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Fluxus and the Democratic Mundane

Ross Cole

From the very beginning, theory and praxis were coexistent in Fluxus, two sides of the same mischievously counterfeited coin. This union is nowhere more apparent than at a "little summer party" entitled *Après John Cage* organized by George Maciunas and Benjamin Patterson in Wuppertal, West Germany on the evening of 9 June 1962.[1] The proceedings opened with a text written by Maciunas, read aloud in German translation, under the title "Introduction: Neo-dada in New York." This essay was a symptom of Maciunas's enduring obsession with mapping and synthesizing modern art historical trends on a global scale. Contemporary neo dada, he proposes, is defined above all by its "concretism," an aesthetic that sits on a continuum stretching "from extremely artificial art, illusionistic art, then abstract art…to mild concretism, which becomes more and more concrete, or rather nonartificial till it becomes non-art, anti-art, nature, reality."[2] For Maciunas, Fluxus was an exploration of the neglected limits of this axis, foreshadowing Yuriko Saito's claim that the philosophy of art has never quite been "broad enough to capture every aspect of our aesthetic life."[3] In what follows, I take seriously her idea that there is something "moral, social, political" about nurturing and sharpening this "aesthetic appreciation of the mundane."[4]

Maciunas offers his most sustained description of a concretist approach by turning to music and sound, domains of experience central to Fluxus history:

> In music a concretist perceives and expresses the material sound with all its inherent polychromy and pitchlessness and "incidentalness," rather than the immaterial abstracted and artificial sound of pure pitch…A material or concrete sound is considered one that has close affinity to the sound producing material…Thus a note sounded on a piano keyboard or a bel-canto voice is largely immaterial, abstract and artificial since the sound does not clearly indicate its true source or material reality—common action of string, wood, metal, felt, voice, lips, tongue, mouth etc. A sound, for instance, produced by striking the same piano itself with a hammer or kicking its underside is more material and concrete since it indicates in a much clearer manner the hardness of hammer, hollowness of piano sound box and resonance of string…These concrete sounds are commonly, although inaccurately, referred to as noises.[5]

[1] "Kleinen Sommerfest: Après John Cage" invitation card, Galerie Parnass, Wuppertal, 9 June 1962. Fondazione Bonotto (FXC1582). Maciunas is referred to on this invitation as "Chefredakteur der neuen Kunst-Zeitschrift FLUXUS." The essay was read by Arthus C. Caspari.
[2] George Maciunas, "Neo-Dada in Music, Theater, Poetry, Art," in *Fluxus: Selections from the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection*, ed. Clive Phillpot and Jon Hendricks, 25–7 (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1988), 25. The essay's title is different from that advertised on the invitation card.
[3] Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1.
[4] Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, 2–3.
[5] Maciunas, "Neo-Dada," 26–7.

"Indeterminacy and improvisation," he adds, are vital to this concretism paradigm along with other tactics independent of the composer employed to circumvent the artifice of "human pre-determination" while enfolding the volatile "reality of nature."[6] Concretism aspired to the purposeless patter of rainfall, the susurration of a crowd, sneezes, a butterfly in flight, or the indecipherable movements of microorganisms. Such work, he insists, would be indistinguishable from an enhanced engagement with life itself: "if man could experience the world, the concrete world surrounding him…in the same way he experiences art, there would be no need for art."[7]

In Maciunas's view, neo-dada artists were pursuing a radical acceptance of the world simply as it is—a material turn that usurped and made redundant the idea of art as a preserve of experts and elites. Their approach involved attempts to unite form and content to the extent that such distinctions would evaporate entirely. Thus, "a concretist perceives and expresses a rotten tomato without changing its reality or form."[8] Concretists would not depict rotten tomatoes in paint as ciphers of waste and corruption, nor would they temper their ugliness by embedding them in language. The example is well chosen: something to be purged, a repellent and commonplace thing, a shrewd allusion to vernacular rebuke. But there is something strangely ambiguous about the way the statement is phrased. The concretist both *expresses* and *perceives* the rotten tomato, at once *presenting* and *receiving* it aesthetically. This, I would like to argue, is significant. Running throughout Fluxus is a revolutionary idea not simply of artistic production, but of reception. Such emphasis on the aesthetic, I want to suggest, has a political import best explained via the work of Jacques Rancière.

As the title of the event at which this address was presented made clear, it was to John Cage that Maciunas owed his primary debt. The notion that concrete artists provide "a kind of framework, an 'automatic machine' within which or by which, nature (either in the form of an independent performer or indeterminate-chance compositional methods) can complete the art-form, effectively and independently of the artist-composer" recalls Cage's idea from his 1957 lecture "Experimental Music" that an experimentalist "resembles the maker of a camera who allows someone else to take the picture."[9] Maciunas was intrigued with the relationship Fluxus might have with antecedents such as Cage, Marcel Duchamp, and Luigi Russolo.[10] His theory of concretism evoked not only the *musique concrète* of Pierre Schaeffer—an "objective music," Schaeffer states, in which "things begin to speak by themselves"—but also Russolo's 1913 proposal for a Futurist "Art of Noise," a manifesto republished by the Something Else Press in 1967 in a translation by Fluxus artist Robert Filliou.[11] One of

[6] Maciunas, "Neo-Dada," 27.
[7] Maciunas, "Neo-Dada," 27.
[8] Maciunas, "Neo-Dada," 26.
[9] Maciunas, "Neo-Dada," 27; John Cage, "Experimental Music," in *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, 7–12 (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 11.
[10] Maciunas designed several diagrams illustrating these genealogies: see, for instance, Phillpot and Hendricks, ed. *Fluxus*, 30–3 and *Film Culture—Expanded Arts* 43, special issue (1966). This issue contained Maciunas's "Fluxfest Sale" and his well-known "Expanded Arts Diagram."
[11] Pierre Schaeffer, *In Search of a Concrete Music*, trans. Christine North and John Dack (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 91–2. Maciunas's theory of concretism differs from *musique*

Maciunas's precursors for Fluxus was what he referred to in diagrams of the early 1960s as "futurist bruitism."[12] A keen student of art history, he would likely have been aware of Richard Huelsenbeck's discussion of this term in the essay "En Avant Dada" anthologized in Robert Motherwell's 1951 collection *The Dada Painters and Poets*—a text central to Cage's teaching.[13] "Music," Huelsenbeck writes, "of whatever nature is harmonious, artistic, an activity of reason—but bruitism is life itself."[14] Following in Cage's footsteps, Maciunas appears to imitate key aspects of Russolo's manifesto, including its critique of the "hieratic atmosphere" of musical art and its enthrallment to "the soft and limpid purity of sound."[15] Much like Russolo, Maciunas wished instead to elevate "Musical Noise," something more in tune with the realities of urban experience and the pleasures to be derived from its unending cacophony of timbres—"the gurglings of water, air and gas inside metallic pipes, the rumblings and rattlings of engines…the hubbub of the crowds, the different roars of railroad stations, iron foundries, textile mills, printing houses, power plants and subways."[16] Dressed like a Futurist in his signature bowler hat, Maciunas, seemed equally unable to suppress "the intense desire to create a true musical reality" by (quite literally in Fluxus) "stepping and pushing over violins and pianos."[17]

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concrète, however, in that Schaeffer used concrete sounds as raw material for creative manipulation; indeed, he describes the resulting compositions as "the equivalent of abstract painting" (181).

[12] See George Maciunas, "Space projected in time GRAPHIC MUSIC/Time projected in space MUSIC THEATRE (c.1961), Museum of Modern Art (2381.2008) and "Time/time projected in 2 dim. space POETRY GRAPHICS/space/space projected in time GRAPHIC MUSIC/Time/Time projected in space MUSIC THEATER/space (c.1962), Museum of Modern Art (2382.2008). Maciunas continued to work on increasingly elaborate charts for over a decade, culminating in *Diagram of Historical Development of Fluxus and Other 4 Dimentional, Aural, Optic, Olfactory, Epithelial and Tactile Art Forms (Incomplete)* (1973), Museum of Modern Art (2895.2008).

