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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS

Department of Art History and Archaeology

A Network of Experience:
Community Building and Social Restructuring in Fluxus
by
Margaret Sherer

A thesis presented to the
Graduate School of Arts & Sciences
of Washington University in
partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree
of Masters of Arts

May 2016
St. Louis, Missouri

Table of Contents

List of Figures.....	iii
Acknowledgments.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: The Beginning of Fluxus and Early Events.....	7
Chapter 2: Who's In and Who's Out; The Fluxus Community.....	36
Chapter 3: CEO Maciunas and the Corporate Body of Fluxus.....	60
Conclusion.....	87
Figures.....	90
Bibliography.....	101

List of Figures

Figure 1: Fluxus Collective, Poster for <i>Fluxus Internationale Festspiele Neuester Musik</i> , Städtisches Museum, Wiesbaden, Germany, September 1-23, 1962.....	90
Figure 2: Dick Higgins, <i>Danger Music No. 2</i> , 1962. Performance at Fluxus Internationale Festspiele Neuster Musik, Wiesbaden 1962. Photograph by Hartmut Rekort.....	91
Figure 3: Dick Higgins, <i>Danger Music No. 15</i> , 1962.....	92
Figure 4: Fluxus Collective, <i>Flux Food</i> , “Colored Meal,” Flux New Year’s Eve in New York, 1974. Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, in Jon Hendricks, <i>Fluxus Codex</i> ...	93
Figure 5: George Maciunas and Billie Hutching, <i>Flux Wedding</i> , 1978.....	94
Figure 6: Collective, image of Yoshi Wada officiating <i>Flux-Mass</i> (detail), 1970. Photo by Susan Elizabeth Ryan.....	95
Figure 7: George Maciunas, “New Marlborough Centre of New Art,” publication, n.d.....	96
Figure 8: Alison Knowles, <i>Bean Rolls</i> , 1965. Museum of Modern Art, New York.....	97
Figure 9: Takako Saito, <i>Spice Chess</i> , 1965. Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection, Museum of Modern Art, New York.....	97
Figure 10: Ay-O, <i>Finger Boxes</i> , 1964. Harvard Art Museum/Fogg Museum.....	98
Figure 11: Robert Watts, Ben Vautier, Ken Friedman, and Jim Riddle, <i>Fluxpost Kit 7</i> , 1968.....	98
Figure 12: Willem de Ridder, European Mail-Order Warehouse/Fluxshop, 1965. View of the 1984 reconstruction installation at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, Texas.....	99
Figure 13: Robert Watts, <i>YAM Collage</i> , 1961.....	100

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Margaret Sherer

Washington University in St. Louis

May

Introduction

Over the past fifty years the complex history, aesthetics and philosophy of Fluxus have continued to challenge artists and historians alike. The staunch aversion of Fluxus to fitting within precise definitions has led to a multiplicity of interpretations, associations and unanswered questions. At its core Fluxus was an informal international group of artists producing work in a wide range of media. Fluxus production of the 1960s and 1970s included performances, mass-produced objects boxed into packages called Fluxkits, magazines and posters, musical and word compositions, full-scale operas and organized community events. The nature of Fluxus requires an approach to the group that goes beyond studies of medium, style or coherent political agenda. This task has been taken up by art historians within the last three decades following a renewed interest in the history and significance of Fluxus. Drawing from intellectual and cultural history and philosophy, these historians have initiated the process of contextualizing and historicizing Fluxus. Often described as a community, the group of artists that constitute Fluxus used not only their social interaction, but also their artistic production to create a social and artistic structure intended to supplant the dominant social frameworks and ideologies imposed by contemporary society and the art world. By the 1960s, many artists had become disenchanted with the manner in which conformity and mass consumption had become primary forms of Western identity. Following in the footsteps of earlier avant-garde artists, many of whose work underwent critical revival in postwar America and Europe,¹ Fluxus artists reacted to the homogenization and celebration of consumer culture in the United States especially by

¹ Dada, in particular saw new life post-World War I in the United States and inspired a generation of 'Neo-Dada' artists, which will be discussed further in this work. Examples of major reintroductions of Dada and early twentieth-century avant-garde thought in the 1950s and 1960s include Robert Motherwell's 1951 anthology documenting the sensibilities of Dada aesthetic, titled *The Dada Painters and Poets*, and numerous postwar monograph and solo shows of Dada leader Marcel Duchamp's work.

reappropriating the very commodities of this culture and subverting the economic exchange-value of these objects to assign new value to them as points of social exchange. Through the development of social interactions among both the artists themselves and between the artists and audience, as well as a web of distribution channels based on commercial and gift exchange utilizing Fluxus activity and artwork, Fluxus artists sought to create an alternative social space and means of creating and interacting with art that was both reactionary against, and inspired by, contemporary society. This study sets out to examine Fluxus as not only a historical movement or group of artists, but an attempt by a group of people at a form of heterodox social structuring that experienced its own internal dissonance and degrees of success and failure.

One aspect of Fluxus that is of particular interest is its unique group structure and function. Within the literature on this topic, scholars have often taken a historical and biographical approach that defines the group by its social activity and organization. In publications such as *Fluxus: A Conceptual Country* and *Fluxus Reader*, authors focus on the history and development of Fluxus, providing a chronology of the work, but beyond the participatory and collaborative character of performances, publications and organizations the Fluxus artwork is not as thoroughly discussed in relation to its function as a basis for social interaction and the attempted development of an alternative community through Fluxus.² In addition to the historical and biographical approach to the Fluxus group, other art historians have recently examined Fluxus production through the lens of theory, focusing on the aesthetic and philosophical influences and implications of Fluxus work, such as historian Hannah Higgins' book *Fluxus Experience*.³ Higgins in particular convincingly relates Fluxus to the aesthetic theory of John Dewey and concepts found in the phenomenology of philosophers such as

² Estra Milman, ed., *Fluxus: A Conceptual Country* (Providence, RI: Visible Language, 1992); Ken Friedman, ed., *Fluxus Reader* (New York: Academy Editions, 1998).

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

Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Higgins proposes an understanding of Fluxus as experiential in nature and pedagogical in function, using events and objects as the crux of her writing. In my argument, I will work from this theoretical understanding of Fluxus to examine the intended and actual role that such experiential and pedagogical artwork had in the social dynamic of the Fluxus group.

Within the scholarship on Fluxus, the global Fluxus group has also been discussed generally in terms of the informal social structure and chronology of the group and the artists' interest in the fusion of art and life, with less attention paid to possible cohesive social motives and consequences, whether successful or not.⁴ Some authors examine George Maciunas' political and social agenda, but as distinct from Fluxus as a whole, due to the lack of a manifesto signed by the group members or other concrete group statements of a singular ideology.⁵ Building on previous scholarship related to the personal and art historical development of Fluxus and its theoretical foundation, I will examine aspects of the social structure of the group and how Fluxus art relates to this group formation. Bridging the gaps between historical development, artist biographies, and theory, I hypothesize that an overarching goal of the Fluxus group was the establishment of an alternate model of artistic production and social interaction that rejected traditional cultural and economic institutions in response to the burgeoning capitalistic and hierarchical artistic and social structures that dominated Western, and especially American, culture.

The social and artistic interaction between Fluxus artists and audience, the creation of subversive Fluxus institutions and channels of commercial distribution, and the role of Fluxus art objects in establishing and supporting these interactions all evidence ongoing attempts by

⁴ See Milman, ed., *Fluxus: A Conceptual Country*; Ken Friedman, ed. *The Fluxus Reader* (New York: Academy Editions, 1998); Janet Jenkins, ed. *In the Spirit of Fluxus* exh. cat. (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 1993).

⁵ See Jon Hendricks, ed. *Fluxus Codex* (Detroit, MI: Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, 1988); Owen F. Smith, *Fluxus: The History of an Attitude* (San Diego, CA: San Diego University Press, 1998).

members of the Fluxus group to criticize contemporary culture while providing an alternative to it. In this research, I investigate the goals and activities of core members of Fluxus, which were not cohesive, but complicated and riven with contradiction. Through examination of the statements and actions of artists, as well as Fluxus artwork, I will tease out some of the points of contention within the group. By the beginning of the Cold War era, everyday life had become infected with commodification and consumerism, and so Fluxus artists had to negotiate the threat of colonization by the same consumer culture they were attempting to subvert, and also the threat of their commercial and promotional strategies becoming the pure commerce they were against. While some members of the Fluxus group attempted to avoid these risks by exercising a lack of concern for the actual monetary profits made by their work and by adjusting their productive focus from the fetishization or sanctification of the object to its role in spurning person and intellectual interaction, as will be elucidated, not all Fluxus artists shared the same beliefs about the commercial activity and goals of the group.⁶

Informal Fluxus association spanned the globe, with numerous artists, at one time or another, interacting with the Fluxus ethos.⁷ Several contemporary art movements, including the Gutai Group in Japan, New Realism in Europe, and Pop and performance artists in the United

⁶ In the literature on the Fluxus group, authors have tended to focus on aspects of Fluxus—the experiential nature of the work, the social interaction of the members of the group, the relationship of Fluxus work to earlier avant-garde art movements, and the biographies of individual Fluxus artists—independently. My contribution to the canon of research and writing on Fluxus is the analysis of these aspects in relation to one another as the basis for overarching ideals and beliefs held within the group that then informed their production. I take into account primary and secondary sources from the artists themselves and art historians—including Dick Higgins, George Maciunas, Estera Milman, Owen Smith and Hannah Higgins—while placing Fluxus within the social, political and philosophical context of the period in order to establish the internal and external function of both Fluxus artwork and the group itself. While historians such as Hannah Higgins and Estera Milman have discussed the social, experiential and pedagogical nature of Fluxus work, parallels to mainstream political and cultural institutions and the influence of the social and political climate of the time have not been emphasized in their analysis. I believe it is necessary to draw these comparisons in order to understand not only the setting in which Fluxus developed, but also the goals of the group and the success, or lack thereof, experienced in attempting to achieve these goals.

⁷ Throughout my thesis I will be using the term ‘network’ as defined by Merriam-Webster Dictionary to refer to an informal association of people in the sense of friends or colleagues. There were also attempts, specifically on the part of George Maciunas, to establish formal structural elements within the Fluxus group at one time or another, which I will discuss.

States, also interacted with Fluxus. Fluxus, true to its name, was not a static or clearly defined movement, but was continuously fluid in both membership and artistic practice. Early Fluxus performance festivals developed throughout Western Europe beginning in 1962 with a series of Fluxus concerts held in Wiesbaden, Copenhagen and Paris, followed by the seminal Festum Fluxorum Fluxus at the Dusseldorf Art Academy in 1963.⁸ Also in 1963 were Fluxus festivals held in Amsterdam, The Hague and Nice. All of these performances were organized by artists who would become the core members of the Fluxus group, including Ben Patterson, George Maciunas, Dick Higgins and George Brecht. While they were the result of planning by these artists, they were primarily a direct manifestation of loose associations, collaborations and contacts, rather than the product of a cohesive artistic group. As Owen Smith has suggested, “this association, as so often happened in the history of Fluxus, was not so much a collaboration of like-minded artistic innovators as a much more mundane affiliation of friends of friends who needed a performance space for their experimental work[...].”⁹ Although Fluxus consisted of artists around the world, for the sake of thorough analysis, the artists and I will focus on worked mainly in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s. The reasoning behind such a focus is derived from the organization of the group and its activity. George Maciunas, who is considered by many art historians to be the founder of Fluxus, with other core members of Fluxus such as Dick Higgins, Alison Knowles, and Robert Watts, conducted most Fluxus organization and production in the United States, while maintaining contact with international Fluxus associates. Although many of these artists spent periods of time traveling globally during the early days of Fluxus activity, the majority of their work in association with Fluxus, established as a more

⁸ These early performances, and especially the Wiesbaden performance series, will be discussed here in further detail in Chapter One.

⁹ Owen Smith, “Developing a Fluxable Forum: Early Performance and Publishing,” in *Fluxus Reader*, ed. Ken Friedman (New York: Academy Editions, 1998), 5.

unified and intentional artistic group, took place within the United States following these early European festivals. In tracing the development of Fluxus, concentration on Fluxus activity in New York also serves as a manageable microcosm of the larger evolution of the group.

Beginning with the early 1960s event-based festivals and the conceptualization of Fluxus, the first chapter examines the attitudes of artists who would define Fluxus and the beginnings of the Fluxus aesthetic in the historical formation of the group. The second chapter continues the discussion of the group, focusing on the internal structure of the group itself. After the founding members of Fluxus had come together, a social and organizational dynamic naturally formed. Following the Fluxus ideology of the integration of everyday life and art, the personal and artistic attitudes and interactions between Fluxus artists were similarly intertwined. From these interactions developed community structures and art practices that informed the establishment of Fluxus social institutions and conventions. Finally, the third chapter investigates the extension of these novel social institutions into the realm of the commercial. The creation of independent distribution channels for Fluxus artwork and the evolution of the Fluxus organization based on a traditional capitalist framework support a possible undercurrent of ambivalence toward the free market capitalist system that Fluxus criticized, which is further problematized in an exploration of the function of Fluxus objects that were promoted and sold using these channels of distribution.

Chapter 1: The Beginning of Fluxus and Early Events

In the 1950s and 1960s artists in the United States and Europe combined the strategies of collectivism and collaboration, the embodied art experience, and the use of everyday objects and actions as a means of active resistance to the growing commodification of art and consumer material culture. Such an aversion to mainstream society during this period followed in the footsteps of the earlier avant-garde that rejected the autonomy of art institutions by elevating everyday objects to the status of art. In doing so, avant-garde artists attempted to integrate art into life and break the exclusivity of high art, in hopes of changing society as a whole.¹⁰ Although initially radical in their challenge to the dominant conception of art-making and exhibition, work by the early twentieth-century avant-garde—including dada Readymades, which were radical in their placement of everyday items in the gallery space, and Cubist collages, which incorporated elements of the everyday—were pulled into the orbit of the museum system, and were eventually incorporated into the canon of high art. In the beginning of the twentieth century, avant-garde artists began to seek new ways of refuting the oppressive high art world, taking what art historian Alex Potts refers to as the “heroic stance.”¹¹ Epitomized in the constructed image of more successful Abstract Expressionists, this hero artist was viewed as the autonomous individual confronting societal norms and rejecting the demands of the established market.¹²

During the height of modernism in the early twentieth century, avant-garde artists had withdrawn from the materialist values and contemporary capitalist societies that caused them spiritual discomfort, turning inward as a means of self-fulfillment. For modernist artists working

¹⁰ Alex Potts, “Autonomy in Post-War Art, Quasi-Heroic and Casual,” *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 27, no. 1 (2004), 46.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 47

¹² *Ibid.*

in the first half of the twentieth century, the work of art existed as an independent and essentially transcendental world of pure creation, and if valid meaning could not be located in the social world it could only be found in pure abstraction. Initially, the self-sufficiency of art and the aesthetic experience as an end in itself functioned as a kind of protest against materialism and the practical value assigned to the commodified objects of consumer culture, but by the 1950s the replacement of conventional social values with the purely aesthetic by these artists began to yield self-referential formalism that left little space for social significance or obligation.¹³ By the Cold War period, the work of Abstract Expressionists had cemented formalism as a fundamental negotiation for contemporary artwork. In the United States, and specifically New York, monumental paintings by Abstract Expressionist artists reduced form to the physical marks on the canvas and the relations between color, line and field. Abstract Expressionists pushed the modernist notion of form to the extreme using the traditional medium of paint and canvas, ultimately creating finished products of which they could claim individual authorship.

With Abstract Expressionism, the painting was still objectified and the viewer could choose the degree of detachment or involvement he or she had with it.¹⁴ In much the same way that more traditional large scale artwork functions, the viewer was not physically interfered with by the painting and the viewer was limited in his or her physical engagement or interference with the painting. These monumental paintings, as autonomous objects produced and sold, became fetishized and commodified as any other product in a capitalist market. The flourishing postwar economy in the United States and this commodification of culture that arose from the commercial exploitation of the association of social status with consumption and the sacred status of art objects caused the American art market to balloon by the second half of the

¹³ For further discussion see Suzi Gablik, *Has Modernism Failed?* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1984). 10.

¹⁴ Johanna Drucker, "Collaboration without Object(s) in the Early Happenings," *Art Journal*, vol. 52, no. 4 (Winter, 1993), JSTOR <http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.wustl.edu/stable/777624>, 54.

twentieth century, with the number of major collectors in the United States rising from roughly two dozen in 1945 to 200 in 1960, and to 2,000 by 1970. Modern American art-market prices similarly increased, exemplified by paintings such as Jackson Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm*, which sold in 1957 for \$30,000.¹⁵

In order to return art to the dissident role initially intended by the avant-garde, artists of the 1960s turned again outward, leaving behind the individualism and pure abstraction of Abstract Expressionism that had become absorbed into the traditional commercial market and embracing socialization through collaborative and collective art practice that envisioned objects not as the final product, but rather as a means to such socialization and thereby outside the commercial art market. As art historian Johanna Drucker suggests, the generation of artists following Abstract Expressionism sought a “rejection of the signature terms of mastery, originality, and authorship, and an overall subversion of the commodity-and-object-oriented structure of visual art.”¹⁶ In what came to be known as “happenings,” artists such as Allan Kaprow used collaboration as a method to extend the concept of form from the contained surface of the canvas to the immediate realms of time and space, thereby challenging the limitations of the rarified canvas painting and the canonized notions of originality and authorship bound to the modernist tradition of art making. Directly preceding and overlapping with Fluxus activity, happenings took place predominantly in New York from 1958 through the first years of the 1960s. Early happenings at artist George Segal's farm in New Brunswick, New Jersey, as well as those organized by Allan Kaprow found inspiration in the events staged by John Cage at Black Mountain College, an innovative and community-based experimental arts school in Asheville, North Carolina.

¹⁵ Erika Lee Doss, *Twentieth-century American Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 155.

¹⁶ Ducker, “Collaboration without Object(s) in the Early Happenings,” 52.

One of the first conceptions of the “happening” piece, titled *Theater Piece No. 1* took place in 1952 in the dining hall of the college under the direction of Cage, who was a faculty member there at the time. This theatrical, multi-media evening involved numerous overlapping activities, including Cage reciting a lecture from a ladder positioned in the center of a group of seated audience members, choreographer Merce Cunningham improvising movements with a dog, painter Robert Rauschenberg playing Edith Piaf records on an old phonograph, a movie playing on one of the dining hall walls, and various other actions taking place throughout the space.¹⁷ This playful, chaotic, multisensory environment called into question what was and what was not part of the art event. As audience members listened, watched and reacted, their personal lived experience in the moment and the performance itself became conflated, allowing the audience members to become collaborative producers of the event that had neither a preconceived goal nor a resulting objective product. A few years later, in 1957 Kaprow was invited by Cage to attend his composition class at the New School for Social Research in New York, which he began regularly attending thereafter. In these classes, which were also attended by Fluxus artists Dick Higgins, George Brecht, Jackson Mac Low and others, Cage gave the students weekly assignments to find and employ ordinary objects, such as playing cards and toys, in exercises and new art pieces that would be demonstrated for classroom interaction. While many non-musical elements such as these were incorporated by Cage in his theatrical compositions, as art historian Liz Kotz points out, for his students these “exercises became...

¹⁷ Doss, *Twentieth-century American Art*, 141. For a detailed account and analysis of *Theater Piece No. 1* at Black Mountain College, see Ruth Erickson, “Chance Encounters: Theater Piece No. 1 and Its Prehistory,” in *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College, 1933-1957*, eds. Helen Molesworth and Ruth Erickson (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 2015): 298-303.

ends in themselves,” essentially “isolating event-structures from Cage’s programmed performances.”¹⁸

By 1959 Kaprow, influenced by what he had been taught at the New School, organized the first self-described “happening,” *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* at the Reuben Gallery in New York, providing an opportunity for a wider audience to experience this type of work. In this event, rather than passive observers, the audience became active participants, as evidenced in Kaprow’s score for the work, which contains a “cast” list of the “artist” participants and then ends with the entry “the visitors—who sit in various chairs.”¹⁹ Kaprow had divided the gallery space into three separate rooms painted by plastic sheets in which audience members sat in groups. At points throughout the performance, each group moved to a different room where they would experience different sets of sensory events dictated by Kaprow’s thoroughly scripted score that directed participants on when to move and when to applaud. In so doing, Kaprow removed a large degree of spectatorial authority while blurring the divisions between performer and audience.²⁰ Such performances were, then, inherently social in their forced interaction between the people involved, while also having an advantage over traditional painting and sculpture in that they stimulated a critical consciousness in the spectator. Through these events, viewers became pulled into an immediate experience of their social surroundings, and rather than didactically demonstrating modes of social thought and behavior, as traditional theater had, such performances set conditions in which people could actively experience reality and their existence within it.

¹⁸ Liz Kotz, “Post-Cagean Aesthetics and the ‘Event’ Score,” *October*, vol. 95 (Winter 2001), JSTOR <http://www.jstor.org/stable/779200>, 73.

¹⁹ Johanna Drucker, “Collaboration without Object(s) in the Early Happenings,” 54.

²⁰ Mike Sell, ed., *Avant-Garde Performance and Material Exchange: Vectors of the Radical* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 144.

Similar to the fragmented and ephemeral sensory experience of happenings, Fluxus reacted to the traditional visual model of early modernist art that classified the viewer as idealized, disembodied and uniperspectival by calling upon the viewer to collaborate and participate in the work. Although happenings relocated the artwork in immediate time and space, embodying the viewer as actor and relinquishing the reliance on a static object as the locus of creative expression, they still maintained elements of traditional theater, such as a predetermined and bracketed performance time and a delineated set of instructions provided by the artist to be followed strictly by performers and audience. Fluxus instead used the objects and instructional scores involved in such performances to allow for the almost complete absence of original authorial intention and the removal of the last traces of traditional didactic theater by transcending the confines of the designated, singular performance time and space. Fluxus artists accomplished the removal of such traditional limitations by essentially creating scores and instructions meant to be repeated and reinterpreted *ad infinitum* by any and all people, at any point in time and in any location that the performer of the instructed action chose, with or without the presence of the original artist. As Fluxus artist George Brecht believed, the Fluxus score has a history and also a living, social existence, with the performance of such events beginning with the very reading of the text.

