

Border Crossings

Three Transnationalisms of Fluxus

Hannah Higgins

I have argued elsewhere that Fluxus performance is both an extension and critique of that great movement known as American Abstraction or Abstract Expressionism.¹ To limit it exclusively to either domain, critique *or* extension, is to view it either as an unproblematic extension of formal modernism, *or* as a mere negation—just so much neo-Dada chaos. It stands to reason that, as extension and/or critique, what came to be known as neo-Dadaism differs both by aesthetic and social form. Where one set of modern movements might be identified by their ability to express a national gestalt (German Expressionism, American Painting, Italian Futurism, etc.), the other trajectory is rightly described in opposition to these. The other stream, which might be called the avant-garde and which routinely dips into and out of the other (much as a stream bends around stones), is self-consciously transnational, doing its best to transgress and ignore national boundaries, nationalist gestalts, and the other sundry forms of centrist political and economic organization that characterized the modern era.

Typical of this current, the transnationalism of Fluxus is mentioned repeatedly in artists' statements, and is appropriately understood as an indictment of American hegemony in the postwar period. For this reason many Fluxus artists routinely use the term *internationalism* to describe the reach of American power in the postwar period, while arguing for the "internationalism" of Fluxus as different—or for our purposes transnational from the perspective of the nonhierarchical nature of the relationship. For example, Fluxus artist and resident historian Ken Friedman describes Fluxus in transnational terms while using the word *international* to describe American hegemony: "When it came time for

America to stand on its own in the international art world, however, politics, economics, and political economics dictated that Abstract Expressionism be treated as some kind of uniquely American triumph," which was rejected by Fluxus artists.² Friedman continues, "It is the other tradition that influenced Fluxus, a tradition that has inevitably been neglected because it is antinationalistic in sentiment and tone and practiced by artists who are not easily used as national flag-bearers."³

Similarly, Fluxus artist Dick Higgins (my father), listed internationalism as the first of nine points "common among most Fluxworks."⁴ As it was used, a transnational ethos is implied. Describing the earliest murmurs of Fluxus around the globe in the late 1950s and early 1960s, he wrote:

In Europe there were, in the beginning . . . Wolf Vostell, Nam June Paik, Emmett Williams and Ben Patterson, among others. In the United States there were, besides myself, Alison Knowles, George Brecht, Robert Watts, and others I have already named; also La Monte Young, Philip Corner, Ay-O and still others. In Japan there were Takehisa Kosugi and Mieko Shiomi, and more. Probably there were about two dozen of us in six countries.⁵

From these two artists' statements a pair of basic facts about Fluxus are surmisable. First, for these and other Fluxus artists, the group was intentionally transnational from the outset and, second, this transnationalism functions as a core criterion of Fluxus practice. Put differently, the transnationalism of Fluxus does not merely mark its social dimension, but is inherent in the work as well. In what follows I will describe these two aspects of the transnationalism of Fluxus; first by telling the historical narrative establishing the loose network of Fluxus artists, and then through descriptions of several Fluxus works that are structured according to a transnational paradigm.

The first part of the story of Fluxus as a transnational artists' group is virtually uncontested. Although it is quite impossible to say exactly when Fluxus began, it is possible to establish a time span during which its experimental formats were established and the social nexus of Fluxus was formed. Experiments in sound art, installation, and performance were occurring simultaneously in Japan, Germany, Eastern Europe, and the United States in the late 1950s and early 1960s. These experiments were being carried out by "Group Ongaku" and others at the Sogetsu Art Center in Tokyo, in the classroom and among the students of com-

poser Karlheinz Stockhausen in Cologne, Germany, and around John Cage in New York.

These cells of activity would become united under the rubric of Fluxus in about 1962 and in large part as a result of the travels of Cage around the world. While it might be argued that demonstrating the centrality of an American composer to Fluxus as a community in the pre-Fluxus days merely reiterates the American centered model for postwar culture, I would counter that Cage's travels were logistically possible because of the internationalism of American culture, but that he utilized this access to promote an agenda of transnationalism. In other words, these travels spun a kind of world wide web, or communication network, through which nonhierarchical creative collaborations were made possible.

A World Wide Web?

