

LOCALITY FLUX

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To conceive of 'fluxus' as a movement or an idea, with a traditional linear, progressive trajectory, having a beginning and an end, is to tell only half the story. That very conception is at variance to the lived experience of doing something Fluxus. Now, with people promoting, representing, theorising, involving, creating in/on Fluxus for totally diverse interests, (whether they are philosophical, artistic, financial, institutional or good for their career), such diverse approaches have made this terrain fertile testing grounds as to what counts in contemporary art 'events'. This short text attempts to draw out some 'hot-spots' in Fluxus discourse you can examine. If we were to start by reading Fluxus via a historical model with a seminal force - in this case starting, like the big-bang of the universe, with George Marciunas - it will only serve to draw our attention to a pretty well worn thought or idea. Lets think as artist Shusaku Arakawa suggests, at a 'different angle'.

Now Fluxus was never only one singular group, and by its auto-formulation, it could never really end - George Brecht once compared Fluxus to a Wheel of Fortune, being an object of some uncertainty whose stopping point is not yet clear. What we can glint however, is that it more or less started in the late 1950s in Weisbaden, initially including George Marciunas, Emmett Williams, George Brecht, Dick Higgins, Alison Knowles, Nam June Paik et.al. Then there were the festivals in 1962 with La Monte Young, Jackson Mac Low, Yoko Ono and Robert Watts, and experimental artists like Joseph Beuys and Ben Vautier and many others. Fluxus waned throughout the 1970's (as Paik, Beuys, Vostell, Ono etc. galloped to stardom), but this period did demarcate a sort of 'first generation' of Fluxus artists from the second generation- who (together with some of the first generation) supported Fluxus through till the present day, in particular to the initiation of the Fluxus Anniversary Events in 1992 such as *Fluxattitudes* (NYC), *Fluxus Virus* (Cologne), *Excellent '92* (Wiesbaden-Erbenheim, Copenhagen, Denmark) as well as the 1993-6 *In the Spirit of Fluxus* retrospective which started at the Walker Art Centre.

Characterising Fluxus

Numerous theories and terms have been conjured to represent Fluxus; hip ones like Fluxus is 'a laboratory, green capitalism or Zen Vaudeville' - in short an idea or concept. Fluxus is also meant to have kick started performance art or conceptual art, in the linear history of late modernism. In the positive (rather than the Dada nihilistic) spirit of Fluxus, this would be straight jacketing its transformative capabilities. Fluxus people themselves have occasionally weakened and attempted characterisation, like Dick Higgins' nine criteria and Ken Friedman's 12 Fluxus ideas (Globalism, Unity of art and life, Intermedia, Experimentalism, Chance, Playfulness, Simplicity, Implicativeness, Exemplativism, Specificity, Presence in time and Musicality)- all these, however useful, ultimately would presume a method. Lets hope that the incoherent and diverse spirit of Fluxus events transcend this.

Overarching descriptions, methods or concepts underestimates Fluxus, but the details, the little strategies which Fluxus people invents make big waves. Take Dick Higgins' strategies of *boredom* and *danger*¹: boredom in a Fluxus work, be it repetitive scores or whatever, may fade or displace the cognitive boundaries between self, work and surroundings. The work disappears into the

¹ See Ina Blom, 'Boredom and Oblivion', *The Fluxus Reader* ed. Ken Friedman, Academy Editions, West Sussex 1998 pp.63-90

surroundings, and the spectator will disappear into the work. At this moment of fading, the state of Fluxus *super-boredom occurs*, which is indistinction, oblivion, causing us to see *events* as *events*. La Monte Young does something similar, working with the possibility of producing effects that are unforeseeable through a single command -in a way prophetic to the popularity of catastrophe today.

With Fluxus people, there is also an insatiable need to document all the possible moments, events, primary and secondary materials which are Fluxus, often without re-presenting or analysing such material. Yet Emmett Williams finds Fluxus to be - 'the longest lived *thing*, in terms of an art movement, in the twentieth century'.² Williams in this off the cuff way characterised Fluxus as a *thing*, rather than as an idea, concept or method. A *thing* cannot be reduced to or abstracted toward mere method, it presents us with the richness of infinite detail, rather than the exclusive reduction of a concept or idea. One would like to imagine there is a certain concurrence between this way of looking at the world with notions introduced by the famous philosopher of science, Paul K. Feyerabend, in his latest book, *Conquest of Abundance*.

Realism versus the richness of Being

Paul Feyerabend in the *Conquest of Abundance: A Tale of Abstraction versus the Richness of Being*, argues passionately against 1) Realism, and 2) the tyranny of universals.