This social existence begins with the individual action of reading, but the true nature of the Fluxus event score and performance was in the social exchange and physical and mental engagement of the people involved. Collaboration between the Fluxus artists and their audience and between the artists themselves created a collective in both the social and artistic sense. The dictionary definition of collective and collectivism relates to centralized control, especially in terms of the means of production. Collectivization among modernist artists had been taking place

throughout the twentieth century, seen in the formation of artist groups around an ideology based on social and political change. Modernist artists saw the collectivization of their professional roles and functions, as participants in artistic movements such as Surrealism and Suprematism, as a realization of their task as artists to mold completely new societies or as reflections of the loss of the collective human bond that was the result of technological and cultural progress. After World War II, the idea of collectivism became frequently associated in the United States with the state-sanctioned collectivist operations of the socialist USSR and the perception of lost individuality. This Western politicization of collectivism continued through the 1950s, but its medium and aims remained cultural, as the nationalism that had developed during the war was being supplanted by mass consumer culture in the United States. As Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette argue, the collective social form constructed an alternative to commodified society as a form of cultural politics or cultural radicalism:

From the Situationists to Group Material to the Yes Men, postwar cultural politics was most clearly realized within informally networked communities of artists, technologically savvy art geeks, and independent political activists who embraced the plasticity of postwar political identities while turning directly toward the spectacle of mass commodification...in order to make use of its well-established network of signification, amplification, and distribution.²¹

By the mid-twentieth century, international avant-garde art groups, such as CoBrA, Lettrist International and Situationist International implemented collective gestures for carrying out their aesthetic and intellectual approaches to mass culture that took the form of actions they referred to as *détournement* (meaning “hijacking,” or “rerouting”) which were essentially a form of irreverent parody, manifested in acts such as the borrowing of behaviors or clothing styles and the rejection of imposed modes of navigating urban spaces. These gestures have been defined as

²¹ Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette, eds., *Collectivism After Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 10.

“turning expressions of the capitalist system and its media culture against itself”²² and were meant to be a way of disrupting officially sanctioned interaction with the social space around us and policies of social isolation, while forcing conventionally private property to be collective.²³ Fluxus artists incorporated this form of parody and plagiarism in their work with similar goals of disruption, but also extended such collective activity from the public realm of the city to the private sphere of intimate socialization in their event scores meant to take place both within and without the domestic space.

By making such exchange the crux of their art, Fluxus artists were able to call attention to the larger context of interaction in society. Joseph Beuys, who was associated with Fluxus, believed that through what he referred to as “social plastic art,” artists would be able to use their work to address social concerns.²⁴ Beuys argued that “nothing else is able to change the social conditions or relations than the extended concept of art.”²⁵ But with what did artists like Beuys find fault in contemporary society and why would they want to change social conditions? By the 1950s, especially in post-war America, capitalist markets and the advancement of consumer culture had led to what many artists in Fluxus felt were pervasive problems in the structuring of society. The shifting role and distribution of wealth in Western culture had affected socioeconomic stratification. As the 1950s became the 1960s, Fluxus artists were reacting to a postwar era dominated by the Cold War. Ideological tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union were not only based on the opposition of communism and capitalism, but on the opposition between having and not having any ideology. Sociologist C. Wright Mills argued in

²² Douglas B. Holt, *Cultural Strategy: Using Innovative Ideologies to Build Breakthrough Brands* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 252.

²³ Jelena Stojanović “*Internationaleries*: Collectivism, the Grotesque, and cold War Functionalism,” in *Collectivism After Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945*, eds. Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 28.

²⁴ Craig J. Saper, *Networked Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 23.

²⁵ Joseph Beuys, in interview with Peter Mönnig, 1981, published by the periodical *Daily Edition*, quoted in Saper, *Networked Art*, 116.

his 1951 book on American society argued that indifference was the predominant political attitude of the era, saying of the American middle-class “they are strangers to politics. They are not radical, not liberal, not conservative, not reactionary; they are inactionary; they are out of it.”²⁶ This attitude, Mills suggested, was supported by the contemporary cultural tenor of social and economic security. With the beginning of the 1960s came isolationism and the stirring of a new internationalism and public interest that shifted from the passivity and self-indulgence of the 1950s.²⁷ While many Fluxus artists did not assert strong ties to any one political ideology, there remained political implications in much of their collective artistic work. In addition to the influence of collective practices of earlier avant-garde art movements, Maciunas also suggested that the collectivism fundamental to Fluxus was based in part on the 1920s Soviet group and publication LEF (Levyi Front Iskusstv, or Left Front of the Arts). In a letter to Tomas Schmit, Maciunas connects the Fluxus ideology to that of LEF, writing “...Fluxus objectives are social (not aesthetic). They are connected to the group of LEF group of 1929 [sic] in Soviet Union (ideologically)... FLUXUS is against art as medium or vehicle promoting artist’s ego... Fluxus therefore should tend towards collective spirit....”²⁸

Fluxus artists continued the use of everyday objects and the detritus of life, but also began to move away from the purely aesthetic object with the practice of “event” works that relied on performative activity and interaction between people. In these events, based often on public performance of instructions that are either unabashedly banal life actions or the playful interaction with everyday objects in conventionally unproductive ways, Fluxus artists joined

²⁶ C. Wright Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1951; 2002), 328.

²⁷ See Arthur M. Schlesinger “The New Mood in Politics,” in *The Politics of Hope*, ed. Arthur M. Schlesinger (Boston: Riverside Press, 1962) for extended discussion of this shift in the sociocultural climate of the United States.

²⁸ George Maciunas, letter to Tomas Schmit, January, 1964, Gilbert and Lila Silverman Archive, quoted in Jon Hendricks, “Collective,” in *Fluxus Codex*, ed. Jon Hendricks (Detroit, MI: Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, 1988), 37.

artistic practices and concrete experiences, strengthening this “art-life” relationship. Events incorporated social interaction in a way that objects placed in a vitrine in a museum could not. One example of a Fluxus event work that used a most ordinary object in order to create novel physical and social interaction is Ben Vautier’s *Audience Variation No. 1* (date unknown). For this performance, Vautier instructed that the audience all be tied up together by performers in the aisles, throwing balls of twine to create a dense web of string over the audience’s heads. With enough string, the audience became entangled in one another, to the chairs they were in, and thus to the event and space itself. Once the audience was thoroughly bound, the performers left the space and the audience members were forced to untangle themselves before they could leave. This piece suggests both the social and individual experience of the performance for the performers and the audience, while blurring and even exchanging the role of performer and audience member for those present. The collective of artists that had orchestrated and performed this event materialized a collective of audience members who had to work together, interacting physically and socially, to free themselves. The audience members were no longer passive observers of the performance, but became active participants, while the original performers who had thrown the balls of string became observers of the audience twisting and turning to negotiate their predicament. While the balls of string are not the intended art product, but a tool to create the art experience, they also become fetishized as a record that traced the history of the movement of performers and audience.

In much the same way that the string was essential to the physical connection of the audience and the performers, also essential to this novel community was informal social connection, both with each other and with the public, through their art. At its core, Fluxus was a group of individuals working with each other on both a local and international scale. Many of the

Fluxus artists traveled extensively in Europe, Asia, and America practicing a kind of nomadic lifestyle that functioned as a type of research strategy for their art. Such a lifestyle was perhaps the result of Fluxus artists' alienation from the cultures they found to be corrupt and commercialized. In the 1950s, McCarthy anti-Communist fervor pushed many artists out of the United States, while remnant strains of domestic fascism left a bitter taste in the mouths of others. Rejecting the nationalistic and competitive characteristics of Cold War era internationalism, Fluxus artists sought community beyond national borders and association through ideas. As artist Geoffrey Hendricks said, "in a certain way we're nomads. We travel and we connect up with people of similar minds and then things grow out from there."²⁹

As Hendricks' statement suggests, it was not through a predetermined set of goals or strategy that the formation of the Fluxus group and their production took place, but through the connections and interactions of the artists in their travels. In 1960, a continuation of Cage's experimental music class at the New School served as the backdrop for the meeting of La Monte Young and George Maciunas, who would become a leader of the Fluxus group. Young subsequently invited Maciunas to attend a series of performances and art exhibits at a loft owned by contemporary artist Yoko Ono on Chambers Street in New York. At what later came to be known as the Chambers Street series, Maciunas was introduced to Higgins, Mac Low, and Brecht among others. The same year, Maciunas opened the A/G Gallery at 925 Madison Avenue with his colleague Almus Salcius, where he took the main responsibility for organizing performances and exhibitions in the space.³⁰ During this year, the organic development of Fluxus began.

²⁹ Geoffrey Hendricks in conversation with Alison Knowles, Hannah Higgins, Bracken Hendricks, and writer Janet Kaplan, published in "Flux Generations," *Art Journal*, vol. 59, no. 2 (Summer 2000), 12.

³⁰ Owen Smith, "Proto-Fluxus in the United States, 1959-1961: The Establishment of a Like-minded Community of Artists," in *Fluxus: A Conceptual Country*, ed. Estera Milman (Providence, RI: Visible Language, 1992), 49-50.

Traveling to Europe in the early 1960s, these artists continued to work separately, but also began to unite to organize the first European Fluxus performances. Maciunas decided to leave the A/G Gallery in 1961 and took a job as a civilian designer of printed materials for the United States Air Force at a base in Wiesbaden, West Germany.³¹ Before leaving for Germany, Maciunas had been in conversation with Young, who intended to publish a collection of work by artists in the United States, Japan, and Europe. Young had collected materials including music scores, essays, poetry and performance scores from several participating artists for the publication he planned to name *An Anthology*. Young offered Maciunas the position of co-publisher and designer of the magazine; work on the master copy had begun in mid-September of 1960.³² The eventual publication of this collection in 1963 was significant because it solidified the participating artists as a group with similar artistic goals and ideologies, including Higgins, Brecht, Emmett Williams, and Maciunas, that would form the nucleus of Fluxus.

On his trip to Wiesbaden, Maciunas brought many of the materials intended for this publication and between 1961 and 1962 he developed the idea for his own magazine, which he decided to name *Fluxus I*.³³ The term “fluxus” was intended originally by Maciunas merely to be the title of his proposed magazine, and he began planning performance concerts in Germany using the term as a means of advertising this publication. He said in an interview with Larry Miller:

So basically it was me alone then who finally determined we were going to call that name and reason for it was the various meanings that you’d find in the dictionary for it, you know, so that it has very broad, many meanings, sort of funny meanings. Nobody seemed

³¹ Owen Smith, *Fluxus: The History of an Attitude* (San Diego: San Diego State University Press, 1998), 41.

³² Smith, “Fluxus: Proto-Fluxus in the United States, 1959-1961,” 52.

³³ Thomas Kellein, “I Make Jokes! Fluxus through the Eyes of ‘Chairman’ George Maciunas, in *Fluxus*, ed. Thomas Kellein (London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 48.

to care anyway what we were going to call it because there was no formal meetings of the groups or anything.³⁴

While in Wiesbaden Maciunas made the acquaintance of other artists working in Germany including Nam June Paik and Emmett Williams, and he kept in contact with Dick Higgins and Alison Knowles, who were also traveling in Europe during this time. Maciunas' acquaintance with Nam June Paik would prove fruitful that year in the development of Fluxus festivals in Germany. In the spring of 1962 Paik was contacted by Rolf Jahrling, the director of Galerie Parnass in Wuppertal, and asked to organize a performance called *Zum Kleinen Sommerfest "Après John Cage"* for the gallery. Turning the offer down, Paik instead mentioned that Maciunas and artist Ben Patterson might be interested. Both artists accepted the offer to help, and the first public manifestation related to Fluxus developed. *Après John Cage* was performed on the evening of June 9, 1962 and was intended for guests who had attended the opening of an exhibition of paintings at the gallery. The Kleinen Sommerfest was held in the tradition of the European garden party, with attending guests dressed for such an occasion.³⁵ The event included performances of musical works by Higgins, Maciunas and Patterson, and concluded with a lecture given by Maciunas titled *Neo-Dada in Music, Theater, Poetry, Art*.

Maciunas, a historian by nature, had looked to Dada as an influence in his early conception of Fluxus. In the lecture, Maciunas discussed new developments in art, including "concretism," which engaged "the world of concrete realities," rather than "artistic abstractions."³⁶ Although he did not explicitly reference his contemporary Allan Kaprow's Happenings or New Realism in his lecture, they served as starting points in the introductory part

³⁴ George Maciunas, "Transcript of the Videotaped Interview with George Maciunas by Larry Miller," March 24, 1978, in *FLUXUS etc./Addenda I, The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection*, ed. Jon Hendricks (New York: Ink &, 1983), 16.

³⁵ Smith, *Fluxus: History of an Attitude*, 59.

³⁶ George Maciunas, *Neo-Dada in Music, Theater, Poetry, Art*, trans. Peter Herbo, quoted in Jon Hendricks, "Foreword," in *Fluxus Codex*, ed. Jon Hendricks (Detroit, MI: Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, 1988), 23.

of the speech dedicated to Cage and the non-artificiality of non-art, anti-art and reality. Moving away from these other artists in the proceeding sections of his speech, Maciunas made the first public proclamation of a distinct Fluxus aesthetic ideology. Maciunas argued that the “actual contribution of the concrete artist... lies in the creation of a draft or rather in a method through which a form can create itself independently of him.”³⁷ He took concretism a step further, stating that art nihilism and anti-art actually achieve a greater rejection of artificiality than concretists.³⁸ He said that art nihilists “oppose forms artificial in themselves, models or methods of composition,...[and] artificially constructed phenomena in the various areas of artistic practice” while acting against “the artificial separation of producer or performer, of generator and spectator or against the separation of art and life.”³⁹ It seems here that Maciunas was really in favor of the complete rejection of “art” in the traditional sense of an object without function in the everyday context of life, which is artificial in its purposelessness and contextualization outside of the brackets of daily activity and utilitarian production.

Maciunas had also designed and printed a brochure for the guests titled *Fluxus [Brochure Prospectus for Fluxus Yearboxes]*, using it as a savvy means of advertising his intended publications and the upcoming festivals he was planning.⁴⁰ The four-page brochure was printed on black and orange paper, stapled in a folder with “Fluxus” on the cover, and distributed during the performance. The brochure, which contained a dictionary definition of the term ‘fluxus,’ a list of the editorial committee for the new publication of the same name, and information on ordering the publication, was meant specifically for public distribution, not just within the

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ the Concrete art movement was a precursor to Fluxus, founded in 1930 by the artist Theo van Doesburg and closely associated with the De Stijl art movement. The ethos of Concrete art was based on the concept that art should be non-referential, as its components should not allude to anything encountered in the natural world. As opposed to abstract art, which could often include abstractions of nature, Concrete art was intended to stem directly from the mind.

³⁹ Maciunas, *Neo-Dada in Music, Theater, Poetry, Art*, 23.

⁴⁰ Smith, *Fluxus: History of an Attitude*, 59.

gallery space.⁴¹ Maciunas incorporated words like “anti-art,” “concept art,” “Dada,” “theater,” and “happenings” in the design of the brochure in order to educate the public about the new Fluxus art while historically contextualizing it and encouraging interest in the work. The introduction of the name for his publication and concert series in this setting was strategic. Because Fluxus was essentially unknown in Europe at this point, Maciunas took this opportunity to introduce Fluxus in relation to the more widely known work of John Cage, presenting it as a kind of post-Cage art that was developing in America.⁴²

Following this performance, Maciunas continued to work with artists in Europe to plan and advertise a concert series in Wiesbaden that would strengthen the presence of Fluxus in Europe (Fig. 1). Beginning September 2-3, 1962, the Wiesbaden Fluxus Festival series took place over three weekends. The first weekend consisted almost entirely of music and performance using pianos. The second and third weekend events included action music, concrete music and event pieces that would form the model for subsequent European Fluxus festivals.⁴³ This series of performances was also significant in the formation of an emerging Fluxus aesthetic. Due to the wide variety of works presented, tensions among the participating artists arose. In the first weekend, which was dominated by musical performances, some of the composers and performers—including Michael von Biel and Karl Eric Welm—took issue with the action music performances and events that were also staged. As Higgins describes, “they did not like some of the pieces Maciunas was doing... and they had a style of living that was too self-indulgent to be concrete with the lively aspects of Fluxus. So we kicked Von Biel’s crowd out and Rose left.”⁴⁴ This statement suggests that by this point the artists who were active in

⁴¹ Jon Hendricks, “Collective,” in *Fluxus Codex*, 91.

⁴² Bazzichelli, *Networking: The Net as Artwork*, 34.

⁴³ Smith, *Fluxus: The History of an Attitude*, 73.

⁴⁴ Dick Higgins, *Postface I Jefferson’s Birthday* (New York: Something Else Press, 1964), 68.

organizing the first weekend and reorganizing the remaining two weekends after a number of composers and musicians left had begun to form a more specific idea of the Fluxus sensibility.

During the last two weekends of the Wiesbaden Fluxus series, Dick Higgins, Alison Knowles, Emmett Williams, Ben Patterson, and George Maciunas fortified their central role in Fluxus as they worked on a new series of performances that would become part of the Fluxus oeuvre. Event pieces of the second and third weekend in Wiesbaden included Patterson's *Paper Piece* and Higgins' *Constellation No. 4*. Patterson's *Paper Piece* instructed two performers to enter the stage from the wings carrying large three-foot by fifteen-foot piece of paper held over the heads of the audience members while other pieces of paper were heard being torn and crumpled off-stage. The large sheet of paper was then dropped on the audience as shreds and balls of paper were thrown at them and other sheets of paper containing a call for the audience to "promote living art, anti-art, promote NON-ART REALITY to be grasped by all people, not only critic, dilettantes and professionals..." were also dispersed among the crowd.⁴⁵ Some of the other performances during this festival recalled earlier avant-garde musical composition, like Higgins' *Constellation No. 4*, which instructed performers to choose a single sound made with any instrument available, including his voice or other nonconventional instruments.⁴⁶ Patterson's event, however, demonstrated the beginning of a shift in Fluxus away from other art movements, as well as a growing concern with propagandizing Fluxus ideas. These and the other event pieces in the Wiesbaden series pushed against the more traditional new music performances that had been originally scheduled, creating a new aesthetic of non-music performance and interaction that would come to be intimately associated with Fluxus.

⁴⁵ Owen Smith, "Developing a Fluxable Forum: Early Performance and Publishing," 3.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 4.

Up until this point Fluxus was not seen as an organized group and the artists working together had not officially adopted a name, although they had practiced art together intermittently since the 1950s. In his essay “Fluxus Theory and Reception,” Higgins suggests that the artists also had not *publicly* presented themselves as a group until the Wiesbaden festival, where the term Fluxus was used for the first time as the label for their group performance.⁴⁷ Indeed, this festival series served both as a marker for the internal solidification of Fluxus as a group and as a major point of public exposure to Fluxus work.⁴⁸ The Wiesbaden festival drew a larger audience than previous performances by the artists involved. Additionally, local press attended some of the performances, taping them for a partial television broadcast.⁴⁹ Some of the event pieces caused quite a stir among viewers and gained notable media attention. Two of these prominent pieces were *Danger Music No. 2* (Fig. 2), performed by Higgins and Knowles, and *Danger Music No. 15*, performed by Higgins. The two performances were presented in succession, and were described in detail in a published review of the festival written by Richard O’Regan:

Higgins entered and took a bow. He sat himself beside a bucket. His wife, Alison Knowles, appeared with a pair of scissors. She began to cut his hair. Higgins looked content. After 15 minutes, the audience grew restless. Paper airplanes circled from the back row. Conversations took over.... At this moment, Higgins sprang from his barber’s seat and seized two pounds of butter and a container of a dozen eggs...he smashed some of the eggs on his now completely shaven head. He tossed eggs into the air, onto the floor, and gently into the audience. Those in the know nonchalantly unfurled umbrellas. One egg dripped sadly from the wall. Higgins mixed butter and eggs and advanced towards the audience. An elegantly dressed lady fled through an exit expecting the mess

⁴⁷ Dick Higgins, “Fluxus Theory and Reception,” in *Fluxus Reader*, ed. Ken Friedman (New York: Academy Editions, 1998), 220.

⁴⁸ This is not to suggest that the formation of Fluxus should be assigned a specific date or event for its birth because it was not so much a particular ideological program as it was several individual artists collaborating to distribute their work. That being said, many artists associated with Fluxus have stated that if there was such a date around which Fluxus came to be, it would have been the second and third weekends of the Wiesbaden festival. See Emmett Williams interview with Owen Smith, April 27, 1988, cited in Smith, *Fluxus: History of an Attitude*, 73.

⁴⁹ Smith, “Developing a Fluxable Forum: Early Performance and Publishing,” in *Fluxus Reader*, 8.

to be hurled into the air. Instead, Higgins placed it tenderly in the hands of several members of the audience.⁵⁰

While there certainly was a degree of shock value with event pieces such as *Danger Music No. 2* and *Danger Music No. 15*, as evidenced by the description of the woman fleeing the room, it is the interaction between Knowles and Higgins and the engagement with the audience that is most significant in this and later Fluxus event performances. The score written for *Danger Music No. 2*, in typical fashion of Fluxus event scores, is open-ended and allows for a great deal of individual interpretation in its execution. Reading only “Hats. Rags. Paper. Heave. Shave.,” Higgins had the freedom to choose the actions, incorporating the objects, his body, and other people as he was compelled in the moment of performance. His interpretation that day, as he described, was “shaving my head and heaving political pamphlets into the audience.”⁵¹ But it is worth noting that Higgins had not decided to shave his own head. Instead, he made the choice to have his wife, Alison Knowles, cut his hair for him. By acting out the normally mundane activity of getting a haircut in front of the audience, Higgins essentially bracketed the activity in space and time, asking the viewers to really experience it; to experience each cut of the scissors, the loss of hair as it fell from his head, and above all the intimacy and connection between Knowles and Higgins, gained through the trust Higgins put in her and the impact Knowles had in physically touching and altering Higgins’ body.