In 1958 and 1959 several students of the Musicology Program at Tokyo National University and their friends in Fine Arts and Literature established a collaborative, improvisatory music group. By 1960, this collaboration expanded to include dance and was called "Group Ongaku" and included among its members several artist-composers who would become associated with Fluxus after 1962. These were Takehisa Kosugi, Chieko (Mieko) Shiomi, and Yasunao Tone. In 1961 and 1962 this group gave several important concerts at the Sogetsu Art Center in Tokyo. The center constituted the core of Japan's active avant-garde scene. In 1962 Cage visited the center with (then expatriate) Yoko Ono, while on a six-week tour of Japan. Cage dedicated a work to her and her husband at the time, the established experimental composer and future Fluxus artist, Toshi Ichianagi. This work resonated with his own, famous 4'33" of silence. The piece, 0'00", is strikingly minimal: "In a situation provided with maximum amplification (No Feedback), perform a disciplined action."⁶ These and other concerts were held and the seeds sown for Japanese Fluxus, especially in terms of establishing the written correspondence and creative exchanges that would evolve into later friendships and collaborations.⁷

European Fluxus likewise evolves an aesthetic independently of Cage, albeit eventually developing lines of communication with other groups in contact with him. Since the early 1950s, German serialist composer Karlheinz Stockhausen had been at the center of vanguard music in Germany. His composition course in Darmstadt, which was attended

by American minimalist composer La Monte Young (1950) and Korean artist Nam Jun Paik (1957–58), shared an orbit of experimentation with the Darmstadt Circle of poetry and theater that included (in the late 1950s) American expatriate poet Emmett Williams. From 1958 to 1963 Stockhausen also worked through the electronic music studio of WDR (West German Radio) in Cologne (with Paik), as well as the influential performance atelier of his wife, the painter Mary Bauermeister, also in Cologne.⁸ An international array of artists later associated with Fluxus could be found circulating through this remarkable atelier and the greater context of it: the list would include Paik, Benjamin Patterson (United States), Wolf Vostell (Germany), and Williams.

Significantly, Events written by Cage's students in New York were presented in Cologne at this atelier in 1960. These were performed at the Contre Festival (a music Festival de Resistance) against the IGNM (International Society for New Music) in June. This four-day series included, from the circle of students associated with Cage, works by Cage, George Brecht and La Monte Young and, from Darmstadt and Cologne, works by Paik and Patterson.

[Bauermeister] organized a "Contre-Festival," to be held in Cologne over four days in June. . . . The performances included works by John Cage, Toshi Ichianagi, Sylvano Bussotti, George Brecht, La Monte Young and Christian Wolff—performed by David Tudor—as well as two concerts by Nam June Paik. . . . (In October) Merce Cunningham and Carolyn Brown danced to pieces by John Cage, Christian Wolff, Earle Brown, Toshi Ichianagi and Bo Nilsson, performed by David Tudor and John Cage. One day later, again in the attic studio, one heard and saw compositions by Cage, La Monte Young and Paik—the interpreters were Cornelius Cardew, Hans G. Helms, David Tudor and Benjamin Patterson.⁹

Based in part on these historic concerts involving several Fluxus artists at the Bauermeister atelier, the atelier has been called a "Proto-Fluxus in Cologne."¹⁰

The nearby German town of Wuppertal, later home of the first "Fluxus"-titled exhibition at Gallerie Parnass in 1962, was the home of the publisher Kalender/Ebeling und Dietrich, which produced scrolled magazines of experimental music and poetry appropriately called *Kalendarrolle No. 1* and *Kalendarrolle No. 2* in November 1961 and June 1962, respectively. These scrolls brought together an international assortment

of artists and associates, among them Paik, Patterson, Swiss artist Dieter Rot, Williams, and Young—all of whom would later become associated with Fluxus.

In summary, both before and after this context in flux was in flux as an *us*, it included artists from the United States, almost every European country, and Korea and Japan. What remained was to establish the “us” of Fluxus. The lines of communication as well as the terms of collaboration were enabled in large part by the communications network established by Cage’s travels. Even in New York, which was to become one center of Fluxus activity in the 1960s, the community of Fluxus developed around this mild-mannered composer.

In John Cage’s historic class *Composition of Experimental Music* at the New School for Social Research in New York in 1958, many future associates of Fluxus in the United States met for the first time. Cage would borrow concert material from this class for the 1960 Bauermeister concerts named above. Similarly, his uniquely minimal event *0’00’* of the 1962 Sogetsu concert adapts from the explorations of his composition class as well. Fluxus artists in Cage’s class included a chemist, George Brecht, a collagist, Al Hansen, a poet and composer, Dick Higgins, and another poet, Jackson Mac Low.