In this discussion, Feyerabend extends his early quests for pluralism³: for him, all real cultures tend to change to adjust to Nature or being, but they do so not by rigorous analysis, but rather ambiguously and through anomalies - it is never a case of progressive 'objectivity' in research which resolves our understanding and intuneness with nature. The point is to debunk the myth of such objectivity. For Feyerabend, under pluralism all cultures approach nature ambiguously, hence there is good sense in saying that *every culture can in principle be any culture*. Furthermore, science is not one method, it is many, and its plurality is not coherent, but full of conflicts. Science achieves results via 'different methods, myths, models, expectations and dogmas'. Quantum theory implies, according to Feyerabend, that properties once regarded as objective depend on the way in which the world is being approached - "nature as described by our scientists is indeed an artefact built in collaboration with a Being sufficiently complex to mock and, perhaps, punish materialists by responding to them in a crudely materialistic way"⁴. What a marvelous vision.

He further advocates that what is needed is the production of more *artefacts* and *changing appearances* in order to give us "a feeling for the enormous and largely unfathomable powers that surrounds us". Unlike rationalists who would like to 'nail things down', he argues for the necessity of artists, poets and musicians (like Fluxus people) who cherish ambiguous words, and all that is necessary to dissolve the rigidity and 'objective' tendencies of scientists.

"And where is the scientist who would permit good, solid science money (such as a small percentage of the millions that keep flowing into the Human Genome Project or the billions promised to the Texas Supercollider) to be spent on the examination of, say La Monte Young's music? Conversely, where is the artist, or the art commission, ready to fund a new and revolutionary science project?"⁵

² Nicholas Zurbrugg 'A Spirit of Large Goals: Fluxus, Dada and Postmodern Cultural Theory at Two Speeds', pp.175, *The Fluxus Reader*, op.cit

³ Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method*, New Left Books 1975, London

⁴ Paul Feyerabend, *Conquest of Abundance*, Uni. of Chicago Press 1999, London pp.240

⁵ Paul Feyerabend, op.cit, pp. 223-4

The Second Generation and Globalism

The second generation of Fluxus artists brought Fluxus to a much wider, arguably almost 'global' or 'glocal' context, with non-Atlantic participants from Japan (more than 27 artists, with Takako Saito, Mieko Shiomi and Yoshimasa Wada, Shigeo Kubota taking part in over a dozen Fluxus events each), Korea and Scandinavia (particularly Eric Andersen). More importantly, out of the Friedman-Lewes chart⁶ of Fluxus artists and their participation, 10% of the 352 artists identified with Fluxus were women, including Alison Knowles, Carolee Schneemann, Charlotte Moorman, Yoko Ono, Saito, Shiomi and Kubota who took part in over a dozen Fluxus events each. The picture painted points to probably more women and non-European artists associated with Fluxus than any other grouping in Western art history. For what the second generation did was that it reflected upon the first, by implicitly criticising its (still) patriarchal nature⁷, its need to be named, remembered and located. The second generation, whilst equally as creative, did not harbour the will to be remembered nor fame.

This second generation's varied geographic participation does add value to Fluxus' claim to be a genuinely global phenomenon. Now-a-days it's hard for us to conceive of the term *globalism* without that other over-rewarded term, *technology*. Ken Friedman recalls that Fluxus had never ascribed to technological methods. Though Fluxus grew at a time of intermedia, as well as the foundations of chaos studies and electronic engineering, it stayed well clear of the "dead-end solutions typical of the 'art and technology' craze"⁸. Instead, Fluxus aspired to provide alternative paradigms, for technoart begs for an art of technical applications. The exception being Paik, and Paik was always the exception, who was certainly crazy with it, who impetuously hyper-realised the technological approach.

Perhaps we can ask further: How does Fluxus sit within present day notions of 'globalism' - in terms of the audience, the artist and the curator? What aspect of Fluxus is still poignant?

Art objects traditionally require a perception, which involves attention, concentration, knowledge and connoisseurship, a set of bi-focals and a walking stick, that is, the art object is the focus and foreground of our attention. The mediatised world brings with it a new mode of perceiving - *browsing* - of web pages, files, and even art objects in 'real' space. Objects and events regarded in this holiday-on-ice way inevitably stay in the background of our attention. Like lounging music, artworks aren't much more than sensorial registrations.

Since Fluxus is radical, despite whatever paradigm or heuristic Fluxus members adopt, it is difficult to imagine that Fluxus artists would want a sort of passive perception which a mediatised milieu demands. The super-boredom of Dick Higgins and La Monte Young still requires active perception, even if the goal is to surprise the perceiving subject. The good old-fashioned humanist spirit never really departed Fluxus. Give me the bi-focals anyway.

⁶ Ken Friedman, 'Fluxus: Global community, Human Dimensions', *Visible Language*, 1992, vol.26, Pub. RISD, Providence, no. 1-2, pp. 155-79

⁷ see Kathy O'Dell's 'Fluxus Feminus', *The Drama Review* 41,1 (T153), Spring 1997, Published by NYU and MIT, pp.43-60. in which she identified how female Fluxus artists created semiotic havoc amongst the Fluxus order, by introducing a performative body/text distinction which resulted in the excommunication of Schneemann by Marciunas

⁸ Ken Friedman, 'Fluxus and Company', *The Fluxus Reader*, pp.237, op.cit.