Extending this interaction from the stage to the audience, Higgins intellectually engaged the viewers, while also physically interacting, by throwing political pamphlets at them. This action is linked at once with the symbolic act of dispersing propaganda, and with the implication of his irreverence toward the message written on the paper because he throws it, letting the pamphlets fall where they may, rather than diligently handing them to each person. What seems

⁵⁰ Richard O’Regan, “There’s Music—and Eggs—in the Air,” *Stars and Stripes*, October 21, 1962, 11.

⁵¹ Higgins, *Postface I Jefferson’s Birthday*, 69.

to be more important than the words printed is the act of dissemination, the physical exchange between himself and the people in the room. As the performance of the second *Danger Music* score immediately follows, Higgins rhymes the act of throwing pamphlets with the act of throwing eggs. Again, the physical culmination of the event score for *Danger Music No. 15*, like *Danger Music No. 2*, was the result of Higgins' immediate and improvised interpretation. The score instructed only to "work with butter and eggs for a time" (Fig. 3), so the action could be done anywhere with any number of people, using the eggs and butter in any way deemed fit for an undefined amount of time. The structure of the action music and event pieces at these festivals established an exchange of person-to-person interaction between the performers and the audience members. These scores involved simple actions, ideas and objects from daily life. They could be acted out by artists other than the original creator, as art that is open to various realizations and exists independently of a single author, democratizing the art-making process and allowing any person to become involved in the culmination of the work.

Also in these early event pieces the body becomes equated with the materials used. Fluxus placed value on the ordinary objects, like eggs and butter, as tools for creative expression in performance, while also placing value in the everyday actions that we participate in, such as cutting hair, as potential moments of artistic expression. One important aspect of this value placement is the commingling of these objects—used as they would be in everyday activity—and the freedom given to these objects to shift from their conventional utility to their nonconventional performative use. The freedom given to these objects can be extended to imply our own potential freedom in society, or specifically the society envisioned by Fluxus, to move freely between the roles of worker, artist and audience. The clouding of the boundary between

performance versus life was not just implied but openly asserted, as artist Geoffrey Hendricks' son Bracken Hendricks elaborates:

Hannah [Higgins] and I and all of us Flux Kids have discussed the arbitrariness of the definition between life and art.... The pitcher that's used to pour off the ladder [in a Fluxus performance] is also the pitcher at home that's used to serve orange juice in the morning. This blurring of a continuum of relationship to materials, to experience, to definition of performance opens up a kind of creative freedom, and brings the essence of art back closer to daily living.⁵²

By drawing connections, both conceptual and physical, between the body acting and the objects acted with and upon, the body was presented as both subject and object to create an interrelated field of experience and perception. In these terms, Fluxus opened the viewer and performer to experience a sense of belonging in the world of objects and other people around them, not only in the moment of Fluxus performance, but in daily life. As Kristine Stiles wrote, because "Fluxus originated in the context of performance, ... the nature of its being—the ontology of Fluxus—is performative."⁵³ The nature of Fluxus was also open and collaborative, requiring the viewer(s) to add something to the work to complete it. The exchange of activity and objects here is primarily physical and cognitive. The experience is immediate and visceral, incorporating the senses, emotion and action, as exemplified in *Danger Music No. 15* by the sensory experience of viscous egg material in the participant's hand, the anticipation of possibly being hit with an egg, and the active response in either fleeing the space or receiving the egg tenderly offered by Higgins.

While performative, Fluxus was also distinct from the performance works of other art movements in its abandonment of the theatrical. The result of this non-theatrical performance is a new understanding of both art and life. Knowles pointed this out, saying "Whatever it is you

⁵² Bracken Hendricks, in conversation with Alison Knowles, Hannah Higgins, Geoffrey Hendricks, and writer Janet Kaplan, published in "Flux Generations," *Art Journal*, vol. 59, no. 2 (Summer 2000), 10.

⁵³ Kristine Stiles, "Between Water and Stone, Fluxus Performance: A Metaphysics of Acts," in *In the Spirit of Fluxus*, exh. cat., ed. Janet Jenkins (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1993), 65.

have to touch and work with, you can make a kind of performance of it, but it has to be stripped of the hangings and accoutrements of theater. What happens is that kind of revelation,... an *emptiness*, opens up.”⁵⁴ Rather than using the everyday objects in such a performance in a manner that is theatrical, and thus separate from their everyday function, Fluxus artists implied that the event pieces are not artistically transcendent or disconnected from the activity of non-artists. Underscoring this effort to merge art and life, and the desire to encourage in all people a new general perception of life as art, Knowles also stated “The non-theatricality of those [event] pieces encouraged people to find art within their own lives. These were the most ordinary and accessible materials made magical with simple ideas.”⁵⁵ The magic of these materials is found in their function as tools of interaction. While Fluxus performances centered on the body as a means of experiencing the world, such experience was achieved only through physical interaction with objects and other people. From these objects people derive knowledge of the world and their place in it. Fluxus performance condensed the simple gesture of interaction and human behavior in the exchange between the object and the act. In so doing, Fluxus opened these behaviors to investigation, and by extension Fluxus then investigated the conditions in which people behave and interact, creating social meaning.

In addition to interweaving everyday activity with artistic performance, these events were often imbued with a sense of purposelessness in the action that opposes the typical impetus for activity in modern life. In the context of society, getting a haircut may be motivated by socially imposed standards of appearance with little consideration of the physical act itself, but in the space of the Fluxus festival, Knowles shaves Higgins’ head not for the sake of social

⁵⁴ Alison Knowles, interview by Estera Milman, “Road Shows, Street Events, and Fluxus People; A Conversation with Alison Knowles,” in *Fluxus: A Conceptual Country*, ed. Estera Milman (Providence, RI: Visible Language, 1992), 103.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 102.

presentability, but as a pure act of experience and interaction. Thus, the typical reasoning or purpose behind such an act is removed. The element of purposelessness in Fluxus events stood in contrast to the system of incentives and purpose that regulates free-market capitalist society. Rather than acting or working as a means of earning money to the end of buying more things, advancing social position, etc., the activities performed in Fluxus events became intrinsically valuable as affirmations of being-in-the-world. These actions are not commodified or mediated, but are manifestations of living in the present environment and moment. Such manifestations can be interpreted through the notion of “embodiment,” as it is understood in European phenomenology. Treated extensively in the work of philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, embodiment refers to the physical and experiential presence of our bodies, as an essential precondition for subjectivity, perception, thought, and social interaction.⁵⁶ It is through the body as acting subject that we make connections with one another in the world, and these connections form the basis of larger social networks. By focusing on the corporeal subjective interactions that mirror those of contemporary society but exist outside of its framework, Fluxus created an alternative arena for social and communal interaction among people.

The goal of this new platform for interaction was not to work within traditional models of social and artistic hierarchy of artist and viewer or consumer and object, but to create equal exchange between person and person. One of the most important aspects of Fluxus performance in these terms is the democratization of the process of realizing the work. The idea of authorial control or authority is undermined in the active participation of the audience as the ideas of the original authors are transformed by the involvement of participants in the culmination of each work. Higgins suggests this process of experiencing and participating in a Fluxus work should be

⁵⁶ See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, (1945) trans. Colin Smith (reprinted: London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

understood in terms of a “hermeneutic circle—the [artist’s] idea of the work, leading to manifestation of work, leading to recipient, leading to recipient’s own thought processes, leading to new idea of work, leading to further thought processes, leading to modified perception of work being manifested, leading back to altered perception of the idea of the work.”⁵⁷ In this sense, the individual, subjective perception of the work by the recipient is an intrinsic part of the work, even if that perception may differ from how the artist perceived it or how it was interpreted by the performer. The result is that each recipient’s perception of the work manifests its meaning and, because this perception is individualized to each recipient, there exists in one work a multiplicity of meanings. Such a multiplicity does not divide the experiences of the audience, but opens up connections in the shared subjective, or transpersonal, experience, that establishes a democratic network of experience and creation between the artist and participants. As Alison Knowles said in a discussion of the group, “I’ve always thought of Fluxus as remarkable for its offering of collaboration with so-called ordinary people as well as Fluxus artists.”⁵⁸

Much like the proto-Fluxus *Après John Cage* performance, the motivation behind these early Fluxus festivals was not only to make art but to publicize the planned Fluxus publications and to spread awareness of the work being done by these artists. In this way such performances are example of the Fluxus form of *détournement*, as they reverse typical hierarchies of advertisement and propaganda. Regarding the planning of the Wiesbaden festival, Maciunas said in interview: “...we thought, well, we’ll do concerts, that’s easier than publishing and will give us propaganda like for the publication.... So the idea was to do concerts as a promotional trick for selling whatever we were going to publish or produce. That’s how the Wiesbaden series came

⁵⁷ Dick Higgins, “Fluxus Theory and Reception,” 229.

⁵⁸ Alison Knowles, in conversation with Geoffrey Hendricks, Hannah Higgins, Bracken Hendricks, and writer Janet Kaplan, published in “Flux Generations,” *Art Journal*, vol. 59, no. 2 (Summer 2000), 6.

by and that's the first time it was called Fluxus Festivals.”⁵⁹ The motivation to not only put on performances, but to use them as a “promotional trick” to sell their work resonates with the strategy of burgeoning advertising and consumer markets throughout the West, and Maciunas and the other Fluxus artists saw the advantage of using mainstream publicity networking to promote ideas that criticized the establishment and offered an alternative to it.

This strategy of appropriating bureaucratic distribution channels of publicity to disseminate their work and ideas was further cemented after Maciunas, who by the mid-1960s had taken the role of leader in the group, wrote and circulated the *Fluxus News-Policy Letter No. 6* among Fluxus artists in April of 1963. The newsletter was divided into two sections, the first section proposing actions that he wanted the artists to take before the upcoming New York City Fluxus festival and the second section proposing the contents of the festival. Maciunas called upon artists and friends in New York City to commit disruptive acts, including:

Prearranged ‘break downs’ of a fleet of Fluxus autos & trucks bearing posters, exhibits, etc. in the middle of busiest traffic intersection.... Clogging-up subway cars during rush hours with cumbersome objects (such as large musical instruments... Large signs bearing fluxus announcements.... Disrupting concerts at ‘sensitive’ moments with ‘smell bombs.... Ordering by phone in the name of museum, theater or gallery for delivery at the exact or just prior [to] the opening, various cumbersome objects: rented chairs, tables, palm trees, caskets, lumber...⁶⁰

These proposed activities were ideologically determined and, if carried out, would have functioned as anti-establishment propaganda. Maciunas’ desire to arrest the smooth functioning of urban transportation and to interrupt cultural events like concerts with these playful and disruptive actions point to his interest in awakening the public to a critique of modern society. Placing the institutionalized gallery and museum systems directly in his sights, Maciunas wanted to not only disrupt the function, specifically the openings, of such establishments, but also to

⁵⁹ Maciunas, “Transcript of the Videotaped Interview with George Maciunas by Larry Miller,” 14.

⁶⁰ George Maciunas, *Fluxus News-Policy Letter No. 6*, April 6, 1963, Gilbert and Lila Silverman Archive, New York, n.p.

advance Fluxus as a theoretically preferable alternative to these imposing and restrictive systems by advertising Fluxus work on large signs in the process. In contrast to the response Maciunas had expected, though, many Fluxus artists were against such disorderly and aggressive behavior, and the proposed disruptions were never realized. Jackson Mac Low, for instance, was particularly negative about Maciunas' proposal, responding "I AM AGAINST ALL SABOTAGE & NEEDLESS DISRUPTION. I CONSIDER THEM UNPRINCIPLED, UNETHICAL & IMMORAL IN THE BASIC SENSE OF BEING ANTISOCIAL & HURTFUL TO THE VERY PEOPLE WHOM MY CULTURAL ACTIVITIES ARE MEANT TO HELP..."⁶¹ Mac Low's statement suggests that, although he was not interested in using such abrasive tactics, he still considered his art to be social and cultural in nature, and he was motivated by a desire to affect social change.

Mac Low was not the only artist to voice his opinion. He and others wanted to promote their work and to open the public to this new social and artistic community, but understood that disruption and what may be interpreted as antisocial acts would alienate people more than attract them. In a letter to Maciunas, Higgins argued that "There's no point in antagonizing the very people and classes that we are most interested in converting. Our point of view is strong and insidious, and is best established by meetings, lectures, and shrewd publicity. The publicity of our activities so long as it is not completely a fabrication, cannot help but interest people..."⁶² Out of a desire to maintain what he referred to as a "common front" in Fluxus as much as the realization that using more socially established channels of publicity would be most effective, Maciunas quickly issued *Fluxus News Letter No. 7* in May of 1963, in which he emphasized that the previous newsletter was not intended to be a "dictate," but merely a "stimulus to start a

⁶¹ Jackson Mac Low, letter to George Maciunas, April, 1963, quoted in Smith, *Fluxus: The History of an Attitude*, 114.

⁶² Dick Higgins, letter to George Maciunas, n.d. quoted in Smith, *Fluxus: The History of an Attitude*, 130

discussion.”⁶³ He also admitted that his motivation for the proposed street disturbances of *News-Policy Letter No. 6* “was largely ‘commercial’—the more disturbances—the more press notice, the more audience, etc. etc.”⁶⁴ From statements like these it becomes clear that the artists involved in Fluxus were not merely making art for the sake of art, but were interested in disseminating their beliefs through their art.

Because their ideas about the nature of art in relation to everyday life were opposed to the hierarchical structure of the museum and gallery system, they had to work outside of these systems that otherwise would have been the arena in which they could distribute their work. As Higgins observed, “there were so few ways open to us to present our work,” so it was necessary for Fluxus to create and maintain its own collective by networking with one another and the public, taking advantage of mainstream models of publicity and propaganda that had proven effective as a method of supporting the dominant social framework, and so would be effective in spreading Fluxus’ message.⁶⁵ Rather than completely dismissing modern bureaucratic systems of advertising, media and publicity, these artists had found a way to reconfigure them, appropriating these conventions to suggest an alternative to them. Maciunas and the Fluxus group’s active advertising for their work is but one way in which these event pieces and the publicity for them formed a means of distribution of Fluxus ideas and an arena for social and artistic exchange.

While pervasive concerns about promotion and distribution of their artistic production communicate the conception of Fluxus as a professional artistic organization of collaborators, throughout the existence of the group there was a continued cultivation of a more personal, social association. This interpersonal dynamic advanced especially in America in the 1960s as the

⁶³ George Maciunas, *Fluxus News Letter No. 7*, May 1, 1963, Gilbert and Lila Silverman Archive, New York, n.p.

⁶⁴ George Maciunas, letter to Emmett Williams, n.d., quoted in Smith, *Fluxus: The History of an Attitude*, 116.

⁶⁵ Dick Higgins, letter to Jindřich Chaloupecký, September 9, 1965, quoted in Smith, “Fluxus: A Brief History and Other Fictions,” in *In the Spirit of Fluxus*, 34.

artists continued to collaborate, and the Fluxus sensibility took root. Around 1963, many of these artists returned to New York City, including Brecht, Maciunas, Higgins, and Knowles. Upon arriving in New York, it became clear to these artists that in order to successfully produce and distribute their art and their ideas, they must maintain a strong collective. Knowles described this realization in interview with Estera Milman: “When we got back to New York, we had no concert halls, we had no audience at all. How were we going to keep together?”⁶⁶ Although Fluxus artists had been successful in locating various spaces in Europe to perform, there was no reliable location in the United States for the continuous production of Fluxus material. Conscious of the need to remain a group, the artists who had returned to New York immediately took action to maintain their collective. In the fall of 1963, Maciunas initiated plans to create a place in New York devoted to Fluxus activity. In October of that year he found such a place at 359 Canal Street, where, on the second floor of the building, Maciunas established a “Fluxhall.”⁶⁷ The hall was intended to function as a performance space to host Fluxus events, concerts and artistic activities. The first official Fluxus concert series in America, titled *Fully Guaranteed 12 Fluxus Concerts*, took place at the Fluxhall during in April, 1964. Concerts took place there during the weekends from April 11 to May 23, 1964.

By the mid-1960s, Fluxus festivals in New York expanded to include group games, banquets, travel, celebrations and ceremonies, many of them taking place at the Fluxhall. The actual space of the Fluxhall was a rectangular room with no set stage, only open areas designated for performance.⁶⁸ The physical structure of the hall demonstrates a continuing interest in the dissolution of any separation between the audience and the performers. Because there was no

⁶⁶ Alison Knowles, interview by Estera Milman, “Road Shows, Street Events, and Fluxus People; A Conversation with Alison Knowles,” 100.

⁶⁷ Smith, *Fluxus: The History of an Attitude*, 135.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 147.

stage that designated such a division, the performances in New York in the 1960s marked a point in the evolution of the Fluxus aesthetic from the earlier European concerts. This change from early Fluxus concerts was seen by Fluxus artists as crucial to furthering the dissolution of the divide between art and life, and was focused in the American group. Higgins recognized this specialization, writing “there is a slight difference between European Fluxus and American Fluxus. The Europeans have tended to perform their Fluxus works in the context of festival, while the Americans have tended to let the life situations predominate more often.”⁶⁹ The early event pieces stressed the interaction between the material, social, and mental worlds, negotiating degrees of social and political autonomy within the private and the public realms as well as the artistic and cultural realms. Now Fluxus events became even more democratic and participatory, integrating the audience into the work at all levels, while providing a continued community within the group that crossed over from the bracketed art world into the realm of everyday life.

This progression toward greater democratic involvement and direct participation reflected a larger sociopolitical movement during the mid-1960s among the American Left.

Conceptualized most prominently by young activists who formed the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and other radical groups during this period, the notion of “participatory democracy” offered an alternative to modern political practices and ideologies prevalent in 1960s America. During this period, the college campus became the locus of organized social conflict that created the foundation for SDS and other similar groups to emerge. This movement saw two lines of growth; the first a search for an alternative life style informed by the Free Speech Movement and the psychedelic left, and the second rooted in politics based on the civil rights movement and the peace movement.⁷⁰ In 1962 the SDS published a political manifesto entitled

⁶⁹ Higgins, “Fluxus Theory and Reception,” 233.

⁷⁰ Howard J Ehrlich, “Social Conflict in America: The 1960’s,” *The Sociological Quarterly* 12 (Summer 1971), 299.

the *Port Huron Statement* that drew upon not only these social and political influences, but also on the notion of the inseparability of the aesthetic experience and the political and social experience, rooted in the philosophy of John Dewey. In his book *Art as Experience* Dewey explains that “art insinuates possibilities of human relations not to be found in rule and precept, admonition and administration.”⁷¹ Dewey here is linking art with the transformation of society and suggesting that the aesthetic experience is intertwined with the experience of the everyday. For the authors of the *Port Huron Statement* this became a principle upon which to base their ethos of democracy not only as a political practice, but an aesthetic practice. The participatory democracy championed by SDS, as outlined by philosopher Arnold Kaufman, was understood by some members of the group to provide a method by which to reject egoistic individualism and to engage with the flux of communal and social experience.⁷² This disavowal of Old Left individualism in favor of the New Left social engagement and collectivity of participatory democracy provided an overtly political parallel to the artistic cultural shift from the introverted individualism of modernist movements like Abstract Expressionism to the self-abnegation and communal spirit of the participatory art of Fluxus.⁷³

⁷¹ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934) (reprint: New York: Perigree Books., 2005), 352.

⁷² James Miller, “*Democracy is in the Streets*”: *From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 144-46.

⁷³ While art historians including Hannah Higgins and Estera Milman have drawn brief comparisons between the activist spirit of 1960s American culture and Fluxus art, they have remained at the level social and experiential engagement, without analysis of the parallel between the shift from the ideology of the Old Left to the New Left and from the ideology of Abstract Expressionism to the ideology of Fluxus.

Chapter 2: Who's In and Who's Out; The Fluxus Community

The foundation of the Fluxus group was the formation of a community of like-minded individuals that connected and collaborated, forming what Maciunas often referred to as a “Collective” of artists.⁷⁴ While the Fluxus events and objects themselves were integral to the formation and dissemination of Fluxus concepts, it was the organic social interactions created by such events and objects, which could not have been delineated or predicted by the event scores or any initial intentions of the artists, that the social project of these artists really took shape. The continued development of Fluxus theory and works reflects the conceptualization of a structure of interaction and creation parallel to, but separate from dominant social contexts and institutions (e.g. the institutions of organized religion, marriage, organized neighborhoods, health and learning facilities) found in the Western world, and specifically in the United States. In the planning of Fluxus social events, clinics, and a housing cooperative for Fluxus artists, the group continued to break down the traditional distinctions between the activities of everyday life and artistic production. While these projects worked to create a social and artistic community of artists that was touted to be democratic and open to both fellow artists and the public, interactions between the artists suggests that the social world of Fluxus was not without internal conflicts. As Wolf Vostell, a German artist associated with Fluxus, stated of the group, “The positivity of Fluxus has given the possibility of meeting each other and staying together.

⁷⁴ George Maciunas, letter to Dick Higgins, n.d. [ca. July 1966], box 1, folder 493, Gilbert and Lila Silverman Archive, Museum of Modern Art, New York., n.p. Refer to the quote In Chapter One by Geoffrey Hendricks regarding Fluxus artists as nomads that connected with one another for primary support of this conception of the Fluxus collective community.