Among the experiments produced in the class was a new performance format called the *Event*, which was invented in the class by George Brecht. The Event figures heavily in the subsequent work of most Fluxus artists around the globe, and while the form of documentation differs by artist, most can be scored in the format shown in George Brecht’s collected early Events, *Water Yam* of 1963–65 (fig. 1). These call for the performance of everyday rituals or routines (or absurd versions of these) in such a way that the informational structure of the routine—its experiential character, possible contradictions, or normally ignored elements—are thrown into high relief for the performer or viewer. For example, Brecht’s *Solo for Violin, Viola, Cello or Contrabass* (1962) reads simply “polishing.”¹¹ The performer enters, carefully polishes the instrument and leaves, and in so doing shifts the audience’s attention from virtuoso performance to preparation of the instrument. Another Event, by Czech Fluxus artist Milan Knizak, is called *Snowstorm No. 1* (1965) and simply instructs that “Paper gliders are distributed to an idle and waiting audience” (fig. 2).¹² What results is a snowstorm of quietly gliding paper airplanes as the audience returns them . . . back and forth and back and forth and so on. The exchange of sheets is experientially beautiful, like the caring gesture toward the instrument as tended to by

Brecht. Both works therefore illustrate the implied attentiveness to the everyday world around the performer demanded by the Event format, which clearly evolves out of Cage's theory of "silent" music as a means of "waking up to the very life we're living."¹³

Collaborations ensued in and around the Cage class. These included the New York Audio Visual Group, which was established by Hansen and Higgins early in 1959. This group held regular Sunday morning performance-meetings at the Epitome Coffee Shop on Bleeker Street in Manhattan. Meetings consisted of collaborations and demonstrations with many artists who would become associates of Fluxus, including fellow student Jackson Mac Low. Relatedly, in 1961, Jackson Mac Low and La Monte Young took over the East Coast issue of a California-based publication called *Beatitude* (renaming it *Beatitude East*), which was released in 1961 as a collection of Events and like-minded experimental musical notations called *An Anthology*. Like the *Kalendarrolle* of Wuppertal, of the twenty-four composers (from Europe, Japan, and the United States) in *An Anthology*, over half would become associated with the rubric *Fluxus* a year later.

An earlier Cage class (1957) had included composer La Monte Young, who introduced the erstwhile organizer of Fluxus and Lithuanian graphic designer, George Maciunas, to the artists of *An Anthology* late in 1960 or early in 1961. That year Maciunas opened a gallery at 925 Madison with his friend Almus Salcius. Albeit originally intended as a site for selling ancient instruments and abstract art, after meeting the artists loosely associated with the Cage class, the program was changed. In 1961 the AG gallery hosted a series of performance evenings of experimental music in order to support a proposed Fluxus Magazine—the first time the name *Fluxus* appears in print.¹⁴ Also in 1961, Japanese expatriate artist Yoko Ono hosted a performance series in her loft with the help of Young.

In summary, as Fluxus slowly evolved into a group, artists, poets, and composers from across the globe took up the highly elastic Event format and corresponding experimental attitude, adapting it to their poetry, dance, daily life, and musical traditions. What resulted was a truly global, avant-garde group. Perhaps it was inevitable that these artists would make transnationalism an explicit or implicit topic in their work. In any case, there are two forms of what might be called "Flux geography" within Fluxus. The first form is representational; the artists addressed an international array of Fluxus artists and made special or altered maps charting (real or imagined) creative exchanges with them. The second



Fig. 1. George Brecht, *Water Yam*. The two exemplified, center right, have collaged covers made by Brecht, ca. 1965.



Fig. 2. Milan Knizak, *Snowstorm No. 1* (1965)

form is a bit more ambiguous, although it too reflects the transnationalism of Fluxus. The artists wrote Events for each other as dedications. These dedications routinely address geographic, cultural, and linguistic distances between the artists.

Fluxus Geographers

Border crossings figure heavily in the works of Fluxus artists from virtually every continent and throughout its forty years of activity. In every case, however, a unique Fluxus geography is implied. It is flexible geography of altered state-lines, moving continents, mobile artists, and otherwise fluxing boundaries predicated on an elastic web of personal relationships held together by common interests, free-form socializing, and written correspondence with artists around the globe.

The artists' specific applications of this geographic flux betray the wide range of intentions that typify almost every aspect of Fluxus as a group. There are no fixed outcomes, no agreed-upon manifestos, and no explicit political doctrines dictating the behavior. Rather, the fluxing boundaries have implications that range from the militant to the fine-arts cultural, to the merely social and the experiential in what Fluxus scholar Owen Smith has called "a non-hierarchical density of experience. In this way Fluxus does not refer to a style or even a procedure as such but to the presence of a totality of social activities."¹⁵ Reflecting these social activities, one type of Flux geography suggests the movement of people or information around the globe as it is currently mapped.

