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Freedom? Nothingness? Time? Fluxus and the Laboratory of Ideas

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Abstract
At the 50-year anniversary of Fluxus, Ken Friedman looks back on the activities and achievements of a laboratory for art, architecture, design, and music. This article examines the political and economic context of the 1950s against which Fluxus emerged to become the most radical and experimental art project of the 1960s, thoroughly international in structure, with women as well as men in central roles. The article examines the hermeneutical interface of life and art through 12 Fluxus ideas: globalism, the unity of art and life, intermedia, experimentalism, chance, playfulness, simplicity, implicativeness, exemplativism, specificity, presence in time, and musicality.

Keywords
concept art, Fluxus, hermeneutics, intermedia

Fluxus is not:
– a moment in history or
– an art movement.
Fluxus is:
– a way of doing things,
– a tradition, and
– a way of life and death.
(Dick Higgins, 1997: 160)

Fluxus is what Fluxus does –
but no one knows whodunit.
(Emmett Williams)

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2012: Fifty Years of Fluxus

The ferment and roiling wake of two world wars found many people who were not exactly artists looking for a way to understand and fit into the world. In 1945, Al Hansen was an American soldier in occupied Germany. One day, he found a piano on the fifth story of a burnt-out building. Al pushed it off.

2012 marks the 50th anniversary of the first Fluxus Festival in Weisbaden, Germany. Since then, Fluxus has had moments of renaissance, moments of invisibility, and moments of recognition that were widely misinterpreted. This is understandable for a phenomenon that has a namesake in Heraclitus's doctrine of flux: 'all things flow and nothing stands' (Plato, 1931: 344). The half-century mark brings us farther from the birth of Fluxus in 1962 than Fluxus was from the birth of Dada.

There were visible and significant similarities among Fluxus, Dada, and Surrealism. All were international, but Dada and Surrealism were only international in European terms. Dada had a modest, somewhat uncomfortable presence in North America, and no significant presence in Asia. The Nazi-era exile of European intellectuals and artists gave Surrealism a stronger American presence, especially in New York, but Surrealism remained a Western European phenomenon. In contrast, Fluxus was comprehensively international. Fluxus was a tricontinental forum of artists from Asia, North America, and both parts of Europe, East and West. It is telling that one can portray a history of Fluxus that centers either on Germany or on New York, but one can equally well write a history of Fluxus centered on Japan, or histories of Fluxus with a focus on participants from Sweden, Denmark, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, or on activities in Canada, California, Iceland, Korea, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Lithuania, Norway, France, or England.

Two factors made Fluxus resolutely international. One was a broad membership of key participants in all these nations and regions. The other is the fact that the Fluxus community saw itself as international in a world where funding for art, music and even film was generally national, along with gallerist and patronage networks. This made funding difficult when projects inevitably included more participants from other nations than from the generally national funding agencies to which one might appeal for support.

For the most part, whatever we did, we had to do for ourselves – a 'do it yourself' mentality infused Fluxus activities, both the work and the structures we created to make the work possible. If we shared some of this 'do it yourself' approach with Dada and Surrealism, we went much farther, building publishing firms, production companies, regional centers, and projects that were surprisingly long-lived in contrast with the generally short lifespan of Dada and Surrealist journals and centers.

Figure 1. Flux Year Box 2, 1966.[1] Screen-printed in black on lid. Purchased through the William S. Rubin Fund. Photograph © 2012 Hood Museum of Art.

Another crucial similarity was a heterodox relation to media. The Dadas and the Surrealists worked across art forms with cheerful abandon, and this was the case for Fluxus artists as well. But here, too, Fluxus went farther. We were as likely to step beyond art forms entirely, or to make use of media that had never been considered art. This intermedia ethos became a central characteristic of Fluxus.

But the differences between Fluxus, Dada, and Surrealism were more important than their similarities. In terms of art, Dick Higgins (1998: 217) described Fluxus as something that 'appears to be an iconoclastic art movement, somewhat in the lineage of other such movements in our century – Futurism, Dada, Surrealism, and so on'. But Dick and the other Fluxus people found it embarrassing to be labeled as neo-Dada. In their view, what 'Fluxus people were doing had rather little to do with Dada' (Higgins, 1998: 218). Unlike Dada, Fluxus was not as intense in its apparent anarchism. Unlike Surrealism, it was not an art movement.

Two major differences in the social constitution of Fluxus specifically stand out. One was a tricontinental membership, including women and men from dozens of nations. The other was the strong presence of women. This difference marked more than the difference between Fluxus and Dada or Surrealism. It was a difference between Fluxus and any community of artists that the world had seen before. Fluxus artists and composers would include a major group of groundbreaking women: Alison Knowles, Yoko Ono, Carolee Schneemann, Mieko Shiomi, Takako Saito, Shigeko Kubota, Alice Hutchins, Nye Farrabas, Kate Millett, Carla Liss, Alice Hutchins, Charlotte Moorman and others played key roles in Fluxus. While this revolutionary aspect of Fluxus has not been as well noticed as should be the case, more women were active in Fluxus, and more were central to the work of the community, than in any art groups before it.

The feminist scholarship of Fluxus has begun, pioneered by such early contributors as Kathy O'Dell (1997), and special journal issues have begun to appear, such as the special issue of *Women & Fluxus: Toward a Feminist Archive of Fluxus* (see Fredrickson, 2009; Kawamura, 2009; Kubitza, 2009; O'Dell, 2009; Peterle, 2009; Yoshimoto, 2009). Alison Knowles and Yoko Ono have received significant curatorial attention, while Carolee Schneemann's work has been given a significant revaluation focusing both on Schneemann's work and on her intellectual influence in the Fluxus era (see Stiles, 2010; Schneemann, 2002). Fluxus women made a radical contribution to the larger stream of feminism in art and public life, something unimaginable in the male-dominated Dada group and unthinkable to a group such as the Surrealists, whose reliance on sexual imagery and male fantasies made their group something of a phallocracy.