Individually artists existed before and after, but for a few years they had the same ideals, though not the same opinions.”⁷⁵

Ideologically, while Fluxus artists did not all share the same opinions, the group did advocate for standards of globalism⁷⁶, democratic participation, and anti-commodification that allowed for the participation of both artists and the public around the world. Several artists involved in Fluxus recognized this quality of the network, including Ken Friedman, who became a member of Fluxus in 1966 through the efforts of George Maciunas and Dick Higgins. Writing on his experience with Fluxus, Friedman observed that “we [Fluxus artists] are a special community... our community is international...we convened ourselves, rather than being summoned into existence...we do not remain together for ideological or economic reasons, but for issues more complex that may perhaps touch on both.”⁷⁷ Although, like Friedman, many of the artists involved in Fluxus viewed their community as a loose network of personal associations and collaborative art production, certain members, and especially Maciunas, worked to set ideological goals and boundaries for Fluxus in attempts to make the structure of this community more concrete. Similar but varied definitions of what Fluxus was or was not emerged among the artists participating in the community, and ultimately led to not only a dynamic group formation, but also contradictions and disagreement among participants.

⁷⁵ Wolf Vostell, in interview with Giancarlo Politi, published by *Flash Art* 72-73, March-April 1977, quoted in Milman, “Introduction,” in *Fluxus: A Conceptual Country*, ed. Estra Milman (Providence, RI: Visible Language, 1992), 12.

⁷⁶ Fluxus artist Ken Friedman described the term “globalism,” as “central to Fluxus,” writing that Fluxus “embraces the idea that we live on a single world, a world in which the boundaries of political states are not identical with the boundaries of nature or culture.” He opposed this to internationalism, which can foster a degree of competition among nations, as distinctions between each nation remain intact. Ken Friedman, “Fluxus and Company,” in *Fluxus Reader*, ed. Ken Friedman (New York: Academy Editions, 1998), 245.

⁷⁷ Ken Friedman, “Fluxus: A Global Community, Human Dimensions,” in *Fluxus: A Conceptual Country*, 160.

Particular versions of a Fluxus manifesto written by Maciunas beginning in 1963, and intermittently over the next decade, exemplify attempts to set the parameters of Fluxus. In a letter to artist Tomas Schmit, Maciunas provides an early Fluxus manifesto:

...Fluxus objectives are social (not aesthetic)...[they are concerned with:] Gradual elimination of fine arts (music, theatre, poetry, fiction, painting, sculpture etc. etc.) This is motivated by desire to stop the waste of material and human resources... and divert it to socially constructive ends.... Thus Fluxus is definitely against art-object as non-functional commodity—to be sold & to make livelihood for an artist.... Fluxus therefore is ANTIPROFESSIONAL (against professional art or artists making livelihood from art or artists spending their full time, their life on art.) Secondly FLUXUS is against art as medium or vehicle promoting artist's ego, since applied art should express the objective problem to be solved not artist's personality or his ego....⁷⁸

In this short passage, there are multiple key points that underline what Maciunas envisioned for the Fluxus group. His emphasis on the social over the aesthetic and his outright rejection of what he referred to as the artist's ego are elements of Maciunas' definition of Fluxus that he continued to stress throughout his life, but they are also aspects of his personal ideology that were not consistently carried out in his own artistic practice or in the work of other Fluxus artists. In a later manifesto by Maciunas, written in 1965, he again underlined the importance of the collective function over individualism, while also expanding further on his attitude toward Fluxus as a nonprofessional, anti-commodity effort, writing that the Fluxus artist, in order

TO ESTABLISH ARTISTS NONPROFESSIONAL, NONPARASITIC, NONELITE STATUS IN SOCIETY... [HE] MUST DEMONSTRATE OWN DISPENSIBILITY, HE MUST DEMONSTRATE OWN SELFSUFFICIENCY OF THE AUDIENCE, HE MUST DEMONSTRATE THAT ANYTHING CAN SUBSTITUTE ART AND ANYONE CAN DO IT. THEREFORE THIS ART-AMUSEMENT MUST... HAVE NO

⁷⁸ George Maciunas, letter to Tomas Schmit, January, 1964, Gilbert and Lila Silverman Archive, quoted in Jon Hendricks, "Collective," in *Fluxus Codex*, ed. Jon Hendricks (Detroit, MI: Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, 1988), 37.

COMMODITY OR INSTITUTIONAL VALUE, IT MUST BE UNLIMITED,
OBTAINABLE BY ALL AND EVENTUALLY PRODUCED BY ALL.⁷⁹

With this collective spirit as his goal, Maciunas took it upon himself to establish rules under which what he considered official Fluxus artwork could be created and exhibited. Initially distributed in an essay by Maciunas entitled, “Conditions for Performing Fluxus Published Compositions, Films & Tapes,” (1965) and outlined in multiple Fluxus newsletters that circulated among the group, these rules established concrete parameters and definitions for works published by Fluxus, as selected by Maciunas. His proposed conditions required that during any concert, if the number or duration of Fluxus compositions exceeded non-Fluxus compositions, the concert must be advertised as a Fluxconcert. Additionally, if Fluxus compositions did not outnumber non-Fluxus pieces, each Fluxus work must be accompanied by a notice of permission granted by Fluxus. Not only did Maciunas list artists and specific works to which these conditions would apply, but he also stated that non-compliance with his conditions would make any performer or producer liable to a lawsuit for recovery of damages.⁸⁰ The implementation of such conditions and the punitive effect of such liability not only served to protect Fluxus work, but also to limit control over the production and exhibition of Fluxus art and to give Maciunas extended governance over Fluxus activities. While it is clear that the intent for these conditions was to ensure that credit for the work would be given to Fluxus, it should be noted that Maciunas was not concerned with the crediting of individuals, but the larger Fluxus group, which could include any number of people at any given point in time. These rules

⁷⁹ George Maciunas, Fluxus Manifesto, 1965, Gilbert and Lila Silverman Archive, quoted in Jon Hendricks, “Anonymous and Undetermined Authors,” quoted in *Fluxus Codex*, 133.

⁸⁰ George Maciunas, “Conditions for Performing Fluxus Published Composition, Films & Tapes,” n.d. [ca. 1965], box V, folder A.1.36, Gilbert and Lila Silverman Archive, Museum of Modern Art, New York. The artists listed in this essay include the complete works of George Brecht, Albert M. Fine, Hi Red Center, Milan Knizak, George Maciunas, Chieko Shiomi, James Riddle, Ben Vautier, and Robert Watts. Several individual works by Eric Andersen, Alison Knowles, Jackson Mac Low, Ben Patterson, Tomas Schmit, Nam June Paik, Emmett Williams, and La Monte Young are also listed.

therefore maintained the basic concept of collective authorship, but also appointed Maciunas the judge of what could be considered Fluxus work, and so simultaneously undermined the group's ethos of democratic and non-authoritative art production. In subsequent letters and statements from Maciunas to others in the group, he highlighted the function of these rules as a means of ensuring promotion of the Fluxus collective, while also acting as essentially a copyright to protect the group's efforts. This set of guidelines was but one way in which Maciunas assumed the role of "commissar" for the collective, as Dick Higgins suggests in his essay "Fluxus Theory and Reception."⁸¹ Many members of the Fluxus group, and Dick Higgins especially, were often critical of Maciunas' assertion of authority over Fluxus activities. As will be evidenced here by personal letters from multiple Fluxus artists, Maciunas' authoritarian stance was not one agreed upon by everyone associated with Fluxus, and remained contested throughout the group's history.

Maciunas' attempted control over Fluxus work and artists was also manifest in his efforts to organize and distribute work by Fluxus artists in publications and collections that he termed "Fluxkits." Beginning in 1962, as Maciunas developed plans for his future *Fluxus* publication; he also contacted artists regarding their interest in signing over the rights to their work. In a letter to Robert Watts, Maciunas described his plan to publish in a "kind of special Fluxus edition" for individual artists including George Brecht, Ben Patterson, Emmett Williams, Tomas Schmit, Nam June Paik, and Robert Filliou. He asked Watts if the artist would be interested in having all of his past and future work published in a similar edition, but emphasized that it would take place under the condition that he "must have exclusive rights to publish them AND ALL YOUR

⁸¹ See Dick Higgins, "Fluxus Theory and Reception," in *Fluxus Reader*, ed. Ken Friedman (New York: Academy Editions, 1998), 220.

FUTURE WORKS.... All works will be copy-righted internationally.”⁸² The plans for these Fluxus art editions would serve both the artists within the Fluxus group and Maciunas’ personal belief in collectivism. The project was intended to be sold and distributed among the public, as well as between the participating artists, and therefore would function to promote both the Fluxus group and the individual artists whose work made up each edition. Although the copyright for these collections was under the name Fluxus, and so associated with the entire collective, it was Maciunas who selected the artists and works to be published and who had the final decision on how exactly Fluxus would be characterized, thereby fashioning himself the orchestrator of the success of Fluxus. While Maciunas referenced the enforcement of such a copyright in numerous writings, the terms of the copyright were not clearly iterated, and the function of the copyright does not seem to have been to ensure economic security or profit, as much as a means of further rejecting individual authorship and also to disseminate the name of the group over individual names of artists. In a letter to Tomas Schmit, dated two years after he had solicited Robert Watts’ interest in his own special Fluxus edition, Maciunas explained that he copyrighted such compositions “so we can FORCE mention of FLUXUS (collective) rather than individuals. This is all part of the anti-individualism-campaign.”⁸³

Beyond establishing rules for the Fluxus collective and gathering work under the Fluxus name, Maciunas in particular was preoccupied with maintaining an established list of people who were involved in the group. Rather than relying on unspecified group dynamics, Maciunas chose instead to chart and categorize not only the historical development of the Fluxus movement, but also the involvement of those associated with it, taking on the multiple roles of historian,

⁸² George Maciunas, letter to Robert Watts, December 1962, box V, folder A.1.41, Gilbert and Lila Silverman Archive, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1.

⁸³ George Maciuna, letter to Tomas Schmit, January 24, 1964, Gilbert and Lila Silverman Archive, quoted in Jon Hendricks, “Collective,” in *Fluxus Codex*, 90.

archivist, and leader. One striking example of Maciunas' endeavors to essentially rank all artists even tangentially involved in Fluxus is a mailing distribution list created by Maciunas. Because the professional and social association of Fluxus artists spread throughout the world, such lists were essential to maintaining contact between the individuals. Upon first glance, this extensive list of artists and mailing addresses appears relatively innocuous. What was unusual about this and similar distribution lists created by Maciunas was the inclusion of an index that identifies nine different categories in which each listed individual was placed. Such a listing solidified not only the physical association of people and locations, but also established a hierarchy within the group, identifying certain individuals as integral to Fluxus while others became relegated to the periphery.

The index for this distribution list reads: "1 fluxcore; 2 past flux, flux allies, associates; 3 objects, environments, graphics, etc.; 4 events, happenings etc; 5 music; 6 dance; 7 film; 8 recent *Concept* artists; 9 other."⁸⁴ Maciunas, acting as the commissar of the group, personally assigned those involved one of these nine ranks. Not surprisingly, Maciunas placed himself within the "fluxcore" category, along with other active Fluxus artists including Robert Watts and Ben Vautier. Ranking second tier as "past flux, flux allies, associates," were artists who objectively also continued to be active within the group during the 1960s, including Ben Patterson, Tomas Schmit, and Takako Saito. While the third through ninth categories are not explicitly hierarchical, it is clear that this indexical system imposed by Maciunas implied a scale of importance within the Fluxus group, with tier one being "fluxcore" and tier nine simply called "other." But what qualified a person as "fluxcore" rather than simply an artist producing objects

⁸⁴ George Maciunas, mail distribution list, n.d., box V, folder F.1, Gilbert and Lila Silverman Archive, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

or events? Maciunas did not provide any further explanation of these categories, so it can be assumed that he relied heavily on his own inclinations.

In fact, Maciunas' ranking of artist Nam June Paik in this list highlights the subjective and arbitrary nature of Maciunas' Fluxus hierarchy. Although Nam June Paik had been integral to the organization and exhibition of early Fluxus concerts, Maciunas had placed him in the fourth rank of his index. Viewed in isolation, this might not suggest anything other than Maciunas' categorization of Paik's work as primarily event-based, but in light of personal comments made by Maciunas, the role of such ranking as punitive or exclusionary comes to light. In a 1967 letter from Maciunas to Ben Vautier (whom Maciunas had considered "fluxcore") Maciunas wrote that he "...did not include Paik in Fluxfest sheet... because like all prima donas [sic] and like [Allan] Kaprow, he likes & insists that his pieces be performed by HIMSELF ONLY."⁸⁵ This quote supports a reading of Maciunas' distribution list and rankings as a product of his own beliefs regarding what is and is not Fluxus, and as evidence of his belief that he was not only a leader in the group, but had the role of determining who and what Fluxus really was. This comment also demonstrates Maciunas' continued preoccupation with his personal understanding of Fluxus as a collective in which no one artist should act or take credit for work independently, as he seemed to determine who was really of the Fluxus spirit based on how willing they were to relinquish personal credit for their work in favor of collective Fluxus attribution. Simultaneously, though, Maciunas' self-assigned authoritarian impulse—seen here and in his ranking list—stands in glaring contradiction to what he himself envisioned Fluxus to be.

The assumption of this power by Maciunas stands in contradiction to his own statements about the structure of the group, such as his argument in a letter to George Brecht that "Fluxus is

⁸⁵ George Maciunas, letter to Ben Vautier, March 1967, quoted in Jon Hendricks, "Collective," in *Fluxus Codex*, 57.

no ‘proletarian dictatorship’ with an inflexible ‘party program’. It is a collective in the true sence [sic] of the word.”⁸⁶ Maciunas’ apparent inconsistency in his role as leader and his democratic conception of Fluxus did not go without criticism from other members in the group. Dick Higgins, in particular, voiced his concern that Maciunas was stepping out of his bounds on several occasions. In an especially biting letter to Maciunas, Higgins accused him of trying to elect himself “exclusive dictator with the exclusive right to the term [Fluxus].”⁸⁷ In this same letter, Higgins went on to state that both he and Maciunas “know who are Fluxists,” and that Maciunas had consistently destroyed the utility of the term Fluxus and had “mis-used the whole situation for your personal cultism and aggrandizement.”⁸⁸ This letter was most likely in response to an earlier letter sent by Maciunas to Higgins that forbade Higgins and his wife Alison Knowles from performing certain of their own works while on tour if they were not going to advertise the concert as “Fluxus.” Maciunas’ command was described by Higgins in a letter addressed to Jeff Berner and dated one day before his writing to Maciunas. In this letter to Berner, Higgins also compared Maciunas’ behavior to the “Stalin phase of Russian history, with universal hostility confronting a unique situation,” while arguing that in reality they are working in a “highly decentralized world...with all the particles moving independently, and in order to achieve what fundamentally we all agree on, it is imperative that we remain capable of maneuvering appropriately.”⁸⁹ Higgins’ reference to Stalin here is of particular significance, and will be expounded upon below.

⁸⁶ George Maciunas, letter to George Brecht, n.d., [ca. 1962], box V, folder A.2.22, Gilbert and Lila Silverman Archive, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

⁸⁷ Dick Higgins, letter to George Maciunas, August 23, 1966, box I, folder 493, Gilbert and Lila Silverman Archive, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 1-2.

⁸⁹ Dick Higgins, letter to Jeff Berner, August 22, 1966, box I, folder 493, Gilbert and Lila Silverman Archive, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1. Higgins’ reference to Stalin here is of particular significance, and will be expounded upon below.

In the spirit of this statement, Higgins did elect to continue his own independent maneuvering throughout his association with the group. In 1964, Higgins had decided to establish The Something Else Press, Inc., a press with which Higgins published work by artists associated with Fluxus. Maciunas took the creation of this press as an attack on the group, referring to it as an organization that was a “rival” to the Fluxus activities and publications that Maciunas had created.⁹⁰ Taking the establishment of Something Else Press not only as a threat, but a personal affront, Maciunas again used the phrase “prima dona [sic] complex” in reference to the actions of a Fluxus artist. Stating that “friends [Higgins and Knowles] quit or left Fluxus,” Maciunas wrote in 1966 that Higgins’ exit from Fluxus was motivated by the desire for greater personal glory, and that the same had happened with Nam June Paik.⁹¹ Whether or not these artists actually were trying to dissociate themselves from Fluxus, Maciunas had decided for the collective that such dissociation was taking place. Maciunas also demonstrated concerns over the commitment of other artists to Fluxus, such as George Brecht, who had associated with the group from its inception. Suspicious of Brecht’s desire to associate with Fluxus based on his observations that Brecht was drinking beer while Ben Vautier performed and that he had chosen to publish some of his work with Higgins’ Something Else Press, Maciunas wrote to Vautier that he would assume Brecht had decided to dissociate himself from Fluxus, saying that maybe Brecht had not told him directly because he “does not want to hurt my feelings.”⁹² Maciunas’ statement regarding Brecht’s possible fear of hurting his feelings also indicates that Maciunas personally tied himself with Fluxus as the creator of the group, emotionally linked to it more

⁹⁰ See George Maciunas, letter to Dick Higgins, n.d. [ca. July 1966], box I, folder 493, Gilbert and Lila Silverman Archive, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1.

⁹¹ George Maciunas, letter to Ben Vautier, n.d. [ca. October 1966], box V, folder A.1.36, Gilbert and Lila Silverman Archive, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 4.

⁹² George Maciunas, letter to Ben Vautier, March, 1967, box V, folder A.1.37, Gilbert and Lila Silverman Archive, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1.

than others might have been. In this same letter to Vautier, Maciunas insisted that Fluxus is “voluntary” and anyone can associate with, or dissociate from it if they so choose, but in this and previously referenced letters regarding membership association, as well as his chart ranking the degree of involvement or importance in the group of various people, it is clear that Maciunas had appointed himself the arbiter of who was and who was not to be considered a member of Fluxus.⁹³

While some Fluxus artists may have also seen Maciunas as having a leading and decisive role in the state of the Fluxus collective, the majority signaled their refusal of Maciunas’ self-assigned authority. The manifestoes written by Maciunas were never signed by the majority of the group. There was no consistent program that would have asserted Fluxus as a movement in the same vein as earlier avant-garde movements. Above all else, according to statements made by members of the group, it was a certain “spirit” that bound Fluxus together and that should be the focus of Fluxus work. Following the conflicts between Higgins and Maciunas, Ben Vautier wrote an open letter to the group emphasizing just that. Listing several active Fluxus artists, Vautier wrote “all these people mean Fluxus to me. Even if they are not Fluxus, or have quit, or have been expelled, or have never been Fluxus.... So calling them Fluxus or not will never transform their originality but on the other hand it helps to strenthen [sic] and link. Together the same spirit.”⁹⁴ In direct response to Higgins and Maciunas’ temporary rivalry, Vautier stated “Higgins and Maciunas are... both concerned in promoting the some [sic] spirit in art.... It seems to me silly and unnecessary that because someone is on Higgins’ list Maciunas would have nothing to do with im [sic], or vice versa.”⁹⁵ Ultimately, Vautier’s sentiment won out within

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ben Vautier, letter to Fluxus, n.d. [ca. September 1966], box V, folder A.1.36, Gilbert and Lila Silverman Archive, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

the Fluxus group, and Higgins and Maciunas continued to collaborate and promote Fluxus with the help of one another. Thus, regardless of Maciunas' attempts at a degree of exclusivity within Fluxus, it would remain, as Higgins described, always "open for new people to 'join'."⁹⁶

Although many of the artists working in Fluxus considered themselves to be relatively apolitical, Maciunas connected the significance of the collective activity of the group with a socio-political struggle, and thus would not have taken Higgins' comparison of Maciunas to Stalin as negatively as Higgins may have intended.⁹⁷ To Maciunas, the Fluxus common front must put the collective before the individual, working against and outside of the existing cultural system. For other Fluxus artists, the political was not as essential in relation to any set social view or ideology, but more so as a symbol or aesthetic, such as when "all the elements of a performance behave democratically, none dominates the others," as Higgins described.⁹⁸ Despite the overt disavowal of politics by some Fluxus artists, their own social and political beliefs were still reflected in the philosophy of their performances and objects. Through such democratic and participatory performances, Fluxus artists attempted a continuing resolution of the art/life dichotomy, combining artistic production with typically everyday physical and social interactions. By the late 1960s, Fluxus artwork, especially in the United States, reflected an evolution in the group from earlier, more traditional concert events, to practices that integrated art and daily life. Later Fluxus activities such as Fluxus meal events, Fluxus church services, and a Fluxus wedding appropriated and subverted established forms of social exchange, encouraging novel observation and understanding of such activities and their implications. In so doing, these artists attempted to shake themselves and others out of the complacent and uncritical acceptance

⁹⁶ Dick Higgins, "Fluxus Theory and Reception," in *Fluxus Reader*, 221.

⁹⁷ See George Maciunas, letter to Emmett Williams, n.d., Jean and Leonard Brown Collection, The Getty Center for the Arts and Humanities, Santa Monica, CA, quoted in Owen Smith, *Fluxus: The History of an Attitude* (San Diego: San Diego State University Press, 1998), 112.

⁹⁸ Dick Higgins, "Fluxus Theory and Reception," in *Fluxus Reader*, 228.

of traditional modes of social behavior, desacralizing these institutions and behaviors, and opening space for engagement with new modes. By reinhabiting older forms of social interaction, undermining them and ultimately distorting them, the artists were enacting a new form of social interaction parallel to, but distinct from those older forms.

By this point, the artists involved in Fluxus had been not only working together, but socializing and living together for years. As Knowles commented, the group was more than professional; to them gathering to interact and work “was like the family getting together over chicken dinner, once a week to see if we had any new material...”⁹⁹ The new material that Knowles was referring to here was not separate from this family and community dynamic. While early Fluxus event pieces were based on daily activities, but were removed from the context of everyday life and isolated in the stage or performance space, the later Fluxus works became virtually indistinguishable from daily life altogether. Events such as the *Flux-Christmas Meal Event* and Maciunas’ Fluxus wedding operated both as manifestations of artistic expression and as intimate communal experiences that mirrored celebrations and ceremonies common in modern society. The *Flux-Christmas Meal Event* was announced in the *Fluxus Newsletter* dated December 2, 1968. The announcement read “all are invited to participate by bringing a prepared meal or drink event. Notify me [Maciunas] in advance what you will prepare.”¹⁰⁰ This announcement reads almost exactly like an informal invitation to a Christmas potluck. What distinguishes this as a Fluxus work is the decision to transform the meals and drinks into events.