In the following 1975 letter to Japanese Fluxus artist Mieko Shiomi, for example, Maciunas uses the transnational community of Fluxus artists to spar with the attorney general of New York, whose office was harassing owners of several artists' co-op housing projects organized by Maciunas and called Fluxhouse Inc.

Dear Mieko,

Could you mail me in an envelope a blank postcard. . . . I will write a message and then send it to you to mail it to the Attorney General in N.Y. It will look like I am in Japan. I will do this from all over the world. Absolutely confuse him. Thanks a lot,¹⁶ George

This simple use of the mail makes a person virtually invisible: the artist is everywhere and therefore nowhere to be found. This project was called "Flux Combat" and its object was the meddling bureaucracy of New

York City, which had a difficult time categorizing (for taxation and regulation) artists' use of industrial space for domestic and studio life. With other Fluxus artists and friends Maciunas had established Fluxhouse Inc. as a cooperative housing scheme that would enable artists to purchase renovated industrial space at cost.¹⁷ When the bureaucracy threatened the project, he sent these subversive requests around the world.

More typical are proposals for circumnavigations of the world published by Maciunas in 1975–76. These would take the form of caravans in “Rover type” trucks, a sailing trip on an eighty-five-foot schooner or, most famously, “a very extensive sailing not just around, but throughout the world” in a converted mine sweeper.¹⁸ These circumnavigations proposed that groups of ten to twelve artists serving various crew functions would travel around the world visiting some hundred various historic (if unrecognized) sites. The last is the most compelling; in contrast to gazing over vast distances through the windows of a plane, through the windows of a truck, or over the side of a boat, the artists would be confined to a vary small space, presumably talking, making Fluxus projects, and occasionally exiting for a visit somewhere. Days might be spent in the unclaimed space of “international waters,” while artists from this truly transnational avant-garde group would prowl the dark, deep waters of the world's oceans and least populated regions. What's more, beneath the ocean and in the remotest parts of the world, borders are unmarked and therefore freely passed over. Remarkably, each proposal included equipment lists, technical diagrams of each vessel, proposed itineraries and detailed site maps of many proposed stops.

The most famous Fluxus maps are probably Mieko Shiomi's “Spatial Poems.” The first, “Spatial Poem No. 1” (1965), details sixty-nine word locations collected between March and May 1965 (indicated by printed flags) on a hand-drawn map of the world (fig. 3). “Spatial Poem No. 2” (1966) details the directions people were facing around the world at 10:00 P.M. (Greenwich time) on October 15, 1965, and “Spatial Poem No. 3” (1972), a puzzle-calendar. In these Spatial Poems, a moment and action are placed in relative space on a global scale, but at a shared moment in time. The function of time is crucial here as it marks the shared experience, the transposition, of artists the world over. As a written work displaying words and locations across the space of the page, it is most obviously a poem. However, at the moment when the words were found, there was a poem too: imagined but not knowable by the participants since what came before or after one's choice was unknowable. Like Maciunas's Flux Combat postcards, Shiomi's simultaneously

ephemeral (as performance) and concrete (as poem) work necessitated correspondence across not one or two, but perhaps forty different national boundaries. The spatial poem is only conceivable, much less realizable, from within the context of a group of artists routinely carrying out transnational, creative exchange.

It comes as no surprise that several Fluxus artists reconfigured maps, historic and contemporary, in manners that reflect this principle of national fluidity. Within Fluxus even the comparatively traditional medium of painting expresses the principle of fluid borders and exchanges; Dick Higgins painted a series of maps overlaid with arrows that sweep across geographical, political, and historic boundaries as well (fig. 4). The arrows derive from Higgins's early experiments with choreography, which he called Graphis works, in the late 1950s. In the Graphis works, performers responded to moving lights, later expressed as lines and arrows as directional and gestural instructions. In the paintings, these choreographic lines suggest the movement of human forms (friends?) freely around the globe: the human body as weather pattern. He called the arrows "wind."¹⁹ Insofar as the map is true to its source, the map paintings are like Maciunas's detailed maps for circumnavigation as well as Shiomi's for the Spatial Poems.

