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Fluxus Thirty-Eight Degrees South: An interview with Ken Friedman

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In the 1960s, Ken Kesey and his Merry Pranksters used a psychedelic school bus to take drug culture and heightened consciousness on the road. A Volkswagen bus served a similar purpose for the young Ken Friedman as he travelled across America, promoting an altogether different sensibility. Ken Friedman is one of the remaining living figures associated with Fluxus, a legendary group of artists, designers, composers, and architects whose members included Yoko Ono, Nam June Paik, George Maciunas, Milan Knizak, Mieko Shiomi, Dick Higgins, La Monte Young, Joseph Beuys and more, with such friends as John Cage, Christo and Jeanne-Claude. Lithuanian-born architect and artist Maciunas coined the term Fluxus from a Latin-based word meaning “to flow,” describing an experimental attitude to art that resisted conceptual and disciplinary boundaries. Higgins would later coin the term intermedia to refer to art forms that crossed boundaries so far that they gave birth to new forms and media (“Intermedia”). Fluxus itself was what Friedman describes as a “laboratory of ideas” (“Fluxus: A Laboratory of Ideas”), serving as a crucial launching ground for such new media as performance art, installation, artist books, video art, mail art, new music, and more.

When he met Maciunas in New York in 1966, Friedman was an aspiring Unitarian minister more interested in philosophy and theology than in art and design. His association with Dick Higgins's influential Something Else Press put him into the orbit of other Fluxus artists, such as Alison Knowles, Emmett Williams, Peter Moore, and Meredith Monk, as well as an energised vibe of creative innovation. When Higgins saw Friedman make a small box resembling a handcrafted Fluxus object in Higgins's New York apartment, he sent Friedman to meet Maciunas (Higgins, "Being" 3). From that moment, Friedman never looked back. Assuming the role of a "Fluxus missionary," Friedman was pivotal in the distribution of Fluxus activities throughout the country from New York (Fluxus HQ) to San Diego and San Francisco (Fluxus West), as well as to England, where he conceived and helped to launch the year-long Fluxshoe. While some locations were more active than others, the compass points also designated Fluxus centres and activities in cities throughout Europe: Fluxus East was in Prague, Fluxus North was in Copenhagen, Fluxus South was in Nice. Friedman moved between various headquarters across the United States in his Fluxmobile, a Volkswagen bus which doubled as a traveling studio and portable warehouse of Fluxus artefacts. Friedman was attracted to the Fluxus convergence of an unashamedly conceptual approach to art and the socially engaged aspirations of the counter culture with an art that would merge into and embrace daily life. In making Fluxus mobile – literally – Friedman realised the Fluxus goal of taking art out of the gallery and into the street.

Fluxus was not well-known in the mid- to late 60s and its significance for contemporary art, design and culture has become apparent only in retrospect. Friedman shares the credit for this recognition; as Peter Frank writes, "historically and spiritually, Ken Friedman is Fluxus. He has helped to ensure that the elusive and supposedly ephemeral Fluxus movement is now regarded as a permanent force in art and presence in art history" (177). Indeed, Frank credits Friedman with the crucial, galvanizing influence that enabled the "substantiation of the Fluxus ethos in a context wider than art" (151). While this

“youthful enthusiasm” was crucial to the formative years of Fluxus in the mid-60s, Frank also recognizes this wide-ranging influence in his later creative pursuits, notably with the Finnish ceramics manufacturer Arabia in the late 1980s. Friedman’s approach to ceramics as a Fluxus artist dramatically “married the modernist workshop with the post-modern assertion of variety and individuality” at a time when Arabia was seeking a fresh approach to the design of utilitarian, everyday household utensils that were also decorative objects (149). The Finnish design economist Esa Kolehmainen specifically pointed to Friedman’s “interartistic” approach to domestic design as a means of inventively combining utility, design, and art into a kind of “gesamtkunstwerk” that could be exhibited as well as sold.

Fluxus continues to resonate as a set of ideas around art, design, community, and collaboration in the age of the social network, participatory culture, and increasingly mobile media. Friedman was one of several artists who anticipated the artistic and social potential of the Internet and global communications when they pioneered mail and correspondence art in the early 1970s. (Friedman’s substantial contribution to the latter is comprehensively detailed in Norie Neumark’s and Anne-Marie Chandler’s 2005 *At a Distance: Precursors to Art and Activism on the Internet*). In 1976, Nam June Paik published an equally famous essay in which he predicted the “information superhighway” that became the Internet; in 1994, Paik curated the first online Internet art exhibition, including Friedman’s work. And when Dick Higgins famously coined the term intermedia in 1965, he too foreshadowed the predominant multimedia paradigm associated with the digital age. In a discussion of the history of the triptych “intermedia, multimedia, media,” Friedman points to Higgins’s recognition and acknowledgment of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s precursory use of the term “intermedium” in an 1827 lecture on Edmund Spenser (Friedman, “Coleridge/Intermedium”). For Friedman, though, Higgins was “too modest,” pointing to Coleridge’s one-off use of the term. Coleridge uses the word in the context of a discussion

