Intermedial Perception or Fluxing Across the Sensory

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Abstract: This article argues for the cross-modal nature of intermedial perception particularly as it applies to Fluxus Events. Perception is both cultural and physiological. As such it has the ability to physically and conceptually link human beings to their environments. The admittedly brief survey of Events described here moves 'across the sensory' from sound to text to image, smell and proprioception. As an international phenomenon, Fluxus and its experiential dimension have implications for what Walter Ong calls the global sensorium.

In a historic essay published in 1965 in the Something Else Newsletter, Fluxus artist, head of the Something Else Press (and my father), Dick Higgins, revived a term first used by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1812. Higgins used the term, intermedia, to describe artwork that made use of structural continuities between the arts: poetry that was both read and seen as form (visual poetry), poetry that was both read and heard as sound (sound poetry), theatre with musical and painterly elements (happenings), and all other arts in between. Higgins wrote 'I would like to suggest that the use of intermedia is more or less universal throughout the fine arts, since continuity rather than categorization is the hallmark of our new mentality'. Thirty years later, these intermedia relationships assumed graphic form in the schematic 'Intermedia Diagram' of 1995 (Figure 1).
The diagram shows, for example, the interaction of Sound Poetries, which emphasise the sound component of language and poetic association, and Concrete Poetry, which evolve around a homology of visual form and verbal content such that poetry is structured visually in a convergence of the communicative motive of graphic design and verbal content. It remains poetry because it uses letters, words and their mechanics to build this bridge. Concrete and Sound Poetries overlap in the diagram, as they do in practice, with visual-sound poetry (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Jackson Mac Low, A Notated Vocabulary for Eve Rosenthal (1978). Reproduced courtesy of the artist.

For example, Jackson Mac Low’s A Notated Vocabulary for Eve Rosenthal (1978) consists of text and music fragments, a kind of song collage, seemingly tossed across a page. Mac Low’s poem demonstrates the extent to which the literal meaning of each word can be augmented (or even replaced) by the experiential nature of musical and spoken sound. Here, the associative or testimonial nature of much modern poetry is replaced by the physical presence of sound (often in repetition) and a graphic mode of presentation.

The performer’s attentiveness to the spontaneous relationships between adjacent parts becomes a totally absorptive process, as the borders of the page seem to disappear with the choice of manifold and ever-changing directional and sound options. This opening-up of the space of the written page in all directions prompts words and word fragments to hang in the air (for the audience), just as they seem to do on paper (for the performer). One thinks of a verbal/musical rendition of leaves caught in the wind. The listener, who may be either the performer listening to him/herself or the audience member, moves between the musical component and the sonic and literal contents of the word fragments.

Sounds and text fragments exist as such, not as mere vehicles of literal meaning. Such poems, in other words, inhabit the intermedium between
graphic art, poetry and music, or between viewing (the total pattern), literary experience (reading) and sound (hearkening). Put another way, this poem involves the places where visual, literary and musical structures overlap. Significantly, the term intermedia (as Higgins originally intended it) refers to structural homologies, and not additive mixtures, which would be multimedia in the sense of illustrated stories or opera, where the various media types function independently of each other. Rather, in this poetic intermedium, the traditional reading of text and music from left to right is subject to the alternative visual logic of the image. Like leaves, fragments of text are strewn across the performative space of the page that has been stripped of the rigorous sequencing of lines from left to right and from top to bottom. Working against restrictive formal categories in the arts, the intermedia approach offers an alternative to specialisation and professional standards of the so-called fine arts. For instance, grammar, meter and word choice no longer necessarily establish the qualitative features of poetry.

In its implied resistance to specialised skill sets, the intermedia concept more generally partakes of the anti-establishment orientation of much elite and popular culture during the 1960s. Significantly, the argument originally targeted art historical practices. In the same essay Higgins writes:

The concept of the separation of media arose in the Renaissance. The idea that a painting could be made of paint on canvas or that a sculpture should not be painted seems characteristic of the kind of social thought, categorizing and dividing society ... which we call the feudal conception of the Great Chain of Being. ... The scene is not just characteristic of the painting world as an institution, however. It is absolutely natural to (and inevitable in) the concept of the pure medium.3

For Higgins, intermedia work is a historic necessity, functioning in his own time as a foil for the specialisation of the arts and countering the overdetermination of painting as the dominant art of his era. During this time, the late 1950s, abstract modes of painting routinely assumed a near-hegemonic dominance among the arts.