However, another form of Flux geography transforms the maps and their content—altering distances and geographical relationships through assemblage, collage, and scale manipulation. For example, Robert Watts's limited edition Fluxkit *Fluxatlas* (1972), would consist of a box containing about fifty stones from "specific and well described locations (country, town vicinity, which beach or shore, which sea, lake or river) . . . from various parts of the world. (So far we have pebbles from Azores, Minorca, Cycladic Islands, Cape Hateras, end of Long Island, Manhattan . . .)" (fig. 5).²⁰ Maciunas's label for the edition shows an altered map. This atlas of stones suggests an alternate world geography conceived from the standpoint of mobile, natural artifacts brought together through the collective efforts of this transnational artists' group.

The work harkens back to cabinets of curiosities, those seventeenth-century containers for natural wonders garnered from around the world. Instead of natural wonders that mark each place for its specificity, however, we find simple stones, remarkable for their similarities more than for their differences. What's more, the list of places is idiosyncratic, reflecting the happenstance locations of friends rather than demonstrating the farthest reaches of human travel in the era before commercial tourism.



Fig. 3. Mieko Shiomi, "Spatial Poem No. 1" (1965)

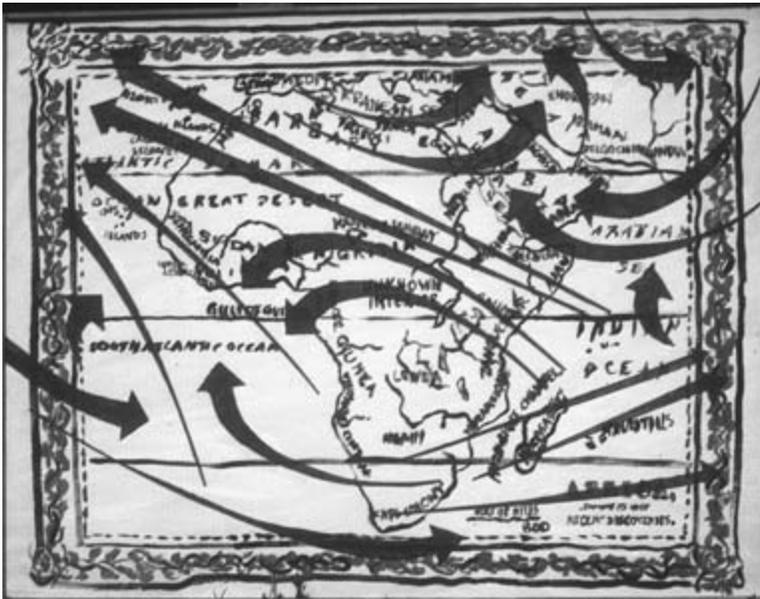


Fig. 4. Dick Higgins, Map Painting, no date

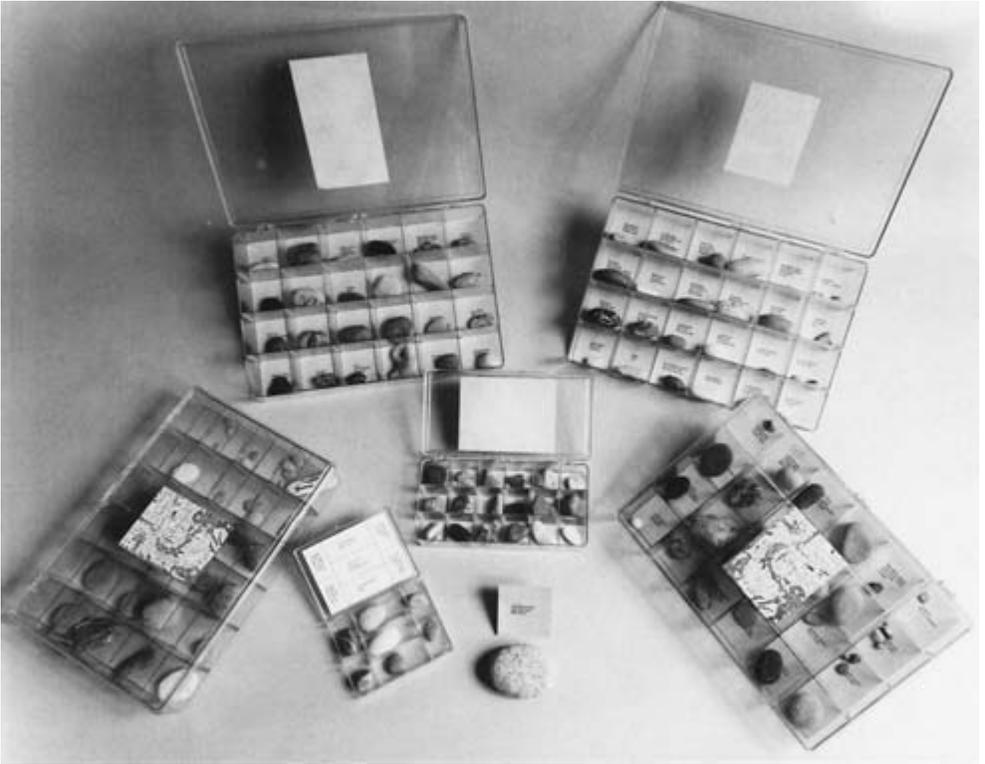


Fig. 5. Robert Watts, *Fluxatalas* (1972)

In a similar vein, French Fluxus poet Robert Filliou described an imaginary, new discipline of geography within his projected, utopian university the PoiPoiDrome—“Geography—streets and roads a man has trod on printed on his shoe soles.”²¹ This lighthearted take on the subject also suggests the social, as opposed to universal, dimensions of space. There would be identical tracts of paths traversed with friends, and anomalous patterns where the walker trod alone. One imagines two friends comparing soles (souls?).

The second form of transnationalism as practice might be said to take its lead from the social side of Fluxus. In this second form, where Events are written by one artist and dedicated to another, the transnationalism of Fluxus is reflected not literally (as a map), but indirectly, as a cultural by-product of a group routinely engaged in transnational exchange, like Shiomi’s spatial poems. The practice is commonplace among Fluxus

artists living near each other; however, for the purpose of this argument the list is limited to dedications that cross national boundaries.