[13] See Sally Banes, *Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and the Effervescent Body* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 29. Maciunas participated in classes with Cage's successor at the New School, Richard Maxfield: see Emmett Williams and Ann Noël, ed. *Mr. Fluxus: A Collective Portrait of George Maciunas, 1931–1978* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 322. The dedicatee of two works by La Monte Young, Huelsenbeck had participated in the 3rd *New York Avant-Garde Festival* at Judson Hall in 1965 alongside Cage, Charlotte Moorman, James Tenney, and several Fluxus affiliates; see Christel Schüppenhauer, ed. *Fluxus Virus, 1962–1992* (Köln: Galerie Schüppenhauer, 1992), 340. See also Richard Huelsenbeck, *Memoirs of a Dada Drummer*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel, ed. Hans J. Kleinschmidt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

[14] Richard Huelsenbeck, "En Avant Dada: A History of Dadaism," in *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology*, ed. Robert Motherwell, 2nd edn., 21–48 (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981), 26.

[15] Luigi Russolo, *The Art of Noise*, trans Robert Filliou (Ubuclassics, 2004), 5. Originally published 1967 as a Great Bear Pamphlet by Something Else Press. There are striking points of similarity between Russolo's text and Cage's early writings such as "Credo." As Maciunas indicates in his 1961 diagram, this influence was mediated by Russolo's friend Edgard Varèse. On these connections, see David Nicholls, "Cage and the Ultramodernists," *American Music* 28/4 (2010): 492–500. Another notable influence here is Antonin Artaud, whose work Cage encountered via David Tudor and Pierre Boulez. Significantly, Cage references Artaud when discussing the idea he had in 1951 "that each thing is itself, that its relations with other things spring up naturally rather than being imposed by any abstraction on an 'artist's' part." See Jean-Jacques Nattiez, ed., *The Boulez–Cage Correspondence*, trans. Robert Samuels (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 96.

[16] Russolo, *The Art of Noise*, 6, 7.

[17] Russolo, *The Art of Noise*, 7. On such attire, see Mari Dumett, *Corporate Imaginations: Fluxus Strategies for Living* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 61–71 and Peter Wollen, "Magritte and the Bowler Hat," in *Paris / Manhattan: Writings on Art*, 128–45 (London: Verso, 2004).

For George Brecht, Cage's approach to indeterminacy and Schaeffer's *musique concrète* likewise provided the model for what he describes as an "open-minded receptivity" that would situate creative practice in the same conceptual category as "the configuration of meadow grasses, [or] the arrangement of stones on a brook bottom."[18] The essential aim was to "get away from the idea that an artist makes something 'special' and beyond the world of ordinary things."[19] It is this insistence on the ordinary, modest, and ubiquitous that would sustain the Fluxus coalition as it grew and developed, drawing on what Brecht describes as "simple, even austere, means" including "materials, natural and fabricated, metals, foils, glass, plastics, cloth, etc., and electronic systems for creating light and sound."[20] Small typewritten event scores from his 1963 *Water Yam* compendium claim all manner of quotidian things as unsigned readymades by George Brecht: sink, stool, suitcase, comb, sleep, water, ice, steam, broom, table, mirror, dresser, umbrella, ladder, lamp, tea, eggs, vehicles, pissing, polishing, colours, Thursday, a ringing telephone, a keyhole, a vase of flowers placed on a piano, a closed window, an open window. They function, Julia Robinson notes, as "mobile conceptual propositions" that open up relationships between subject and object "not as a vehicle of expression but a cue to perception."[21] The structure of such work, Brecht notes, derives from something "unrelated to the history of art" but "continuous with all of nature…a deeply personal, infinitely complex, and still essentially mysterious, exploration of experience."[22]

What interests me in this essay is an intersection of politics (democracy) and aesthetics (mundanity) that highlights an aspect of Fluxus distinct from its frequent associations with violence, destruction, and radical avant-garde critique.[23] What does it mean politically, I want to ask, to thematize commonplace aspects of daily life and move away from the idea that artists reveal something more than what is already there to perceive? What is political about the ways in which Fluxus revitalizes perceptual engagement, tuning attention to marginalized or unremarkable forms of experience? What is the political significance of aesthetic receptivity when removed from its

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[18] George Brecht, *Chance-Imagery* (Ubuclassics, 2004), 24, 12. Originally published 1966 as a Great Bear Pamphlet by Something Else Press.

[19] Brecht, *Chance-Imagery*, 12.

[20] George Brecht, "Project in Multiple Dimensions" (1957–58), in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, ed. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, 2nd edn., 384–85 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 384.

[21] Julia Robinson, "From Abstraction to Model: George Brecht's Events and the Conceptual Turn in Art of the 1960s," *October* 127 (2009): 77–108, 105, 103. A facsimile of *Water Yam* can be found at https://monoskop.org/File:Brecht_George_Water_Yam_1963.pdf. See also Liz Kotz, *Words to Be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

[22] Brecht, "Project in Multiple Dimensions," 384–5. On this theme more broadly, see Benjamin Piekut, "Chance and Certainty: John Cage's Politics of Nature," *Cultural Critique* 84 (2013): 134–63 and George J. Leonard, *Into the Light of Things: The Art of the Commonplace from Wordsworth to John Cage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

[23] Terry Riley and Henry Flynt, for instance, both define Fluxus in relation to violence: see, respectively, David W. Bernstein, ed., *The San Francisco Tape Music Center: 1960s Counterculture and the Avant-Garde* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 214 and Henry Flynt, "La Monte Young in New York, 1960–62," in *Sound and Light: La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela*, ed. William Duckworth and Richard Fleming, 44–97 (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press; Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1996), 79.

historical attachment to art and diverted onto concrete reality? Answers to such questions can be found by turning to Rancière's writing.[24] For Rancière, art and politics both render things in common and things excluded, things visible and invisible, sayable and unsayable, thinkable and unthinkable, possible and impossible. Aesthetics plays a crucial role in shaping "what presents itself to sense experience" at particular temporal moments, thus defining the ground of politics as such, which "revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak."[25] There is consequently "an 'aesthetics' at the core of politics"—though something very different from Benjamin's claim about the aestheticization of politics under fascism and the politicization of aesthetics under communism.[26] This unconventional approach is traceable back to the archival discoveries leading toward Rancière's 1981 *La Nuits des prolétaires: Archives du rêve ouvrier*—a book that offers an inventive rereading of emancipation not as a Marxist seizing control of the means of production, as Kristin Ross puts it, "but rather seizing the right to dead time, the right to think, the right to occupy the terrain the bourgeoisie had carefully preserved for itself: the terrain of aesthetic pleasure."[27]

La Nuits des prolétaires opens up a new way of conceiving the political significance of Fluxus beyond the politics of its individual associates and Maciunas's quixotic fascination with the Soviet Union.[28] The politics of art, as Rancière points out, is not the politics of artists.[29] Rancière's work is concerned instead with locating and resisting an urge to put things and people in their proper place, in a hierarchy, and to decide on that basis what is important and worthy of attention. He encourages us to read history against the grain, looking for the ways in which workers were able

> to take back the time that was refused them by educating their perceptions and their thought in order to free themselves in the very exercise of everyday work, or by winning from nightly rest the time to discuss, write, compose verses, or develop philosophies. These gains in time