Higgins maintains that the hierarchy of specialised arts is the product of specific historical circumstances that categorised and defined human experience in the modern era. The historiography of art, literature and music reflects this development as it mirrors the processes of disciplinary specialisation and industrial mechanisation. The move toward intermedial thinking signals a widespread historical process over the last 40 years. This phenomenon is evidenced by the interdisciplinary changes in the arts, mass media, academic disciplines, and in the shift toward a post-industrial economy. Examples of intermedia thinking that
predate Higgins’s recovery and expansion of the term include a 1958 essay called ‘The Legacy of Jackson Pollock’ by Allan Kaprow, author of the first ‘Happening’ and a friend of Higgins:

I am convinced that to grasp Pollock’s impact properly, we must be acrobats, constantly shuttling between an identification with the hands and body that flung paint and stood in the canvas and submission to the objective markings, allowing them to entangle and assault us.2

As these words suggest, Happenings (like other painterly-performance forms emerging simultaneously in France, Germany and Japan) extend and critique the heroic gesture of action painting through the intermedium of performance, where ‘we must be acrobats’.

This presents us with a two-fold account of the resurgence of performance art (in this case the Happening) during the late 1950s and early 1960s. If performance art is viewed as a continuation of painterly action, modernism – that is, in the intermedium between painting and theatre. Examined outside the arena of modern painting, performance art routinely assumes the position of anti-art, often also termed ‘neo-avant-garde’. Such approaches remove Happenings from the intermedia category and associate them instead with a kind of chaos theatre.
That said, the staunch physicality, or acrobatic nature, of many Happenings and much European Action Music (and their legacies) remain quite different from the minimally formatted and modestly scaled Fluxus Event, with which Higgins is associated® (Figure 3).

Whereas Kaprow, an erstwhile painter and collagist, invented the Happening, George Brecht, a chemist, conceived of the distilled Event format. Brecht, Kaprow and Higgins all attended a course on musical composition offered by John Cage in 1958-9 at the New School for Social Research in New York. Common backgrounds notwithstanding, while the experiential intensity of the Happening no doubt has some ontological affinity with music, it is primarily structured between painting and theatre, as demonstrated in the above statement. In contrast, Brecht's extremely distilled, textual scores from 1959-62 recall poetry, musical notation, and the everyday situations they propose – all simultaneously (see Figure 2).

The Fluxus Event, like intermedia art generally, 'suggests a location between the general idea of art media and those of life media', 6 as Higgins put it, referring to the fact that two domains overlap, but remain distinct areas. The centrality of everyday actions in many Events routinely leads to the common misperception that Fluxus Events seek to erase the art/life divide. However, the exploration of everyday activities as performance Events requires that they remain located within the domains of graphic art, music or poetry, for their position in between these media involves a presence within the camp of arts and culture. Even as the boundaries of art extend beyond previously perceived aesthetic or institutional boundaries, the relationship to materials and ideas associated with the arts remains. Or, once an activity has moved from life into art as an Event, it cannot return, unchanged, to life.

The hovering bubbles of the Intermedia Diagram (whose sizes seem indeterminate) imaginarily expand, contract, pass over and through each other in a visualisation of the fluidity characteristic to intermedia arts (Figure 1). This variability of boundaries between media in the intermedia chart necessitates an understanding of the senses, the physiological basis of all experience, as cross-modal in nature and productive of aesthetic experience. Put differently, intermedia studies draw attention to the overlapping aesthetics and their relations to the senses as implied by the Event format. Such an examination also calls for an expanded concept of aesthetics beyond its routine association with the visual arts.

Far from being limited to the traditional realms of painting and sculpture, the categorising behaviour of the modern era established the hierarchy of the senses in the modern period, at least in the
cultural mainstream. Perhaps for this reason, hierarchies both in the fine arts and relating to the sensory system run roughly parallel to each other: from the visual as painting and as the sensory basis for the literary arts (as read), through sound as music to the baser art forms of movement (dance), taste (gourmet cooking) and scent (perfumery). Intermedia work, it could be said, occurs between media categories and perceptual categories. Understanding the power of intermedia work in general, and the Event in particular, calls for a cross-modal aesthetics of all senses as based in the interactions of hearing, touch, smell, taste and sight. The consideration of intermedial (and therefore intersensory) art therefore requires a simultaneously physiological and cultural framework for each sense as a cross-modal perceptual system.