For reasons I have been unable to ascertain, a disproportionate number of these dedications involve Korean Fluxus artist Nam June Paik. Higgins included a dedicated Event to Paik in his “Danger Music” series, which places the performer in physical or psychological danger. *Danger Music Number Nine* (For Nam June Paik) of February 1962 reads: “Volunteer to have your spine removed.”²² Paik responded with *Danger Music for Dick Higgins*, “Creep into the VAGINA of a living WHALE.”²³

While in Europe organizing the first Fluxus-titled festivals, Lithuanian expatriate George Maciunas wrote *Twelve Piano Compositions for Nam June Paik* (1962), which American Emmett Williams (who has spent most of his life living in Germany) expanded in another (thirteenth) *Composition to Paik*. Maciunas’s series extrapolates from two Brecht Events, the Solo for Violin and his famous Piano Piece (1962) instructing “a vase of flowers on (to) a piano.”²⁴ Maciunas’s dedicated compositions for Paik are therefore simultaneously adapted from Brecht—a double homage.

Composition No. 1 Let piano movers carry piano onto the stage.

Composition No. 2 Tune the piano.

Composition No. 3 Paint with orange paint patterns over the piano.

Composition No. 4 Using a straight stick the length of the keyboard sound all keys together.

Composition No. 5 Place a dog or cat (or both) inside the piano and play Chopin.

Composition No. 6 Stretch the three highest strings with a tuning key until they break.

Composition No. 7 Place one piano on top of another (one can be smaller).

Composition No. 8 Place piano upside down and *put a vase with flowers* over the sound box.

Composition No. 9 Draw a picture of a piano so that the audience can see the picture.

Composition No. 10 Write a sign reading: piano composition no. 10 and show the audience the sign.

Composition No. 11 Wash the piano, wax and *polish it* well.

Composition No. 12 Let piano movers carry the piano out of the stage.²⁵

Williams responds with *Piano Concert for Paik No. 2* (1965), which involves a Fluxus ensemble or orchestra in the coercion of a pianist:

Orchestra members seat themselves and wait for the pianist. The pianist enters, bows and walks to the piano. Upon reaching the piano, he jumps from the stage and runs to the exit. Orchestra members run after him, catch him and drag him back to the piano. The pianist must try his best to keep away from the piano. When the pianist is finally returned to the piano, the lights are turned off.²⁶

Three years later, Williams made another dedication, this time to the composer who introduced these artists to Maciunas in 1961. *For La Monte Young* (1962) reads, “Performer asks if La Monte Young is in the audience.”²⁷ The piece has a situational humor. The audience invariably looks around for someone by that name to stand up, assuming he is somehow necessary to the performance. Young was not in Europe during the first blossoming of Fluxus Festivals in 1962, although he had already played a crucial role in early Fluxus; perhaps Williams was invoking him, or the irony of his absence during this clearly historic moment.