[24] While writing this essay I was grateful to be pointed toward Jacob Proctor, "George Maciunas's Politics of Aesthetics," in *Fluxus and the Essential Questions of Life*, ed. Jacquelynn Bass, 22–33 (Hanover, NH: Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), a chapter that also draws on Rancière's ideas.
[25] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2004), 8. Rancière's ideas have arrived comparatively late within musicology. For an introduction, see João Pedro Cachopo, Patrick Nickleson, and Chris Stover, eds. *Rancière and Music* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020) and Jairo Moreno and Gavin Steingo, "Rancière's Equal Music," *Contemporary Music Review* 31/5–6 (2012): 487–505.
[26] Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 8; see Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zorn, 211–44 (London: Pimlico, 1999), 235.
[27] Kristin Ross, "Introduction: Kristin Ross on Jacques Rancière," *Artforum International* 45/7 (2007): 254–55, 254.
[28] See Cuauhtémoc Medina, "The 'Kulturbolschewiken' I: Fluxus, the Abolition of Art, the Soviet Union, and 'Pure Amusement'," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 48 (2005): 179–92 and Cuauhtémoc Medina, "The 'Kulturbolschewiken' II: Fluxus, Khrushchev, and the 'Concretist Society'," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 49–50 (2006): 231–43. Some of Maciunas's most radical proposals can be found in his *Fluxus Manifesto* (1963), Museum of Modern Art (2390.2008.x1-x2), and the coordinated attack on New York City outlined in *Fluxus News-Policy Letter No. 6* (1963), Museum of Modern Art (2170.2008). He also designed and contributed to Henry Flynt's *Communists Must Give Revolutionary Leadership in Culture* (1965), Museum of Modern Art (2961.2008.1x1-x3).
[29] Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott. London: Verso, 2009, 72.

> and freedom were not marginal phenomena or diversions in relation to the construction of the workers' movement and its great objectives. *They were the revolution*, both discreet and radical, that made these possible, the work by which men and women wrenched themselves out of an identity formed by domination and asserted themselves as inhabitants with full rights of a common world.[30]

By doing so, he argues, these French artisans of the 19th century disturbed the socially accepted distribution of roles and political subjectivities, a distribution predicated on an ostensibly natural order. Rancière's work deliberately muddies such distinctions, unearthing a fundamental and subversive "equality of intelligences" that reveals "a capacity for thought and action that is common to all."[31] Art and creativity, in other words, can inaugurate new realms of transgression and democratic possibility.

Fluxus, as we shall see in relation to specific examples, does something very similar. By dwelling on mundane concrete reality, Fluxus attests to a profound yet often neglected truth: that the aesthetic is common and equally available to all. Realizing what Saito describes as "hidden potentials," it proposes a different kind of perceptual world-making that, as Rancière submits, not merely represents or symbolizes a different social order, but rather offers up the prospect of a revolutionary change in receptivity, community, and individual experience.[32] Fluxus, in short, disturbs given social structures by democratizing access to the aesthetic. In so doing, it negates those hierarchies of value held dear by modernism—hierarchies that are inherently political.[33] By revelling in play, nonsense, and insignificance, Fluxus works reclaim time and space from a world demanding relentless dedication to purpose, productivity, industry, meaning, order, and economic efficiency. As Rancière might put it, Fluxus fosters and expands perceptions not so as to shatter the false consciousness spun by capitalist domination, but rather to recover the aesthetic amid the very exercise of everyday life.[34] By renouncing political ambition as such, it nevertheless has the effect of revealing the myriad ways in which aesthetics is bound up with historical distributions of capacity and incapacity, agency and freedom.

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[30] Jacques Rancière, *Proletarian Nights: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, trans. John Drury (London: Verso, 2012), ix. Emphasis added.
[31] Rancière, *Proletarian Nights*, xi–xii.
[32] Yuriko Saito, *Aesthetics of the Familiar: Everyday Life and World-Making* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 225.
[33] See, for instance, John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice Among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880–1939* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992).
[34] In pursuing this argument I'm choosing to be slightly creative with Rancière's own views on 1960s art. Although he does not turn his attention in any significant way to Fluxus, Rancière is sceptical of the kind of approach taken by Dada, in that he finds it difficult to disentangle from a critical impulse grounded in dissimilarity. The closest he gets to discussing Fluxus is perhaps the following: "From Dadaism through to the diverse kinds of 1960s contestatory art, the politics of mixing heterogeneous elements had one dominant form: the polemical. Here, the play of exchanges between art and non-art served to generate clashes between heterogeneous elements and dialectical oppositions between form and content, which themselves served to denounce social relations and the place reserved for art within them…The collage of heterogeneous elements generally took the form of a shock, revealing one world hidden beneath another: capitalist violence beneath the happiness of consumption; and commercial interests and violence of class struggle beneath the serene appearances of art." (Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, trans. Steven Corcoran [Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009], 51). In a sense, I am here trying to reclaim Fluxus from Rancière's dismissive reading of 1960s neo dada.

Purposeful Purposelessness

As we have already seen, Cage's avuncular shadow loomed large over Fluxus to the extent that its earliest appearance in Europe was at an event entitled *Après John Cage*.[35] Nam June Paik's 1959 performance of his own *Hommage à John Cage*—which involved, among other things, attacking a prepared piano—likewise echoes this shared sense of deferential repetition and Oedipal struggle.[36] Several Fluxus artists, as is well known, had initially begun their work as composers at the New School for Social Research enamoured with his legacy and teaching. Cage had, as it were, provided the compass for this younger generation of "intermedia" artists—a term coined by Dick Higgins in the mid-1960s as a way to describe a range of new work that "seems to fall between media."[37] "Where do we go from here?" Cage asks in his 1957 lecture "Experimental Music" printed in the brochure accompanying the recording of his 25-year retrospective concert.[38] The answer: "towards theatre" as a form offering up the possibility of a "purposeful purposelessness or a purposeless play."[39] This kind of play, Cage emphasises, "is an affirmation of life—not an attempt to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply a way of waking up to the very life we're living."[40] It is precisely the extent to which Fluxus activities become purposeless play that defines their politics—a politics that, as Rancière shows, has its roots in Schiller's belief that the aesthetic derives not from an "apolitical love of pure beauty," but from play, "which is its own end."[41]

To look more closely at this embrace of an intermedial form encompassing theatre and music, I want to focus on the notorious "FLuXuS INTERNATIONALE FesTsPiELe NEUEsTER MUSiK" held in Wiesbaden, West Germany three months

[35] On this topic, see Kyle Gann "No Escape from Heaven: John Cage as Father Figure," in *The Cambridge Companion to John Cage*, ed. David Nicholls, 242–60 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
[36] See Amy C. Beal, *New Music, New Allies: American Experimental Music in West Germany from the Zero Hour to Reunification* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 118.
[37] Dick Higgins, "Synesthesia and Intersenses: Intermedia," http://www.ubu.com/papers/higgins_intermedia.html, originally published in *Something Else Newsletter* 1/1 (Something Else Press, 1966). See also Steve Clay and Ken Friedman, eds. *Intermedia, Fluxus and the Something Else Press: Selected Writings by Dick Higgins* (New York: Siglio, 2018).
[38] Cage, "Experimental Music," 12.
[39] Cage, "Experimental Music," 12.
[40] Cage, "Experimental Music," 12. Cage had put such ideas into practice in his 1959 *Water Walk*, which utilized a series of everyday objects including a bathtub, pressure cooker, rubber duck, vase of flowers, watering can, blender, soda siphon, whistle, and five radios. *Water Walk* was premiered on Italian TV in 1959 and subsequently performed on the US game show *I've Got a Secret*. See http://www.openculture.com/2014/12/john-cage-performs-water-walk-on-us-game-show-ive-got-a-secret-1960.html. On the 1958 retrospective, see Martin Iddon and Philip Thomas, *John Cage's Concert for Piano and Orchestra* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020). On the aesthetics of play more broadly, see John Sharp, *Works of Game: On the Aesthetics of Games and Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015).
[41] Jacques Rancière, *The Lost Thread: The Democracy of Modern Fiction,* trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 77.

after the little summer party in Wuppertal.[42] These concerts were at once theatrical spectacle, purposeless play, and chaotic adventures in musical concretism that served to awaken aesthetic sensitivity. Featured at both the *Après John Cage* event and the Wiesbaden festival was a piece entitled *Variations for Double-Bass*, composed the previous year by the African American contrabassist Benjamin Patterson. Patterson's piece comprised a series of absurdist gestures carried out in, on, with, or alongside his instrument. Dressed in suit and tie for the Wiesbaden performance, he marks the town on a map and places the pin of his contrabass in this circle; he fastens clothes pegs and clamps to the four strings near the bridge, making the instrument an equivalent of the prepared piano; he uses a dining fork to eat material concealed within the peg box; he pulls a silk stocking over the scroll; he inflates a balloon inside its body through one f-hole before attaching a whistle in place of the pump; he dusts the instrument with a feather duster; he attacks the strings with a bow-like newspaper holder, shredding paper in the process.[43] The score is typical of Fluxus pieces: four small typewritten sheets of paper containing a series of seventeen discrete instructions. Patterson tells us that for its first performance he derived parameters such as pitch, dynamics, duration, and number of sounds from a graphic map of ink blots.