Each sense relies on specific types of information. For instance, what is learned or can be learned by one sense, such as listening, differs both biologically and culturally from what is learned by seeing, smelling, touching or tasting. Here, the basic orientation system involves mechanoreceptors that act to equilibrate the body by obtaining information about gravity. Similarly, the act of looking provides the visual system with data about distance, action etc, which, in turn, support the functioning of these receptors. Receptors operate exclusively according to their particular task of equilibration, just as tactile information produced by the haptic (touch) system, or vibratory events recorded by the auditory system remain specific to these respective senses. The combined effect of interacting sense organs and the culture of their hosts produces the complex process we call perception.

This point is worth repeating. Sensory systems, the physical channels for every piece of information we have about the world, do not naturally function independent of each other physiologically or culturally. For example, as a subject hears a sound, the head turns toward it so as to see its source and to position itself frontally toward the origin of the sound. Here, eyes and body contribute to the subject’s ability to learn from what is, strictly speaking, a sound. Classical music, delivered in a live performance, requires a physically restrained audience in rows of chairs. The fact that people must be sitting and facing forward suggests a sense of physical control over the audience. To ‘get it right’ requires this posture as opposed to others. Western classical music, like the specialised art forms that have come to constitute high art in general, requires the isolation of one particular sense. In practice, this phenomenon has turned into a cultural mandate. Sitting backwards in a chair or dancing in a symphony hall is simply not done.

Sensory theorist J.J. Gibson suggests that, as one sense affects the function of another, it forms an ‘overlapping field’, put into play by
the observer in a kind of ‘feedback’, or active inquiry. Applied to intermedia work, this phenomenon highlights the observation and coordination of several perceptual systems. In what follows, I consider a series of Fluxus Events with particular intermedial qualities. I will then move toward a clarification of the term that accounts for the difference between intermedia in Higgins’ sense and the way the term has come to be used by others. Due to the predominance of intermedial logic in Events, this short discussion can neither survey all examples, nor can it explore all cross-modalities in depth. Instead, brief descriptions of Fluxus intermedia that link hearing to touch, touch to vision, vision to smell and smell to taste, illustrate the interdependence of the senses and the intermedial art forms associated with them.

Intermedia structures and Fluxus Events

A photograph depicting Philip Corner’s 1962 Piano Activities initially appears merely to record the physical destruction of a piano (Figure 4).

As such, the work might be understood as an indictment of the restrictions of normative piano performance. Such an approach recalls the reactive notion of the avant-garde, in which the destruction of fine art translates into the emergence of anti-art. However, looked upon as an intermedial Event that actively engages the materials of the piano, Corner’s work activates a range of perceptual systems that only incidentally (and with clear and affirmative intent) results in the destruction of the piano.

Contrast this intermedial Event with a classical piano performance, in which the act of touching keys creates a series of sounds considered ‘correct’ from a musical standpoint. From a perceptual perspective, the pianist’s performance at the instrument suggests that the sense of touch remains in the service of the ear. Touch is subservient. Corner’s piece,
on the other hand, empowers the performer by assigning specific roles such as rubbing, cutting, etc. In turn, feedback mechanisms (of the perceptual systems of touch to sound and back again) produce a simultaneously sonic and tactile experience as art, rather than a competent reproduction of a classical score. As a result, the work can be described as intermedial and cross-sensory — at least at the level of the performer's experience.

By contrast, the audience perceives the work at the visual-auditory level; 'What is that sound? Is it a brick rubbed over the strings — or a saw bowed across the back of the piano?' One need not close one's eyes to isolate sounds from the visual distractions of the traditional symphony hall. Even for the non-participating audience member, the result is a form of intermedial hearkening, or inquisitive listening — a perceptual form that Martin Heidegger describes as particularly linked to perceptual awakening. He writes 'Hearkening too has the kind of Being of the hearing which understands. What we first hear is never noises or complexes of sounds, but the creaking wagon, the motorcycle. We hear the column on the march, the woodpecker tapping, the fire cracking."

This attentive form of listening closely relates to curiosity, the inability of locating the exact source and nature of a sound. For our purposes, such an attentive, watching-listening mode of perception matters for each new sound or action implies its corollary sense at the other side of the intermedium. 'I see a nail, which sound is that?' Or the reverse: 'I hear a new, tinkling sound, what is its source?' Heidegger continues, 'Curiosity ... does not seek the leisure of tarrying observantly, but rather seeks restlessness and the excitement of continual novelty and changing encounters'. In concert, the piano is disembowelled by a range of interesting tools, provocative both for the sounds that they create and for the ways in which they alter the instrument.