Overall, a hopeful, proactive engagement with the world distinguished Fluxus from the far darker and often reactive worlds of Dada and Surrealism. Fluxus people had a sharp sense of the differences. Robert Filliou's (1973 [1963]) outline of the Fluxus 'program' illuminated those differences in its playful simplicity.

1950–1960, etc.: Conversations and Constellations

Many of the people who came together in Fluxus in 1962 and 1963 already knew each other. They had worked together in different projects and shifting constellations for many years. Dick Higgins, Jackson Mac Low, Allan Kaprow, Al Hansen, and George Brecht studied musical composition with John Cage at the New School for Social Research. In the 1950s, Cage's classes became a fountain of innovation for 20th-century art and music. In the years since, an ever-increasing number of artists and composers claim to have attended the class. Just as European relic hunters located enough wooden fragments of the True Cross to

build a first-rate ship of the line, the number of artists and composers who now say they studied in the John Cage classes could fill a sports arena. The few who actually studied with Cage – or with Richard Maxfield, who taught the class after Cage – shared what was then an unpopular range of concerns. This was a time when abstract expressionism was the most highly publicized tendency in visual art, before the even more materialistic medium of Pop Art replaced it. The market did not govern music in such a dramatic way, but few composers had an interest in the radical forms that Cage and his students developed. Interest in Cage's class grew as the class receded into history, while teacher and students became increasingly famous (Friedman, 2009a: 75).

At about the same time, Nam June Paik and Wolf Vostell were experimenting with old television sets in Germany. In France, Ben Vautier had opened his record shop in Nice. French economist Robert Filliou had moved to the United States to study economics and work for the Coca Cola Company. Different stories account for the many Fluxus people located in different spots around the world.

Dick Higgins's (1965 [1964]) *Post Face* offers a near-contemporaneous account of the early days leading up to Fluxus, as does Al Hansen's *A Primer of Happenings and Time-Space Art* (1965). Jerry Hopkins's biography of Yoko Ono brings the New York downtown loft scene to life in a richly evocative account (1986: 20–30), while Owen Smith (1992: 45–57; 1998: 13–68) gives an overarching historical description, and Hannah Higgins (2002) offers an account that is both experiential and theoretical, along with an historical overview. Jackson Mac Low, Henry Flynt, Dick Higgins, and others published their memories and accounts in the 1982 Wiesbaden catalogue for the 20th anniversary festival (Block, 1982). In the first decade of the new millennium, Bengt af Klintberg (2006) published a beautiful memoir on Fluxus in Sweden. While the memoir clearly focused on Swedish Fluxus, the same kinds of stories can be told about Japan, Finland, Canada, Korea, France, Denmark, Czechoslovakia, Lithuania, Australia, Germany, Italy, New Zealand or another dozen nations where Fluxus has been part of a global conversation.

What brought the conversation into being was a conjuncture between people, places and the era in which they found themselves talking together. The spirit of the time was vital. Zurbrugg (1998: 172) says simply that 'Fluxus arose in the late 1950s and early 1960s... decades [that] ushered in, to appropriate the famous lines from Charles Dickens' 1859 novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, both ''the best of times'' and ''the worst of times''.

Higgins (1997: 163) described the developing Fluxus network in waves. The first wave of Fluxus artists and composers included George Brecht, Dick Higgins, Alison Knowles, George Maciunas, Yoko Ono, Nam June Paik, Ben Patterson, Mieko Shiomi, Robert Watts, Emmett Williams and La Monte Young. Soon after the founding festival at Wiesbaden,

a second wave of Fluxus artists adopted the forum, including Milan Knizak, Willem de Ridder, Tomas Schmit and Ben Vautier. These were followed by a third wave including Geoffrey Hendricks and myself, and later waves including Jean Dupuy, Larry Miller, Yoshimasa Wada and others.

But Fluxus was far from programmatic. Rather, in a world dominated by abstract expressionism and Pop Art, Fluxus became a laboratory, a living room, and a safe harbor for very different people who had nowhere else to go.

1966: Meetings and Memories

George Maciunas and I first met on a steamy, summer day in New York. He ushered me into the kitchen of his tenement flat in the old SoHo when it was still Little Italy. The apartment contained three rooms: a compact, well-designed office and workroom, a kitchen, and a closet-cum-warehouse filled with the very stuff of Fluxus. The office was a neat clutter of drafting tables, desks, shelves, papers, projects, notebooks, and files. George's workspace was rigged out with a marvelous contraption that enabled him to reach up and tap a weight to summon items he wanted. By means of a counterbalance and some strings and rods, whatever he wanted would float into his grasp. At least, this is my memory. I am not sure if I actually saw the working device, or a prototype, or if this is just a memory of a planning diagram that George showed me.

To the left of the kitchen, George had a huge, walk-in closet or a small storage room. The room was filled with floor-to-ceiling shelves, like an industrial warehouse. It *was* an industrial warehouse, the comprehensive inventory of Fluxus editions in unassembled form. The shelves were loaded with boxes storing the contents of Fluxus multiple editions, suitcases and year boxes. When an order came in for a Fluxbox, George would go to back of the closet, select the appropriate plastic or wooden container, and march through the room plucking out the proper cards and objects to emerge with a completed work. He'd select the proper label, glue it on, and have a completed edition ready to mail (cf. Friedman, 2008: n.p.; 2009b: 48–50; see also Frank, 2008).