[Figure 1 here]

The piece anticipates and perfectly illustrates Higgins's idea of intermedia. "The ready-made or found object," Higgins writes, was "in a sense an intermedium since it was not intended to conform to the pure medium…and therefore suggests a location in the field between the general area of art media and those of life media."[44] This area, he felt, was relatively unexplored and yet the wellspring of a whole range of "aesthetically rewarding possibilities."[45] What Patterson creates in *Variations for Double-Bass* is something like an intermedium between a set of musical variations for contrabass and a store cupboard of household items: a world map, a pen, toy whistles, clothespins, gold-face paper, plastic butterflies, woodworking clamps, paper clips, hair pins, a suede-leather brush, furniture casters, a comb, corrugated cardboard, newspapers, a red feather duster, a Japanese hand fan, balloons, shoelaces, string, electrical wiring, rags, food, a corkscrew, kitchen utensils, scissors, stockings, a picture postcard. But the piece is also an intermedium between a double bass and sculpture, performance art and sound art, music and farce ("'bartok' and/or 'fingernail' pizzicati, catapult butterflies from strings," one instruction reads).[46] The result is an uncanny slippage between media, between art and everyday life, between

[42] On transatlantic experimentation, see Beal, *New Music, New Allies* and Martin Iddon, *New Music at Darmstadt: Nono, Stockhausen, Cage, And Boulez* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
[43] For the written score, see Benjamin Patterson, *Variations for Double-Bass* (1962), Museum of Modern Art (2640.2008.a-d). Footage of the Wiesbaden performance is available online at various locations including https://www.ardmediathek.de/video/hr-retro-oder-hessenschau/fluxus-festival-in-wiesbaden/hr-fernsehen/Y3JpZDovL2hyLW9ubGluZS8xMzY0MzY.
[44] Higgins, "Synesthesia and Intersenses."
[45] Higgins, "Synesthesia and Intersenses."
[46] Patterson, *Variations for Double-Bass*.

highbrow and mundane. *Variations for Double-Bass* entreats its audience to equate Webern and Bartók with a bird call imitator or a hand slapping and tapping on the instrument's side. All sounds (no matter how odd, funny, unheeded, marginal, or annoying) are analogous. There is no purpose to the piece other than this playful attempt to take seriously the aesthetic in the widest and most radically inclusive sense. In so doing, Patterson establishes an unsettling commonality between art music and haphazard vernacular noise. These concrete sounds are made audible in a new way, rendered equal, removed from their lowly positions in a hierarchy of worth.

In an ironic preview for the US military newspaper *The Stars and Stripes* that the concrete poet Emmett Williams happened to be working for at the time, Patterson underscores this attitude to Williams hamming up the role of an unhip reporter:

> EW: "Would you call this a visual or auditory musical experience?"
>
> BP: *"Decidedly both."*
>
> EW: "But is it music?"
>
> BP: *"What do you mean, is it music? Of course it's music. It's performed on a musical instrument, it's taking place in a concert hall, and I'm a composer and trained musician."*
>
> EW: "I see."[47]

Patterson's wry humour, inflected by the everyday "survival technique" he had been forced to adopt as an African American, betrays a serious point: of course *Variations for Double-Bass* contains sounds meriting sustained attention; of course these have an equal right to be admitted into the aesthetic.[48] What the piece achieved was something akin to Viktor Shklovsky's ideal of *ostranenie*, in which things are "intentionally removed from the domain of automatized perception" and "brought into view."[49] As La Monte Young recalled when reflecting on his experiments with Terry Riley at the San Francisco Dancers' Workshop, in the process of discovering new sounds and new ways of producing them they "reconsidered sounds we had never previously listened to so closely."[50] This is exactly what Maciunas envisioned for concretism: the

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[47] OEW [Emmett Williams], "Way Way Way Out," *The Stars and Stripes*, 30 August 1962, 11. At the time, Maciunas was employed by the US Air Force and used his position to subsidize Fluxus; Patterson even jokes, "our great patron was the military" (Williams and Noël, ed., *Mr. Fluxus*, 55). See also Emmett Williams, *My Life in Flux—And Vice Versa* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992). On hipness, see Phil Ford, *Dig: Sound and Music in Hip Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[48] George E. Lewis, "In Search of Benjamin Patterson: An Improvised Journey," *Callaloo* 35/4 (2012): 979–92, 984. See also George E. Lewis, "Benjamin Patterson's Spiritual Exercises," in *Tomorrow Is the Question: New Directions in Experimental Music Studies*, ed. Benjamin Piekut, 86–108 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014).

[49] Viktor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990), 12.

[50] La Monte Young, "Lecture 1960," *Tulane Drama Review* 10/2 [1965]: 73–83, 81. These experiments culminated in *Poem for Chairs, Tables, Benches, etc. (or other sound sources)*. For its New York premiere in April 1960 at the Living Theatre, Cage and David Tudor pulled heavy benches across a tiled floor for around seven minutes. On these collaborations, see Janice Ross, *Anna Halprin: Experience as Dance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 141–6 and Jeremy Grimshaw, *Draw a Straight Line and Follow It: The Music and Mysticism of La Monte Young* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 68. Many of Young's scores from 1960 are published in La Monte Young, ed., *An Anthology* (New York: La Monte Young and Jackson Mac Low, 1963).

mundane brought into view and reconsidered as art in such a way that artists would consequently forfeit their privileged role as sole gatekeepers to the aesthetic.

The Wiesbaden festival also involved a collaborative interpretation of Philip Corner's *Piano Activities* presented by Patterson, Williams, Higgins, Paik, Maciunas, Alison Knowles, and Wolf Vostell. In newsreel footage by Hessischer Rundfunk, the region's public broadcaster, we see Williams carrying a large stone that he drops onto an open grand piano. A hammer is used to smash its keyboard to pieces. A kettle is scraped along the surviving strings. Finally, the instrument is carried away as if wounded. Photos taken over the course of the festival show it being sawn apart, stepped on, stroked with a brush, and assaulted with small planks of wood. Corner's score had not called for outright demolition, but suggested a multitude of possibilities: playing in an "orthodox manner," muting strings, plucking, scratching or rubbing, dropping things, acting with "external objects," striking, preparing, and silence—while showing both "restraint and extremity."[51] This rendition, as Maciunas confessed to Young in a personal letter recounting the events, had been pragmatic:

> Wiesbaden was shocked, the mayor almost had to flee the town for giving us the hall. We gave very good performances, too bad the audience was not too large…[A]t the end we did Corner's *Piano Activities* not according to his instructions since we systematically destroyed a piano which I bought for $5 and had to have it all cut up to throw away, otherwise we would have had to pay movers, a very practical composition, but German sentiments about this "instrument of Chopin" were hurt and they made a row about it.[52]

Sound recordings made by Maciunas that he later sent to friends capture a brilliant cacophony as the spectacle of destruction played out on stage: chords and clusters, sporadic notes in all registers often jarringly out of tune, percussive thuds, friction noise, clatters, sawing, knocks, tapping, hammering, audience interjections, and an electric drill.[53] Patterson later pointed out that the most noteworthy aspect of these performances was that, as he puts it, "we…made sounds—like you've never heard before."[54] These concrete sounds opened up an entirely new domain of audibility and, in so doing, an entirely new and previously unthinkable mode of listening.