Arguably, this curiosity functions differently for the performer than for the audience. Instead of 'I see a saw, which sound is that?' Or the reverse: 'I hear a new, rhythmic sound, what is its source?' The performer wonders, 'What sound will this saw make here or there?' Or, 'What is the other performer doing that is creating that sound in relation to mine?' These questions mark the unique ability of the haptic mode (touch) to 'explore and alter' what it comes into contact with. In other words, Corner's Piano Activities demonstrates what happens when the normally neglected haptic (or tactile) mode of knowing is brought into an equal feedback loop with the auditory and the visual mode, as opposed to a position of subservience to them. The unique aspects of each sense (of listening to experience, of vision to scan and of touch to alter) converge in ways that remain impossible in traditional musical performance.
As an activity that occurs within the domain of high art, Corner's piece suggests the constancy of touch as it always, actually, relates to musical performance. The inclusion of touch is significant because Western culture has largely ignored the haptic perceptual system, where it is normally associated with its utilitarian dimension. 'We are not accustomed to thinking of the hand as a sense organ since ... we grasp, push, pull, lift, carry, insert, or assemble for practical purposes.'

A deceptively simple piece like Piano Activities, then, involves listening, touching and seeing in various mutually reinforcing, non-hierarchical ways. The work's intermediality positions it somewhere between the established disciplines of music, sculpture and theatre (on the diagram this would be object music or action music), at the same time as it is cross-modal between different senses depending on the position of the individual in the audience or on stage.

At the sensory level, sound is uniquely proximate in our environment. This physiological aspect of sound may explain its association, in the West at least, with the affective power of music.

In other words, Piano Activities communicates sound information that, in turn, renders the visual experience of the work as physically present. Instead of being merely seen, the work is, literally, felt. Not surprisingly, there are implications for Mac Low's Concrete/Sound Poetry, which extrapolates traditional poetic devices such as assonance, dissonance and meter, and uses them as a means of physiological connection between audience members and the performer in a manner normally associated with music (Figure 2). In addition, abandoning the traditional left-to-right scansion of language and musical notation in favour of a multi-directional reading of an all-over spray of fragments supports the auditory effect since the conventional flow of words and notes is disrupted. My own experience at readings of such works confirms this observation. The sounds are as much felt as they are heard, while the audience imagines the reader's eye meandering through a forest of fragmented lines.

On the Intermedia Diagram, Mac Low's poem intermediates between Sound and Concrete Poetry and Fluxus Performance. Similarly, Corner's piano work intermediates between Action Music (the performer), Object Music (the transformed piano), Graphic Music Notation (in the form of
a scripted Event score) and Fluxus Performance. In a way characteristic
to Fluxus Events, these works involve structural homologies between
established disciplines as well as cross-modal sensory experiences
necessitated by these overlapping forms.

Fluxus artist Ben Patterson’s *Lick Piece* (1963) also involves virtually
every sense organ for the performers and, at least at the imaginative
level, for the audience as well. In this work, a woman’s body is covered
in whipped cream and then licked clean. When the performers are
licking the whipped cream off of the woman, the taste-smell system is at
work. The tongue explores both the constitution of the medium
(flavours), and its composition (textures). In this case, the flavours and
temperatures of the woman’s body additionally alter the cream. The
ultra-sensitivity of the tongue as the most receptive organ in the haptic
(touch) system makes this a tactile work as well. Here, the tongue’s
caressing of the woman’s body evokes a constant exchange between
tastes of sweet, salt and sour, complemented by changing sensations of
solidity and viscosity. The model, one imagines, would have a different
experience.

The varying sensitivities to touch and temperature spread slowly but
assuredly over her body in what could be an erotic or at least a highly
sensitive tactile encounter for her entire haptic system. However, the
work also references cultural content such as the motif of the academic
nude or the stripper, or by recurring to art historical parlance in phrases
such as ‘the licked surface of academic painting’ used to describe the
transparent surface necessary to illusion. *Lick Piece*, it could be said,
belongs to an intermedium between academic painting, pornographic
theatre and dining.