The kitchen had a sink, windows, stove, table, and chairs. These were all quite ordinary except for the refrigerator. George had a bright orange refrigerator. When he opened it, I could see he had filled it with oranges from the bottom clear to the top shelf. The top shelf, on either side of the old-fashioned meat chest and ice tray, held four huge jugs of fresh orange juice. He offered me a glass of orange juice.

Maciunas peppered me with questions. We discussed all sorts of things: things without names, things that jumped over the boundaries between ideas and actions, between the manufacture of objects and

books, between philosophy and literature. Maciunas invited me to join Fluxus. I said yes.

At that point in my life, I was planning to become a Unitarian minister and theologian, though to say theology also meant philosophy in much the same sense that Ralph Waldo Emerson was my role model as a minister. It never occurred to me that Fluxus was a community of artists – Daniel Spoerri was a ballet dancer and chef, Dick Higgins was a printer and typographer, George Maciunas was an architect and designer, Henry Flynt was a mathematician, Nam June Paik an inventor and composer, Robert Filliou an economist. Why not a minister and theologian?

What appealed to me about the Fluxus people and George's invitation was their asking interesting questions, and the sense that everyone was welcome to ask them. That was a welcome thought in a world where too many people left asking questions to the long-dead Socrates. In 2011, Jacquelynn Baas framed an exhibition to summarize the five decades of Fluxus by reflecting on the essential questions of life, questions that Fluxus people posed in their projects. For Baas, the work 'sets the agenda and continually reforms the questions that the observer asks of it' (Osborne, 2006: 417). For Baas (2011: 47–84), the work asks 14 questions: 'Art (What's It Good For)? Change? Danger? Death? Freedom? God? Happiness? Health? Love? Nothingness? Sex? Staying Alive? Time? What Am I?'

For some of the Fluxus people, the first question was nearly irrelevant. 'What's art good for? Who cares?' Or, perhaps, 'Who cares about art? Well, the answer is that we did and we didn't.' Or, perhaps again, we did and we didn't depending on the times. And this has a great deal to do with what was at stake in Fluxus – or seemed to be, as well as with the world and circumstances around us.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the art world made little sense to us. It ignored us for the most part, and it didn't like us when we somehow popped up. Even the art dealers and critics who occasionally had a good word for us nearly never included our work in exhibitions. The explanation was simple: there was nearly no market for what we did. I can understand that; gallerists who want to make a living have to sell art. Fluxus people were happy to sell things as art when they could, but they were rarely willing to stop experimenting long enough to build a brand.

Bengt af Klintberg described what happened as people grew old and the art market began to pay attention in describing the shift from experimental and often ephemeral work to work designed for markets:

> Ephemerality, finally, has characterized Fluxus activities from the very beginning. This was signaled in the name Fluxus which can mean both 'flow' and 'change.' For the Fluxus artists, it has been more important to give dense if even ephemeral expressions of the spirit of the time than to produce durable works of art for posterity.

> When the concerts, festivals and the occasionally staged everyday events were over, they only remained in the form of posters, programs and photos. Those Fluxus artists who constructed works of art often chose to work in a small format and they used cheap, ephemeral materials such as paper. Collages from pages in notebooks, receipts and press cuttings had a revival among several artists connected with Fluxus. The making of big paintings was left to artists who wanted to keep up with the competition on the art market. The Fluxus artists preferred to teach the art of living in the present. Later in their lives, economic realities forced several of them to accept the conditions of the art market. This is why exhibitions of Fluxus art have become frequent during recent decades, which they weren't in the 60s. (Klintberg, 2006: 57–8)

This, of course, is why I feel lucky to have a day job that I enjoy, a job with the added advantage of work that pays me to think.

It wasn't the ministry, though, or theology. Despite the surprising sponsorship of Fluxus concerts, projects, and sermons by various Unitarian Universalist churches and conference centers – along with the somewhat controversial *Art Folio* of the Religious Arts Guild (Friedman, 1971) – I never did become a minister. Instead, I pursued a daily life. This was ultimately the stakes in the Fluxus game.

As Bengt af Klintberg (2006: 12–13) writes:

> the Fluxus artists aimed to erase the borderline between art and life. Their attitude can also be expressed thus: it is not important if their work is called art. What it is all about is to give shape to experiences, and that can be done not only by means of a picture ('art') but just as well by an action which is staged and then ends. That action can be to brush your teeth (Ay-O's 'Morning Glory'), make a salad (Alison Knowles's 'Proposition') or to produce a sound by moving your fingernail over the teeth of a comb (George Brecht's 'Comb Piece'). What matters is not to give these events the status of 'art.' What matters is to learn to experience life with open, receptive senses. On the other hand: if you call it 'art' ('music,' 'song,' etc.), then you lift the experience from its ordinary context and invite to an aesthetic experience.

That's what we did not want. And that, of course, is what set us at odds with the art world.