of allegory and parses it as “the proper intermedium between person and personification” (Coleridge 511). As a rhetorical figure, allegory bestows general or universal qualities on a singular figure (such as the Faerie Queen or Bunyan’s Pilgrim). The term would have no doubt been novel in Coleridge’s day, at a time when the Romantic poets were seeking a decidedly modern idiom for the practice of literary criticism. Friedman is correct in pointing out that Coleridge’s “‘intermedium’ was a singular term, an adjectival noun, and nothing more. In contrast, Higgins’s word ‘intermedia’ refers to a tendency in the arts that became a range of art forms and a way to approach the arts” (Friedman, E-mail). In contrast to Coleridge’s gloss of a correspondence between general and particular, then, intermedia connotes flow and dissemination, the formation of syncretic novelty from different elements. Similarly, there could not have been a more appropriate term than Fluxus to describe a general attitude to art making, society and culture that crossed the “boundaries of recognized media” and fused the languages of art “with media that had not previously been considered art forms” (Friedman, E-mail).

2012 marks the fiftieth anniversary of Fluxus. I have been cautious not to characterize it as an art movement, network or other collective noun. From the early 1960s to the present, such nomination is the first thing to be qualified or simply renounced in any discussion of Fluxus. This caution became a literal imprimatur of the Fluxus imagination when Dick Higgins published a manifesto as a rubber stamp in 1966:

Fluxus is not:

—a moment in history, or

—an art movement

(qtd. in Friedman, “Fluxus: A Laboratory of Ideas” 36)

From the very beginning, artists associated with Fluxus have followed Higgins’s contrariwise definition, seeking to avoid the pigeonhole identity of a stable and fixed thing. What then, we might reasonably ask, is being celebrated, remembered, memorialized or simply noted in 2012?

Perhaps Owen Smith set the right tone in 1998 when he described Fluxus as an "an attitude towards art-making and culture that is not historically limited" (*Fluxus* 1). Smith goes further than most to avoid identifying Fluxus with familiar ways of thinking about historical definitions of art, classifications, periods and *isms*. Indeed, he suggests associating Fluxus with fable by pointing to Jorge Luis Borges on the recto cover of *Fluxus: The History of an Attitude.* Here, Smith quotes: "'fluxus, therefore we are,'" attributing this to "Herbert Ashe, *Orbis Tertius*." This is surely the *sine qua non* of resistance to defining Fluxus in terms of normative or familiar organizations, art practices or traditions. Here, in a metaphysical *regressus*, Smith identifies Fluxus as simply *plural* by using a fictional character who "suffered from unreality" (Borges 6), while associating the quote with a trans-historical literary hoax (you will find Ashe in Borges, but not the aphorism). Perhaps, after five decades of qualified definition and explanation of what Fluxus is and is not, its association with something plural, elusive and continuous (the conspiracy of authors known as Orbis Tertius) may be the most accurate way of conceiving this thing known as Fluxus. Towards the end of "Tlön Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," the narrator anticipates that "a hundred years from now someone will discover the hundred volumes of the Second Encyclopedia of Tlön" (Borges 18). It was perhaps this anticipatory consciousness of something yet to come that prompted the artist Tomas Schmit to assert in 1981 that "Fluxus hasn't ever taken place yet" (qtd. in Smith, *Fluxus* 11).

As if responding to or even precipitating this sense of becoming, a series of exhibitions and publications continue to appear under the rubric of Fluxus. In 2009 Ken Friedman's *99 Events* accompanied an exhibition of the same name at the Stendhal Gallery in New York. Friedman's (1998) monumental *Fluxus Reader* (out of print and on the rare books register for many years) has just been released as an ebook. In 2011, the Hood Museum of Art in Hanover, New Hampshire launched a major touring retrospective of Fluxus works and artefacts curated by Jacquelynn Baas.[1]