At the other extreme from Patterson’s public taste-smell-touch work, we
find Takako Saito’s intimate chess games. These self-contained and
pristine versions of sense material (sound or scent) stake their claims to
cross-modal sensory exchange on the stylised battlefield of chess. *Smell
Chess* (1965), for example, deals with chess as a strategic game of skill
that tests the opponent’s ability to use the formulaic or predesignated
moves of pieces against each other. Despite this reputation, artists have
long enjoyed the aesthetic combinations and temporal dimensions of the
game. Duchamp famously remarked that ‘All chess players are artists’.
Relying on the physiology of smell, Saito’s practice of assigning a scent
to each piece confounds the common perception of the game as a
strictly strategic endeavour. Smell is unique as a sense because its effect
is, literally, direct and within the brain.

The olfactory bulb, which contains the neurological organs needed for
smell, resides within the limbic region of the brain. This area is also
associated with personal memory. In Saito’s work the improvised
networks of associative memory and olfaction are placed in juxtaposition to the comparatively concrete skills of strategy and analysis in traditional chess. One imagines this: I grasp a bottle. ‘Hmm ... This smell is familiar. Garlic! That Italian place on Thompson Street with my old friend Hermann. What a scent for a knight! Now where’s the queen?’

From a cultural perspective, the memory we value is memorising memory. This has been beset by the more personally pungent memories of life lived – remembering. This is possible because the visible/spatial grid of pure chess has been married to other, internal coordinates of personal and cultural memory. The fixed grid of social strata (in the form of assigned movements across regular squares) has been altered by a membrane of permeability. Similarly, the legendary design for a room-scaled version of Smell Chess by Fluxus artists Larry Miller and George Maciunas employed the traditionally neglected overlap between kinaesthetics and smell. Smells have class and cultural overtones that resonate with location: the artists proposed hashish, fish, and fart smells that might suggest a party, a fish stall or a bathroom – to name a few possibilities. As a perceptual system, smell is also uniquely capable of creating a sense of ritual and transition – therefore its near-universal use in rites of passage. The ritualised movements of chess pieces reinforce this association with smell in its intermedium with ritual and game, sculpture and performance.

In these works, then, the artist’s ‘eye for colour’ has been given over to A Nose for Art, to use the title of Eric Andersen’s 1998 piece. Here, a series of plaques with bronze noses on them appears at nose level along a gallery wall. As the press release for the show described it:

The nose is a body part that plays a mythical role in all cultures ... Science has recently discovered that the nose is the host of our sixth sense. This is our sensory apparatus for scent molecules, the feronomes, which olfactory sense cannot smell ..."}

Significantly, as described here, the nose contains the sixth sense (of someone’s presence reserved for psychics and lovers). Smell, then is doubly functional. It serves both as a carrier of olfactory information (the smell of things) and, more subtly, as an index of the presence of others at a much more subtle level. Both functions appropriately correspond with the protrusion of the nose from the face since the nose is the first part of the body to enter space. As one approaches someone or something, one needs to know who and what one is moving toward. This placement is also appropriate to the associational power of smell: What does my memory tell me about this thing? A plaque on the wall, titled ‘Nose for Art’, represents its physical position on the human face and its forward placement as the body traverses space – the body’s
kinaesthetic sensibility, effectively guiding the body (possibly) before one sees where one is headed. This work hence exploits the intermedium between dance, theatre, sculpture and perfumery.

How walking is accomplished has been the focus of several other intermedial Events, in particular Dick Higgins’ *Walking Song* (1963) and Alison Knowles’ *Shuffle* (1961). Walking Song instructs the performer to ‘place your left foot forward, shift the weight of your body to the left foot. Place your right foot forward, shift the weight of your body to your right foot’. In repetition, the text amounts to a virtual anthem for equilibrium and movement. It goes without saying that, as a culture, we rarely consider kinetics (movement through space) as a perceptual category even though kinetic awareness is clearly the perceptual system responsible for skill in dance and athletics, the latter of which is highly prized by this (Occidental) society. With each movement of the body in space, every spatial coordinate in a room is transformed. At a more subtle level, kinetic perception is almost always at work. However, like haptic awareness, it usually assumes a subservient position to other senses as one walks across a room to encounter people and things through vision, sound, and touch.

Higgins’ work demonstrates that even at the most basic activity of stepping or shuffling across a room, kinetics is at work. As Gibson reminds us:

> In a quadruped, the opposing muscles of each leg must work reciprocally by alternately contracting and relaxing, extending and flexing, and the bilaterally opposite muscles of the legs must work reciprocally in order to walk with alternate steps ... the whole system of coordination is circular and depends on continuous registration of the positions of the parts of the body.

