

# ARCHIVIOBONOTTO

Creative R'Evolution.

50 Years of Fluxus from the Archivio Bonotto

Barcelona: 21 - 23 gennaio 2009

Thomas Kellein

## Ways of Fluxus

The funniest and most radical episode in twentieth-century art is the story of Fluxus. George Maciunas (1931-1978), its self-declared chairman, established strangely radical modes of presentation in its name. In his view, the bulk of conventional art business – museums, theatres, concert halls, opera houses, and publishers – should cease to exist. And Fluxus was to be so uncomplicated that it could be realised by anyone more or less anywhere.

Maciunas, who died at the age of forty-six, devoted his life to Fluxus. “The boy was playful and disobedient,” wrote his mother, “he always wanted to be completely free.” Not only as a boy, but in all of his adult life he was radical and revolutionary. A staunch opponent of personal enrichment, he came up with Spartan solutions for almost every life situation, developing his own subversive notion of art well before today’s global networks and multi-million dollar art market became a reality.

When the Fluxus Festivals of “newest music” began in Wiesbaden in September 1962, German television was invited. A six-minute report was made. The journalists did their utmost to come up with polemic responses to all the different concert items. The artists were shown stoically entering the concert hall and again as they clapped. The piece being performed was “Clapping”, by Joseph Byrd. After a brief glimpse of a piece by Jackson Mac Low, the speaker’s voice declared, “Anything Dada can do, we have done longer.” Following this, Benjamin Patterson’s “Variations for Double Bass” were shown. The composer stepped onto the stage, secured the strings of his bass with clothes pegs, and screwed wooden ferrules onto his bow. Patterson then wined sticky tape around the top section of his instrument. Following this he leaned his double bass against the seat of a chair, before laying down some bread on the instrument which he then ate. With an air pump attached to a tube, the composer enticed sounds from the instrument’s body. Towards the end of the piece, he dusted off his double bass.

Emmett Williams, who performed the “Four Directional Song of Doubt for 5 Voices” with Alison Knowles, Dick Higgins, Benjamin Patterson, Nam June Paik, and George Maciunas provided another example of Fluxus art. While Knowles repeatedly sang the word “never” at different pitches, Higgins countered with “no,” and Paik persistently sneezed, Williams conducted evenly and with a fixed gaze. The tabloids reported with a reference to “‘newest music’ in the madhouse style.” Dick Higgins, however, one of the twenty early Fluxus artists and performers, regarded the immensely long-winded aspect of the Festival as its essence: “The Wiesbaden Festival was the most ambitious of all. It lasted a month, with three, four, or five performances each week-end. The other festivals were smaller. The beauty of the Wiesbaden festival was that we had no worry for time—we could do many terrific long pieces that could not be fitted into other festivals.”

In late 1964, after more than two years of international Fluxus concerts and some exhibitions, the first Fluxus anthologies in New York were packed. Maciunas had set

## ARCHIVIOBONOTTO

Creative R'Evolution.

50 Years of Fluxus from the Archivio Bonotto

Barcelona: 21 - 23 gennaio 2009

up a workshop in his loft in Canal Street. Regarding "Fluxus 1" he stamped the envelopes with collected contributions of his Fluxus artists, secured them with three nuts and bolts, pasted an "accordion" with square, typographed name tags for the authors, and placed the hand-collated anthologies into wooden boxes. The end-products, also with "Flux-Kit" and later "Flux Year Box 2", the three major artists' anthologies published by Fluxus Editions, mostly went to the participating artists. Commercially, they were no success.

Many Fluxus publications were to take the form of a "Game Box" with little flip-books, small bottles, and loose items in wooden compartments. The echoes of Duchamp's "Boîte en Valise" were highlighted by a number of cases for the "business man" who was willing to spend a little more. Everything published so far since 1964, the plastic boxes with works by individual artists, or George Brecht's "Water Yam" in a cardboard box (later on in a white plastic box), "Bottle-Events" or a "Suicide Kit" by Ben Vautier, was to be had for very few dollars. As far as the distribution process was concerned, a year after the first boxes and suitcases came out, Maciunas had praise for French artist Ben Vautier: "Popularity of Fluxus in Europe owes almost 99% to your effort."

Maciunas's early contacts with practicing musicians, composers, and artists he first met through La Monte Young and Yoko Ono in New York, motivated him to open a gallery of his own on Madison Avenue. However, already in 1961 when the hoped-for profits failed to materialize, he left for Germany. There, in a small apartment in Wiesbaden, he declared himself "Chairman" of the Fluxus movement. From 1962 on he wanted to attract avantgarde artists from Germany, France, the Netherlands, Denmark, Great Britain, Eastern Europe, Japan, and the United States. He discussed many of the possible Fluxus pieces in his correspondence. These exemplary, minimalist events were and are, not only in his eyes, to nurture a new flourishing world art. It is still different from every other culture we know.