosophical Review*, no. 58 (July 1949), pp 330-44.
- 6 Sellem, 'Twelve Questions for Ken Friedman', p 104.
- 7 Bruce Altschulen, cited in Matthew Rose, 'Fluxus something? Is There a Renaissance in Fluxus or Just Boredom with Everything Else? A Survey of Fluxus in America', in *Fluxus Research*, p 15.
- 8 George Maciunas, 'Manifesto' printed in Philpot and Hendricks, eds, *Fluxus: Selections ...*, p 2.
- 9 Jean Dupuy, 'Where' in *Fluxus!*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 1990, p 13.
- 10 George Maciunas, cited in Jon Hendricks, 'Introduction to the Exhibition', in *Fluxus: Selections ...*, p 24
- 11 Dick Higgins, 'Fluxus: Theory and Reception', in Philpot and Hendricks, eds, *Fluxus Research*, p 26.
- 12 Marcel Fleiss, 'Fluxus in Paris', unpublished typescript, no date [1989], p 1.
- 13 Maciunas, 'Manifesto', p 2.
- 14 Estera Milman, *Fluxus and Friends: Selection from the Alternative Traditions in Alternative Art Collection*, Iowa City, University of Iowa Museum of Art, 1988, unpaginated.
- 15 Maciunas, 'Manifesto', broadside, 1965; cited in Milman, *Fluxus and Friends*.
- 16 Jean Sellem, 'About Fluxus, Intermedia and So ... : An interview with Eric Andersen', in *Fluxus Research*, p 60.
- 17 Sellem 'Twelve Questions for Ken Friedman', p 95
- 18 Achille Bonito Oliva, 'Ubi Fluxus ibi Motus' in A Bonito Oliva et al, eds, *Ubi Fluxus ibi Motus*, Venice, Biennale, and Milan, Mazzotta Editore, 1990, p 26.
- 19 George Brecht, 'Something about Fluxus', in A Bonito et al, eds, *Ubi Fluxus ibi Motus*, p 144.
- 20 Robert C Morgan. 'The Fluxus Phenomenon', in *Fluxus Research*, p 125.
- 21 Oliva, *Ubi Fluxus ibi Motus*, p 26.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p 27.
- 23 Morgan, 'The Fluxus Phenomenon', p 125.