[Figure 2 here]

Contemporaries sensed that something was amiss, the festival's posters soon scrawled with the slogan "DIE IRREN SIND LOS" ("THE CRAZIES ARE ON THE LOOSE," in Natilee Harren's translation), a gesture hard not to imagine as a Fluxus prank.[55] The concerts did indeed present something deliberately "wrong"—a series of

[51] Philip Corner, *Piano Activities* (1962), Museum of Modern Art (2130.2008.a-c).
[52] Letter from Maciunas to Young, quoted in Williams and Noël, ed., *Mr. Fluxus*, 53. This letter is reproduced as a facsimile in Phillpot and Hendricks, ed., *Fluxus*, 35–7.
[53] See http://piano-activities.de/englindex.html. Copies of these tapes had been sent to Vytautas Landsbergis and Kuniharu Akiyama, and have only recently been rediscovered.
[54] Benjamin Patterson in Williams and Noël, ed., *Mr. Fluxus*, 54.
[55] Natilee Harren, *Fluxus Forms: Scores, Multiples, and the Eternal Network* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 13.

incoherent, playful, irrational, and nonsensical tableaux using instruments as objects in ways unsanctioned by tradition. Adopting the broken form of circus, vaudeville, and slapstick cinema (an aspect of Fluxus we'll address in more detail), these performances refused the hierarchical instincts of modernism, instead allowing spectators to trace their own paths through a plotless maze of fragments. Their politics reside in the fact that they generate what Adorno might describe as a self-conscious "negation of meaning," the warped echo of a structure that was once obligatory.[56] Although Maciunas's mother, a dancer steeped in high culture, was mortified by these concerts, the museum's janitor (according to Higgins) "liked them so well that he came to every performance with his wife and children."[57] It is a sign that Fluxus was doing something markedly democratic in its aesthetic commitment to the mundane, contributing to what Rancière would refer to as a "redistribution of the sensible."[58] In Fluxus, anyone can be a competent listener or performer: many pieces at the festival, Tomas Schmit notes, were so simple and required the use of such ordinary props that "any child and almost any adult could perform [them] without rehearsal."[59] This is another way of saying that the subversiveness of Fluxus lies not in its shock and juxtaposition, but rather in its radical insistence on an equality of intelligences.

The FLuXuS INTERNATIONALE FesTsPiELe NEUEsTER MUSiK has allowed us to see how Fluxus works generated what Higgins calls "aesthetically rewarding possibilities" from a series of unpromising, overlooked, or everyday materials. In so doing, they inverted ideas about what was worthy of heightened attention, in turn revealing a capacity for artistic action common to all. As Cage puts it in his dialogue between a teacher and an unenlightened composition student: "But, seriously, if this is what music is, I could write it as well as you."[60] Concurrent with this democratization of production was a distinctive approach to reception that shifted focus away from artworks imbued with meaning to the ways in which ordinary, mundane, and meaningless things might be experienced through the lens of art.

A good example is Paik's 1965 *Zen for Film*, a silent length of transparent 16mm film leader housed in a small plastic case with a characteristic Maciunas design.[61] What at first sight appears to be a prank or gimmick conceals an object lesson in spectatorship and agency.[62] *Zen for Film* is much more than a cheap gag using the mechanics of cinema. When projected onto a wall like any other film, it comes to life in a way that opens up a realm of aesthetic experience beyond the limitations of its compromised form. Cage was quick to notice this fact, remarking that specks of dust on the blank screen "become, as you look at the film, extremely

[56] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2002), 153–4.
[57] Banes, *Greenwich Village*, 63.
[58] See Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 7.
[59] Tomas Schmit in Williams and Noël, ed., *Mr. Fluxus*, 64–5.
[60] John Cage, "Experimental Music: Doctrine," in *Silence*, 13–17, 17.
[61] Nam June Paik, *Zen for Film* (1965), Museum of Modern Art (2628.2008).
[62] On this theme, see Sianne Ngai, "Theory of the Gimmick," *Critical Inquiry* 43 (2017): 466–505 and Natasha Lushetich, "Whatever Happened to the Judo Throw? Fluxus and the Digital Gimmick," *On Curating: Fluxus Perspectives* 51 (2021): 176–88.

comic. They take on character and they take on a kind of plot—whether this speck of dust will meet that speck. And if they do, what happens? I remember being greatly entertained and preferring it really to any film I've ever seen before or after."[63]

These comments provide the perfect illustration of Rancière's ideas on the politics of spectatorship, notably in relation to cinema and popular entertainment—domains central to the way in which Fluxus was conceived. In his statements and manifestos, Maciunas insisted that Fluxus was "derived from" a fusion of Spike Jones, Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, gags, games, vaudeville, Zen, Dada, Cage, and Duchamp.[64] He lists its characteristics as follows: "humorous, monostructure, insignificant, ~~not serious~~, unpretentious, unprofessional (anyone can do it)."[65] Whereas avant-garde artists such as Allan Kaprow, pioneer of the Happening, "insist that only they the professionals can perform or direct their own pieces," he writes, Fluxus must be uncommonly egalitarian—a "*rear-garde* since it moves in the opposite direction…tending to be closer & closer to natural event (till it will eventually disappear)."[66] Whereas art proper was pretentious, elitist, and complex, Fluxus was to be inclusive, simple, and accessible. *Rear-guard*, tellingly, is the very term Clement Greenberg uses to describe mass culture: "popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc., etc."[67] The masses, Maciunas implies, were not in need of deliverance from this empire of kitsch, but instead from New York's self-professed avant-garde that saw itself as the preserve of an enlightened minority—a liberation that might be accomplished by a revolution in awareness fuelled by abundant, amusing, trivial kitsch itself.

It is in this attachment to vaudeville and slapstick cinema—a recasting of earlier music hall routines onto the flat cinematic screen—that Fluxus shows itself to be something markedly democratic. For Rancière, Chaplin is a particularly important figure in what he calls the "aesthetic regime of art."[68] This new regime set about dismantling a system "where the dignity of the subject matter dictated the dignity of genres of representation," thereby reversing or cancelling "the opposition between high and low" drawn along aesthetic lines.[69] Chaplin is "an anti-acting actor" whose performances are "a perversion of the very logic of the agent": his films bring "a paradoxical virtue into the machine age…the virtue of doing nothing."[70] Fluxus,

[63] Joan Retallack, ed., *Musicage: Cage Muses on Words, Art, Music* (Hanover, NH: Weslayan University Press / University Press of New England, 1996), 135.
[64] See George Maciunas, "Comments on Relationship of Fluxus to So-called 'Avant-Garde' Festival" (c. 1964), in Williams and Noël, ed., *Mr. Fluxus*, 120–1, 121 and Larry Miller, "Transcript of the Videotaped Interview with George Maciunas, 24 March 1978," in *The Fluxus Reader*, ed. Ken Friedman, 183–98 (Chichester: Academy Editions 1998), 192.
[65] Maciunas, "Comments on Relationship of Fluxus," 121.
[66] Maciunas, "Comments on Relationship of Fluxus," 120–1.
[67] Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*, 3–21 (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1989), 9.
[68] Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, trans. Zakir Paul (London: Verso, 2013), 192.
[69] Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 28–9.
[70] Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 204.