This brings us back to Emerson, who foreshadowed both John Cage and Fluxus by introducing the concept of the ordinary into American philosophy and art. He was one of the first Americans to write about

Asian religion and philosophy as well – another link to Cage and to Fluxus artists, many of whom shared an interest in Asian philosophy, especially Zen Buddhism. In contrast to the European concept of the sublime, which was a distinctly different view of culture, Emerson emphasized the present moment and the commonplace. In his essay titled 'Experience', Emerson writes: 'I ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic... I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low. Give me insight into today, and you may have the antique and future worlds.' His embrace of the quotidian even turns rhetorical: 'What would we really know the meaning of? The meal in the firkin; the milk in the pan; the ballad in the street; the news of the boat; the glance of the eye; the form and gait of the body.' Like Emerson and his close friend Henry David Thoreau, Fluxus artist Dick Higgins would also celebrate the near, the down-to-earth, the familiar, in his 'Something Else Manifesto' and 'A Child's History of Fluxus' (Friedman, 2011: 37–8; see also Emerson, 1983 [1837]: 68–9; Higgins, 2004 [1964], 1984: 87–92).

Erasing the boundaries between art and life was the key issue – to embrace the world in its fullness. Again, this echoes Emerson (2012 [1840]: 485): 'I dreamed that I floated at will in the great Ether, and I saw this world floating also not far off, but diminished to the size of an apple. Then an angel took it in his hand and brought it to me and said, "This must thou eat." And I ate the world.'

1965: The Birth of Intermedia, Part 1: When Dinosaurs Ruled the World

In 1965, the late artist and publisher Dick Higgins (1966, 1984) coined the term 'intermedia' to describe art media that grow from separate media into generative hybrid forms by crossing the boundaries of known media.

Over the centuries, the arts had shifted from a locus for the generation of meaningful symbols in a human community to a locus of technically expert production in specific media. By the late 20th century, however, the emphasis in art had shifted from a broad, general field of skill in meaning generation to narrow technical skills in specific media.

By the 1950s, art critic Clement Greenberg and others built an influential theory of art on the idea that each medium – painting, sculpture, etc. – should focus on what it does best. They emphasized the purity of the medium as the definitive feature of their approach. Philosopher Mark Taylor (1999: 32–3) explains this view as the idea that each art medium was and should be strictly autonomous, with two-dimensional painting distinct from three-dimensional sculpture, and with narrative and text eliminated from both. In this approach, art forms required a neo-Platonic purity, and the purest media were the best. Abstraction, with

Figure 2. Flux Corsage, 1966.[2] Artist/Maker: Ken Friedman. Gift of the Friedman Family. Photograph © 2012 Hood Museum of Art.

its inherent ability to capture the pure qualities of form, was the most progressive and therefore the best and most advanced form of art (Taylor, 1999: 7). But this pure art was – or became – an art of the elite. If bohemian painters made their work in grimy New York studios, gathering at the end of the day to drink in funky bars, their dealers sold

the paintings to people of extraordinary wealth – Rockefellers, Whitneys, Guggenheims, and the like.

By the middle of the 1960s, the great debates in art revolved around abstract expressionism and – later – around the hyperkinetic world of Pop Art that emerged as its counterpart and rival. This was a contest between and among markets. It is difficult today to understand the sway that Clement Greenberg held over art criticism. Several factors account for it. First, and genuinely, Greenberg had been among the first to identify the new work, writing about it in a series of influential essays and exhibition reviews. Greenberg's writings remain models of artistic perception and virtuoso rhetoric in their conceptual clarity and formal elegance. Over a period of four decades, Greenberg virtually defined what it was to be an art critic in the role of public intellectual (Greenberg, 1989 [1961], 1988a, 1988b, 1995a, 1995b; see also Fenton, 2012). But several other factors made Greenberg powerful, making the art he celebrated influential and marketable. One of these was the interest of the American government in promoting American culture during the Cold War. The government sponsored exhibitions that traveled the world in a process that was ultimately celebrated as 'the triumph of American painting' (Sandler, 1976). This triumph ensured market success at home, all the more because it suited a conceptual and political agenda ensuring continued engagement by major museums, powerful dealers, and gallerists (see Guilbaut, 1985). It was also a much smaller art world than it is today, and a few major figures held sway over the whole of it. Greenberg became one of those figures.

At the same time that Greenberg played a pivotal public role in critical debate on the arts, he played an equally decisive role as an advisor to artists, dealers, and their collectors, sometimes well paid. If Clement Greenberg was a brilliant thinker and writer, it is also possible to imagine him as a late modern Bernard Berenson.

The question of modernist politics is somewhat more vexed. In Serge Guilbaut's (1985) reading, the New York art world 'stole the idea of modern art'. This was an approach to art that crossed the Atlantic in the years before and after the Second World War, cementing the position of the American art market through a complex series of negotiations and relations among the politics of artists and the economic factors of the world in which they worked. Clement Greenberg, for example, was a Marxist of sorts, but he deployed a kind of Marxist historicism to focus on the inevitable progression of art toward its necessary end in purist abstraction. The idea of politics or an engagement with the world is nearly irrelevant. In this sense, one might argue that modern art lost its political bite. But one must ask what bite there was to the forms of modernism that preceded the so-called triumph of American painting. What difference did Picasso's political affiliations make? Did Dada influence Germany in any meaningful way? These are difficult questions.

They interested some Fluxus artists, especially George Maciunas and Dick Higgins. George was especially hopeful that he could use Fluxus to reform society by attacking art – a form of iconoclasm that returned the word to its original meaning.

George was a political thinker, and in his view he was an architect with a vision of city planning, housing, and the distribution of social goods for the common good. His vision of Fluxus was at times a form of social planning based on a deep, underlying vision. While many of his hypotheses and ideas were unworkable, his vision was profound, and he practiced the life he preached in the best traditions of social experiment from Thoreau or the Shakers to Gandhi and the Amish. George lived his theories, testing them, changing his approach, while modifying and expanding his views.