However, the work is not merely kinaesthetic, it is perceptually cross-modal as well. At the characteristically slow pace of guidance in such instructional settings, the progress of transformation of every spatial coordinate in the room suggests an awareness of space normally reserved for sculpture. This piece therefore engages intermediality between sculpture and theatre, and possibly incantation, if one considers the moment of repetitive instruction.

The same can be said about the other walking piece, Knowles’s *Shuffle*, in which performers shuffle across a floor, quietly sounding what is under their feet. As a result, this work inhabits a kinaesthetic-musical intermedium as the shoes of performers brush gently across the surface of the floor, eliciting sounds from surfaces as diverse as wooden floorboards, squeaky tiles or muffled carpets.
The placement of human events in physical space evoked a unique Flux-geography for several artists. Their works demonstrate that the space of intermedial Events need not be limited to a room, but could in fact occur across the global map. Most significantly, Mieko Shiomi’s *Spatial Poem No. 1* (1965) documents the enunciation of words by various performers at specific times and places. It takes the form of small flags pinned into a map of the world. These markers turn into meaningful locales in an experiential world geography of Fluxus artists. Since Fluxus artists travel extensively and come from virtually every European country, the USA as well as Japan and Korea, Shiomi’s work speaks to the global production and experience of Fluxus intermedia work. The physical and sensory aspects of the Events remain constant, even as their reception and intent may differ for audience and artist alike according to any given geographic locale. When Phillip Corner described Fluxus as ‘throwing pieces of reality at the audience’, it is this constancy of the physical aspect despite geographic variation that he may have had in mind.

Someone who happens upon the card placed by Brecht’s performer in his *Five Cards* piece (from a collection of scores published by George Maciunas in 1962 as *Fluxus One*), might immediately have his or her environment transformed, literally, into an exhibit. The word ‘exhibit’ appears on five cards (about half the size of a business card) intended to be placed by the receiver. The cards and the idea of their placement remain constant even as what is chosen for exhibition and responses to that selection would differ according to different artists and audience members. Like Shiomi’s *Spatial Poem*, Brecht’s *Five Cards* involves an action that may move across national and cultural boundaries, while simultaneously establishing its constancy and its cultural context. For instance, a person encountering the word ‘exhibit’ in a museum, or bathroom, in Kyoto or New York would generate very different meanings.

Walter Ong provides a terminology for this multinational, cross-modal experience, wherein social contexts shift while the idea of the sensorium (or sensing ability of human beings) remains constant. In ‘The Shifting Sensorium’ he describes culturally unique relationships between the perceptual systems in each society. ‘These relationships must not be taken merely abstractly but in connection with variations in cultures. In this connection, it is useful to think of cultures in terms of the organisation of the sensorium. By the sensorium we mean the entire sensory apparatus as an operational complex. The differences in cultures which we have just suggested can be thought of as differences in the sensorium, the organisation of which is in part determined by culture at the same time as it makes culture.’

Significantly, while the Event format first appears in Cage’s class in musical composition in New York, many Fluxus artists outside the USA
had already been gravitating toward the Event for some time. Besides the Cage class, there were: the Darmstadt circle of concrete poets and Karlheinz Stockhausen's composition courses in Darmstadt, Germany; works in the Cologne atelier of his wife, painter Mary Bauermeister; and the greater context of visual poetry in France and Germany; No theatre, Group Ongaku and the Gutai Group in Japan. As Fluxus slowly evolved into a group, artists, poets and composers from across the globe took up the highly elastic Event format and adapted it to their poetry, dance, everyday life and musical traditions. The result was a truly global vanguard group, including artists from every European country (East and West), the USA, Japan and Korea. However, even as the global context of the Event suggests a variety of acculturated readings of the primary information, all locations share the physiological dimension of the Event.