Paik, on the other hand was part of what Williams has rightly called the “‘permanent cadre’ of seven traveling performers” during the European tour.²⁸ Sometime later, in about 1965, Japanese Fluxus artist Takehisa Kosugi would write *South No. 2 (to Nam June Paik)* for his Korean comrade. The text pokes gentle humor at Paik’s strong Korean accent, while it simultaneously invites the audience to study the translingual sound (of an English word spoken by an émigré Korean) for an almost unendurable duration:

Pronounce “SOUTH” during a duration of more than 15 minutes. Pause for breath is permitted but transition from pronunciation of one letter to another should be smooth and slow.²⁹

In addition to this long list of dedications to Paik, dedications across European boundaries were also common. For example, George Brecht, then expatriate American living in Niece, wrote *For a Drummer (For Eric)* (1966). The dedication refers to Danish Fluxus artist and onetime student at the Conservatory of Music in Copenhagen, Eric Andersen:

Drum on something you have never drummed on before.
Drum with something you have never drummed with before.³⁰

One imagines all forms of musicalization—bodies, food, instruments, and so on.

A year later, Swedish Fluxus artist Bengt af Klintberg wrote *Number 4 (Danger Music for Henning Christiansen)* for the Danish Fluxus by that name (famous for painting things a lurid, bright green). The score simultaneously refers to Higgins's "Danger Music" scores in the title and content; "Climb up into a tree. Saw off the branch you sit on."³¹ Dick Higgins had also written for this artist in *Danger Music Number Thirty-Three (For Henning Christiansen)* (May 1963), "Have a ball show."³²

Altogether, these dedicated Events, like the objects discussed before them, demonstrate techniques through which Fluxus artists have made work that demonstrates, or explicitly illustrates, creative exchange with each other across national and cultural boundaries. These are not mere diagrams of the origins of artists, or traveling shows that introduce work around the globe, but actually demonstrate the putting-into-practice of the principle of transnationalism that is central to Fluxus. This is especially true of the use of distant friends to expand the contents of a work, as in the work of Mieko (Chieko) Shiomi. All of these works are, however, *simultaneously* interdisciplinary and transnational in character. These two aspects of its identity cannot be considered separately, especially since there is much work in Fluxus that brings these two principles together. Put differently, the concept of intermedia, to which most Fluxus work belongs, is part and parcel of its transnationalism.

Transnational Intermedia

Walter Ong provides terminology for sensory experience, which I take to be the fundamental subject matter of Events and Fluxkits, as a multinational 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 of 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 organization 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 organization of which is in part determined by culture at the same time as it makes culture.³³

In other words, the global context of Fluxus Events and objects suggest acculturated readings of the primary information present in them all, even though at all locations the physiological dimension of the Event is shared.

This idea—that the global sensorium suggests a transnational context for primary experience—resonates with a historic essay published by Dick Higgins in 1965 in the *Something Else Newsletter*. In the essay “Intermedia,” Higgins (the founder of the press) revived a term used by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1812.³⁴ 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), theater with musical structures inherent to it (Happenings), and all manner of other arts in between.

Significantly, he viewed this structure as having a social dimension. Working against strict categorization in the arts, intermedia would be an alternative to specialization in the arts, as well as to the national pride taken in this or that specialized art form. In other words, for Higgins intermedia work is a historic necessity, functioning in his own time as a foil for specialization of the arts, as well as the overdetermination of painting as *the* art of his time, the late 1950s—an era routinely associated with a near hegemonic dominance of American art.

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. However the social problems that categorize our time, as opposed to the political ones, no longer allow a compartmentalized approach.³⁵

Higgins continues, “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.”³⁶

Thirty years later, these intermedia relationships were given graphic form as the schematic “Intermedia Diagram” of 1995 (fig. 6). The hovering bubbles of the diagram (whose sizes are indeterminate) imaginarily expand, contract, pass over and through each other in a visualization of the fluidity inherent in the intermedia dynamic vis-à-vis the arts, but also

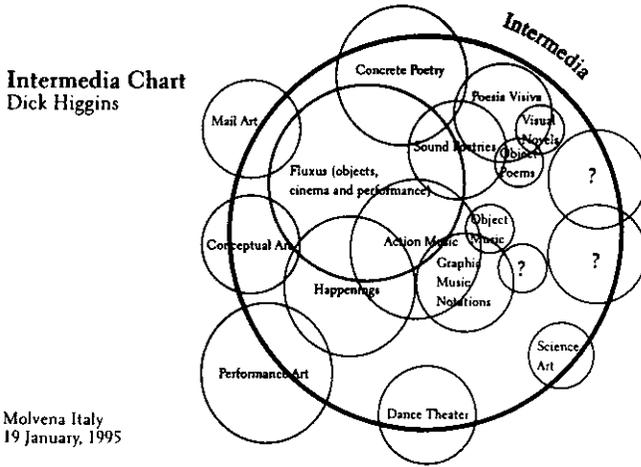


Fig. 6. Dick Higgins, “Intermedia Diagram” (1995)

suggest fluidity of locations, or artists in geographic space. Note his use of the Italian term “Poesie Visiva.”