The exhibition catalogue, *Fluxus and the Essential Questions of Life,* was published by the University of Chicago Press. Baas's remarks in her introduction to the catalogue conspicuously partake in the resistance-is-not-futile discourse of *not* defining Fluxus: "This is not a book about the history of Fluxus. Still less is this book about the *art* history of Fluxus" (1). In 2011, The University of California Press published *Source: Music of the Avant-Garde (1966–1973)*, a massive anthology selected from the influential journal of the same name. The book is a veritable *Who's Who* of the experimental music scene of the late sixties, featuring many artists and composers associated with Fluxus, including Dick Higgins, George Brecht, Nam June Paik, John Cage, Robert Filliou and Ken Friedman. (In one entry, Paik describes commissioning Ken Friedman to write his *third synfonie*.) Any discussion of Fluxus must now engage with the issue of its legacy. Ken Friedman and Owen Smith did so in 2006, emphasising that debates "on the past, present and even future of Fluxus make it clear that Fluxus matters to many people" (10). Friedman believes that there "were many Fluxuses and there still are" (10), while distinguishing "younger artists who consciously work in the tradition" established by "the artists long known as Fluxus artists" (6). The question of Fluxus' legacy will no doubt continue as it moves beyond its half century anniversary. The tenor of this discussion may have already been cast, for as Friedman and Smith suggested, the "question of legacy is always beset with difficulties… Who inherits? Who has the right to inherit?" (5).

Ken Friedman was appointed as Dean of the Faculty of Design at Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne in 2008, where he is also University Distinguished Professor. Friedman's daily activities consist of leadership and research. In his off-work hours, he continues to spread the word and keep the Fluxus spirit alive. As a sign of the increasingly wireless, disembodied times we live in, it is entirely appropriate that this interview was conducted via email. Things do, indeed, continue to flow.

Darren Tofts:

2012 marks the 50th anniversary of Fluxus. What do you think the history of Fluxus means to the contemporary world of ideas, art and culture?

Ken Friedman:

Emmett Williams once wrote, “Fluxus is what Fluxus does but no-one knows who done it.” I think of that when I try to imagine what Fluxus achieved. With respect to developing new media and avenues for expressing ideas, we created a great many ways of working that artists now use: video, installation, artist’s books, artist’s magazines, mail art, performance art, multiples. It’s a long list. It was an experimental project, and it was a meeting point for very different kinds of people. There was no common program – rather we were friends who shared some ideas in common. More important, we built a sheltered workshop in a world ruled first by abstract expressionism and tachisme, later by pop art. We were small, furry mammals trying to survive in a world ruled by dinosaurs. If you don’t believe me about the dinosaurs, just read some of the art magazines of the late 1950s and early 1960s!

What did we try to achieve? In 1982, Dick Higgins wrote an essay proposing nine criteria to distinguish or indicate the qualities of Fluxus. Later on I worked with Dick’s list, expanding it to twelve criteria: globalism, the unity of art and life, intermedia, experimentalism, chance, playfulness, simplicity, implicativeness, exemplativism, specificity, presence in time, and musicality.

Some of us wanted to bring about a new world or a new mentality through art. That was Dick Higgins’s goal – in his “Something Else Manifesto,” he wanted to “chase down an art that clucks and fills our guts.” Others wanted to bring an end to art. George Maciunas reasoned that the art world was the mirror of a corrupt system. His view effectively suggested that we could change the system if only we could shatter the mirror to end the illusion of art. This didn’t work. Despite the extraordinary inventiveness of the Fluxus people, we did not transform the art world nor did we bring art to an end.

Of course, the goal itself was mistaken. Some artists broke with Fluxus over George's insistence on the need to end art, while George himself overestimated the power of art in the larger frame of culture. In my view, the idea that one can transform the world by changing art resembles imagining that one can divert ocean currents by steering an iceberg. The art world is an individual iceberg and the currents of culture carry it along.

George saw himself as an architect or social planner rather than seeing himself as an artist. I wrote an article about this aspect of George's life, available on the George Maciunas Foundation website. In a way, these aspirations made sense. In another way, George's conceptual program may have been a form of sympathetic magic. At any rate, it didn't work: the art world is still here, and George would be surprised to discover that Fluxus is now seen as a significant tradition in 20th century art. George himself would have found it both horrifying and hilarious to be elevated to the status of a modern master as he now is.

Modern master status would please others, and some Fluxus people wanted to achieve it. They wanted to comment on society through art while remaining artists. While they sought an art that embraces daily life, their idea of daily life is different from the idea of daily life for people who work outside the realms of art and music.

Those of us who kept a foot in life outside art found the ambiguity energizing. However, treating life outside art as something to be valued in its own terms without demanding that it be seen as art distanced us from the art world. One can hardly cross that philosophical barrier with words. I feel like Socrates standing all night in the snow to contemplate ideas – without being able to put those ideas into words, or even to frame them as questions.

Fluxus did very well as art. The effort that some Fluxus people made to abolish art failed, leaving some wonderful art behind to commemorate the failure. The Fluxus effort to reshape culture had some success, but it was a limited success that was deflected and absorbed into mainstream culture. Perhaps one day, a cultural historian or an historical anthropologist will sort these streams out to describe what happened. As Duchamp used to say, “posterity will be the judge.”