similarly, is the doing of nothing in the guise of a slapstick gag. It is a kind of radical clowning in the aesthetic realm, rid of narrative and character, detached, irrational, and distilled to small vignettes in which audiences are left to conjure up meaning, just as Cage does in his account of dust particles in *Zen for Film*. The fragmentary, non-linear form of popular entertainment, Rancière writes, "allows what the ingenious assemblage of the drama forbids: that the spectator can embroider his own poem around these patterns."[71] Through this anti-dramatic privileging of the spectator, Fluxus shares its inner logic with circus performance, pantomime, and the vaudeville stage. This sphere of lowbrow amusement holds within itself the shadowy archetype of all art, if we follow Adorno: in their "intentionlessness," circus tableaux "confess to what authentic artworks conceal in themselves as their secret apriori."[72] From such "disdained forms," he argues, "much can be gleaned of art's secret."[73] This artistic enigma—"the defeat of gravity, the manifest absurdity of the circus," its purposeless expenditure of effort—is nothing less than the raw constituent of the aesthetic.[74]

What Cage's remarks on *Zen for Film* demonstrate is a rudimentary truth that Rancière seeks to accentuate: "the spectator also acts."[75] To dismiss *Zen for Film* as a cynical exercise in emptiness would miss the mark. Much like Cage's *4'33"*, it is instead a kind of intermedial window onto the mundane that reframes what is permissible, what its audience is capable of witnessing, doing, and saying. The opposition between viewing and acting is a false binary that, Rancière argues, has historically sustained political inequalities and institutionalized forms of dominance. To return to his 19th-century artisans, their leisure activities were "a demonstration of equality" that "disrupted the distribution of the sensible which would have it that those who work do not have time to let their steps and gazes roam at random."[76] Allowing individual minds to roam autonomously, in other words, constitutes a revolutionary gesture that has the potential to reconfigure social space. Emancipation, in this reading, is a "blurring of the boundary between those who act and those who look."[77] Fluxus intentionally blurs such boundaries, avowing that even something as neutral and vacant as a silent stretch of film leader (a kind of aesthetic degree zero) affords creative agency in reception. As a prototypical spectator, Cage weaves his own plot around the indeterminate patterns presented by chance. Like *Variations for Double-Bass* and *Piano Activities*, *Zen for Film* is an acknowledgement that its audience is emancipated to the extent that they already possess a capacity for aesthetic encounter enabling an active, ludic, and freely contemplative engagement with the world we are too often told is the lone province of art and the preserve of the few.

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[71] Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 83.
[72] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 80–1.
[73] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 287.
[74] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 186. Indeed, Adorno points out that "it is no coincidence that the name 'artist' is borne both by the circus performer and one who has most turned away from effort, who champions the audacious idea of art, to fulfill its pure concept" (280).
[75] Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 13.
[76] Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 19.
[77] Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 19.

One final example will help to clarify this line of argument. Following on the heels of the *Fluxus 1* anthology and the various *Fluxkit* attaché cases, *Flux Year Box 2* was the last of Maciunas's year box multiples, conceptualized in 1965 and produced during the late 1960s.[78] The wooden box measures roughly 20 x 20 x 8.5cm and has a hinged lid, clasped at the front, decorated with a circus-like medley of typefaces in a grid spelling out F L U X / Y E A R / B O X 2. At first glance it could be a small household toolkit or folkish compendium of parlour games, perhaps making reference to Duchamp's passion for chess or Joseph Cornell's cases of Surrealist kitsch. Much like these mid-century works and Duchamp's earlier *Boîte-en-Valise*, it has the feel of an intimate offering or gift waiting to be explored. Once opened, it reveals a series of neat internal partitions packed with an assortment of intermedial Fluxus ephemera: hypnotic, fast-cut loops of 8mm black and white film by Maciunas and Paul Sharits (a medium celebrated by Jonas Mekas at the time as a new form of American folk art),[79] along with a handheld film viewer, doctored playing cards, *Flux Postcards*, Shigeko Kubota's *Flux Medicine* (18 empty capsules of translucent plastic), event scores such as Robert Watts's *Mailbox Event* (a personal favourite: "open mailbox / close eyes / remove letter of choice / tear up letter / open eyes"), name cards in Maciunas's distinctive graphic style, Ken Friedman's *Flux Corsage* (a box of seeds), games and puzzles by George Brecht, a piece reading "please answer this question carefully" followed by two tick boxes reading "yes" and "no," *Ice Cream Piece* by Albert Fine (instructing us to buy an ice cream and either eat it, give it away, wait until it melts, or repeat), *Total Art Matchbox* by Ben Vautier (a small matchbox intended to destroy all the art ever made), and a rubber pear readymade by Claes Oldenburg.

[Figure 3 here]

Oldenburg had written a kind of mantra for this drastically expanded vision of aesthetics just as the Fluxus milieu was beginning to coalesce in downtown Manhattan:

> I am for an art that is political-erotical-mystical, that does something other than sit on its ass in a museum.
>
> I am for an art that grows up not knowing it is art at all, an art given the chance of having a starting point of zero.
>
> […]
>
> I am for an art that takes its form from the lines of life itself, that twists and extends and accumulates and spits and drips, and is heavy and coarse and blunt and sweet and stupid as life itself.
>
> […]

[78] See *Flux Year Box 2*, compiled by George Maciunas, Harvard University Art Museums (M26448.1-43); details of the box's contents can be found at https://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2011/fluxus_editions/category_works/fluxyearbox2 and http://fluxus.lib.uiowa.edu/content/flux-year-box-2.html.

[79] Jonas Mekas, "8mm. Cinema as Folk Art" (1963), in *Movie Journal: The Rise of the New American Cinema, 1959–1971*, ed. Gregory Smulewicz-Zucker, 89, 2nd edn. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

> I am for art that is put on and taken off, like pants, which develops holes, like socks, which is eaten, like a piece of pie, or abandoned with great contempt, like a piece of shit.[80]

Like other artists affiliated with Fluxus, Oldenburg extends Dada and Zen-derived traditions of elevating "life itself" via works that refuse their own significance—that originate and end with the unspectacular, are ephemeral and evanescent, "smoked, like a cigarette," hammered with, stitched, sewed, pasted, filed, sniffed, "lost or thrown away." The result is an aesthetics "of the washing machine…a government check…red and white gasoline pumps…refrigerators…plastic phonographs," but also of nature and entropy, "of rust and mold." The artist is rendered an anonymous figure "who vanishes, turning up in a white cap painting signs or hallways"—a Fluxus everyman, instigator of work no longer reliant on the institutions of art.[81]

Indeed, *Flux Year Box 2* moves us from the gallery and concert hall into the home and wider world, enriching and receding ever more into the everyday. Many objects involve a form of purposeless activity: tearing up your mail, walking around with a liquescent ice cream, sending a postcard with a message left blank for the postman to fill in. Their realization relies on participation—from opening the box and selecting an item to the presence of miniature puzzles, philosophical brain teasers, and small pieces of card asking you to "fold here," "cut here," "glue here," "unfold," or "pull apart," as well as James Riddle's *E.S.P. Fluxkit* instructing us to blindfold ourselves and learn how to distinguish six pieces of coloured paper by touch alone. It is a quiet treasure trove of possibility the only purpose of which is the pleasure to be derived from doing something so delightfully silly and unproductive (even *Total Art Matchbox* is amusing in its bathos—imagine trying to burn down The Louvre with a matchstick or set fire to Michelangelo's David). It speaks to a childlike part of the imagination that revels in the experience of undirected time, a liberation from means and ends, an emancipation from logic. In a word, it presents occasions for play. And through such determined futility comes enchantment, a perceptual rebirth suspending time from purpose itself. As Rancière puts it, the aesthetic is really "a new 'art of life,' an education of each and all" whose politics reside in a disruption of bodies in community annulling a longstanding hierarchy of ends that has "divided the world into two between those who could have no end other than the day-to-day reproduction of their existence and those who, being sheltered from this vital constraint, could conceive more ample ends, invent their means and risk undertaking them."[82]

[80] Claes Oldenburg, "I Am for an Art…," in *Theories and Documents*, ed. Stiles and Selz, 385–88, 385–6. This essay was originally published in the catalogue of the exhibition *Environments, Situations, Spaces* at the Martha Jackson Gallery, 25 May to 23 June 1961. An expanded version appears in Claes Oldenburg and Emmett Williams, eds. *Store Days* (New York: Something Else Press, 1967). See also Robert E. Haywood, *Allan Kaprow and Claes Oldenburg: Art, Happenings, and Cultural Politics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017). On scatological connections with Maciunas's work, see David Joselit, "The Readymade Metabolized: Fluxus in Life," *RES* 63–4/1 (2013): 190–200.
[81] Oldenburg, "I Am for an Art…," 386–7.
[82] Rancière, *The Lost Thread*, 77.