Shiomi's map of Events performed at different times and locations suggests that it remains the same work, known differently. Several other Events similarly isolate specific movements or sounds in such a manner that they imply the presence of a basic, emotional force that remains outside of linguistic (and therefore cultural) differences altogether. Most obviously, some works utilise a seemingly primal level of vocalisation. Dick Higgins's Danger Music #17 (1962), which instructs the performer to 'Scream! Scream! Scream! Scream! Scream!' is notorious in this regard. Similarly, Eric Andersen's Crying Room (1998), which is permanently installed in the Nikolai Kirke in Copenhagen, contains cassettes playing ritualised crying tapes that run virtually all the time alongside special crying stones designed to hold the listener's tears. As sound works, these skirt the specificity of words that would find them in a particular linguistic context. Instead, the work employs a timeless and transcultural emotional language that nevertheless recurs to a shared point of cultural origin. Both works stand at the forefront of language. As Gibson reminds us, 'Vocalization of this kind existed long before speech, and it was from this repertory of spontaneous, unlearned utterance and our hominid ancestors that conventional speech sounds developed'.

Unlike the isolated phonetic elements of Mac Low's poems, these guttural sounds of crying and screaming form an elemental language of the human organism: meaning occurs more at the perceptual (than even the most fragmented, symbolic) level. 'The cry "wolf" has an entirely different function from either the cry of alarm at seeing a wolf or the howling of a wolf itself'. Put another way, even as crying or screaming may become aspects of a ritual or artistic performance, they do so as signifiers of a direct response to things. That is, they at least seem to step outside of the language of codes and indirect communication about things (happiness, terror, sorrow) and instead articulate the primary response to them. No human needs to learn what a scream or
cry means at the emotional level, even as one needs to learn the word for wolf to discuss it or to know the cause of the feeling. That Eric Andersen’s ‘Crying Room’, or its more portable recording, elicits crying from the audience attests to the profound empathic power of these direct utterances, even as they have been removed from their culture of origin.

In summary, whether through the overlapping of touch, taste, smell, sound or speech, all of these works have, at some level, the principle of directness, non-mediation, and unprocessed experience at their core. This does not, however, mean that the Events are detached from the cultures of the artists that produced them. Far from it. As Shiomi’s Spatial Poem No. 1 and Brecht’s Exhibit cards illustrate, the Event adapts itself to many contexts even as its structure privileges perceptual systems over semiotic ones: the global sensorium. This goes some way toward explaining the difficulty people have in describing (or translating into words) Fluxus Event work. However, the sheer possibility that human animals sense in common, and that communities are established where certain sensory experiences are shared, suggests meaningful applications of intermedia aesthetics beyond Fluxus specifically, and beyond the specialised context of the art world generally. But first, the art world needs to be held accountable for a certain amnesia, since Fluxus is routinely ignored as the source behind much contemporary, sensual art.25

Concluding remarks: intermedia, mixed media and interactive mixed media

Today, most work associated with the concept of intermedia addresses interactivity in ways that are very different from their original understanding. In contrast to interactions of sensory modes overall, many technological intermedia works involve only sight and sound: with the latter normally added to the former after the fact as an experiential accessory. Compared to the original meaning of the term intermedia, wherein modalities and the senses they employ were ‘fused conceptually’ and could not be separated, very little computer-generated work is actually intermedial in structure in the historic sense. Rather, ‘the term shortly acquired a life of its own’, Higgins wrote in 1981, ‘It was picked up, used and misused, often by confusion with the term ‘mixed media’’.26 Hence one wonders as to where to position the prefix ‘inter’ when addressing or discussing computer-based work? The answer, it seems to me as a non-expert in this work, lies in the much-vaunted interactivity of the computer.

It should come as no surprise that ‘interactive mixed media’, a clumsy if precise term, may have lost or collapsed its middle terms ‘active’ and ‘mixed’ into the framing prefix and noun, ‘inter’ and ‘media’. Thus we are left with a homonym of the original term that potentially confuses the field of practice as it applies to new, technology-based work. On one side, there is intermedia work in the historic sense, which continues
to be made by Fluxus and other artists, and on the other side, there is
intermedia work of the other kind: technological, interactive mixed
media. Both camps feature wonderful work: 'the term is not
prescriptive', Higgins wrote, 'it does not praise itself or present a model
for doing either new or great works'.

