Fluxus as Fragmentation and Continuity

Fluxus can be defined, loosely, as an on-going activity and this will be discussed in greater detail as we move forward. In this talk I will explain both the history of Fluxus and the problems associated with it as well as answer two vitally important questions: 1) How is it music? and 2) Why is it important or relevant? These, I feel, are the two most common objections Fluxus must overcome as well as two of the most simple to answer once an understanding of Fluxus is attained.

It is said that no part of history arrived from a vacuum and Fluxus is no different. Many factors such as Dada, Futurism, Chance and Indeterminism, and the increasing sophistication of society once fueled the initial stages of Fluxus. Yet, what is Fluxus? We need to know what it is in order to accurately define its beginning. This is, however, the first fundamental flaw of history and one of the many conventions Fluxus rejects. This is because Fluxus was never a movement, which of course makes it very difficult to define. From the first festival even through today, Fluxus has never had a true leader and has never attempted to introduce certain tendencies into the ongoing community of the arts.¹

The “chairman” of Fluxus, however, was George Maciunas, one of a number of people who took a course in experimental composition taught by John Cage at the New School for Social Research in New York. This class, given from 1957-1959 was the start of Fluxus in America. Yet, people were already doing similar activities in Europe, and even one person from Korea would be extremely important later on, as Maciunas found out when he left New York to escape debtors after compiling material for a magazine. This was published, in Germany, as *Fluxus*, a word for change, and the name stuck. Prior
to this publication, what George Brecht, Dick Higgins, Alison Knowles, and LaMonte Young were doing had no name.

By naming their activities Fluxus a certain concretization was avoided because no person doing Fluxus would call themselves exclusively that. This is a key aspect for its survival as it was, and is, comprised of a loose collaboration of artists, musicians, poets, and writers that sometimes do similar things in a certain vein and enjoy that while they do it. A prime example of this is Nam June Paik, one of the seminal figures in Fluxus from the first festivals onward. He was not only a Fluxus artist but a great innovator for video installations and the use of televisions in performances. LaMonte Young, a minimalist before the likes of Steve Reich and Philip Glass, has a Fluxus career of less than a decade and compositions from only a 3 year span, 1960 to 1962.

Of course, we still don’t know what Fluxus is. In a manner of speaking, Fluxus is an experimental art form where sounds of everyday objects, events, and activities are used to eliminate the elitism of the Western art culture. Hearing things you generally only see, or completely take for granted, feeling things you never take the time to appreciate, and using commonly known objects as things other than themselves to heighten awareness are the main ideals behind Fluxus, why, we shall see later.

Fluxus began with two forms of expression, the Event and the Fluxkit. Events could be anything, performed by any number of players, at anytime, place, or even nothing at all. The key to these Events is that they were always auditory even through the visual medium, that is, no matter what could be seen, the sound was, at the very least, tantamount. Famous examples of these are *Dripping Music* by George Brecht, where Dick Higgins climbed a ladder and poured water from one container into another,
LaMonte Young’s *Composition 1960 #10*, where one is to “Draw a straight line and follow it,” any of Dick Higgins’s influential *Danger Music* series, including *Danger Music Number Twenty-Nine*, with the instructions “Get a job for its own sake,” or Alison Knowles’s *Proposition*, which states only to “Make a salad.”

The Fluxkit involved a much more hands-on orientation for the audience where each audience member would be able to approach a, generally, small box that could be opened. Inside these boxes were many different things ranging in sizes, shapes, and textures. These things were picked specifically for people to see and really stress the experiential nature of Fluxus. For Fluxus desires to be seen, heard, felt, and experienced in whatever way it is presented. This is its means of transmission and also its survival.

George Maciunas, the self appointed chairman of Fluxus, died in 1978 and with his death brought about the alleged demise of Fluxus. This supposed end to the Events, exhibitions, and festivals all hinged on the fact that Maciunas was the leader of a cemented movement, and without him the individual artists would disperse on their own. However, Fluxus resisted this by not being a rigid movement with exact and pinpoint ideals. The death of Maciunas was not the loss of a leader; it was the loss of a friend and colleague to many artists of the time. As Dick Higgins states in his “Child’s History of Fluxus,” Fluxus cannot die “[b]ecause fluxus has a life of its own, apart from the old people in it. It is simple things, taking things for themselves and not just as part of bigger things. It is something that many of us must do.”

Despite these words, Fluxus has been relegated to a static place in history. Fluxus museums are available for viewing and the *Fluxus Codex* attempts to offer up, in a totalizing fashion, every Fluxus performance that ever happened. These are, while being
good and possibly necessary, very problematic for the present continuation of Fluxus. Anything that resides in a museum is instantly regarded as over and merely a part of the past. Any Fluxus performances, therefore, can be seen in the same light as Renaissance ensembles. Furthermore, the *Fluxus Codex* offers up all things Fluxus, which then creates the problems of exclusion and rigidity. By exclusion I mean keeping new compositions or events from being received as a continuation of Fluxus; and any sense of cemented rigidity in Fluxus would serve only to undercut its historically undermining abilities and its resilience to cooption.