Using food and the activity of eating in this way was common in Fluxus and was one more way in which art and life were merged. Fluxus banquets such as this appropriated the

⁹⁹ Alison Knowles, interview by Estera Milman, “Road Shows, Street Events, and Fluxus People; A Conversation with Alison Knowles,” in *Fluxus: A Conceptual Country*, ed. Estera Milman (Providence, RI: Visible Language, 1992), 100.

¹⁰⁰ George Maciunas, *Fluxus Newsletter*, December 2, 1968, quoted in Jon Hendricks, “Uncovering Fluxus—Recovering Fluxus,” in *Fluxus*, ed. Thomas Kellein (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 131.

rituals of communal eating and celebration that are long-established in Western culture, much in the same way that Fluxus appropriated conventional media and publicity (Fig. 4). Beyond imitation of these traditional community practices, Fluxus reclaimed them as distinct from the trappings of modern culture and consumerism, underscoring the art in such activity by simply designating the meal as such. A series of Fluxus meal events titled *Mono Meals*, which was proposed by Maciunas in the *Flux Fest Kit 2* Flux Fest information publication, simultaneously acted upon and called into question Western social and sensory conventions by bringing the artists together to experience and experiment with unusual and even absurd flavors, smells and sights. Examples of these proposed monomeals, in which all dishes and drinks are based on a single element, include *Fishmeal*, *Clear Meal*, and *White Meal*.

The menu for *Fish Meal*, created by Maciunas, included “fish soup, vinaigrette, pate, pancakes, cutlets, dumplings, bread (from fish bone flour), clear fish carbonated drink, fish jello, pudding, ice cream, pastry, candy, tea, etc.”¹⁰¹ As Hannah Higgins discusses in *Fluxus Experience*, the notion of these various items, including beverages and desserts, all being made from fish to the Western consumer would be, at the very least, unappealing, but such reaction is due to conventions of taste.¹⁰² In addition to conventions of flavor, these meals also subverted social conventions of the dinner party. In the 1950s and 1960s, it was popular to entertain guests in the home, eating meals together as a means of social interaction with varying degrees of formality. In “Food and Eating: An Anthropological Perspective” Robin Fox describes how a formal dinner party of the 1950s would have been served in the dining room, accompanied by coffee or liqueurs in the sitting room, and that the “foods served on these ceremonial occasions

¹⁰¹ George Maciunas, *Flux Fest Kit 2*, 1969, box V, folder A.1.25, Gilbert and Lila Silverman Archive, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2.

¹⁰² Hannah Higgins, *Fluxus Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 47.

have to be ‘special’—to demonstrate thoughtfulness and care on the part of the hosts.”¹⁰³

Undoubtedly, the food served at Fluxus monomeals was special and demonstrated thoughtfulness on the part of the chefs, but it was thoughtfulness taken to the level of absurdity. Rather than concerning themselves with a presentation of a meal to guests as a means of implying certain social standing or propriety, Fluxus artists used the convention of the dinner party to play with their food and to explode conventional definitions of taste and consumption. The attendees of these meals were almost exclusively the artists themselves and their friends, as invitations were sent out to everyone associated in some form or another with the Fluxus group. These meals provided a setting for not only social exchange, but artistic collaboration, and provided a platform in which to solidify their personal and professional relationships.

Other Fluxus food events such as those called *Non Edibles* in the *Flux Fest Kit 2* publication, draw greater attention and criticism toward the Western rituals associated with the sharing of a meal. With soups made from gravel, nails, and hardware, or stuffing made from concrete, these non-edible meals remove all pretense of the activity of eating as a means of necessary sustenance. Fox suggests that in Western culture, the main purpose of eating out with others or of hosting a dinner party was not the act of eating itself as much as the desire to impress and display a degree of affluence.¹⁰⁴ She writes that “In all of this, it is the setting rather than the food itself that is considered. Of course the food has to be ‘good,’ but the type and kind are less important than the aura surrounding the service.”¹⁰⁵ In the setting of the Fluxus inedible dinner, interaction with the “food” becomes even more social, as participants touch the materials, discussing the experience of the dinner without actually consuming it, reducing food and the act

¹⁰³ Robin Fox, “Food and Eating: An Anthropological Perspective,” (Oxford: Social Issues Research Centre, 2003), 6.

¹⁰⁴ Fox, “Food and Eating: An Anthropological Perspective,” 16.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 17.

of eating to a pure and petrified ritual. Thus, the focus of the meal is not the literal act of consumption and digestion, but the concept of doing so, and the shared experience of contemplating doing so. In the collaborative planning, preparation, and shared experience of these food events, the everyday activity of eating is analyzed in order to draw out the purely social aspects of the act within Western culture, as simultaneously the societal construction of a boundary between artistic action and daily life is punctured.

While shared meals served as an informal means of community and artistic practice within Fluxus, the artists also used institutionalized and bureaucratic frames to make their social structure more concrete. While some of the artists associated with Fluxus interacted on a purely social basis, some even romantically, such as Dick Higgins and Alison Knowles who were married in 1960, the Fluxus wedding of George Maciunas and Billie Hutching is an example of the complete convergence of Fluxus artistic practice with their social networking outside of the dominant cultural framework. In the fall of 1977, Maciunas was organizing a Flux New Year's Cabaret, and he decided he wanted to get married and combine the wedding with the Cabaret. The wedding and cabaret took place on February 25, 1978 at Jean Depuy's loft in New York. The wedding, although based on the conventions of a typical Western ceremony, was Fluxus through and through. Both Maciunas and his bride wore wedding gowns (Fig. 5). Geoffrey Hendricks prepared a Fluxus ceremony and officiated the wedding. The bridesmaids were Jon Hendricks and Larry Miller, both of whom were dressed in drag. Maciunas' best man was Alison Knowles, who wore a tuxedo.¹⁰⁶ The gender-bending, seemingly comical ceremony worked on multiple levels to reinforce the Fluxus network and community as distinct from normal cultural frames. Refuting the seriousness of the institution of marriage through the light-hearted

¹⁰⁶ Hollis Melton, "Notes on SoHo and a Reminiscence," in *Fluxus: A Conceptual Country*, ed. Estera Milman (Providence, RI: Visible Language, 1992), 200.

whimsicality of the ceremony, Maciunas and the other participants simultaneously were using the cultural ritual of marriage as a work of art. Those present at this Fluxus wedding were there both as performers in an art event and as guests and participants in an actual social exchange and ceremony.

Another traditionally social and religious ceremony appropriated by Fluxus was the Christian church service. Proposed initially by Maciunas in his *Flux Fest Kit 2* publication, what he referred to as the “Flux-Mass of the Faithfull” followed the framework of the second part of the Catholic High Mass ceremony. The event was planned to take place on February 17, 1970, at Voorhees Chapel, on the Rutgers University campus and expanded to mirror a full Catholic Mass ceremony (Fig. 6).¹⁰⁷ The elements of this event followed the outline of the Catholic Mass, beginning with a baptism that involved “swimming pool events, Zyklus by Tomas Schmit, foam baptism, sneeze powder, Patterson’s whipped cream on a nude, etc.,” and ending with a communion, Agnus Dei, Communion Antiphon, and Missa Est.¹⁰⁸ Not only did the Flux Church mimic established religious practice, it also subverted it through the reduction of religious ceremony to empty frivolity. A detailed outline of the scheduled Flux-Mass activities demonstrates a sentiment not only of playfulness, but of ridicule. During the baptism, various liquids are proposed to be sprayed at the entrance to the chapel, including deodorants, medicated vapors, and disinfectants.¹⁰⁹ These liquids, commonly found on store shelves and used as over-the-counter medical remedies and cleansers, replace the holy water. Instead of receiving redemption and spiritual cleansing from the sanctified water of the Christian faith, Fluxus artists

¹⁰⁷ See George Maciunas, “Call for Ideas: Flux Church, 11:10 AM. Feb. 17th, 1970, Tuesday ta Voorhees Chapel, Douglass College, Rutgers University,” n.d. [ca. 1970], box V, folder F.13, Gilbert and Lila Silverman Archive, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ George Maciunas, “Outline of Flux-Mass,” n.d., box V, folder F.13, Gilbert and Lila Silverman Archive, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

suggest a new means of purification in the secular act of attending to one's own body. The comparison of such activity, and its association with the consumer act of purchasing such goods that do not require sanctification, also suggests the spiritual emptiness of the ceremony itself. The Flux-Mass baptism begs the question of what it is to be cleansed, and what the difference is between the notions of spiritual cleansing and physical cleansing.

Following the baptism, the altar assistants, who are dressed in gorilla suits, were instructed to eat the altar furnishings as the Canon, including "Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus" (played in Morse code by the choir) and "Benedictus & Hosanna" (recited at a speed of ten seconds per word) were performed. Although undoubtedly an amusing spectacle in its own right, the donning of gorilla suits again carries a deeper criticism of the religious institution. The assistants, followers of the priest acting as leader of the service, have been reduced to animals. Behaving as such, they literally consume the furnishings that decorate the church, as churchgoers metaphorically are led by church teachings and consume the words and practices of the institution. The translation of "Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus" into Morse code, the language of military communications typically produced by machines, transcends natural vocal communication and renders the liturgical hymn incomprehensible to those not familiar with the code, while thrusting the ancient prayer into the modern world of warfare. Such a critical undertone in the Flux-Mass perhaps was due in part to the impact felt by Fluxus artists of the changing post-war Euro-American culture. The destruction caused by the Holocaust and the newly developed threat of the atomic bomb had removed the comforts of religious faith and faith in government, leaving people of this period with the new churches of material consumption and war.

In this absurdist Fluxus ceremony, though, the participants found countercultural community. The international group of Fluxus artists rejected mainstream nationalistic tendencies that had developed, embracing their own global network and shared experiences. Although the implementation of Morse code in this Flux-Mass alludes to modernity and militarization, it also suggests a universal language that transcends national citizenship and ethnicity. Following the Canon, the breaking of bread performed at this Flux-Mass more overtly demonstrates this embrace of a new globalism. Before the priest distributes the bread and wine, the Lord's Prayer is recited by the "choir simultaneously in English, Latin, French, Spanish, German, Japanese, Russian, Czech, Polish, Lithuanian, Italian, etc."¹¹⁰ The merging of these voices symbolizes the international quality of the Fluxus collective. Because the voices and languages are all heard at once, the actual words become difficult to decipher, leaving only a unity of voices that rises above the meaning of the words, allowing the audience to physically, immediately experience the sound and their own presence in the space, without the distraction of abstract conceptual associations. The religious setting of this act and the result of this incoherent symphony of languages also recalls the biblical story of the Tower of Babel, which could serve as an inverse to the intention of Fluxus. In the story of Babel, the multiplicity of languages was used as a means of division and isolation, whereas in the Flux-Mass, the overlapping of these numerous languages serves to unite the people experiencing it. This Flux-Mass thus becomes a kind of *lingua franca*, joining together those taking part in it through not only amusement, but also the literal act of communion in the physical gathering and experience of the service, and the communal emptying of the meaning of language in favor of pure noise.

Collective eating and religious ceremony were not the only means of social interaction and community building used by Fluxus artists. The creation of alternative and artistically driven

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

secular Fluxus institutions was also fundamental to this effort. As evidenced by plans made by Maciunas and other artists, Fluxus was conceived of as a wholly new society separate from modern national cultures. One of the earliest examples of this notion is found in an informal proposal made by Maciunas in a letter to Ben Vautier in which he mentioned his desire to move to Japan and establish a “permanent ‘collective farm’” in 1964.¹¹¹ Maciunas suggested that the group would move to the farm and “subsist by growing our own food & doing little things like composing, performing, fluxing around publishing all kinds of things, swindling the idiots & robbing the fat capitalists.”¹¹² This proposal demonstrates Maciunas’ interest in forming an international network of individuals into a cohesive community whose geography would not only be in the communal imagination of the group, but also physically oriented as a self-sufficient and countercultural society. His reference to swindling idiots and robbing capitalists brackets exactly the aspects of mainstream culture and the established art world that Fluxus artists were rejecting and working against. The establishment of a collective farm on which people both live and produce artwork, although never realized, also supports Fluxus efforts to deny the conventional separation between daily life and art in the conflation of mundane activities like growing food with composing and performing. The use of the phrase “fluxing around” suggests also a degree of recreation and informality intended in their art production that would remove their work from the hierarchical modern art museum and gallery systems, rejecting the notion of the artist-genius in favor of a democratic understanding of art as a natural part of the daily life of all people.

While such a farm was never realized in Japan, Maciunas did leave New York in 1975 in order to establish a Fluxus art center on a farm in New Marlborough, Massachusetts. Tentatively

¹¹¹ George Maciunas, letter to Ben Vautier, December, 1962, box V, folder A.1.41, Gilbert and Lila Silverman Archive, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1.

¹¹² Ibid, 1-2.

named the New Marlborough Centre of New Art, the farm was described in a written proposal (Fig. 7) as a

beautifull [sic] ‘village’ of some 12 buildings,” that “presents the possibility of creating a...center that could devote itself to:

- 1) study, research, experimentation and development of various advanced ideas and forms in art, history of art, design & documentation;
- 2) production and marketing of various products, objects and events developed at the Centre;
- 3) organization of events and performances and the Centre and other locations of the vicinity.¹¹³

Acknowledging explicitly the influence of Bauhaus and Black Mountain College on the idea of this center, Maciunas intended ten of the twelve buildings to function as both permanent and temporary residences, studios and workshops. Also included in this formal proposal was a list of the artists Maciunas believed would assume permanent residency at the center. Next to each name in parentheses he assigned either a role that the individual would take at the center or a description of the person’s significance to Fluxus and art in general. Examples of these artists included himself (“design, production of multiples, developing new forms of documentation, new sports, gags”), Robert Watts (“teacher & director of experimental workshops for events, environments and objects”), George Brecht (“one of the founders of Concept art, border-line art, non-art, objects, events, humourous art, etc.”), John Cage (“the fountain-head of avant garde art”), and Dick Higgins (“theatre, art criticism, literary art, music”).¹¹⁴

The remaining two buildings of the Marlborough Centre of New Art were to be dedicated to a library, archives and exhibit space, which would contain reference materials related not only to Fluxus, but to the past avant-garde as well. The inclusion of material on the greater realm of the avant-garde by Maciunas comes as no surprise, given his affinity for making meticulous

¹¹³ George Maciunas, “New Marlborough Centre of New Art,” publication, n.d. [ca. 1975], box V, folder A.1.37, Gilbert and Lila Silverman Archive, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

charts of both Fluxus and the larger art historical continuum. Additionally, the establishment of a library and archive providing materials on the past and present avant-garde served as an educational resource, curated by Maciunas and other Fluxus members that placed Fluxus within the context of this greater art historical continuum. In doing so, Fluxus took its place as a group comparable to seminal modern art movements, while also strengthening its own group identity in contrast to these movements. The creation of a Fluxus library and archive are two of many examples of proposed community institutions that Fluxus intended to create as a tool for community building and Fluxus social benefit. As beneficial for the community as Maciunas might have understood such a library and archive to be, the establishment of these centers would have been incongruous with the initial spirit of Fluxus, which fundamentally rejected such traditional organizations because of their perpetuation of cultural hierarchy and the exclusivity of the arts.

Another Fluxus project that mirrored existing mainstream community building with an eye to artistic production and social benefit was the housing co-operative project focused in the SoHo district of New York City. Between 1966 and 1975, Maciunas organized a total of fifteen housing co-operatives in the neighborhood, intended to function as studios, performance centers, and housing for artists involved in Fluxus. The establishment of these co-ops developed out of a trend already taking place in other areas of New York, in collaboration with Maciunas' desire to form a more structured community of artists. After World War II, many artists had begun to move into commercial buildings in lower Manhattan, the Bowery, the East Village, and further downtown in the city. These artists, including Abstract Expressionists Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, and Jasper Johns, rented these commercial spaces cheaply and took up residence in them illegally. A major problem in this practice was that the residents could be refused lease renewal

after working to renovate the spaces, and would lose the money and effort invested in them.¹¹⁵

Maciunas—aware of these other artists and the difficulties faced in finding affordable studio and living space in the city—decided to alleviate these problems while also forging a concentrated geographical community of Fluxus artists, in a vein similar to his concept of the Japanese farm. In *Fluxus Newsletter*, dated March 8, 1967, plans to form the Fluxhouse Cooperative Building Project were announced by Maciunas, and his intention to purchase loft buildings in the SoHo neighborhood were outlined.¹¹⁶ The Fluxhouse Cooperative was made to provide Fluxus artists with legal and affordable ownership of their living and working space.

Fluxus work took place within the public and private social sphere, as artist Ken Friedman commented, “Some [Fluxus customs] are public, or became public as performance practices do. Others are private, shared experiences among friends, like the dinners and food events.... These become a medium of exchange and development. Some become the basis of paradigms, models and algorithms that also inform Fluxus work.”¹¹⁷ What this quote suggests is that Fluxus artists were not only practicing their ideas and works for public consumption, but had incorporated them, or even understood them to be part of their personal lives and intimate social interactions. Their private parties, dinners and events functioned as a laboratory in which they could develop the concepts that informed their public Fluxus activity and that would define the alternative paradigm of social praxis that they were hoping to achieve. In this way they fortified the uniquely Fluxus practice of merging art and life. The appropriation and transformation of mainstream social institutions by Fluxus artists was not just an implicit tendency, but was an expressed goal of the group. In an interview, Alison Knowles recalled discussing this with Robert Watts, saying “it’s Bob Watts’ idea that Fluxus could overtake existing institutions, the

¹¹⁵ Melton, “Notes on SoHo and a Reminiscence,” in *Fluxus: A Conceptual Country*, ed. Estera Milman 182-83.

¹¹⁶ Hendricks, “Uncovering Fluxus—Recovering Fluxus,” in *Fluxus*, ed. Thomas Kellein, 131.

¹¹⁷ Ken Friedman, “Fluxus: Global Community, Human Dimensions,” 173-74.

churches, the grocery store... In a funny way it was a world of people... We were a kind of grand Fluxus family... The world of Fluxus did exist somewhere, you know, a world of fluxus weather, fluxus books, fluxus people, fluxus art..."¹¹⁸ In the construction of Fluxus community and in the networks of distribution for both Fluxus concepts and Fluxus objects, Fluxus urged the reevaluation of the established museum and gallery system, the modern culture of consumption and intersubjective exchange, and the human situation. Although rife with internal conflicts, ideological contradictions and changes over its evolution, Fluxus ultimately sought to form a new community, without physical borders, based on a divergent model of social and artistic interaction that expanded people's understanding of both society and their role within it.

¹¹⁸ Alison Knowles, interview with Estera Milman at 1985 *FLUXUS: A Workshop Series*, in *Fluxus: A Conceptual Country*, ed. Estera Milman (Providence, RI: Visible Language, 1992), 99.

Chapter 3: CEO Maciunas and the Corporate Body of Fluxus

While the exchange of personal correspondence between Fluxus artists established the social structure of the group, and the organization and establishment of events and institutions based on artistic and social exchange solidified the alternative community of Fluxus, the creation of independent sales and distribution networks by Fluxus artists became the means by which Fluxus disseminated their ideologies and artwork outside of the mainstream art market. Through the extensive use of mail order, advertisement, and the appropriation of traditional consumer practices Fluxus simultaneously rejected the restraints of the gallery and museum system while creating a distinct distribution structure through which Fluxus artists could support their work and interact with their audience. In the creation of mail order warehouses, the use of order forms, and the establishment of commercial shops in New York and abroad, Fluxus artists appropriated traditional avenues for selling their work, and by doing so under a collective structure, simultaneously rejected notions of the autonomous artist in favor of the formation of a democratic community. Although such activities were undertaken in ideological opposition to what these artists understood as an undesirable society of spectacle and unproductive consumption, possible contradictions arise in the close mirroring of these mainstream systems in order to distribute art and ideas that were touted to reject such consumerism.

The artists of Fluxus had become disillusioned with the contemporary art world, believing it had come to rely too heavily on the social elite and that artworks had become empty commodities, turning the role of the artist into a profession like any other in a modern industrial society. The 1950s and 1960s had seen a shift in the notion of aesthetic autonomy that took place in reaction to the emerging consumer culture. Artists during this period moved from the

opposition to bourgeois values of the earlier avant-garde to an opposition to the market system that commodifies and makes spectacle of what was once even radical artistic activity. Such artists, including those involved in Fluxus, chose to operate outside of the mainstream market system, while also subverting traditional notions of value in art through the production of art multiples as well as independent art sales. The practice of producing multiples and of distribution outside of the gallery system, however, had begun decades earlier. For example, in 1935 Marcel Duchamp rented a stall at a Paris inventor's fair, the Concours Lepine, in order to circumvent the galleries and sell his *Rotoreliefs*, a series of cardboard disks printed on both sides with images and concentric circles that created a three-dimensional illusion when spun on a gramophone. His goal in doing this, according to his friend H. P. Roché, was to facilitate "direct contact with the people."¹¹⁹ Although the *Rotoreliefs* do not fit the exact definition of the "multiple"—first elucidated by the Fluxus associate Daniel Spoerri in 1958—because they were made using the traditional artistic duplication technique of lithography, Duchamp embraced the unconventional method of distribution that would take hold in the 1960s.¹²⁰

The first major exhibition of art multiples in New York also directly referenced commerce. In October of 1964, *The American Supermarket* exhibition opened at the Bianchini Gallery. Artists participating in this exhibition included Claes Oldenburg, who associated early on with the Fluxus group, Pop artists Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein, as well as active Fluxus artist Robert Watts. Although still displaying their work within the space of the gallery,

¹¹⁹ H.P. Roché, "Souvenirs of Marcel Duchamp (translated by William N. Copley)," in Robert Lebel, *Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Grove Press, Inc.: 1959), 84.