One of George's core political ideas was that art distracted the world from what it should be doing. As a result, he felt that he could revolutionize contemporary culture by attacking and overturning the social and economic patterns of art and music. The problem with this position is the role of art in culture. While art is embedded in culture, changing the direction of art will not change the direction of the culture within which it is embedded. In a larger essay on George's work as an architect and social planner, I write:

> The factors that make art significant on a deep level embed it in a resolutely stable network of patterns and behaviors. The specific patterns and behaviors of art and art markets are historically contingent. So are most of the forms and media to which they gave rise. Like an iceberg, however, only a small part of the larger system is visible. The largest portion lies beneath the waterline, out of sight, subject to the physics of inertia.
>
> It was George Maciunas's genius to seek ways to use the cultural inertia of art worlds to shift the larger culture around it. George's mistake was that this could not be done. Deflecting the course of an iceberg does not change the ocean currents that move the iceberg from one part of the planet to another. (Friedman, 2008: n.p.)

Dick Higgins's politics was more complex, involving a politics of everyday life that emerged from a vision that would somehow engage daily life in a complex relational network. The complex conflict between abstract expressionism and Pop Art illuminates the gap in which Fluxus found itself – and suggests the odd nature of Fluxus as a cultural manifestation that was never quite comfortable as art.

The rivalry between Pop and abstraction that grew in reaction to Greenberg's purism was not simply reactionary. Despite its claim to

shaping an art rooted in life, Pop remained a new form of purism anchored in the art market. The art market values historical advances and qualitative claims. But if it was possible to describe American Pop as a reaction to abstract expressionism, it is equally important to recognize that this was a matter of markets. Norwegian critic and curator Per Hovdenakk (1994) perceptively argued that Pop emerged when paintings by the Pollock generation were becoming too expensive for the growing art market. Pop Art was in part a response to the changing needs of the art market.

In the form of Fluxus and Happenings, there was an alternative form of Pop Art, something that Hovdenakk was among the first to point out. Al Hansen and Allan Kaprow pioneered Happenings in America. Wolf Vostell and Milan Knizak played that role in Europe. Several American Pop artists emerged from the happenings scene, migrating to gallery art from their earlier base in happenings. These included Claes Oldenburg, Jim Dine, and Red Grooms.

Hovdenakk was partly right to argue that Fluxus and Pop were linked, but they were not two sides of the same coin. While the Fluxus ethos and intermedia were sometimes taken to be an international form of Pop, there were differences. Where painterly Pop made a fetish and an icon of the everyday object, Fluxus looked into the quiet reality of everyday life and took up dense, philosophical issues with a playful, Zen-inflected touch.

This kind of Pop, if it really was Pop, had a tough time on the market. Happenings were hard to sell. Street-smart, market-wise artists such as Oldenburg and Dine soon left happenings behind for painting. Artist-philosophers like Kaprow and Hansen took other paths, Kaprow as a teacher and Hansen as the traveling Bodhisattva of contemporary art.

Fluxus artists tended to cross the boundary between art and life that so many artists talked about, and the more radical artists involved in Fluxus did manage to cross borders. Paradoxically, artists such as Joseph Beuys, Milan Knizak, Nam June Paik and Ben Vautier are the Fluxus artists who have had the most profound impact on the art world, but even the more conservative, art-minded Fluxus artists crossed the boundaries of art forms, moving with ease between tactile, musical, theatrical, visual and literary forms. Often playful and humorous, Fluxus has been characterized by subtle and complex artists such as Dick Higgins, Mieko Shiomi, George Brecht and George Maciunas. To the degree that this intersected with Pop Art, it was Fluxus Pop.

1965: The Birth of Intermedia, Part 2: Propositions, Danger, Hunches

What really set Fluxus apart was its attitude toward daily life and philosophical complexity. Fluxus people tended to reject the notion of

historical advances and qualitative claims. They preferred an engagement with life. Robert Filliou addressed this problem in his manifesto 'A Proposition, a Problem, a Danger, and a Hunch' (Filliou, 2004 [1966], 1971), a declaration against the notion of artistic quality and toward the notion of life. Resolutely accepting mediocrity as the price of his revolution, Filliou called for 'A refusal to be colonized culturally by a self-styled race of specialists in painting, sculpture, poetry, music, etc.... this is what "la Révolte des Médiocres" is about. With wonderful results in modern art, so far.'

Filliou, originally trained as an economist who worked at one point for the United Nations, saw this kind of artistic activity as a model for all human beings. He asks: 'Tomorrow could everybody revolt? How? Investigate.' But he also addresses impediments to the revolution:

> A problem, the one and only, but massive: money, which creating does not necessarily create. A *Principles of Poetical Economy* must be written. Write it. A danger: soon, and for thousands and thousands of years, the only right granted to individuals may be that of saying 'yes, sir.' So that the memory of art (as freedom) is not lost, its age-old intuitions can be put in simple, easily learned esoteric mathematical formulae, of the type a/b = c/d (for instance, if a is taken as hand, b as head, c as foot, d as table, hand over head can equal foot on table for purposes of recognition and passive resistance). Study the problem. Call the study: *Theory and Practice of A/B*. A hunch: works can be created as fast as the conceiving brain. You say aloud 'blue,' blue paint, or light, appears on canvas, etc.... This is already done to light rooms and open doors. Eventually no more handicraft: Winged Art, like winged imagination.

'Alone or with others work this out', Filliou challenges, 'thus further illustrating the 1962 action-manifesto *l'Autrisme*, during the performance of which performers ask one another, then each member of the audience:

> What are you doing?
> What are you thinking?

and, whatever the answer, add:

> Do something else.
> Think something else.'