Fluxus as Australia Knows it in the Age of Bean-Counting

Prior to the travelling 2000 exhibition *Fluxus in Germany, a Long Tale with Many Knots (1962-1994)*⁹ conceived by Rene Block and realised by Carola Bodenmuller, Australian audiences had seen a limited exposure of Fluxus art - the 1994 exhibition at QAG, Brisbane, the 1990-1 *Fluxus!* exhibition which traveled from the IMA, Brisbane, to PICA Perth and Gertrude Street Artists' Space, Melbourne. Fluxus people and their work have also appeared in the recent and the 8th Biennale of Sydney, as well as in an exhibition at Yuill/Crowley Gallery in 1990. Many of these initiations came from Rene Block and his interest in the contemporary Australian context - an exception being the Visual Poetry Exhibition at the Victorian Writer's Centre. Within such presentations, we may feel that Fluxus has been represented in Australia as a more or less fate-a-compleat, a pedagogic exercise. The truth of the matter is that Australian artists, musicians and writers have practiced the spirit of Fluxus for over 30 years.

In the area of experimental music, for example, the late David Ahern stands out as an early catalyst of local Fluxus inclinations. After intensive study with Stockhausen and Cardew in Germany in 1968, and collaboration with John Cage and Nam June Paik, Ahern returned to Australia to develop avant-garde music in the spirit of Fluxus. In 1970 he formed the group *A-Z Music* or *Teletopa* in Sydney. The young group of musicians including Roger Frampton, Peter Evans, Geoffrey Collins, Ernest Gallagher, Geoff Barnard, Gregory Schiemer and Peter Kinny then created musical happenings. Ahern also performed Satie's *Vexations 834*, played very slowly 834 times (taking 22 hours) at Watters Gallery, Sydney 1970 - which incidentally was also the paradigmatic piece for Dick Higgins' strategies of *boredom* and *immersion* in Fluxus events.

What happened in Australia between the lived experience of something like *A-Z Music*, which maintained the 'spirit of Fluxus' and the pre-packaged *browsing* of Fluxus as a past seminal moment, as presented to us in museums, galleries and travelling shows? We already know of this vast gap in Australia, between the re-presentation of something contemporary from the outside and that, which is lived now or within the recent history of Australian art - yet are they totally incommensurate experiences? Are the present representations of Fluxus, like the interest in Situationism in the 80's and 90's, yet another end-game attempt to force another move of validation for fashionable artists?

to exist within an ever growing institution, which requires a foil to the claim against a 'climate of conservatism'? Is it ever not a 'climate of conservatism' for institutions, which rely on a logic of progressive avant-gardism to justify their existence? Turning to a bigger picture however, we *are* living in a climate of not just conservatism, but of regression and denial. PMBC John Howard has instituted a semiotic scenario equivalent to enforcing every man, woman and child to jump into the bed of bean counters. The issue is much deeper here, it is not just a question of whether art institutions in Australia are totally self serving or that they serve the regressive directives from above - it is a question of such regressive ideologies being pervasive in Australia, and repetitions of simplistic tepid generalities of the Howard government is strident in all fields, be they the sciences or the arts. Perhaps the present significance of Fluxus in Australia is what the Fluxus state of mind has to offer - in a techno-mediatised, post-modern condition, dovetailed with retro 50's Howard doctrines - Fluxus offers attention to detail and specific events, it offers empathy for what Feyerabend observes as changing appearances and ambiguity.

⁹ At Sydney College of the Arts Gallery, Sydney and Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology Gallery, Melbourne, 2000

Finally, Fluxus cuts across a lot of claims by the cartel of international curators that the art of the present day is 'global'. Present day art, as presented by an ever growing, powerful, cartel of international curators, with an assortment of exotic moments from the first, second and third worlds is more akin to a multi-national company's processed package. The cartel relies on advertising, exoticization and general bullying more than it does a respect for unevenness, uniqueness and the infinitude of detail. With the global showing of a more or less selected group of contemporary works - these works are more than often one proposition by an (any) artist, taken out of the artist's oeuvre, and placed within the curator's portfolio with other artists' propositions. In effect, the silent orchestration of these works by the curator is the curator's speech. The effect is multiplied by other clones who want to belong to the same powerful herd by silently speaking in concurrent voices. What is originally the choice of one starts to look like a consensus, what seems like a consensus solidifies into feeling as if the opinion is an accurate, objective and realistic description of the state of 'global' contemporary art. In effect the artwork is becoming a currency for curatorial barter, an abstraction and a browsing object for the audience. The Fluxus spirit's respect for specificities provides an interesting antithesis to the objectifying and generalising tendencies which now spreads over the art high church. We see a sort of applicative universalism that even the high church of science had to throw out the window years ago.

Fluxus then, provides another position which is global, not necessarily because more people around the world are now participating in it, but primarily because its legacy of an ambiguous attitude would counter any impositions of simplifications and simple minded ideologies, trajectories, methods and styles, on growth and intuneness to being. What Fluxus offers us, then is concurrent to Feyerabend's hope- it is primarily an ethical decision, for artists and curators alike - a question of empathetic quest and valuing of artefacts and appearances versus the generalising, flattening implosion of the mediatised world and its institutional declines.

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