¹²⁰ Kevin Concannon lists Spoerri's three basic principles for a "multiply": "1) they shouldn't be manufactured with conventional artistic duplication techniques, thus traditional modes of printmaking, photography, and sculpture were excluded; 2) they should communicate their inherent idea without the personal hand of the artist in the object so that the production of the works could be handled by other persons; and 3) the multiple should be moveable or otherwise alterable, allowing the viewer to participate in the production of the art." See Kevin Concannon, "Mass Production: Artists' Multiples and the Marketplace," in *Mass Production: Artists' Multiple & the Marketplace*, exh. cat. (New York: Emily Davis Gallery, 2006), 11.

these artists incorporated mass consumer products, such as the egg sculptures placed in an actual egg carton that Robert Watts submitted to *The American Supermarket*.¹²¹ Warhol's submissions to *The American Supermarket* were his well-known *Brillo Boxes* and actual Campbell's soup cans, which he initialed and sold in groups of three for \$18.00. His appropriation of the common cleaner and cans of soup is an example of his continued use of popular 1960s iconography to engage with popular culture and to simultaneously lower the elite status of art, making it more intellectually accessible to the public.¹²²

Three years prior to this exhibition, Oldenburg had already engaged in a discourse on commerce with his project *The Store*. In 1961 Oldenburg began a series of sculptures whose subject matter was pulled from the commonplace commodities found in stores throughout the city. These sculptures of everyday items, including shirts, cigarettes and slices of pie, were displayed in a rented storefront in New York in a way similar to how the actual items they mimicked would be sold in local shops. With *The Store* Oldenburg began to appropriate the modus operandi of the consumer marketplace as a commentary on it, but his attitude ultimately remained more ambivalent than his Fluxus contemporaries. His project, because it was partially funded by the Green Gallery, did not exist completely outside of the gallery and museum system.¹²³ Pop artists like Warhol and Oldenburg had fashioned themselves businessmen, taking the commercial market as their model, as is evidenced by Warhol's comment "Being good in business is the most fascinating kind of art... making money is art and working is art and good business is the best art."¹²⁴ Such a statement could be understood as embracing the development

¹²¹ Concannon, "Mass Production: Artists' Multiples and the Marketplace," 13.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Coosje van Bruggen, *Claes Oldenburg: Mouse Museum/Ray Gun Wing*, exh. cat. (Cologne: Museum Ludwig, 1979), 21.

¹²⁴ Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B & Back Again)*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Javanovich, 1975), 92.

of post-WWII consumer culture, endorsing the structure of the capitalist market and the commodified objects within it. Warhol, Oldenburg and other Pop artists infiltrated society through the use of popular iconography and the elevation of the everyday to high art. Although there was an element of critique in this emphasis on art's contemporary place as a commodity within Pop art, ultimately these artists celebrated that commodity status.

While also infiltrating society through the incorporation of everyday objects and the consumer market system, Fluxus did so in order to criticize the mainstream economic structure and commodification of the art world and to establish independent market structures through which to disseminate their work and ideas. Fluxus worked to undermine the entire art market itself using strategies of direct sale and multiples as earlier artists had, but also developed different routes of distribution through self-operated venues and stores, the use of mail ordering systems, and collective authorship, while stripping away the dichotomy of artist-producer and patron-consumer through the encouragement of democratic artistic production and experience in everyday life. A major point of departure for Fluxus artists from the work of Pop artists was the use of collective authorship. Looking to Warhol's initialed soup cans, it is clear that his goal was not just to raise questions about the commodification of art. Through signing the cans, as well as various other activities that proliferated his name and face, Warhol was advancing the cult of the artist and essentially also promoting himself as another product for consumption in the art market. It is this self-promotion with which Fluxus artists found fault in their contemporaries. In a note written to Ben Vautier, Maciunas voiced his disagreement with the Pop artists, stating that he didn't "get along [sic] with them very well. They all have 'prima dona [sic]' complexes & I have no patience with prima donas [sic]."¹²⁵ Rather than self-promotion, Maciunas championed

¹²⁵ George Maciunas, letter to Ben Vautier, n.d. [c. 1967], box V, folder A.1.37, Gilbert and Lila Silverman Archive, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 4.

promotion of the group as a singular entity. Not only did Maciunas personally believe in such a collective attitude, he also expected other Fluxus artists to behave collectively. In a letter to Dick Higgins Maciunas wrote:

Fluxus is not an individual impresario & if each does not help another collectively [sic] by promoting each other, the Collective would loose [sic] its identity as a Collective and become individuals again, each needing to be promoted individually.... Ben Vautier and Jeff Berner I think illustrate very well what I mean by a collective attitude. Whenever they organize events or publish material...he does it as part of a Fluxus activity. In other words he promotes Fluxus group (meaning some dozen other people) at the expense of his own name.¹²⁶

A manifestation of Maciunas' work toward collective authorship using the model of conventional business practice was his creation of a Fluxus copyright that would function similarly to commercial copyrights. Maciunas had conceived of such an exclusive right early in the development of Fluxus. As stated in his 1962 letter to Robert Watts, Maciunas was forming a more concrete notion of the collective production of Fluxus over individual artist production through the implementation of an international, albeit not legally-based, copyright of work published through Fluxus.¹²⁷ The function of his proposed copyright was to protect the interests of individual artists and Fluxus as a whole. He explained in the letter to Watts that his present and future works would be internationally copyrighted "...so no copies will be permitted & no performances [done] without some \$ to you [Watts and other Fluxus artists]."¹²⁸ Additionally, the copyright was a function of Maciunas' overarching political and philosophical beliefs. In a letter to Tomas Schmit, Maciunas further elucidated the role of the Fluxus copyright:

Reasons for our copyright arrangements;

¹²⁶ George Maciunas, letter to Dick Higgins, n.d. [c. July, 1966], box I, folder 493, Gilbert and Lila Silverman Archive, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1.

¹²⁷ George Maciunas, letter to Robert Watts, December 1962, box V, folder A.1.41, Gilbert and Lila Silverman Archive, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

1. Eventually we would destroy the *authorship* of pieces & make them totally anonymous—thus eliminating artists “ego”—Author would be “FLUXUS.” We can’t depend on each “artist” to destroy his ego. The copyright arrangement will eventually force him to it if he is reluctant.
2. When we hold copyright collectively we propagandize the collective rather than the individual.
3. When FLUXUS is noted after each FLUXUS copyrighted composition it helps to propagandize the broader—collective aspect of the composition...¹²⁹

Of note in this explanation of the Fluxus copyright is Maciunas’ comment that individual artists could not be depended upon to abandon their egos without the force of the copyright. Maciunas voiced his concern on more than one occasion that Fluxus artists in America and abroad were unable to eliminate their egos. For example, in a letter written to Vautier in March of the same year as the introduction of the copyright, Maciunas told the artist that he had “notice[d] with disappointment your GROWING MEGALOMANIA,” and advised him to “Curb & eliminate your ego entirely. (if you can) don’t sign anything—don’t attribute anything to yourself—depersonalize yourself! that’s in true Fluxus collective spirit.”¹³⁰ In the letter Maciunas also lamented the inability of other Fluxus artists in America to “depersonalize themselves,” saying “No one can succeed to do this here either.”¹³¹ So, in an attempt to enforce a more pure collective spirit, Maciunas felt it necessary to impose this copyright as a type of stipulation for inclusion within the collective. In doing so, Maciunas once again was assuming the role of leader of the group, even if he was also subject to the terms of the copyright. The act of creation itself in this instance placed Maciunas in a position of power within the internal structure of Fluxus.

It is also important to consider the implications of the third listed reason for the introduction of a Fluxus copyright. The “broader—collective aspect” of Fluxus compositions, a

¹²⁹ George Maciunas, letter to Tomas Schmit, January 1964, quoted in Jon Hendricks, “Foreward,” in *Fluxus Codex*, ed. Jon Hendricks (Detroit, MI: Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, 1988), 27

¹³⁰ George Maciunas, letter to Ben Vautier, March 16, 1964, Gilbert and Lila Silverman Archive, as quoted in Jon Hendricks, “Anonymous and Undetermined Authors,” in *Fluxus Codex*, 133.

¹³¹ Ibid.

notion that can be expanded to all Fluxus production, implies not only the collective nature of the Fluxus group of artists, but also the collective aspect of the works in relation to all people who participated or interacted with Fluxus art. As will be discussed further specifically regarding Fluxus objects, Fluxus art functioned to democratize the creative and artistic process, involving the participation of recipients of Flux items, spectators of concerts, and audience members in events in the continuing realization of the work. The notation of “FLUXUS” after copyrighted compositions would then exist not only as a demarcation of the Fluxus group, but also as propaganda of the ideological concerns of Fluxus to break down the artist/audience binary. Fluxus, in this sense, becomes a reference to a larger community that extends beyond the group of active Fluxus artists to the public that experiences Fluxus, and is brought into that community through such experience. Thus, the traditional bureaucratic copyright, exclusive in its purpose as an assertion of private or individual ownership, is now appropriated and undermined, in order to advocate inclusive, collective participation.

But what was the impetus for the Fluxus collective’s seemingly paradoxical rejection of the institutionalized market in favor of a new, yet uncannily similar, alternative? Maciunas’ previously referenced 1965 manifesto for Fluxus established a distinction between the emerging Fluxus artist and the conventional artist. In it he argued that the traditional “ARTIST DOING ART” raises the “COMMODITY QUANTITY” of the art by making it appear “COMPLEX, EXCLUSIVE, INDESPINSIBLE [sic]...AND THEREFORE ACCESSIBLE NOT TO THE MASSES BUT TO THE SOCIAL ELITE.”¹³² In order to avoid this effect of inaccessibility and cultural oppression, and to be “NONPARASITIC,” Maciunas and other Fluxus artists believed it

¹³² Maciunas, *Fluxus Manifesto*, 1965, Gilbert and Lila Silverman Archive, as quoted in Jon Hendricks, “Anonymous and Undetermined Authors,” in *Fluxus Codex*, 133.

necessary to abandon the restrictive institutions that assigned such commodity value.¹³³ If the goal of Fluxus was to extend the experience and production of art to all people, however, some kind of means of distribution was necessary. The success of mainstream consumer modes of distribution was undeniable, and so rather than dismissing or attempting to completely escape modern culture's mass-market bureaucracy, Fluxus artists adopted and then reshaped these systems to provide an alternative mode of consumption that was inclusive and allowed for a new understanding of culture and community. This alternative system was built on the framework of a social and commercial network of reciprocal interaction.

A significant manifestation of the commercial Fluxus network was the establishment of Fluxshops in the United States and abroad. Occupying half of the space Maciunas had procured for his Fluxhall on Canal Street in New York was the flagship Fluxshop. Following its opening in 1964, this shop functioned as a distribution center for publications and objects and also as a conventional store in which people could purchase Fluxus materials.¹³⁴ Knowles referred to this shop in almost quaint terms, stating, "We opened a little store front. We'd sell the objects that George [Maciunas] was always madly making..."¹³⁵ Despite the modest characterization provided by Knowles of the Fluxshop project, in reality the store was operated in much the same way that larger commercial enterprises were. The third edition of Fluxus' newspaper publication, titled *Fluxus cc Valise TRiangle* was printed in March of 1964 and included, among a lecture written by artist Henry Flynt and a centerfold poster for upcoming Fluxus concerts, an order form for Fluxus objects and an advertisement for the Fluxshop. The order form listed the Fluxshop as being open daily from 2:00 PM to 10:00 PM from April 10 to May 30, 1964. On the

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Owen Smith, 135

¹³⁵ Alison Knowles, interview by Estera Milman, "Road Shows, Street Events, and Fluxus People; A Conversation with Alison Knowles," 100.

order form was included a list of 59 works currently available for purchase, such as Alison Knowles' *Canned Bean Roll* (Fig. 8) and Takako Saito's *Spice Chess* (Fig. 9).¹³⁶

The inclusion of an order form and the description of the Fluxshop as both a store and a mail order warehouse demonstrated, as Owen Smith suggests, the evolution of Fluxus into more object-based production from its initial conception as a publication.¹³⁷ The objects used by the collective in making the multiples for sale in the store most often consisted of small, commonplace items that Maciunas and the other artists sourced locally from junk shops and bins throughout New York.¹³⁸ Cheap knickknacks, toys, and other mundane items were removed from their place in the lumped-together and overlooked detritus of a society of excess, and recontextualized in the space of the Fluxshop. There customers could be reintroduced to the material world around them within a venue familiar to the modern consumer. Despite the familiarity of the storefront, the experience of the Fluxshop was anything but average. A cash register intended to be installed in the New York Fluxshop in 1968 was described by Maciunas as having 100 keys that would each be “electrically or mechanically connected to switch on events, sounds, or small panels (on price indicators on machine itself).”¹³⁹ The cash register being considered an “exit event” in itself, a time clock was also planned for the shop, which would be used as an “entrance event,” and would imprint time cards with different texts and symbols rather than accurate times.¹⁴⁰ By referring to these machines and their use as “events,” Maciunas fashioned the shop as a continuous Fluxus event, in which both workers and customers are implicated as performers in the process of artistic realization.

¹³⁶ George Maciunas and “Fluxus Editorial Council,” *Fluxus cc Valise TRIangle*, in *Fluxus Codex*, ed. Jon Hendricks (Detroit, MI: Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, 1988), 95.

¹³⁷ Owen Smith, *Fluxus: The History of an Attitude* (San Diego: San Diego State University Press, 1998), 144.

¹³⁸ Hannah Higgins, *Fluxus Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 59.

¹³⁹ George Maciunas, *Fluxnewsletter*, March 8, 1967, box V, folder A.1.37, Gilbert and Lila Silverman Archive, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 3.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

The central Fluxshop in New York ultimately was not as successful as Maciunas had hoped. In an interview with Larry Miller shortly before Maciunas' death, Maciunas estimated spending "about \$50,000" on the production of Fluxus materials that would never see a return.¹⁴¹ When asked by Miller why the enterprise was not more successful, Maciunas stated flatly, "No one was buying it, in those days. We opened up a store on Canal Street, what was it, 1964, and we had it open almost all year. We didn't make one sale in that whole year."¹⁴² This lack of sales was perhaps due, in part, to Maciunas' interest in forming a system that, although parallel to mainstream commercial institutions, was still separate from it. The results of this mode of operation may have, in fact, been detrimental to the collective's goal of widespread democratic dissemination of their work and ideas. Dick Higgins acknowledged this, writing:

I wanted to offer Fluxus to everybody, to have Fluxus and Fluxus-type work (similar works by other artists who were outside our circle) available in airport book shops and grocery stores. Maciunas focused on the work being cheap but gave little attention to making them accessible to ordinary people; to promotion and distribution beyond the order forms that were printed in his *CC V TRE* newspapers, which, of course, had to circulate among the right people to function at all, people who already had some idea what they were looking at.¹⁴³

While Maciunas was circumventing pre-established galleries and museums, his creation of completely new stores and distribution networks again reflected the systems already in place, to a degree that some Fluxus artists felt may have impeded their objectives. Higgins stated that he and other Fluxus artists of "a strong populist streak" were indeed concerned that the Fluxus items and publications being sold in this manner "were too elitist (our productions were 'collectibles,'

¹⁴¹ George Maciunas, interview with Larry Miller, 1978, quoted in *Mr. Fluxus: A Collective Portrait of George Maciunas 1931-1978*, eds. Emmett Williams and Ann Noël (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 114.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Dick Higgins, "Two Sides of a Coin: Fluxus and the Something Else Press," in *Fluxus: A Conceptual Country*, ed. Estera Milman (Providence, RI: Visible Language, 1992), 149.

and perhaps we were simply producing as much ‘for the collector’ as traditional artists.).”¹⁴⁴

With this in mind, Higgins took the initiative to find other avenues for distributing Fluxus material. Pamphlets published by his Something Else Press, Inc., called the Great Bear Pamphlets, were printed on attractive papers and sold for up to \$2.00 in at least one grocery store, the Berkley Co-op in Berkley, California. According to Higgins, the price was “rather inexpensive, even for the time,” and the pamphlets “were available for some time in a display case beside the vegetable counter.”¹⁴⁵

Operating in France concurrently with the New York Fluxshop was the second largest Fluxus-operated store. La Cédille qui Sourit (“the cedilla that smiles”) opened in the summer of 1965 under the ownership of Fluxus artists George Brecht and Robert Filliou in the seaside town of Villefranche-sur-Mer, and also functioned superficially within the capitalist market model in order to undermine such structure and build an alternative network of interaction. Like the New York Fluxshop, the Cédille carried materials from several Fluxus artists, ranging from books by Alison Knowles and Higgins’ Something Else Press publications to multiples made by Maciunas and Daniel Spoerri.¹⁴⁶ Although not directly operated by Maciunas, the Cédille still functioned as a subsidiary of Maciunas’ larger Fluxus corporation. In a letter to Maciunas Brecht not only announced his and Filliou’s plans for opening the shop, but also requested that Maciunas send them a “‘basic’ Fluxus collection” of objects and publications to be sold.¹⁴⁷ Additionally, Brecht wrote in the letter that they would base their prices on those decided by Maciunas in an earlier newsletter and asked Maciunas what percentage of the sales should be sent to him. Filliou’s

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 151-52.

¹⁴⁶ Natilee Harren, “La Cédille qui ne finit pas: Robert Filliou, George Brecht, and Fluxus in Villefranche,” *Getty Research Journal*, 4 (2012), 127.

¹⁴⁷ George Brecht, letter to George Maciunas, n.d., box I, folder 134, Gilbert and Lila Silverman Archive, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1.

request for Fluxus materials and his deference to the prices Maciunas had set again suggests that Maciunas was the primary organizer of Fluxus commercial activity, and had convincingly presented himself in the role of chief of Fluxus financial operations.

Despite its association with the larger Fluxus commercial venture, Filliou and Brecht's store was set up more like an artist's studio than a conventional commercial operation or gallery space. The items available were not on display as much as mingled together with the artists' works in progress. Production of the items available took place in the store and was drawn out over long periods of time in a manner that suggested that the products would never be completed.¹⁴⁸ Unlike Maciunas' Fluxshop, which was open daily with the intention of making actual sales, Filliou described the Cédille as "a sort of workshop and of shop, of nonshop would we say now, for we were never commercially registered, and the Cédille was always shut, opening only upon request of visitors to our homes."¹⁴⁹ Undoubtedly due to its inaccessibility to a wide customer base, the Cédille did not generate enough revenue to remain open more than a few years, closing in October of 1968. Although it was not economically successful, Brecht and Filliou's French Fluxus shop was conceptually successful, arguably more so than Maciunas' New York Fluxshop, in its critique of the commodification of art during the 1960s. The indeterminate production schedule and dysfunction as a traditional store served to undermine the larger understanding of the functionality of mainstream consumer culture.¹⁵⁰ In fact, the Cédille's failure was perhaps intentional. In his manifesto, Filliou included a section entitled "Homage to

¹⁴⁸ Harren, "La Cédille qui ne finit pas: Robert Filliou, George Brecht, and Fluxus in Villefranche," 127.

¹⁴⁹ Robert Filliou and George Brecht, *Games at the Cedilla; or, The Cedilla Takes Off* (New York: Something Else Press, 1967), n.p.

¹⁵⁰ Harren, "La Cédille qui ne finit pas: Robert Filliou, George Brecht, and Fluxus in Villefranche," 130.

Failures,” in which he argued that since failures are not admired or influential they are a success because “we must get rid of the idea of admiration and of the deadweight of leadership.”¹⁵¹

Although the New York Fluxshop and La Cédille qui Sourit were relatively short-lived ventures, the use of the postal system and mail order warehouses established in the United States and Europe by Fluxus artists continued throughout the 1960s and 1970s. By the 1960s, the mailing of small editions of work by various artists had become a new method of distribution that circumvented the traditional gallery and museum systems. In Fluxus, early examples of such assembled editions include the production of *Fluxus Yearboxes* beginning in 1962. The concept of the Fluxus yearbox originated in Almanacs popular during the beginning of the 20th century, which served as affordable anthologies of a movement’s current work. In the initial plans for the first *Fluxus Yearboxes*, Maciunas announced that the collections would “utilize instead of covers a flat box to contain the contents so as to permit inclusion of many loose items,” which included not only printed material, but also “metal, plastic, wood objects, scraps of paper, clippings, [and] junk.”¹⁵² Maciunas had planned to produce several editions of the *Fluxus Yearbox*, one for each geographic region in which Fluxus artists were active; American, Northern European, Japanese, Southern European, and Eastern European anthologies. Only the first, *Fluxus I*, was completed, and the collection was dominated by American artists, although it did contain work by European and Japanese Fluxus artists.¹⁵³

This completed yearbox is included in a list of “Flux-Products 1961 to 1970” as selling for thirty dollars by mail, and included book events, objects and essays by the artists George

¹⁵¹ Robert Filliou, *Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts*, ed. Kasper König (New York: Koenig, 1970), 74.

¹⁵² George Maciunas, *Fluxus Newsletter No. 1*, February 1962, in *Fluxus Codex*, ed. Jon Hendricks (Detroit, MI: Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, 1988), 103.

¹⁵³ Jon Hendricks, ed., *Fluxus Codex*, 103.

Brecht, Alison Knowles, George Maciunas, Tomas Schmit and Ben Vautier.¹⁵⁴ Also listed in the document are numerous objects for sale by individual artists, such as Ay-O's *Finger Box* (Fig. 10), priced at eight dollars, Brecht's complete collection of *Water Yam* event score cards, priced at twenty dollars, and *Fluxpost Kit* (Fig. 11), comprised of objects by Bob Watts, Ben Vautier, Ken Friedman, and Jim Riddle, which was sold for eight dollars.¹⁵⁵ All of these items would have been made available to the public through the Fluxshop, and more widely through warehouses established by Fluxus for the distribution of work through the mail. In addition to a warehouse set up in the New York Fluxhall and shop, several small warehouses were created in the United States and Europe, such as the European Mail-Order Warehouse, which was operated by Willem de Ridder in Amsterdam (Fig. 12). These mail-order shops sought to spread Fluxus work without aggrandizing it, or heightening the commodity value, in contrast to the function of the traditional gallery space. The postal system was not only a practical method of sharing Fluxus artwork and maintaining contact between artists and patrons, but also served as another institution which Fluxus subverted by way of plagiarizing the tools and materials used by the postal system for alternative Fluxus purposes.