The difficulty, of course, is that the specialists also took control of Filliou's work, colonizing it and adapting it to the art markets, both the economy of buying and selling art and the attention economy for thinking about what art might be and do. In this context, Filliou's

proposition for a solution made little difference. In the context of the time, the idea of letting artists make the effort was intriguing. But Robert Filliou used the terms art and artist in a different way than the normative art world does, and using the art world to mediate his ideas meant that the art world seized Filliou's work, mediating it into a narrow channel rather than a large world of public discourse.

Filliou's idea of a poetical economics emerged during an era of contest, inquiry, and debate that affected all research fields and most fields of professional practice. Filliou sought to link thought to productive action – or perhaps he sought to link thought to productive inaction, as it was for John Cage. Attempting this through art suggested a new kind of research as well.

Figure 3. Flux Year Box 2, 1966. Screen-printed in black on lid. Purchased through the William S. Rubin Fund. Photograph © 2012 Hood Museum of Art.

While Filliou was trained as an economist, other economists considered this range of problems in different ways. One stream of work began in the 1940s when Australian economist Colin Clark laid the foundation for work that Daniel Bell would explore in his discussion of post-industrial society. Marshall McLuhan's mentor, Harold Innis, addressed these issues, as did Fritz Machlup. Like Filliou, they did better in analyzing problems than proposing solutions. Their work had a different fate, and it helped give birth to a slowly evolving public conversation that is open to all in a political dialogue of analysis, critique and proposition.

The grand irony of Filliou's work is that he was transformed from a public thinker into an artist, with all the limitations this implies. As a thinker, Filliou opposed the notion of art as a new form of specialization, subject to the control of dealers, critics, collectors and the highly specialized institutions that serve them. As a thinker, Filliou worked in the productive border zone between art and public life.

Unfortunately, Robert Filliou was transformed into an artist, and the art world linked his ideas to mercantile interests. This was not Filliou's fault. Much like specialists and technocrats in any field, the specialists who manage art world institutions also have a difficult time understanding and working with the productive poetic economies that emerge in the border zone. And so Filliou's ideas were to some degree as toothless as the forms of New York modernism that lost their bite in the journey across the Atlantic. For that matter, the older forms of modernism never quite had the political bite we like to believe they did.

1965 – The Birth of Intermedia, Part 3: Nevertheless

Observing the tendency for much of the best and most interesting art of the 1960s to 'fall between media', Higgins (2001: 5–6) compared the divisions among media with the feudal conception of society that divides humankind into social classes and estates, an 'essentially mechanistic approach' that was relevant during the two industrial revolutions and the third industrial revolution then under way. Higgins described this third revolution as automation: today, we call it the information revolution.

Higgins traced the strict division among media to ideas about the purity of art that developed when initially flexible art forms separated into specific and distinct art media after the Renaissance. Critic Peter Frank observes that the earlier tradition of unified arts practice continued during the Renaissance and partially into the Baroque era, unraveling into separate media with the development of the separate academies in France under Louis XIV. The legally codified structure and focus of the academies with their mandated jurisdiction over specific arts helped set Western art on a course that would echo into the 20th century.

Higgins, Filliou and our colleagues in the intermedia-centered Fluxus group took another approach. We returned to an earlier approach to art that focused on ideas rather than media, using media freely to bring ideas forward. In an influential 1961 essay, artist and mathematician Henry Flynt labeled this approach as 'concept art'. Flynt defined the term as 'an art form of which the primary element is ideas, as the primary element of music is sound' (Friedman, 2005: 52; Flynt, 1963: n.p.).

Some of our colleagues even found this definition too narrow. The notion of concept art worked well, but the term was by definition located in the art world. In contrast, the practitioners of what would become intermedia worked in many domains. These included music, film, television (later video), performance, poetry, writing, books, dance, cooking, and other media as well as art. In coining the term intermedia, Higgins replaced the notion of 'art' with a wider and more adaptable definition that permitted intermedia the broadest range and scope. This wider definition would prove to be theoretically robust.

Higgins's 1966 essay presents intermedia in ontological and expressive terms as an art form that rejects ideas of art separate from life. From the first, we defined intermedia in a philosophical way with a broad horizon anchored in ideas rather than technical skills. Paradoxically, this approach to intermedia frees technology to serve ideas by freeing art from narrow technical demands. This includes the demands of a sociotechnical system that locates art in the narrow conceptual framework of the normative art world.

Higgins, for example, criticizes Pop Art as an art form that neatly follows Greenberg's formalism on one level even as it apparently rejects formalism on the surface. 'Pop Art?', he writes:

> How could it play a part in the art of the future? It is bland. It is pure. It uses elements of common life without comment, and so, by accepting the misery of this life and its aridity so mutely, it condones them. Pop and Op are both dead, however, because they confine themselves, through the media which they employ, to the older functions of art, of decorating and suggesting grandeur, whatever their detailed content or their artists' intentions. (Higgins, 2001: 29)

In response to the argument that intermedia and Fluxus are the other side of the Pop Art coin in their approach to art and life, I argue for the difference between thin Pop, thick Pop, and Fluxus Pop. This builds on Higgins's criticism of art forms with no ontological commitment, art forms that banally reproduce current media. I posed thin, reproductive New York Pop against the intellectually acerbic British Pop and the Fluxus approach to life through intermedia. This focal center on life and lived experience is the key to intermedia.