Darren Tofts:

So what does Fluxus mean to the contemporary world of ideas, art and culture?

Ken Friedman:

It’s a mixed legacy. After all these years, I find myself considering this in several ways. Ben Vautier once complained about “one of those essays where Ken Friedman pretends to know everything.” I don’t know everything, but Ben took exception to my reflections. Perhaps he was right to doubt me. His motto was “Ben doubts everything,” but Ben also says what he thinks about everything. My views on what Fluxus means have changed: today I’d say that one must approach Fluxus through a hermeneutic spiral.

Fluxus has a multiplicity of meanings. Everyone has an idea depending on where they stand. The hermeneutical horizon shifts for the individual, and it shifts with respect to the range of issues and facts you address. It is hard enough to get a sense of what the work of one artist or composer means set against a shifting frame of decades. To get a sense of meaning for the work of thirty or forty artists, composers, designers, architects, and film-makers with respect to the shifting senses of work, self, community and the networks of alliance and dissent they establish amongst each other is even more difficult.

Last year, I gave a keynote lecture on the idea of “The Experimental Studio.” One of the things I spoke about was the experience I often have of looking at work from a few years ago to wonder what I could have seen in it – even my own work. But I have also had the feeling of looking at work to feel quite enchanted, or hearing music to feel quite taken, seeing or hearing it another day, then again finding a new sense to it on another day still. Human beings have a complex set of thoughts and feelings, and the way you encounter a work of art depends as much on you as on the work. The viewer creates the work as much as the artist does. That was a radical idea when Duchamp said it and when it came up again through Fluxus. That also holds true for what Fluxus means.

Dick Higgins wrote about understanding Fluxus through the hermeneutical horizon. I thought about that a lot after Dick suggested it. I first encountered hermeneutics in Paul Ricoeur’s writings in the 1960s when Northwestern University began to publish the translations of his work into English. In those days, I was more interested in Kierkegaard’s dialectical vision, so I did not give hermeneutics the attention it deserved for several years. Dick drew my attention to hermeneutics again in an essay on “Fluxus: Theory and Reception” in the early 1980s. I’ve been giving this more thought lately. What does Fluxus mean?

Winston Churchill once gave a moving funeral oration for a great political opponent who became his ally and colleague in the time before his death. Churchill spoke about the changing perspectives of time and history, and how it is that what seems appropriate at one time seems foolish later, then again, as time changes, what seemed foolish comes again to seem wise. This is the nature of the hermeneutical horizon, and the meaning of all things embedded in the flow of time, ideas and culture.

Darren Tofts:

What events are planned for 2012 to commemorate and celebrate the Fluxus anniversary?

Ken Friedman:

The anniversary celebrations started last year when Jacquelynne Baas organized a touring exhibition that opened at The Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth College. It travelled to the Grey Gallery at New York University and now it goes to the University of Michigan Museum of Art. Readers can visit the exhibition web site to read the exhibition documents and view an exhibition panorama.

Around the same time, Jon Hendricks organized an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

2012 will see a panel at the College Art Association annual conference in Los Angeles organized by Donna Gustafson of the Zimmerli Museum at Rutgers and Jacquelynne Baas, director emeritus of the University of California Museum of Art and curator of the Hood exhibition. The Association of Art Historians in the UK is doing a panel with a focus on intermedia. There will be a 50th anniversary celebration in Wiesbaden, and a floating series of performances and conferences that will tour Europe. There may be more, but I'm not as well informed as I used to be. My daily work occupies most of my time, and many people in the art world think I've vanished or even died.

These days, people sometimes ask me, "Are you related to Ken Friedman the Fluxus artist?" The third time someone asked, I answered: "No, but I met him once."

My major project for 2012 is an expanded edition of my *Events*. George Maciunas announced the publication of my events in 1966. It was originally planned as a Fluxus box with cards. It was part of a Friedman Fluxkit. George never completed the edition. I prepared typescript editions from the 1960s on. Some of these travelled as an exhibition, including the first complete solo exhibition of event scores.

In 2009, I did an exhibition titled *99 Events* at Stendhal Gallery in New York with a catalogue, which contained notes for some of the scores and a thoughtful essay by Carolyn Barnes. I'm hoping to expand on this with more scores, notes, and several added essays.

Darren Tofts:

You recently published a digital edition of *The Fluxus Reader*. What kind of response has it received?

Ken Friedman:

The response was astonishing. The Swinburne Research Bank web site received over 6,000 visits in the first weeks of release. It's still the most downloaded publication on the Swinburne Research Bank. There are many more copies in circulation since we released the book with permission to reprint, copy and pass on. Other digital collections host it, including museums and other culture sites. There's no way to track the total copies in circulation. The response has been terrific.