The relevance of the former sense of the term to contemporary art by
emerging artists is exemplified by Jeremy Boyle, who explores the fusion
of sub-audible sound and tactility. His Untitled (Bench) (2001), which I
saw at the Donald Young Gallery in Chicago, invited the visitor to sit on
a concrete bench quivering with the sound waves of a sub-woofer
installed within the empty, concrete block. After the viewer sits, the
visitor's viewed environment shivers in response to vibrations of his or
her body. The resulting experience is indivisible between sound, sight
and proprioception of the minutest order. Another Boyle piece, Untitled
(Installation) (2001), consisted of sub-woofers submerged in opaque
died liquid, whose sub-audible sounds were played quite loud loudly
(remaining silent), producing visible wave patterns reflected by a
spotlight onto the wall. In Boyle's words:

I am interested in shifting the dominant component of the
experience of sound from the aural to its being seen or felt.
Sound by nature is very physical, it travels through space from
its source as waves and locates its reception entirely as an
internal, intimate sensation within the body.

Similarly, Catya Plate's Sanguine Bedtime Stories was shown at the
Lance Fung Gallery in New York in 2001. It occupies an intermedium
between literature (in this case diary writing), sculpture and smell.
Visitors smell small vials of blood; the interior receptors of memory fire
off while visitors inhabit a red, living-room set whose fleshy tone and
tactile walls suggest the interior of the human body. Here, perfuming
and sculptural space are brought, literally, into the space of memory of
the body and mind structurally. It is elastic in space and time,
suggesting intermedial points that span this continuum, even as the vials
are separable from the room. Perfume and blood share longstanding
association in occult philosophy: the combination recalls magic as well
as the fundamental basis for the evocative power of perfume in the
body's pheromones and scent organs.

The basis of intermedial sensibilities in primary experience and
perceptual systems has a distinct, visceral aspect that serves to connect
us to our world bio-behaviourally, while mediated imagery of any form
is, well, mediated and therefore indirect. It differs by degree at least,
and often by kind. In a world threatened ecologically, I fear we lose a
lot when we give over the physical dimension entirely. I therefore hold
out for the original use of the term, even as it is sometimes applicable to
computer-based work. If the term collapses entirely into its technological connotation, we merely establish new media categories configured (and reified) for the World Wide Web; but perhaps those fears are best set aside for another day. They seem to belong to another project. The words of educational theorist Edward S. Reed come to mind and will stand at the place of a conclusion as they reiterate the importance of Fluxus intersensory intermedia.

It is difficult to be puzzled by the ironies of our so-called information age. The technology for processing and transmitting information has progressed rapidly in recent decades, but in spite of this technological progress there has been considerable regress in meaningful communication among people: a marked rise in nationalism, sectarianism, and violence against persons; increases in ignorance and illiteracy within our 'advanced' society ... the information being left out of these developments is, unfortunately, the most important kind; the information termed ecological – that all humans beings acquire from their environment by looking, listening, feeling, sniffing, and tasting the information, in other words, that allows us to experience things for ourselves.\(^3\)

Notes
2 Ibid, p. 22.
3 Ibid, p. 18.
4 Allan Kaprow, 'The Legacy of Jackson Pollock' (1958), Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life, ed. Jeff Kelley, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), p. 5. The term 'Happening' is first used in Kaprow's '18 Happenings in Six Parts' in 1958. For this reason, it is correct to describe him as the name-giver to this movement. Other artists in Europe and Japan who developed similar theatrical concepts, include the proto-Fluxus group in Cologne and Japan's Gutai, among others who appear in the rubric of Action Music on the Intermedia Diagram.
6 Higgins, 1984, p. 20.
7 Martin Jay has argued convincingly that this 'scopic regime of modernity' (his term) is largely a fiction and that actually vision is more complex culturally and perceptually than most postmodern philosophers would have it. It remains as a cultural commonplace, however, regardless of its being challenged. For a summary of Jay's extensive work on this problem, see 'Scopic Regimes of Modernity' in Vision and Visuality, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1995), pp. 3-28. For the perspective that vision has been the predominant model for truth and cognition since the


9 Ibid.


12 Ibid, p. 216.


14 Ibid, p. 123.


17 Alison Knowles is my mother.

18 Gibson, p. 34.


23 Gibson, p. 90.


25 When *Art News*, as happened last summer, runs an entire article on sensory art and attributes it to the genius of a few youth, they have forgotten their history and mistaken a remote copy for the original. What’s worse, even where young artists have the courage to openly acknowledge their debt to Fluxus Intermedia, Events and Objects, as in Lance Fung Gallery’s ‘The Smell of Fear’, Spring 2001 – *Art News* ignored it. Clearly, the cult of originality, which requires that we do not learn from anyone, and therefore learn nothing, reigns supreme. But there are exceptions in work, if not in fame and glory.


27 Ibid, p. 25.