The *Fluxpost Kit* in particular demonstrates both the use of the conventional distribution avenue of the postal service, and the appropriation of that bureaucratic model to mock the established system and create a parallel alternative network. Included in the kit was a sheet of 100 Fluxus stamps designed by Robert Watts that depicted magazine clippings, drawings and photographs. Much like the Fluxus copyright, these stamps mirrored the tools of a smoothly running bureaucratic system, but were parodies of such forms. Despite appearances, these stamps could not function beyond their aesthetic value because they were not institutionally approved as

¹⁵⁴ George Maciunas, *Flux-Products 1961 to 1970*, box V, folder A.1.10, Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Archive, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 2.

official postal stamps. The canceling stamps designed by Ken Friedman and included in this kit further engage this dichotomy of function and non-function. Based on the conventional postal marking used to deface a postage stamp and prevent its re-use, Friedman's rubber stamp could be applied not only to the Fluxus stamps in the kit, but also any other stamps or objects. A postage stamp, once covered by the cancelation marking, loses its commodity and collector value, both physically and economically defacing the stamp. Friedman's stamp, once used on a Fluxus postage stamp, not only mirrors the bureaucratic allocation and denial of commodity value, but also defaces and denies the aesthetic value of the Fluxus stamp as art object. In this way, the canceling stamp becomes a physical symbol of the Fluxus collective's goals of rejecting the commodification of art and the established capitalist marketplace as a whole.

The recipient of the *Fluxpost Kit* is given the freedom of choice in determining how to use the Fluxus postage stamps and what to label with the rubber canceling stamp, but with the included postcards designed by Ben Vautier, the postal worker is also given freedom to interpret the work and its function. Vautier's "postman's choice" postcard is stamped and labeled with two different addresses on both sides. In this postcard the quality of an experiment or game is present. It is socially accepted that the postman is to deliver mail such as the postcard to a given address, but typically there is only one address provided, and the postal worker acts as passive intermediary between sender and recipient, through the act of choosing. With Vautier's postcard, the passive role of the postman is upended, and a novel reality is created in which the messenger becomes an active agent in the completion of the physical connection made between sender and possible recipient. The decision that must be made by the postman thus becomes the tool through which he becomes aware of his function in the institutionalized postal service, while the

indeterminacy of the postcard's destination undermines the reliance on the smooth operation of such a system.

Considering Maciunas and other Fluxus artists' stated opposition to the commodification of art, the question naturally arises as to why such Fluxshops and order warehouses still participated in the consumer market activities of buying and selling.¹⁵⁶ Possibly problematizing the almost utopian conception of Fluxus alternative commercial activity is the consistent preoccupation that Maciunas demonstrated with the economics of the endeavor. The Fluxus collective, and Maciunas in particular, recognized the market as a thing which can be performed. Although vociferous in his disavowal of capitalist commodification, such performance of the system might suggest more ambivalence toward it. As Mari Dumett argues, "'performing' the system, materializing its *thingness*, might render it more tangible and scrutable. And would this signify a degree of autonomy, a parallel alternative system, from within?... a strategy of mimesis might run the danger of reproducing the very systemic forces it aimed to question."¹⁵⁷ Looking to Maciunas' strategies for organizing Fluxus, and his personal actions, it becomes less clear if his motivation for constructing the collective was as critical as his comments would suggest.

Taking the notion of Fluxus as an actual business one step further, in a *Fluxnewsletter* dated March 8, 1967, Maciunas announced the development of a project called Implosions Inc. for the profitable distribution, marketing and mass-production of Fluxus materials. The description of this project in the newsletter reads:

Triple partnership was formed between Bob Watts, Herman Fine and myself to introduce into mass market some potentially [sic] money producing products (of practical nature) (mostly) Some contacts with manufacturers may promise success. This business will be

¹⁵⁶ Filliou referred to the contemporary capitalist art market as the "economics of prostitution," in *Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts*, 81.

¹⁵⁷ See Mari Dumett, "The Great Executive Dream: George Maciunas, Adriano Olivetti, and Fluxus Incorporated," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 53/54 (Spring-Autumn, 2008), JSTOR <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25608824.pdf?acceptTC=true>, 317.

operated in commercial manner, with intent to make profits. Artists will be offered 5% royalty from total gross sales of products designed by him. Though connection between Fluxus collective and Implosions Inc. has not been clarified yet (though 66% of Implosions is Fluxus in personel [sic] and products), we could consider at present Fluxus to be a kind of division or subsidiary of Implosions.¹⁵⁸

The list of products provided in the newsletter that were to be sold under Implosions Inc. were indeed of a more practical nature than Fluxus objects sold in Fluxshops, and thus were potentially more profitable. Although referred to as “projects” by Maciunas in the publication, the goods listed did not have the same character as previous Fluxus artistic projects, and ranged from stick-on disposable jewelry to paper aprons, “used for outdoor cooking.”¹⁵⁹ In fact, the paper aprons were intended by Maciunas to be “offered to various beer and food manufacturers as premiums etc.”¹⁶⁰ These products, as well as the other objects for sale in Fluxshops, often were labeled with Fluxus stamps or logos, which served as a form of branding for the group. Again, this branding represented a parody of mainstream corporate branding and logos, similar to Fluxus advertisements and the storefronts themselves. While playful and critical in nature, the branding of Fluxus in the commercial sense created a cognitive association between the products that consumers purchased from them and the larger ideology of the movement. It allowed also for the people who owned and interacted with these products to feel a sense of inclusion, or community, with Fluxus. The conception of mass-producing items like the aprons, not for individuals in support of the Fluxus attitude, but as premiums for mainstream companies is yet another example of both Maciunas’ possible underlying ambivalence toward the consumer culture he criticized and his self-fashioning as an entrepreneur in the conventional sense of the term.

¹⁵⁸ George Maciunas, *Fluxusnewsletter*, March 8, 1967, box V, folder A.1.37, Gilbert and Lila Silverman Archive, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

Interestingly, this announcement came within a year of Maciunas receiving a rather hostile letter from Dick Higgins regarding Maciunas' prior fashioning and promotion of Fluxus in the vein of a corporation. In this letter, Higgins supports "the definition of Fluxus as a movement rather than a company," warning Maciunas that he "must therefore not assume that it is possible for you to elect yourself exclusive dictator with the exclusive right to the term [Fluxus]." ¹⁶¹ Higgins then informed Maciunas that he had inquired into the registered exclusivity of the term "Fluxus" with the New York State Bureau of Taxation and Finance, and that as no exclusive rights were found, anyone was entitled to use the word. ¹⁶² Higgins was perhaps attempting a subtle threat in this letter, but it also may have led to Maciunas' eventual decision to create Implosions Inc. Suggesting that there could be legal trouble for Maciunas if the New York State Bureau of Taxation and Finance followed up on his inquiry by investigating Maciunas' Fluxus bookkeeping, Higgins then recommended that Maciunas incorporate his operation in much the same way that Higgins had incorporated Something Else Press. ¹⁶³ The drama and theatricality of this entire exchange between Higgins and Maciunas is demonstrative of the tensions that ebbed and flowed throughout the history of the Fluxus group, and the lack of cohesion that abounded within it. Such argument also supports the understanding of Fluxus as a heterogeneous group of artists that collaborated and interacted socially and professionally, rather than a united art movement.

Maciunas continually demonstrated interest in taking on the role of a business man in his work with the group. Manifesting most clearly in his self-appointed role as executive of Fluxus, determining the framework for Fluxus artwork and membership, Maciunas organized the

¹⁶¹ Dick Higgins, letter to George Maciunas, August 23, 1966, box I, folder 493, Gilbert and Lila Silverman Archive, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

collective on the model of an international corporation. In addition to the lists printed by him of who was part of the collective, and the establishment in 1963 of the first Fluxshop and Fluxhall headquarters in New York, Maciunas created a multinational network of satellite Fluxus hubs in Eastern Europe, Western Europe, and Japan, much like the contemporary emergence of postwar international commercial systems. In order to oversee all of these Fluxus outposts, Maciunas delegated regional management to artists such as Ben Vautier in France, Willem de Ridder in the Netherlands, Milan Knížák in Czechoslovakia, and Kuniharu Akiyama in Japan.¹⁶⁴ At these Fluxus loci additional mail warehouses were organized and each regional Fluxus leader oversaw the continued distribution of Fluxus goods, creating a flow of capital homologous to that of the mainstream capitalist system.

Maciunas also adopted the structure of the white collar workday in his understanding of how Fluxus artists should produce. In a letter to Tomas Schmit, Maciunas encouraged the artist to find a job outside of his art, writing that the “Fluxus way of life is 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. doing socially constructive and useful work—earning your own living, 5 p.m. to 10 p.m. spending time on propagandizing your way of life among other idle artists and art collectors and fighting them, 12 p.m. to 8 a.m. sleeping (8 hours is enough).”¹⁶⁵ Interestingly, Maciunas did not follow his own prescription. In the March 1967 *Fluxnewsletter*, Maciunas also announced his decision to devote all of his time to Fluxus activity, stating “My wage-earning-time killing job has made it difficult for me to devote more time on Flux-projects and correspondence. To remedy this I have left my job a week ago. Now I will have time to collaborate on many more projects, though

¹⁶⁴Dumett, “The Great Executive Dream: George Maciunas, Adriano Olivetti, and Fluxus Incorporated,” 319.

¹⁶⁵ George Maciunas, letter to Tomas Schmit, 1964, quoted in Mari Dumett, “The Great Executive Dream: George Maciunas, Adriano Olivetti, and Fluxus Incorporated,” 320.

much less funds to finance them.”¹⁶⁶ This can be interpreted as another instance of Maciunas conceiving of himself as responsible for the group, taking on Fluxus as his full-time job, in which he would be doing the socially constructive and useful work that he told Schmit to carry out in a separate, professional job.

Ultimately then, given its close approximation to the mass commodity system it was extolling and Maciunas’ personal interest in conducting business-like operations, was the Fluxus collective successful in its criticism? If so, how was it successful, and why would Fluxus artists choose this mode of criticism? Regarding Maciunas’ business approach to Fluxus, De Ridder once commented, “I loved the idea that George [Maciunas] was setting up a business.... It created a fantastic confusion and nobody dared to take the risk not to take you seriously...we agreed that I would set up a mail-order warehouse for Flux products and after that I got regular instructions from headquarters in New York....”¹⁶⁷ Such a continued relationship with consumption perhaps stemmed from Fluxus artists’ desire for liberation from that very culture. Historian Sally Banes argued that if by the 1960s “the contemporary consumer market has replaced the earlier capitalist production sphere as the locus of self-realization—making freedom of choice available for the first time to the many (but not without creating massive social problems)—then the notion of freedom in our time is inextricably linked to economic abundance, particularly as expressed through mass consumer culture.”¹⁶⁸ Additionally, Banes suggested, it is within community that 1960s avant-garde artists, and I posit Fluxus artists in particular, attempted to locate such freedom.¹⁶⁹ Thus, the self-realization associated with the freedom of

¹⁶⁶ George Maciunas, *Fluxusletter*, March 8, 1967, box V, folder A.1.37, Gilbert and Lila Silverman Archive, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 3.

¹⁶⁷ Willem de Ridder, letter to Emmett Williams, 1993, quoted in Dumett, “The Great Executive Dream: George Maciunas, Adriano Olivetti, and Fluxus Incorporated,” 318.

¹⁶⁸ Sally Banes, *Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-garde Performance and the Effervescent Body* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 138.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 137.

choice in consumer culture becomes grounded in the interactive aspect of commercial exchange that takes place within the Fluxshop.

What differentiates the sale of Fluxus work from other forms of consumer activity, and the use of found objects by other artists, is that these acts of distribution and consumption served as the basis of a social interaction through the direct exchange of not only the product itself, but also the personal interaction of producer and consumer with it and the exchange of experience through it. Fluxus art objects that were sold and distributed in these ways performed both in the sense of a business and also as a pedagogy and social situation. In the behavioral element of Fluxkits sold at the Fluxshop, the individual experience of interacting with the objects offers the freedom of choice present in mainstream consumer culture. The distribution of Fluxus art and the shared experience of exchange through it established a social system that existed outside of such a culture. At the level of the individual experience, the function of Fluxus artwork can be understood in relation to John Dewey's Pragmatist theory of aesthetics, a connection elucidated by Hannah Higgins in her book *Fluxus Experience*.¹⁷⁰ In her text, Higgins argued that Fluxus reacted against the traditional visual model of art, which is based on the notion of the viewer as disembodied, and is reinforced by the gallery and museum environment, in which art objects are placed behind glass and can only engage the viewer visually.¹⁷¹ Instead, Fluxus artwork engaged the body, requiring physical interaction through multiple senses to activate the work.

As previously noted, Dewey understood aesthetic experience as distinguishable from everyday experience only in a qualitative sense. He argued that aesthetic experience could also occur as a result of everyday actions and encounters, but that aesthetic experience of artwork is

¹⁷⁰ For more in-depth analysis of the influence of Dewey's aesthetic theory on Fluxus artwork, see Hannah Higgins, *Fluxus Experience*.

¹⁷¹ Ibid, 12.

only possible when the viewer actively produces the experience individually.¹⁷² Through physical interaction with Fluxus objects, a viewer actively produces the aesthetic experience, which is unique to that individual. Fluxus objects, functioning as interactive art, thus incorporate the observer's own actions as a condition of the aesthetic experience. Being made consciously aware of such physical actions as integral to the artwork, the observer becomes embodied in the process of interaction. In Fluxus objects such as Ay-O's *Finger Box*, the traditional visual mode of experiencing art is all but abandoned in favor of a haptic experience. Much like the ambiguity of the double address on Vautier's postcard, with Ay-O's *Finger Box* and other Fluxus multiples, guidelines are set but no clear result is expected. As Dick Higgins wrote of Fluxus works, "one gives the rules without the exact details," and offers instead a "range of possibilities."¹⁷³ The viewer chooses his or her own mode and actions in handling such an object, consciously producing the aesthetic experience while being opened to the freedom of autonomous self-realization via the body and senses.

Ay-O's 1964 multiple was a three-inch box constructed out of cardboard and printed with the artist's name, the title of the work, and an advertisement for the New York Fluxshop. On one face of the cube was a small hole with the simple instructions "Put finger in" printed next to it. Meant to be experienced not in the gallery, but in a private environment, the object encouraged personal exploration in much the same way as the tactile tools used by John Dewey at the Lab School in Chicago.¹⁷⁴ Ay-O's open-ended instruction directed the viewer but also allowed for varied and subjective interpretation. The multiples were filled with different materials, including foam rubber, confetti, steel wool and feathers, but the contents of each box remained a mystery to the viewer except through conclusions drawn by purely tactile investigation. As Higgins

¹⁷² John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 123.

¹⁷³ Higgins, *Horizons: The Poetics and Theory of the Intermedia*, 20-21.

¹⁷⁴ Higgins, *Fluxus Experience*, 36.

suggests, the primary experience of inserting one's finger into the hole in the box generated physical, unmediated truth of the world and one's presence in it.¹⁷⁵ This truth has no end beyond itself, just as the items used in Fluxus multiples no longer served the conventional functions they had in the mainstream marketplace. The foam rubber in one box no longer existed as padding, the steel wool no longer was an implement for cleaning. Instead, these materials existed in their own right, given meaning through their materiality and the physical exploration of that materiality. In this sense, Fluxus multiples that were sold through the shops or mail order were unlike items bought and sold elsewhere. Additionally, although they were distributed using a model similar to the commodified art market, they did not function as traditional art objects. By this point, modern artwork's exchange value, as Yve-Alain Bois wrote, was "determined by the 'psychological' mechanisms that are at the core of any monopoly system: rarity, authenticity, uniqueness, and the law of supply and demand."¹⁷⁶ The Fluxus artwork sought existence not as commodity fetish, a characteristic that becomes attached to a product of labor as soon as they are made commodities, but as an arena to explore thought and a resultant novel understanding of one's environment through the process of interacting with them.¹⁷⁷

Although very personal, such sensuous experience is also connective. Within the world of objects, touch, for example, functions socially. Touching assumes the capacity to be reciprocally touched, creating an embodied subject-object relationship that is at once intimate and communicative, while opposing conventional Western epistemologies of disembodied vision as the means of knowledge. Sharing the experience of what is felt within Ay-O's boxes, people also connect through the communal act of experiencing the sensation. In this way, all Fluxus objects

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 38.

¹⁷⁶ Yve-Alain Bois, "Painting: The Task of Mourning," (1986), in *Painting as Model* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 237.

¹⁷⁷ For further discussion of the fetishization of commodities see Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1 (1867), trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1976).

with which recipients interacted became the connective tissues between people that formed a social community based on direct and shared perception of the world through the body.

Extending beyond the interior subjective experience, Dewey argued that aesthetic experience promotes “active and alert commerce with the world...complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events.”¹⁷⁸ Fluxus multiples allowed the viewer to assert his or her own presence both within a world of object and a world of other people. While the objects became performance in the interaction of the audience with them, they also became tools of performative action between all participants.

The exchange of Fluxus art between artists and audience was not based on a one-directional path from artist to viewer, but on a reciprocal relationship that is more social. In the process of rejecting the pure visual model of aesthetic experience, the activation of the body through direct interaction results in collaborative realization of an artwork. The collaborative nature of Fluxus multiples, which were only fully realized in the interaction of the viewer with them, democratized the art making process. Ay-O's *Finger Box* is not activated until the viewer places his or her finger inside. The concept of the artwork is made concrete in such action. In this way, the artist is not the sole author of the work, and the dichotomy between artist and audience, and artistic practice and everyday actions are blurred. This aspect of reciprocity stands in contrast to the hierarchical and asocial exchanges of dominant art and commercial markets, and instead recalls the reciprocal exchange of gift giving. The idea of such social interaction overtly influenced the practice of some Fluxus artists. For example, during the winter of 1966, Brecht and Filliou invited twenty-nine artists to participate in what they called an “Attempt at the Rejuvenation of the Art of Giving.”¹⁷⁹ For this project, the invited artists were asked to provide

¹⁷⁸ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 18.

¹⁷⁹ Harren, “La Cédille qui ne finit pas: Robert Filliou, George Brecht, and Fluxus in Villefranche,” 135.

objects considered appropriate for giving as gifts to friends. According to Natilee Harren, Brecht and Filliou understood the practice of giving gifts as “an object category capable of evading not only capitalist speculation but also the conventional modes of display that facilitate the translation of cultural value into pure exchange value.”¹⁸⁰

Another example of Fluxus reference to the gift exchange framework is Brecht’s *Water Yam* events, which began in 1961 as Yam Festivals developed by Brecht and Watts, and culminated in a collection of event scores printed on cards and compiled for distribution. The collection of notecards, sold by mail order and Fluxshops, were not conceptualized as singular events, but as instructions to be carried out by many people at different times and places with the results recorded as the “events.” Conceiving of *Water Yam* in this way made the network of shared actions the event. The image of the yam was in fact taken by Watts in his 1961 *Yam Collage* (Fig. 13) from the gift-giving festivals that take place in Papua New Guinea.¹⁸¹ The native people that inhabit the Trobriand Islands traditionally “gift” one another yams that are grown in the community with the expectation of reciprocation. Yams, a staple in the Trobriand diet, function as objects that unify members of different clans and establish political and social relationships between individuals. In this community, the gifting of these valuables implies an expected return of at least equal value, placing the recipient of the gift in a position of inferiority until he has fulfilled that expectation.¹⁸²

Similarly, although the goal in establishing commercial and gift networks of exchange in Fluxus was the eradication of the artist and audience hierarchy and the democratization of art, such a distinction may not have been avoided. Artwork that functions through exchange, with the logic of the gift, presents both implicit and explicit demands for the viewer to reciprocate with a

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Saper, *Networked Art*, 114.

¹⁸² Annette Weiner, *The Trobrianders of Papua New Guinea* (Belmont, CA: Thompson Wadsworth, 1988), 135.

suitable response. Event instructions like those of *Water Yam*, and Fluxus multiples with instructions for interaction did work to remove authorship, but simultaneously placed the artist in the position of giver or instructor, to which the recipient was indebted. In *The Enigma of the Gift*, Maurice Godelier explained this paradoxical relationship as a:

...relationship of solidarity because the giver shares what he has, or what he is, with the receiver; and a relationship of superiority because the one who receives the gift and accepts it places himself in the debt of the one who has given it.... Giving thus seems to establish a difference and an inequality of status between donor and recipient, which can in certain instances become a hierarchy: if this hierarchy already exists, then the gift expresses and legitimizes it.... The gift decreases the distance between the protagonists because it is a form of sharing, and it increases the social distance between them because on is now indebted to the other.¹⁸³

In the 1960s, Fluxus artists were reacting against an already long-established hierarchy in the art world. What Fluxus artists were working toward, as Filliou described, was a “kind of pioneer world that should be in the hands of artists, where we will create, and by creating, make claims upon this part of the world.... There would be no difference between students and teachers. It might be just as a kind of availability or responsibility that the artist is willing to take...”¹⁸⁴ But, even if one outwardly denies distinctions between teachers and students or artists and non-artists, such distinctions become implicit in the choice to take or not take on the responsibility for artistic production to which Filliou referred. By mirroring the model of the dominant commercial and art market, Fluxus artists attempted to criticize such mainstream institutions while offering alternative networks in which artists and their audience could operate. The structure of the capitalist corporation allowed Fluxus artists to independently produce and distribute their work, while the objects of Fluxus production subverted consumer culture. In light of longstanding social conventions of artistic status and Maciunas’ fashioning of himself and Fluxus so closely to

¹⁸³ Maurice Godelier, *The Enigma of the Gift* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999), 12.