The Fluxus Reader went out of print in the late 1990s. I had been getting requests for copies of the book for years. A couple of years back, I discovered copies selling at around $500. I inferred strong demand for a new edition, but I had no way of knowing how great the demand might be. I took the book to Derek Whitehead, Director of the Swinburne University of Technology Library, and he sent me to Rebecca Parker, manager of the Swinburne Research Bank. Rebecca produced a high-quality PDF edition in a fully-indexed, copy-enabled version to permit easy search, quotation, and use of passages or data. Kenny Goldsmith at UBU Web alerted me to the importance of copy-enabled PDF files, and I've adopted his policy for everything I produce. The new edition of *The Fluxus Reader* meets all scholarly requirements and it serves the artistic and philosophical goals we set for it.

Darren Tofts:

Apart from yourself, Joseph Byrd and Yoko Ono, who are some of the other living artists that were associated with early Fluxus?

Ken Friedman:

There's a dozen or so people still living from the early days. Most everyone is a decade or so older than I am. Vytautas Landsbergis was born in the early 1930s, Ben Patterson and Alison Knowles were born in the middle of the 1930s. In 1966, I was the youngest Fluxus artist at the age of 16 and I'm in my early 60s now. Who else is still living from the early days? Along with Ben Patterson, Alison Knowles, and Vytautas Landsbergis, there are Carolee Schneemann, Bengt af Klintberg, Milan Knizak, Ben Vautier, Nye Farrabas, Jeff Berner, Larry Miller, Yoshimasa Wada, Jock Reynolds, Henry Flynt. Every time I finish the list, I think of a few more.

Darren Tofts:

Are these artists still practicing under the imprimatur of Fluxus?

Ken Friedman:

Some folks are still around, and still active. They participate in Fluxus projects and they exhibit as individuals. Ben Patterson remains a whirlwind of energy. He's had a major retrospective and he tours the world doing concerts and projects. Alison is still doing exhibitions, installations, and performances. Vytautas Landsbergis is a member of the European Parliament – I think he occasionally takes part in exhibitions and concerts.

Who else? Carolee Schneemann is an active artist. She's become an icon of feminist performance. Kristine Stiles just published a collection of her letters with Duke University Press. After a tremendously influential career in the early days of performance art, Bengt af Klintberg dedicated his life to folklore. He has been publishing books on urban legends, and in Sweden, the very word for urban legend is based on his name: "klintbergare" or "klintbergers." For many years, he had a popular radio program in Sweden titled "Folk Memories." Milan Knizak is more active than ever as an artist.

Following the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia, he became president of the National Academy of Fine Art and then Director of the National Gallery in Prague Museum. Ben Vautier is another whirlwind – he is always doing exhibitions and projects, sometimes five or six at a time. Nye Farrabas is still active – she used to be Bici Forbes. Geoffrey Hendricks continues to exhibit and perform. Larry Miller is still highly visible. Jeff Berner is a photographer. Yoshi Wada is still composing and producing music on his fabulous instruments. Jock Reynolds is Director of the Yale University Art Gallery. Henry Flynt has been writing papers on philosophy and mathematics and performing a unique style of music sometimes described as avant-hillbilly.

It is impossible to speak of active Fluxus artists without mentioning Christo, one of the most wonderful early Fluxus artists who remains active and whom George Maciunas used to call a “Fluxfriend.” He only did one Fluxus edition. Christo and Jeanne-Claude were vital influences in my life: what I learned from them about how to work in the world remains with me to this day, and it is as important to my research and managerial work as to my art. Christo is working on a temporary installation of fabrics that will run over a forty-two-mile stretch of the Arkansas River in southern Colorado. That will likely take place in 2014.

Darren Tofts:

On numerous occasions you have made the distinction between Fluxus and Fluxism to identify an enduring creative spirit committed to socially grounded, collaborative art. Can you clarify this distinction?

Ken Friedman:

It seemed to me useful to distinguish between the specific group of people that came together under the Fluxus rubric and a larger ethos. Rene Block developed the idea. Rene is a curatorial genius who produced many wonderful Fluxus exhibitions. My sense of the term Fluxism was a notion of socially grounded art. While I found the term and the concept useful, very few people adopted it. The concept of a socially grounded art was metaphoric. So was much of Fluxus. In the end, people preferred to use the term Fluxus.

Darren Tofts:

Do you see any parallels between the current phenomenon of social networking and Fluxus principles of community building through art?