In addition, the sum of these factors is the question, “how do I know what is Fluxus and what is not?” This question is unavoidable and seemingly unanswerable at the same time. Attempting to say exactly what Fluxus is would surely diminish it and arguments could then be made that it was, in fact, a rigid artistic movement, but not placing any requirements leads to saying how can anything be Fluxus? Dick Higgins, once again, steps forward here when he said, regarding when Fluxus was growing in following and strength, “[a]nd then Fluxus began to get copied… When teacups were replaced by millions of teacups they weren’t simple any more, so they stopped being fluxus… they stopped being part of life.”

The fact that the teacups would stop being life is why Fluxus is important. Fluxus is, ultimately, a way in which we can interact with the world. By resisting conceptualizations, museums, elitism, and through its use of the everyday, Fluxus can become to us a model for unearthing the meaning in our world. Moreover, the ontological basis of Fluxus, Fluxkits and Events, allows it to be a conduit for free creativity and discourse while also having multiple perspectives of itself and how it relates to the world.
Hannah Higgins, the daughter of Dick Higgins and Alison Knowles, remarks that, “As such, it offers a model for a multicultural, multilingual society that is characterized by both difference and group feeling, and be a sense of connection to the physical world.”

She also notes the close connection between Fluxus and education, where educators make experiences and knowledge available to their students so they may have a stake in the world as it is progressing. Fluxus, then, also allows us to create meaningful experiences for ourselves in our own lives, in our own ways. As she says, connecting to the experiential basis of Fluxus, “At their best, after all, experiences change our perspectives.”

It is philosophically important for something to have the ability to change our perspective as well. Heidegger, in his essay “The Question Concerning Technology” explains how modern technology has taken over and turned everything into a resource filled with a standing reserve, into which we can tap for a use of some sort. This instrumentalization was taken up later by Adorno and Horkheimer to show how this mode of thinking had pervaded even our everyday interactions and relationships with each other. Coupled with the rise of advertising and consumerism, this worldview added to the lack of meaning available in our lives. To fix this lack of meaning and all-pervading conception of others, technology, and relationships, Fluxus is a viable solution. Both Heidegger and Adorno state that art is the way out as it is, from Immanuel Kant, purposive in its purposelessness and thus resists commodification and instrumental use.

Having answered the bigger question, we are left with only “how is it music?” LaMonte Young’s pieces and writings are the simplest and most effective way in which to answer this question. His Composition 1960 #5 is one of the most controversial pieces
of music. It consists of a simple instruction, to release a butterfly and the performance is to end when the butterfly leaves the auditorium or area of performance. Whenever LaMonte would intend to perform the piece event organizers would question it and him. He was continuously asked how the butterfly would make sounds to which he would reply, “that I felt certain the butterfly made sounds… and that unless one was going to dictate how loud or soft the sounds had to be before they could be allowed into the realms of music that the butterfly piece was music.”vi But it shouldn’t it be able to be heard clearly by the audience? To this he states, “this was the usual attitude of human beings that everything in the world should exist for them and that I disagreed… it is enough that they exist for themselves.”vii His belief is that attempting to enslave sounds and force them to obey our will causes them to be uses and conceals any thing we could learn from them.

Having shown how Fluxus is both highly musical and extremely important to our lives and, to an extent, our happiness in those lives, I am left only to show how Fluxus has survived. Simply put, the internet has allowed Fluxus to once again become the force of a loose collaboration of somewhat like-minded artists. The Fluxlist is extremely active in both creative activities and disseminating information regarding Fluxus while hundreds of artists around the world continue performances of both new Fluxus and old Fluxus. This last distinction is key, as Dick Higgins said, “The Fluxus of 1992 is not the Fluxus of 1962… the real Fluxus moves out from its old center into many directions, and the paths are not easy to recognize without lining up new pieces, middle pieces, and old pieces together.”viii This quotation, from one of the original members, captures the essence of Fluxus itself and how it is able to resist reification and commodification while
being able to offer us a window to meaning, change. Concluding, I have only one more quotation from LaMonte Young in an attempt to sum up Fluxus as succinctly and memorably as possible. “Once I tried lots of mustard on a raw turnip. I liked it better than any Beethoven I have ever heard.”ix

Thank you.

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iii “A Child’s History of Fluxus” pg. 89.
iv Hannah Higgins, Fluxus Experience pg. 207.
v Fluxus Experience pg. 184.
vii “Lecture 1960,” pg. 74
viii www.fluxus.org accessed 4/21/06.
ix “Lecture 1960” pg. 81.