¹⁸⁴ Filliou, *Teaching and Learning as Performing Art*, 116.

a mainstream business it becomes less clear just how successful the Fluxus collective was at achieving their goals.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine Fluxus as not only a historical movement or group of artists, but a social project founded on artistic production. Often glossed over within the art historical continuum, Fluxus proved to be a much more complex and ambivalent moment within cultural and art history. Following in the footsteps of earlier modern artists, Fluxus artists sought relief from a contemporary society that had grown materialistic, rigid in social conventions, and overly bureaucratic. Symptomatic of such a society was the institutionalization and commodification of culture and creativity that manifested in the hierarchical and oppressive gallery and museum markets. The formation of Fluxus began with the idea for a publication and grew exponentially to attempt a wholly separate network of artists and community of global citizens. The evolution of Fluxus was itself a process involving collaboration, conflict and growing pains. Coming from backgrounds in avant-garde art history, philosophy, professional design and business, the members of the Fluxus collective continually sought a resolution to the problems they observed. Criticizing the longstanding separation between art and the everyday, these artists began the Fluxus endeavor by adopting a critical stance against bourgeois culture, and then extending it to the institutions that supported such culture.

In early event pieces, Fluxus artists such as Higgins, Maciunas and Knowles engaged each other and the audience as embodied participants in both artistic practice and the practice of living, two things that came to be understood by them as not mutually exclusive. With Maciunas taking the lead in the fostering of an organized Fluxus movement, numerous international artists associated themselves intermittently with the Fluxus attitude. The global network of communication between these artists and the function of their work within this network was the foundation of an artistic community that did not try to escape modern culture, but attempted to

reconfigure it into a “pioneer world.” But, the structure of the group and its goals were more complicated than one might assume. While advocating the destruction of democratic art production and reception, Maciunas tried to assume almost exclusive control of the identity of the group and its activity. Simultaneously, Maciunas and the rest of the Fluxus collective chose a parody subtle enough to appear to be pure emulation as their form of critique of the dominant cultural and economic institutions. Perhaps believing that the only way *out* was *through*, the Fluxus collective sought freedom and a new understanding of society by reflecting it in alternative frameworks that were both absurd and subversive.

Although providing great support for the understanding of Fluxus as a counter-cultural, idealistic and radically innovative artistic movement, this research has also suggested that the accomplishment of Fluxus’ cultural critique and its proleptic attempts at the reconstitution of everyday relations was difficult, if not impossible. Differing personal opinions and aspirations, as well as the weight of institutionalized social and artistic conventions, hindered the full realization of a novel Fluxus utopian community, despite the effective construction of innovative social interactions through conceptual and object-based exchange, and the implementation of distribution channels independent of the mainstream art market structure. In attempting to understand what exactly Fluxus was, it may be beneficial to begin by grasping what Fluxus was not. Fluxus was not the child of Maciunas, despite what his opinion may have been. Fluxus was not founded at any point on a single, unified consensus between members. Fluxus was not the direct descendent or subset of Dada, New Realism or Pop Art, but it had common interests. Fluxus was not wholly political, social, or aesthetic, although it involved all three to different degrees at different times. Ultimately, Fluxus has proven to be the spirit that propelled action,

brought people in search of community together, and opened up new possible interpretations of present and future culture.

Figures

FLUXUS* Festspiele NEUESTER MUSIK			
IM HÖRSAAL DES STÄDTISCHEN MUSEUMS, WIESBADEN			
SAMSTAG 1. SEPT. 14-30 UHR	KONZERT NR. 1, KLAVIER KOMPOSITIONEN - U.S.A., K.E. HELM UND P. RZEWSKI - PIANISTEN. JOHN CAGE: 31'57'5944 / PHILIP CORNER: KLAVIER TATIGKEITEN FÜR EIN KLAVIER UND VIELE SPIELER & FLUX & FORM NR. 7 & 14 / TERRY RILEY: KONZERT FÜR 2 PIANISTEN UND TONBAND / T. JENNINGS: KLAVIER STÜCKE / JED CURTIS: KLAVIER STÜCK / DRIFTH ROSE: 2. ENNEAD / DICK HIGGINS: CONSTELLATION NR. 1 FÜR 2 KLAVIERE UND 3 RADIOS / LA MONTE YOUNG: "566" FÜR HENRY FLYNN & KLAVIER STÜCKE FÜR DAVID TUDOR NR. 2 / GEORGE BRECHT: FUNF KLAVIER STÜCKE 1941 UND DREI KLAVIER STÜCKE 1942		
SAMSTAG 2. SEPT. 20-00 UHR	KONZERT NR. 2, KLAVIER KOMPOSITIONEN - JAPAN, K.E. HELM - PIANIST. TOSHI ICHIHARA: MUSIK FÜR KLAVIER. NR. 1 BIS NR. 7 / YOSHIO MATSUDAIRA: INSTRUKTIONEN FÜR KLAVIER / SHINICHI MATSUDAIRA: MDSAKEN / YORD ONO: EIN STÜCK UM DEN HIMMEL ZU SEHEN / KEIICHI SATO: CALIGRAPHY / YOSHITAKASHI: EKSTASIS / TORU TAKEICHI: KLAVIER ENTFERNUNG UND ÜBERBRÜCKUNG / YASUNAO TONE: KLAVIER TON MIT TONBAND / GEORGE YASUNO: PROJECTION ESEMPLASTIC I, II UND III		
SONNTAG 3. SEPT. 14-30 UHR	KONZERT NR. 3, KLAVIER KOMPOSITIONEN - EUROPA, K.E. HELM - PIANIST. K.H. STOCKHAUSEN: KLAVIERSTÜCK IV / CLAUDETTE TRAVIS: BAGATELLES / G.M. ROSEN: 2 KLAVIER STÜCKE / KONRAD BOCHNER: KLAVIERSTÜCK & POTENTIAL / JAN MORTENSON: COURANTE / LAAS J. MEYER: GRILLER FÜR PIANIST / MICHAEL VON BIEL: EIN BUCH FÜR DREI / DIETER SCHNEBEL: REACTIONS / HANDELT FÜR EINEN INSTRUMENTALISTEN & PUBLIKUM I & VISUELLE MUSIK FÜR 1 DIRIGENTEN UND 1 INSTRUMENTALISTEN		
SONNTAG 4. SEPT. 20-00 UHR	KONZERT NR. 4, KLAVIER KOMPOSITIONEN - EUROPA, K.E. HELM - PIANIST. JACQUES CALORNE: QUADRANGLES SURIS DE FENÊTRES ET BOULES / PAULS EMILO CARAPEZZA: IN CIELO / CHRISTOPHE CHARI: CESTI SUR PIANO / SYLVAIN BUSSETTI: POUR CLAVIER. 5 KLAVIER STÜCKE FÜR DAVID TUDOR & PER THE FOR EIN KLAVIER UND 5 PIANISTEN / FREDERIC RIZWASKI: SOLOLOGY		
SAMSTAG 5. SEPT. 20-00 UHR	KONZERT NR. 5, KOMPOSITIONEN FÜR WÄCHERE INSTRUMENTE UND STIMMEN - U.S.A., GEORGE BRECHT: KARTENSTÜCK FÜR STIMMEN / JOHN CAGE: SOLO FÜR STIMME (2) 1946 / PHILIP CORNER: PASSIONATE EXPANSION OF THE LAB / DICK HIGGINS: CONSTELLATION NR. 4 & NR. 7 / TERRY JOHNSON: STREICHQUARTETT / PHILIP KRUMH: MUSTER (FÜR STREICHQUARTETT) / JACKSON MAC LOW: BUCHSTABEN FÜR FIVE NUMMERN FÜR DIE STILLE UND DANKE - EINE ZUSAMMENFASSUNG FÜR LEUTE / TERRY RILEY: UMSCHLAG 1940 (FÜR STREICHQUARTETT) / ENNETT WILLIAMS: EIN ZWEIFELHAFTES LIED IN VIER RICHTUNGEN FÜR 3 STIMMEN / GEORGE BRECHT: STREICHQUARTETT / LA MONTE YOUNG: KOMPOSITION 1940 NR. 7 (FÜR STREICHQUARTETT)		
SONNTAG 6. SEPT. 14-30 UHR	KONZERT NR. 6, KOMPOSITIONEN FÜR ANDERE INSTRUMENTE UND STIMMEN - JAPAN, TOSHI ICHIHARA: STANZEN & FILE / KEIICHI SATO: BEWEGLICHE PULS & DISCRETION / YOSHITAKASHI: MATSUDAIRA: EIN STÜCK FÜR SOLO FLÖTE / YASUNAO TONE: ANAGRAMM FÜR STREICHE / YORD ONO: DER PULS		
SONNTAG 7. SEPT. 20-00 UHR	KONZERT NR. 7, KOMPOSITIONEN FÜR ANDERE INSTRUMENTE UND STIMMEN - EUROPA, MICHAEL VON BIEL: STREICH MUSIK / GEORGE MACANAS: SOLO FÜR STIMME UND MIKROPHON / DRIFTH ROSE: STREICHQUARTETT / FREDERIC RIZWASKI: SOLOLOGY FÜR VIOLIN UND THREE RHAPSODIES FÜR SLIDE WHISTLES / BENJAMIN PATTERSON: VARIATIONEN FÜR KONTRABASS		
FRITAG 8. SEPT. 20-00 UHR	KONZERT NR. 8, KONKRETE MUSIK & HAPPENINGS - U.S.A., JOSEPH BYRD: ZWEI STÜCKE FÜR RICHARD WAXFIELD, 1940 / JOHN CAGE: VARIATIONS / GEORGE BRECHT: KARTENSTÜCK FÜR OBJEKTE, TROPFELNDE MUSIK, KERZEN STÜCK FÜR RADIOS & SOLO FÜR EINEN BLÄSER / JED CURTIS: GAVOTTE, ALLEMANDE UND DIQUE / DICK HIGGINS: GEFÄHRLICHE MUSIK NR. 2 UND GRAPHIS 82 / JACKSON MAC LOW: EIN STÜCK FÜR SARI DENEZ / TERRY RILEY: OHNE STÜCK / FÜR PUBLIKUM I		
SAMSTAG 9. SEPT. 20-00 UHR	KONZERT NR. 9, KONKRETE MUSIK & HAPPENINGS - JAPAN, TOSHI ICHIHARA: MUSIK FÜR ELEKTRISCHE METHODEN & HIN MUSIK / K. AIZYAMA: EINE SCHÖNE METHODE / TAKENISHI KOSUGI: MICRO I & NANOSHARIN I / YORD ONO: ZWEI STÜCKE / YASUNAO TONE: TAGE, NUMMERN & UNTERREDUNG / GEORGE YASUNO: MUSIQUE CONCRÈTE UND MONIQUE		
SONNTAG 10. SEPT. 20-00 UHR	KONZERT NR. 10, KONKRETE MUSIK & HAPPENINGS - INTERNATIONAL, NAM JUNE PAIK: SIMPLE / PIERRE MERCURE: STRUCTURES METALLIQUES NR. 3 / NAM JUNE PAIK: HONORÉ & JOHN CAGE / ETUDE FÜR PIANOFORTE UND SONATA QUINZ UNA FANTASIA / DIETER SCHNEBEL: SICHTBARE MUSIK FÜR EINEN DIRIGENTEN / MACANAS: IN MEMORIAM FÜR ADRIANO OLIVETTI / BENJAMIN PATTERSON: SEPTET AUS "LEMONS" UND OVERTURE (2. DARSTELLUNG) / GEORGE BRECHT: WORD EVENT		
SONNTAG 11. SEPT. 14-30 UHR	KONZERT NR. 11, TONBAND MUSIK UND FILME - U.S.A., JOHN CAGE: FONTANA MIX, MUSIC FOR THE WARRIOR MIXER / LA MONTE YOUNG: ZWEI TÖNE / STRA VANDERBEEK: FILMEN / DICK HIGGINS: REQUIEM FOR WACNER THE CRIMINAL MIXER		
SONNTAG 12. SEPT. 20-00 UHR	KONZERT NR. 12, TONBAND MUSIK - U.S.A., RICHARD WAXFIELD: HUPFEN MUSIK / RADIO MUSIK / GAMPY / PASTORAL SYMPHONY / PERSPECTIVES / NACHT MUSIK		
SONNTAG 13. SEPT. 20-00 UHR	KONZERT NR. 13, TONBAND MUSIK UND FILME - JAPAN, KANADA, TOSHI ICHIHARA: KAIKI / NOBUTAKA MIZUNO: TONBAND STÜCK / TORU TAKEICHI: VOCALISM A-I & WASSER MUSIK / YASUNAO TONE: COSTUME UND SARAKIN / GEORGE YASUNO: AGI-AGI-UE / RESHAHARA: FILM / YOSHIO KURI: HUMAN ZOO / OSHIMA: FILM / KAMI FILM / ISTVAN ANHALT: COMPOSITION NR. 4 / CIONI CARPI & L. PORTUGAIS: POINT ET CONTREPOINT (FILM) / MAURICE BLACKBURN: JE (FILM)		
SONNTAG 14. SEPT. 20-00 UHR	KONZERT NR. 14, TONBAND MUSIK - FRANKREICH, "LES PREMIERES DECOUVERTES" / P. SCHAEFFER: ETUDE AUX CASSEROLS / P. HENRY: MUSIQUE SAAS TITRE / P. ARTHUR: NATURE MORTE & LA CUITURE / A. ROSEN: JAZZ ET JAZZ / "RECHERCHES RECENTES" / L. FERRARI: ETUDE AUX ACCIDENTS & TÊTE ET QUEUE DU DRAGON / F.A. WACHE: PRÉLUDE / P. HANZON: ETUDE / J. HIGALOD: ETUDE / B. PARRODANI: ETUDE / P. BAYLE: TREMPINS & LIGNES ET POINTS / M. PHILIPPOT: AMBIANCE II / P. CARSON: ETUDE / P. SCHAEFFER: SIMULTANÉ CAMÉROGRAPH		
EINTRITTS- KARTEN	FÜR JEDEN KONZERT FÜR EIN ABBONNEMENT (14 KONZERTE) FÜR STUDENTEN	DM 3 DM 20 DM 1,50	EINTRITTSKARTEN SIND AM EINGANG ZU ERHALTEN ODER DURCH VORVERKAUF AM HAUPTBAHNHOF, WIESBADEN
FLUXUS* EINE INTERNATIONALE ZEITSCHRIFT NEUESTER KUNST, ARCHITECTUR, MUSIK, ANTHROPOLOGIE, DICHUNG, ANTIKUNST, ETC.			

Figure 1.



Figure 2.

JB5

Danger Music Number Fifteen

-for the dance-

Work with eggs and butter for a
time.

May 1962

Figure 3.



Figure 4.



Figure 5.



Figure 6.

NEW MARLBOROUGH CENTRE OF NEW ART

The Centre is being created in recognition of the great contribution made by Bauhaus and Black Mountain as think-tanks and training grounds for the future avant garde in art and design. The acquisition of a beautiful "village" of some 12 buildings in the township of New Marlborough, presents the possibility of creating a similar center that could devote itself to:

- 1) study, research, experimentation and development of various advanced ideas and forms in art, history of art, design & documentation;
- 2) production and marketing of various products, objects and events developed at the Centre;
- 3) organization of events and performances at the Centre and other locations of the vicinity.

The Centre would be structured as follows:

- 1) Studios, workshops and residences for permanent residents and visiting members of the community would be housed in buildings 3 to 12.

The tentative list of members is as follows: (permanent residents)

George Maciunas, (design, production of multiples, developing new forms of documentation, new sports, gags)

Robert Watts, (teacher & director of experimental workshops for events, environments and objects)

Yoshimasa Wada (developing new musical acoustic and electronic instruments)

La Monte Young (one of the founders of Concept art, new music forms, endless music, electronic sound environments, etc.)

(visiting members):

Ayo (tactile objects, environments and events)

George Brecht (one of the founders of Concept art, border-line art, non-art, objects, events, humorous art, etc.)

Trisha Brown (kinesthetic art, anti-gravitational dance)

John Cage (the fountain-head of avant garde art)

Jean Dupuy (optic constructions, culinary art)

Robert Filliou (poetry, literature)

Richard Foreman (new theatre and stage set mechanics)

Geoff Hendricks (environments and events)

Dick Higgins (theatre, art criticism, literary art, music)

Joe Jones (musical machines and kinetic art)

Shigeo Kubota (video art)

Jonas Mekas (film ix and film criticism)

Larry Miller (e.s.p. art, objects and events)

Peter Moore (photography; technology and archives)

Nam June Paik (technical art, electronic and mechanical, kinetic art, robots, video, etc.)

Takako Saito (games, new sports, objects)

Stuart Sherman (magic acts, vaudeville, events)

Ben Vautier (concept art, neo-Duchamp, humorous art)

Stan Vanderbeek (film animation, video art)

- 2) Library, archives and exhibit space (buildings 1a & 2) would contain reference material (film, photography, video & sound tapes, printed materials and objects) on past and present avant-garde, exhibit new materials developed at the centre and contain the "learning machine" being developed by G. Maciunas.

Figure 7.



Figure 8.

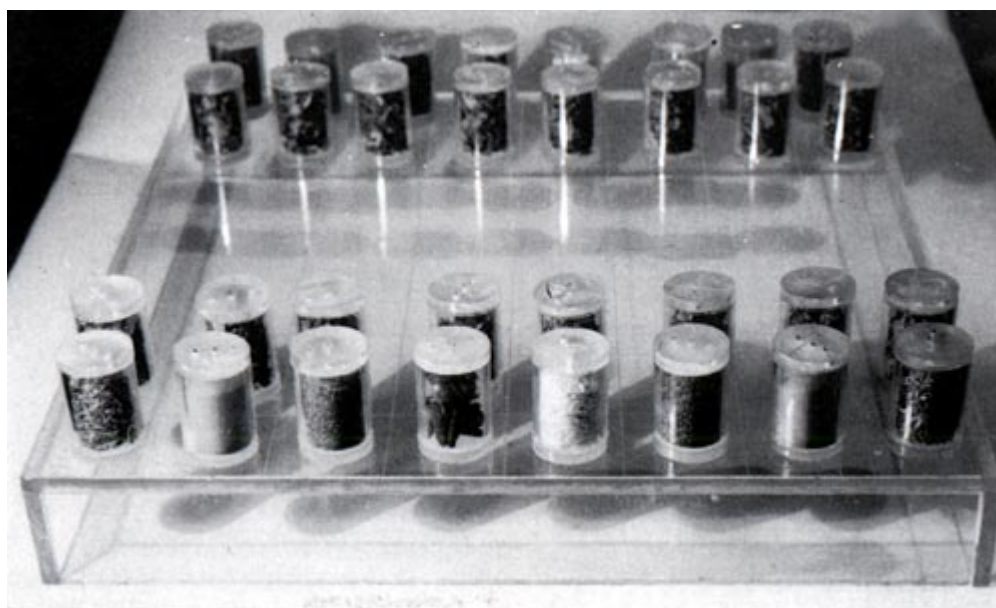


Figure 9.



Figure 10.



Figure 11.

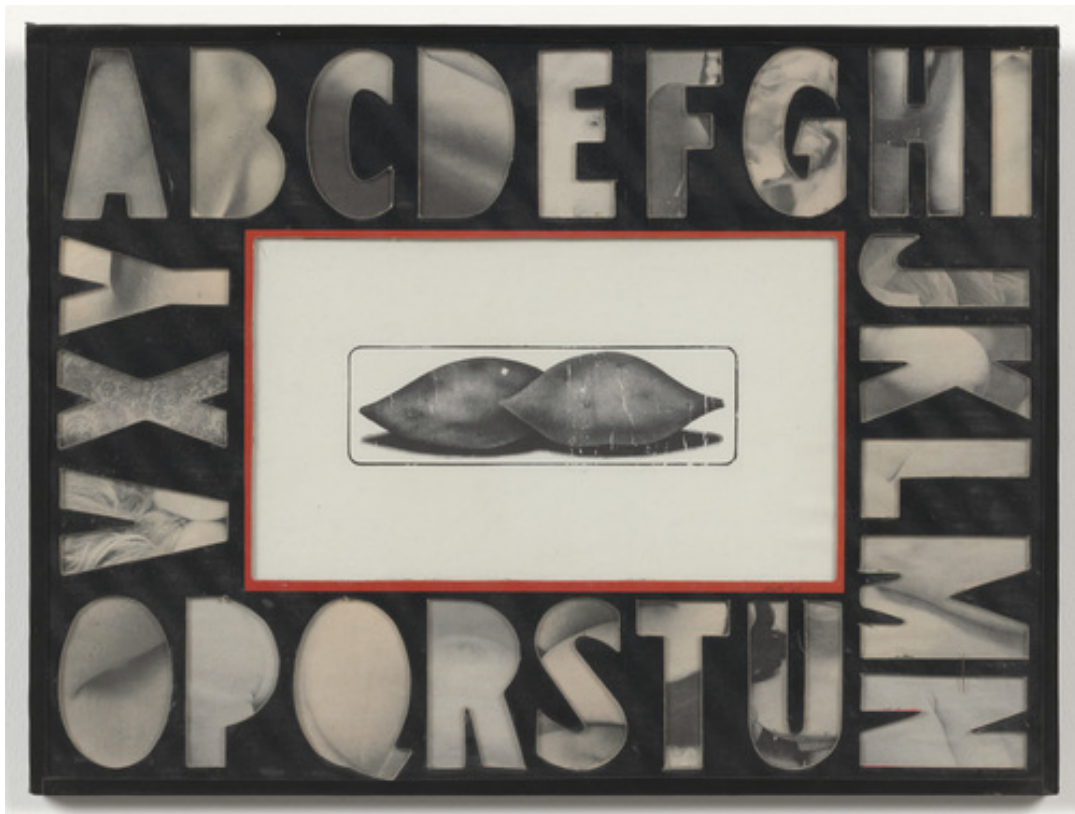


Figure 13.

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