Ken Friedman:

In the 1960s there was great hope for socially grounded art. George Maciunas believed that we could change contemporary culture by revolutionizing the art world and shifting attention away from art. As I've watched things evolve, I'm no longer as hopeful as I once was. It is not possible to offer many empirical insights about the relations between art and society. No one has developed a comprehensive sociology or economics of art that moves from fine-grained micro-social theory to mid-level theory and grand theory. We have to learn how art, aesthetics, and creativity affect different kinds of social and cultural structures to say something that is valid in a descriptive sense. There is nevertheless a great deal we can say in philosophical, interpretive, or hermeneutical terms.

Several years back, Norie Neumark and Anne-Marie Chandler edited a book on networked art for MIT Press. My contribution was a chapter on "The Wealth and Poverty of Networks." I played off the title of Adam Smith's classic text of 1776, *The Wealth of Nations*, but Adam Smith was a moral philosopher before he became the first economist. I wanted a title that referred to both aspects of Adam Smith's work.

Darren Tofts:

Isn't it unusual to use Adam Smith in describing networks?

Ken Friedman:

The common good and the flow of resources through society were at the heart of Smith's concern. In 1752, Smith moved from the chair of logic and rhetoric at Glasgow University to the chair of moral philosophy formerly held by Francis Hutcheson, Smith's old teacher.

The proper and beneficial nature of relations between and among human beings was always a great concern to him. His first great book addresses these issues, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. These ideas reappear a decade and a half later in *The Wealth of Nations*, though they take different forms. Smith asks how we might create a web of balanced relations that enables all to prosper fairly without favouritism and without disadvantage. If you consider Smith's own views without distorting them through the views of people who use his work selectively, you'll see a great deal that applies to communities, investment, and to networks. Many of Smith's ideas have been distorted, as the Nobel Laureate philosopher and economist Amartya Sen noted in an elegant essay he published in the *New York Review of Books* (2009), around the same time he wrote a new introduction to Smith's *Moral Sentiments*. The point of my chapter was that networks are not disconnected events that serve some end in a magical way.

Effective networks require continuous investment. This involves communities and the flow of human energy that keeps networks alive. When we consider networks, we must consider the balance between self-interest and service to others, between private gain and public service. For me, at least, Smith was an apt exemplar, and that is why I refer to him in the title of a piece on networks in a book on networked art. I probably should have made this clearer in the piece itself, but you can't cover everything.

Darren Tofts:

What kind of investment do you have in mind here and how viable is it as an ongoing contribution to an ongoing network?

Ken Friedman:

Sustainable societies require inputs. Networks don't sustain themselves. Rather, a complex series of factors link the rise and fall of networks to the societies they sustain. There has been a lot of magical thinking in the art world that new media or networks would create a socially grounded art in a natural, durable way, and that this socially grounded art would bring about spontaneous social change. I wouldn't say that George Maciunas or Dick Higgins thought this way, but their hope for a socially grounded art requires greater investments than we have seen.

The difficulty that artists have had in contributing substantively to local or to global democracy involves two challenges. The first challenge requires understanding the nature of globalization and its discontents. This understanding must be deep enough to find ways forward, and deep understanding requires a rich foundation in economics, the social sciences and philosophy. The second challenge involves offering solutions that embody the necessary and sustainable energy for durable networks. Most artists fail to offer more than metaphors. While these metaphors move beyond poetry or painting to social sculpture and interactive projects, they fail to meet the needs of sustainable engagement.

Darren Tofts:

You have mentioned "social sculpture," a concept framed by Joseph Beuys who had affinities with Fluxus. It seems to me that Nicholas Bourriaud's concept of relational aesthetics is very much in the spirit of Fluxus. Flash Mobbing events like *Frozen Grand Central Station* or *50 Redheads on the Same Subway Train* sound very Fluxlike to me (I'm thinking of your own *Sock of the Month Club* and *Great Tie-Cuttings of History* event scores).

Ken Friedman:

Bourriaud's (1998) concept of relational aesthetics does have a kinship to Fluxus. The concept of relational aesthetics appeared in the 1960s in the writings of Robert Filliou and Dick Higgins. I discussed many of these ideas in a series of pamphlets that appeared in my 1972 book titled *The Aesthetics*. Two years later, anthropologist Marilyn Ekdahl Ravicz articulated much of this in her doctoral thesis at the University of California at Los Angeles, *Aesthetic Anthropology*. Ravicz drew on John Dewey's pragmatist philosophy to examine a vision of art anchored in societies and cultural engagement. She wrote about Fluxus and my work in the thesis, as well as discussing conceptual art. She later examined these issues further in a 1975 monograph on my work.

While I enjoyed Bourriaud's book, he seems to dismiss Fluxus as a dim ancestor of relational aesthetics much as the horse had a remote three-toed ancestor.

Darren Tofts:

What is the relation between Bourriaud and Fluxus? You basically seem to be saying that you don't think that Bourriaud covers Fluxus well enough in his book.