Structures for a Life to Come

Maciunas was no fan of the avant garde. "To call oneself avant-garde is pretentious (like calling oneself great master etc.)," he writes during the mid 1960s in response to Charlotte Moorman's annual *New York Avant-Garde Festival*.[83] The term, he felt, had "lost meaning" having been "tossed about & tagged to just about anyone writing for drums or putting noises on tape for past 20 years."[84] As we've seen, Maciunas preferred terms such as *concretist* or *rear-garde*, even though many Fluxus associates traversed different fields, activities, and labels, much to Maciunas's disapproval as self-styled Fluxus "chairman."[85] The manifestos he launched were never signed by fellow artists, their names merely included in intricate lists, taxonomies, and artistic genealogies evincing what George Lewis describes as a "kind of networked affinity consciousness."[86] Writing in 1964, Brecht summed up the issue: "individuals with something unnameable in common have simply naturally coalesced to publish and perform their work. Perhaps this common something is a feeling that the bounds of art are much wider than they have conventionally seemed, or that art and certain long-established bounds are no longer very useful."[87] It is in such comments that we can locate a valuable definition of avant-garde art, one that does justice to the political dimensions of Fluxus I have been tracing here. Again, Jacques Rancière's work will allow us to cut through the internal disputes and factional wrangles that characterize Fluxus, reclaiming a lost meaning that Maciunas recognized in the term.

Fluxus is often defined in relation to "Marxist values" and a "transposition of them onto the realm of art," producing something that unfolds as "an artistic critique of consumerism and capitalism."[88] Certain authors, however, have pointed out that Fluxus is perhaps closer to being a "*post-critical*" practice that "does not seek the illumination of some end or fact."[89] Although Fluxus seems to fit Peter Bürger's classic theory of the avant-garde as a form of radical self-critique—a turning against the institution of art in order "to reintegrate art into the praxis of life"—his notion that such art *resists* the aesthetic owing to its autonomy from social function warrants

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[83] Maciunas, "Comments on Relationship of Fluxus," 120. On Moorman's work during this era, see Sophie Landres, "Indecent and Uncanny: The Case against Charlotte Moorman," *Art Journal* 76/1 (2017): 48–69. More broadly, see Benjamin Piekut, *Experimentalism Otherwise: The New York Avant-Garde and Its Limits* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).
[84] Maciunas, "Comments on Relationship of Fluxus," 120.
[85] See Dumett, *Corporate Imaginations*.
[86] Lewis, "In Search of Benjamin Patterson," 980.
[87] George Brecht, "Something About Fluxus," *fLuxus cc fiVe ThReE* (June 1964), Walker Art Center (1989.158).
[88] Dorothée Brill, *Shock and the Senseless in Dada and Fluxus* (Hanover, NH: Dartmough College Press and University Press of New England, 2010), 117, 123.
[89] Roger Rothman, "Fluxus and the Art of Affirmation," in *Beyond Critique: Contemporary Art in Theory, Practice, and Instruction*, ed. Pamela Fraser and Roger Rothman, 25–33 (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 27; Owen F. Smith, "Playing with Difference: Fluxus as a World View," in *Fluxus Virus*, ed. Schüppenhauer, 116–20, 116. See also Owen F. Smith, *Fluxus: The History of an Attitude* (San Diego: San Diego State University Press, 1998). More broadly, see Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30/2 (2004): 225–48.

revision.[90] Through its foregrounding of "sensory encounter," as Hannah Higgins points out, Fluxus transforms "the avant-garde (as institutional critique, as iconoclasm) to become, in part, its opposite: aesthetic experience."[91] Its politics lie in this strange form of aesthetic encounter and its refusal to engage in the conventional salvos of artistic critique. In place of such didacticism, it offers a visionary extension of the aesthetic that lays bare the hierarchies and exclusions underwriting established conceptions of art. For Fluxus artist Ken Friedman, for instance, it represents "a laboratory of ideas and social practice" indicating "a hopeful, proactive engagement with the world" through an embrace of the "quiet reality of everyday life."[92]

Rancière's approach to critique reinforces this latter position, one that I have been adopting throughout this essay. The problem Rancière identifies with so-called critical or political art in the Marxist tradition is that it is predicated on the very distributions and inequalities it supposedly seeks to transcend. Artistic critique, in other words, relies on a fundamental distinction between knowing and not knowing, appearance and reality, action and passivity, capacity and incapacity. It invests in a hierarchical arrangement in which unwitting spectators must be released from their oppression by an enlightened art that reveals society's camouflaged ideological machinery. As Rancière puts it, such art aims to unmask and unsettle, in effect saying "here is the reality you do not know how to see."[93] But Fluxus does something categorically different. Rather than treating the aesthetic as an instrumental means to inspire political mobilization (a tactic that, Rancière maintains, is doomed in any case to failure and frustration), it says something more like "here is the reality you have been told is not *worth* seeing." Fluxus works refuse a position of superiority, just as they annul distinctions between artist and audience, highbrow and lowbrow, form and content, janitor and museum director. Maciunas insisted that Fluxus colleagues must strive "TO ESTABLISH ARTIST S NONPROFESSIONAL, NONPARASITIC, NONELITE STATUS IN SOCIETY" and "DEMONSTRATE SELFSUFFICIENCY OF THE AUDIENCE" by showing "THAT ANYTHING CAN SUBSTITUTE ART AND ANYONE CAN DO IT."[94] Artistic critique consistently demands the very opposite: a professional, elitist, often socially-subsidized art proclaiming again and again that audiences cannot possibly be self-sufficient enough to be free.

To borrow Rancière's words, Fluxus refuses the condescending "logic of the pedagogical relationship"—an inequality that "proposes to generate the short-circuit and clash that reveal the secret concealed by the exhibition of images."[95] As Roger Rothman suggests, it demands "a different set of critical tools" from those trained on

[90] Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 22.
[91] Hannah Higgins, *Fluxus Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 36, 99.
[92] Ken Friedman, "Freedom? Nothingness? Time? Fluxus and the Laboratory of Ideas," *Theory, Culture & Society* 29/7–8 (2012): 372–98, 375, 384.
[93] Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 29.
[94] George Maciunas, *Fluxmanifesto on Fluxamusement* (1965), Luigi Bonotto Collection (FX0870).
[95] Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 8, 29.

"the avant-garde imperative to *expose* and *dismantle*."[96] We have seen that Fluxus is concerned instead with play, suspension of purpose, and aesthetic experience as an end in itself. Rather than confronting the boundaries of deception, it confronts the boundaries of the aesthetic—revealing that such limits are much wider than they have conventionally appeared in art theory and have something fundamental to do with the distribution of bodies in community. Patterson's *Variations for Double-Bass*, Corner's *Piano Activities*, Paik's *Zen for Film*, and the cooperative *Flux Year Box 2* are all intermedial endeavours to redefine the aesthetic along radically democratic lines. They are political to the extent that they *refuse* the outwardly political and turn to embrace unstructured sensible encounter with the mundane and marginal.