Culture theorist Klaus-Peter Busse argues that intermedia function on four levels that allow a broad and open generative framework: a semantic level, a methodological level, a medial level, and a pedagogical level. Intermedia works within and engenders a flexible network of levels and meanings. This flexibility gives rise to an important characteristic that distinguishes intermedia from any single medium. It also distinguishes intermedia from multimedia. This is 'a consistently open conception of media which resists both a technological notion of the medial and a mere Gesamtkunstwerk concept' (Busse, 2005: 266–7).

Today, there are several broad definitions of intermedia. Higgins emphasizes an ontologically engaged art that spreads beyond art into life. Higgins suggests that the crux of intermedia requires rejecting the separation of arts into categories according to medium. For Higgins, intermedia is situated between such media as painting and poetry, music and sculpture, photography and printmaking, etc.

This approach to intermedia is generative and expansive, involving 'art forms that draw on several media and grow into new hybrids . . . works that cross the boundaries of recognized media and often fuse the boundaries of art with media that had not previously been considered art forms' (Friedman, 2002: 245).

There are three major intermedia directions. The first is a technological direction linked to the development of information technology in a post-industrial society. The second is a simple, conceptual direction tradition anchored in Zen or in philosophy. The third direction involved the theatrical tradition of happenings and expanded arts performance (Friedman, 2002: 245–6).

Intermedia artist Jack Ox emphasizes the combinatory quality of intermedia fusion, defining intermedia as 'a combinatory structure of syntactical elements that come from more than one medium but are combined into one and are thereby transformed into a new entity'. She describes intermedia as the 'product of interactions between independent systems in time and space' (Ox, 2001: 47).

Art historian Hannah Higgins (2002: 93) describes intermedia as an 'unstable descriptive term, predicated as it is on the dynamic exchange between traditionally distinct artistic and life categories'. Intermedia, she writes, 'is not so much a thing as a function, allowing for almost limitless artistic formations and experiences'.

Busse (2005: 264) notes five important directions: art works that 1) transgress artistic media and limits on expression, 2) explore the potential of different media, 3) generate a space of trans-disciplinary work involving any or all media, 4) fuse different kinds of text as in hypertext or digital media, and a way of generating art works that 5) 'can be conceived of as product of exchange or production of the exchange between different, meaning-generating systems in time and space'.

Intermedia artist Hans Breder made a central contribution to intermedia theory in developing the concept of intermedia as a liminal art form, or – perhaps – a liminal environment for generating meaningful art. This approach to generating meaningful art is effectively the framework that sociologist and philosopher George Herbert Mead (1967 [1934]: 66, 71–2, 89–90) identified in his concept of the significant symbol. These theorists propose artistic definitions anchored in ontological and expressive traditions over against attempts to define intermedia in specific media-oriented or technological terms.

Intermedia is a central vehicle for Fluxus. It is an approach to art and life appropriate for people who argue that there are no boundaries between art and life. If there cannot be a boundary between art and life, there cannot be boundaries between art forms and art forms. For purposes of history, of discussion, of distinction, one can refer to separate art forms, but the meaning of intermedia lies in an historical moment that often requires art forms growing from the roots of several media to become new hybrids.

Imagine, perhaps, an art form that is comprised of 10 percent music, 25 percent architecture, 12 percent drawing, 18 percent shoemaking, 30 percent painting and 5 percent smell. What would it be like? How would it work? How would some of the specific art works appear? How would they function? How would the elements interact? Thought experiments such as this yield interesting results. Thoughts like this gave rise to some of the most interesting art works of our time (cf. Friedman, 1998: 247–8).

2012: The Hermeneutics of Intermedia

In 2004, philosopher and professor of religion David Klemm wrote an essay on 'intermedial being'. In this essay Klemm examines the space of 'art as performative enactment', writing:

> . . . intermedia makes explicit an essential quality of art that is typically left only implicit in other forms of art: namely, the fact that art assumes its being only in the interpretive act. In other words intermedia only exists or comes into being as such through the interaction between objective elements and the subjectivity of the viewer. In intermedia, the subjective side of the experience is essential and integral to the work of art. Intermedia actualizes this quality as art. (Klemm, 2005: 70)

Klemm argues that this interaction takes place immediately and necessarily in the act of viewing works, asserting that each viewer must construct the meaning of the work in his or her own way from the interaction in consciousness between different elements. There are no given meanings. Klemm anchors this view in the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg

Gadamer. For Gadamer, the primary value of artworks is not pleasure within the specific context of aesthetic consciousness. Aesthetic consciousness disregards everything in the art work extrinsic to the artistic nature of the work. For Gadamer, a different condition holds for artworks: artworks disclose the truth of human being. Works of art dynamically present themselves in their being. They are ontologically disclosive. The truth of art asserts itself when the work engages us and says something to us about what it means to be ourselves in the world (cf. Friedman, 1973: 6–9).

Gadamer (2004: 102–161) explains the development of truth by examining the origins of the work of art. He uses three concepts with meanings that build on each other: play, festival, and symbol. Movement is the key to play. When we play, we submit to the rules of the game, subordinating our own goals and purposes to those of the game itself. The purpose of the game is simply to be played so that the game becomes the master over the players. Then, and only then, the players enter a zone where the game plays itself through the players.

Gadamer uses the concept of festival to show how the work of art also enacts the sense of community, much as the festival does. In a festival, people gather to instantiate and renew the ties that bind them together in a community. These ties become real through the festival. Art is a power to enact an experience of community. In principle, this community is a universal one that extends to everyone to whom the work of art speaks.