Ken Friedman: Perhaps I'm being too fussy. As an artist, I have to take critics at face value, and Bourriaud is a critic. I don't have any idea the relationship he may have to Fluxus. He wrote the book in 1998, I read it a year or two later, I thought it was interesting – but as a scholar, I'd have to argue there are gaps. If what you are asking for is a careful analysis of Bourriaud's position, I'm not really prepared to address it. Bertrand Clavez did so in a fine article in the middle of the last decade. My view is that critics ought to review the literature better than Bourriaud has done if they address historical issues as he attempted to do in discussing Fluxus. Had Bourriaud looked back a bit further, perhaps he'd have thought the concept through in a deeper way.

You raised the issue of Bourriaud's work, and this is my take on it. The idea of relational aesthetics is solid. It rests on the idea of art as a network of social relations and activities embedded in the process of a larger society and culture. Art is a process as well as a product. But here, we're back to pragmatism and to Ravicz.

Darren Tofts:

Do you have any thoughts on relational aesthetics?

Ken Friedman: The key aspect of relational aesthetics is the intimate situation with a performatory or ritual aspect. If you think about it, many situations take on an aspect of relational aesthetics, at least to the partially scripted degree of the planned situation that we see in work by Marina Abramovic or Rirkrit Tiravanija. There is a situation, the artist enters the situation with some intention, a participant or spectator enters the situation, a relationship emerges, something happens. That's also what happened whenever Mozart held the improvisational chamber concerts that he performed for much of his life. Clearly, this is different to a recorded event or an artefact – but there is some relational aspect to any performance – music, art, stand-up comedy.

Gunnar Schmidt, a German cultural historian, wrote me recently to ask about the comic roots of Fluxus. I found myself writing about Ben Patterson, and the exquisite sense of comic timing you see in his performances. Ben's musical training must have something to do with it, but there have always been musicians with a strong sense of timing and a greater stage presence than others have. Ben has both. His stage skill is a cross between the ability of a great actor whose presence embodies the narrative, and a magician whose skill lies in being ability to direct the eye toward himself or away from himself as he chooses. This is intensely relational.

Many Fluxus pieces were conceived as relations between artist and participants. Alison Knowles's famous *Salad* piece – "Make a Salad" – takes that form. But there is a rich tradition of this – Jock Reynolds's magic pieces for one-to-one performance; the many Fluxfeasts and Fluxfood events where people came together to cook, serve and eat; events like my *Twenty Gallons*, cooking and serving soup to hundreds of people. All this dates to the 1960s.

What can we make of it today? I think the sharpest artist in this tradition is Tino Seghal. His insistence that the work may not be documented or reproduced clarifies the pure relational nature of the event. This raises a powerful question, of course, creating a wedge to distinguish between the relational and the musical. Musicality emerges from the score. The relational emerges from the living situation.

Darren Tofts:

So do you see any resemblances between contemporary events such as flash mobs and Beuys's social sculpture?

Ken Friedman:

Flash mobs are quite different from Beuys's social sculpture. Whatever flash mobs involve, no one makes social claims for them or asserts that they represent a mechanism for sustainable community or social change. The idea of social sculpture seems to posit these claims.

Flash mobs are an entertaining social process enabled by new technology. To me, they are a pure form of abstract sculpture in much the same way that any abstract sculpture is only itself, despite the meanings that an artist intends or the meanings we read into it. The issue gets back to the problem of investment in sustainable networks. No one tries to sustain the network of a flash mob. It is what it is. In contrast, social sculpture as Beuys proposed it required a sustainable network that he was unable to create.

It's worth noting that flash mobs are not entirely new. What's new is the technology we use to convene them and the speed with which they can assemble.

In the late 1960s, a San Francisco artist invited hundreds of his friends to get in a taxi at a specific time in the afternoon, each directing his or her cab to the intersection of Market and Castro stets in downtown San Francisco. Several hundred cabs all showed up at the same time and place, bringing the city to a halt as the artists paid up and left their taxis in a huge, milling pack.

Swedish Fluxus artist Bengt af Klintberg used the flash mob idea in a different way for his 1967 *Party Event*. He sent invitations to all his friends – except one – with a text that read: "Green party green clothes." The odd man out got a card reading: "Red party red clothes."

The flash mob idea has many parallels. The notion of the telephone tree that many communities use to spread news or convene emergency meetings is one. Another is the way teenage gangs manage to convene for a fight. Today they use cell phones, but the basic notion goes back centuries. For example, the apprentices of Paris organized a rebellion against their masters in the 1600s using a kind of flash mob technique.

Darren Tofts:

One of the criticisms levelled at Fluxus was its idealism, its belief that art events, such as happenings, were "models for action and behaviour." Is there still a place today for a humanistic conception of art capable of social change?