One of the few critics to understand the significance of this at the time was Susan Sontag. "Against Interpretation" contains the kernel of the idea I have been elaborating here in its final entreaty to "*see* more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more."[97] Sontag was well attuned to these democratic currents in the downtown artworld, identifying what she describes as a "witty appreciation of the derelict, inane, *démodé* objects of modern civilization"—mundane detritus of the lowbrow called upon for "the purpose of reeducating the senses."[98] Much like her Surrealist photographer, Fluxus artists were adopting "an uncompromisingly egalitarian attitude toward subject matter" by revelling in "trash, eyesores, rejects, peeling surfaces, odd stuff, kitsch."[99] Although dismissed as "political naiveté" by Andreas Huyssen, it is precisely through this form of sensuous encounter with "the luminousness of the thing in itself" that something political emerges in Fluxus.[100] To see, hear, feel, and perceive otherwise is the beginning of a redistribution of the sensible. In this reconfigured space, there are no longer distinctions between artist and spectator, art and aesthetics, you and I. There is no meaning to be conveyed, no ideological illusion to shatter—nothing, ultimately, residing beneath what Sontag calls the "sensuous surface."[101] A toy whistle is a toy whistle; a blank film is a blank film; a rotten tomato is a rotten tomato, just as an ice cream is an ice cream. Concretism is an aesthetics not of depth and semblance, but of the phenomenological surface, of transparency and things hiding in plain sight.

Read in this way, Fluxus is testament, in Duchamp's words, to the fact that "the creative act is not performed by the artist alone" but distributed among the many.[102] In Fluxus, art does not have an ontology as such—it is not a thing, but a

[96] Roger Rothman, "Against Critique: Fluxus and the Hacker Aesthetic," *Modernism/modernity* 22/4 (2015): 787–810, 804–5.
[97] Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation," in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, 3–14 (London: Penguin Books, 2009), 14.
[98] Susan Sontag, "Happenings: An Art of Radical Juxtaposition," in *Against Interpretation*, 263–74, 271.
[99] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin Books, 1979), 78.
[100] Sontag, "Against Interpretation," 13; Andreas Huyssen, "Back to the Future: Fluxus in Context," in *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*, 191–208 (New York: Routledge, 1995), 196.
[101] Sontag, "Against Interpretation," 13.
[102] Marcel Duchamp, "The Creative Act," in *The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, ed. Sanouillet, Michel and Elmer Peterson, 138–40 (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975), 140. See also Jacquelynn Baas, *Marcel Duchamp and the Art of Life* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019).

capacity, an opportunity for sensory play. As Claire Bishop points out, "rather than considering the *work of art* to be autonomous," Rancière stresses "the autonomy of our *experience* in relation to art."[103] Whether the sound of a piano being mutilated or dust particles adrift on an imageless film, Fluxus illuminates the frontiers of an artistic heterogeneity in which perceptual agency is given free reign. It conveys routine experience into the aesthetic and the aesthetic back into the quotidian, awaiting what Rancière calls "a community of people in full possession of a sensible equality"—an "aesthetic democracy" founded upon a radical congruence of being.[104]

It is here that politics and aesthetics ultimately join together in Fluxus. The meaning of the avant-garde, Rancière suggests, should be sought not in the strategic figure of a military detachment or organized political party but rather in an "aesthetic anticipation of the future."[105] Fluxus epitomizes this particular form of utopianism. The idea of an art that in its theory and practice anticipates a more egalitarian future is surely what Maciunas felt was being lost from the term *avant garde*. Fluxus affiliates were no strangers to utopian thought. Maciunas, indeed, was well known for his pioneering role in the creation of artistic cooperatives in New York and, at one point, madcap schemes not only to establish an autonomous Fluxus state, but also to purchase an entire Caribbean island upon which he envisaged founding a Fluxus colony.[106] In its invitation to experience life anew through increased sensitivity to the mundane and its commitment to the circulation of abundant, inexpensive art objects opening aesthetic contemplation to all, Fluxus was preoccupied with what Rancière portrays as the "invention of sensible forms and material structures for a life to come."[107] It deliberately "resists thought"—and yet in so doing offers up a powerful utopian vision delineating "new configurations of what can be seen, what can be said and what can be thought and, consequently, a new landscape of the possible."[108]

If this sounds too far removed from the specificities of 1960s neo dada, then it is worth remembering that Higgins had something very similar to say about Fluxus at the time. Intermedia, he argues, has a political resonance given that a historical separation of media "seems characteristic of the kind of social thought—categorizing and dividing society into nobility with its various subdivisions, untitled gentry, artisans, serfs and landless workers—which we call the feudal conception of the Great Chain of Being."[109] This notion that aesthetics plays a decisive role in classifying and distributing society across layers defined by function, value, freedom, and place in the natural order is a striking anticipation of Rancière's hypothesis. What Higgins is implying is that Fluxus transcends this political order through its fluid, inclusive, and non-discriminating approach, attesting to the truth that a landless worker has the same propensity for wonder as a gentleman. Intermedia, he writes, heralds "a classless

[103] Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012), 27.
[104] Rancière, *The Lost Thread*, 86, 88.
[105] Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 24.
[106] See Williams and Noël, ed., *Mr. Fluxus*, 215–42.
[107] Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 24.
[108] Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 131, 103.
[109] Higgins, "Synesthesia and Intersenses."

society, to which separation into rigid categories is absolutely irrelevant."[110] In place of social determinism, Fluxus promises a utopian mutability in which the gallery and concert hall are rendered equivalent with the unremarkable granularity of everyday life, and the artist surrenders their authority over the aesthetic to the multitude. Fluxus accelerates this unsettling redistribution of the sensible, a re-partitioning of sensory experience that foreshadows a previously inconceivable body politic.

Within this radically democratic space, audiences are self-sufficient, everyone has equal access to the aesthetic, and anyone is an artist. The political significance of such distributions, Rancière asserts, is that they reveal "who can have a share in what is common to the community based on what they do," one's occupation determining status, place, and identity according to a division of labour.[111] In a stratified society, there are artists and workers, performers and spectators, poets and slaves—but in a Fluxus utopia, these divisions are suspended and communities are no longer bound by predetermined roles. Anyone can perform *Piano Activities* and receive its effects aesthetically; the simplicity of *Zen for Film* reveals not only that anyone could have made it, but also that spectators have the capacity to let their minds and gazes wander freely and derive enjoyment from autonomous play; *Flux Year Box 2* relies on us to complete its work by engaging in games of aimless, all-embracing triviality.

Fluxus thus offers a remedy to the state of perpetual alienation that Renato Poggioli diagnosed as the condition of all avant-garde art. Such alienation—social, psychological, economic, historical, aesthetic, and stylistic—can only come to an end, he writes, "when the avant-garde artist disappears from the historical and cultural horizon," an event that cannot occur "except as a direct consequence…of a radical metamorphosis in our political and social system."[112] It is this metamorphosis that Fluxus works envisage. Such utopianism explains the peculiar animosity Maciunas expressed toward the institutionalized avant-garde of his day. Fluxus was instead to participate in its own demise by dissolving the borderlines of art through recourse to the aesthetic. I propose calling this practice—in which Fluxus sublimates the previously inadmissible stuff of everyday life—the democratic mundane.

[110] Higgins, "Synesthesia and Intersenses."
[111] Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 8.
[112] Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968), 108–9. Rancière's work, as I've hoped to show, allows us to think differently about Poggioli's claim that "the hypothesis (really only an analogy or a symbol) that aesthetic radicalism and social radicalism, revolutionaries in art and revolutionaries in politics, are allied, which empirically seems valid, is theoretically and historically erroneous" (95).