Klemm identifies Gadamer's deep concept of the symbol that seeks ontological communion 'between the symbol and what is symbolized' (2005: 72), a level deeper than either the representative symbol of abstract information theory or the expressive symbol of emotional engagement. Ontological communion involves the domain of significant symbols at their deepest and most profound level. In Klemm's deep sense, emotional, intellectual, and cultural significance requires comprehensive ontological communion 'between the symbol and what is symbolized', engaging the work of art in the life world of those who come to it. Few works fully achieve this power. Nevertheless, this is the forum of intermedial being and, for Klemm, these three notions bear directly on intermedia.

Klemm goes beyond Gadamer to the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur and the existential philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard. He particularly considers the dialectics of self discussed in Kierkegaard's book *The Sickness Unto Death* (1980 [1848]). Two Fluxus artists addressed these issues in a hermeneutical and philosophical approach to intermedia. Dick Higgins drew on Gadamer for the notion of an intermedia horizon linking the production of art to its reception. Higgins speaks of a hermeneutical art that requires the fusion of horizons (see Higgins, 1984, 1998). I drew on concepts from Martin Buber and from Kierkegaard to describe intermedia as an 'I-Thou' art form (see Friedman, 1973). In another

approach, I developed Kierkegaard's (1954 [1843, 1848]) examination of self through a discussion of limits and boundaries of religion and the relation between the human and the divine.

Klemm approaches intermedia as a category of being that emerges from the intermedial approach to art, an art of liminal spaces. According to Klemm, intermedia art forms invoke a liminal state because they cross boundaries to establish new zones of interaction, understanding, cognition, and emotion.

The Latin word 'limen' means threshold – it defines a boundary between two things, two places or times, two states or conditions. A threshold has no being of its own. It is the transition point between two modes of being. Liminality involves threshold states that mark transitions and growth by crossing the normal boundaries of daily experience and by crossing the normative boundaries of art.

By engendering a liminal space, intermedia invokes an opening toward boundaries and networks that allow the participant access to the state of intermedial being. Gadamer's position is that an encounter with the work of art involves opening a world. This requires rejecting the purely aesthetic as though the pure art form could function in isolation from the total impact of the work. This approach demands that we clarify the ontological content of the artwork. In this sense, the theory of intermedia is a key to the process by which art creates and sustains a symbolic universe. It is daily and liminal both, visible in Dick Higgins's (1964: 21) call for 'an art that clucks and fills our guts', and visible in Milan Knizak's call to 'live otherwise' (Mazzone, 2009). The intermedia vision embraces both in its ontological liminality: Higgins and Knizak both sought an art that crossed boundaries, bringing the daily and the transcendent together.

Grant Osborne's (2006) concept of the hermeneutical spiral can usefully be applied to intermedia. For Osborne (2006: 417–18), the

> text itself sets the agenda and continually reforms the questions that the observer asks of it. The means by which this is accomplished is twofold: grammatical-syntactical exegesis and historical-cultural background. These interact to reshape the interpreter's preunderstanding and help to fuse the two horizons. The actual contextualization then occurs as this process of fusion reaches out in another and broader hermeneutical spiral to encompass the interpreter's life and situation.

While Osborne speaks of theological texts, these concepts mirror Klemm's hermeneutical-ontological description of intermedia.

The hermeneutical horizon affords both a boundary and an interface for art. Duchamp famously said that the viewer completes the work of art – this is another way of saying that the work and the world require

Figure 4. Fluxus and the Essential Questions of Life, 2011. Curated by Jacquelynn Baas. Installation view: Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH. Photograph © 2012 Hood Museum of Art.

each other through the intermediation of a human agent. The Fluxus approach translates this from the hermeneutics of exegesis to the hermeneutics of the life world. The four senses of exegesis are literal meaning, allegorical interpretation, moral meaning with an emphasis on conduct in human affairs, and anagogical meaning pointing toward future application (Thiselton, 1992: 183; see also de Lubac, 1998, 2000, 2009). The hermeneutical spiral moves forward through time, activated by the participation of artist and art, viewer and world.

Notes

1. Object No.: GM.987.44.2. Materials: Five-compartment wooden box containing works by various artists. Artist/Maker: George Maciunas, American, 1931–1978; Eric Andersen, Danish, born 1943; George Brecht, American, 1926–2008; Ben Vautier, French, born 1935; John Cavanaugh, Unknown, 20th century; Willem de Ridder, Dutch, born 1942; Robert Filliou, French, 1926–1987; Vera Spoerri, Unknown, 20th century; Roland Topor, French, 1938–1997; Albert M. Fine, American, 1932–1987; Ken Friedman, American, born 1949; Hi Red Center, Japanese, founded 1963; John Lennon, British, 1940–1980; Frederic Lieberman, Unknown, 20th century; Claes Thure Oldenburg, American, born 1929; Yoko Ono, American,

born 1933; James Riddle, American, born 1933; Paul Jeffrey Sharits, American, 1943–1993; Bob Sheff, American, 20th century; Mieko (Chieko) Shiomi, Japanese, born 1938; Stanley Vanderbeek, American, 1927–1984; Wolf Vostell, German, 1932–1998; Yoshimasa Wada, Japanese, born 1943; Robert Watts, American, 1923–1988. George Maciunas Memorial Collection. Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire.

2. Object No.: GM.986.80.40. Materials: Clear plastic box with paper label on lid containing seeds. Artist/Maker: Ken Friedman, American, born 1949. Object Date: 1966–1976. Dimensions: Height 9.2 cm, Width 12.1 cm, Thickness 1.0 cm. George Maciunas Memorial Collection. Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire.

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