Ken Friedman:

I'd like to believe there is. That said, it is not easy to achieve sustainable, robust models of action in any form at any time, let alone through art. In that sense, Fluxus failed and our critics were right. I failed to achieve many of my goals. Dick Higgins and George Maciunas failed to achieve many of their goals. So did others.

Fluxus failed and our critics are right. Let me bracket that statement. Many of the Fluxus artists had no interest at all in this kind of goal, so they did not fail. They became famous artists. In discussing the long term consequences and reputation of art, Marcel Duchamp used to say, “Posterity will be the judge.” We will see whether the art or the failures turn out to be more interesting.

In a world where artists like Jeff Koons and Damian Hirst define the art market, it’s hard to see what difference socially active art can make or how it can take root. If I could have any art work at all among the world’s masterpieces, I would select a piece from Picasso’s *Suite Vollard* or a calligraphic work by Hakuin Zenji. It would be nice to make the world safe for humble art. If art could make a difference, I think humble art would make this a safer world.

Darren Tofts:

Fluxus was famous for its handcrafted graphics and Fluxboxes. Is this artisan-like approach to producing limited edition multiples still possible in the age of digital imaging and reproduction?

Ken Friedman:

The graphics were handcrafted in the sense that all graphics were handcrafted before computer-based typesetting. All graphics were handcrafted by designers before going to press. In Fluxus, George Maciunas had the skills and technical knowledge to bring those mechanical arts to bear on paper labels and sheets of cards in low-tech press runs for Fluxus.

Fluxboxes were not limited edition multiples, though. They were open-ended editions, designed for mass manufacturing using cheap technology and materials readily available in the 1960s. The versions we see today were not mass manufactured, but George designed them for manufacture. Each Fluxbox was handcrafted to give it an industrial appearance. Most were series, but many were unique variations on basic themes.

Darren Tofts:

You have stated that new times require new art forms. Your long-time friend and collaborator Dick Higgins coined the term intermedia to describe the then-emerging "arts of a new mentality." What kind of art forms do you see as being necessary or appropriate for the world today?

Ken Friedman:

This is a subtle question. Media that flow with the speed of light and the weight of electrons are especially useful in a world being drained of resources. What those media might be are not as evident as one may think. Most digital media and electronic media require huge infrastructure, and many require large, physical equipment to prepare and present the work.

I still like the idea of events and event scores as a way to move forward. This medium is powerful in a humble way – it retains the same conceptual power as it always did. The tradition of the event emerged in the 1950s from the musical philosophy of composer Henry Cowell. Cowell proposed an approach to composing based on breaking the activity of sound into minimal, basic elements. John Cage, who had studied with Cowell, introduced this term to the composers and artists who took his courses in new musical composition at the New School for Social Research in the late 1950s. Both Cage and social theorist Theodor Adorno used the term "event," to speak of music in an ontological sense: work performed in time and realized as time unfolds. In the early 1960s, the circle of artists and composers who would coalesce in Fluxus adapted the idea of the event to describe terse, minimal instructions exemplified in the work of George Brecht, Yoko Ono and La Monte Young.

The musical origin of events means that realizing or performing the score brings the event into final embodied existence. As with music, anyone may perform the score. Like all kinds of music, a score opens the possibility that anyone can adopt a piece in the “do-it-yourself” tradition, realizing the work, interpreting it and bringing it to life. One need not be an artist, composer or musician. It is not necessary to be a professional practitioner of the arts. We realize events in everyday situations as well as in performance, emphasizing the unity of art and life. In many cases, an event may exist in more than one form, leaving a wake with several kinds of artefacts.

Darren Tofts:

This suggests the flow or integration of different media that Higgins had in mind with intermedia, and what we have come to accept as vernacular multimedia or new media culture.

Ken Friedman:

This idea works well for me. Many new media art works fascinate me. I continually encounter works, projects, ideas that I find entertaining, amusing, astonishing – even beautiful. A rapidly expanding technology allows us to shape, transform and manipulate media in ways that were never before possible. Old media take on new meaning in the context of our time. The new work that I’ve enjoyed best lately is a series of maps by artist and designer Paula Scher. She has been creating large, colourful maps made of words that occupy positions on the map of the landmasses and geographical features they represent. These works are conceptually elegant and bold, with rich colour and powerful graphic imagery, and yet Scher realizes them using the old printmaking technique of silkscreen. The maps began as paintings, and Scher then created a wonderful series of prints. A huge silkscreen map of Europe stands on the floor in our reading room – the frame is too heavy for us to hang it. As long as human beings attempt to communicate through visual media, someone will find a way to surprise us.

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Footnotes

1. This exhibition won the 2012 U.S Art Critics Association Award for Best Show in a University Gallery.

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