More specifically, the transnationalism of Fluxus artists practicing their work in relationship to each other does not mean that the work has the same meaning everywhere. The same works mean different things as they cross boundaries. To wit, imagine Paik performing Kosugi’s *South No. 2* in New York, Japan, or Korea.³⁷ Similarly, Mieko (Chieko) Shiomi’s *Disappearing Music for Face* (1964) is an Event with the following score: “Change gradually from a smile to no smile”³⁸ (fig. 7). The perceptual system used for these fine motor movements is called proprioception and involves awareness and movement of the body internally. Despite routine efforts to make the transformation as smooth as possible, the movement is always uneven. For muscles (attached to joints), “receptors discharge at a given rate for a given angle . . . and that rate changes when the angle changes.”³⁹ It is impossible to release a smile slowly and smoothly. This is its shared, physiological dimension for performers, as well as audiences watching the piece. In fact, it is the physiology of direct, unmediated experience that all Events have in common.

From the interpretive perspective (of myself: a Western, white, mid-



Fig. 7. Mieko Shiomi's *Disappearing Music for Face* (1964)

dle-class female), however, the piece has an oddly emotional candor, for the disappearing smile seems to project a shift of mood that I commonly associate with melodrama. However, I can also imagine it performed by Shiomi in Japan, where the interpretive attachments to the piece would work differently. It might suggest a vulgar (Western?) display of teeth unbecoming to a woman in public. Moreover, in a locale with poor dental hygiene, the work might also read as a display of teeth betraying specific class, cultural, or racial associations. This latter dimension was explored by George Maciunas in a set of Fluxpost (smiles), 1978—a sheet of stamps consisting of forty-two different smiles by people of many races and means (some with all teeth, others without, and all manner of smiles in between).

The same sort of interpretive range exists for virtually every Event as it passes through contexts, even though there is a physiological basis for the smile that is shared by the performer and audience alike. This may explain the technological simplicity of the Event format itself. It cer-

tainly explains some of why Fluxus has been interpreted in a multitude of ways at the different locations where it is found. In all, the Event belongs to Ong's global sensorium. The Event's basis in everyday life locates it in the sensate categories shared by all human beings. That these have different cultural frameworks throughout the world goes without saying. Nevertheless, some aspect of their informational structures, their ontology, remains constant in space and time. The maps of Fluxus artists reflect this shared community established by the coordination of primary sensations and the cultural productions that have brought them to pass.

In conclusion, it might be argued that Fluxus Events and kits, the paintings and correspondences of the artists, represent just so much crazy knowledge (i.e., without order), or a mere pataphysics (the science of exceptions). While no single chronological or political framework is common to all Fluxus work, it can be said with some accuracy that communitarian feeling in the form of actions and exchanges against political, geographic, and culturally mediated norms is endemic to Fluxus. Insofar as this work is un-systematic, it is real or natural—part of an ever-changing domain of human engagement with the environment. This movement, or flux, is expressed in the structures of art and transnational exchange inherent to Fluxus. In the words of Plotinus, III.4.6 “Even before reason there is the inward movement which reaches out to its own.” Reaching out to its own, flux extends to flux.us in whatever form.

Notes

1. Hannah Higgins, *Fluxus Experience* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002).

2. Ken Friedman, “Fluxus and Company,” in *The Fluxus Reader*, ed. Ken Friedman (West Sussex, Eng.: Academy Editions, 1998), 242. This essay originally appeared with the exhibition *Fluxus and Company* at Emily Harvey Gallery, New York, 1989.

3. Ibid.

4. Dick Higgins, “Fluxus Theory and Reception,” in Friedman, *The Fluxus Reader*, 224. This essay was written in Berlin in March 1982 and revised in April 1985. It was published in “Fluxus Theory and Reception,” in *Fluxus Research*, special issue of Lund Art Press, vol. 2, no. 2 (1991). The version printed here also appeared in Dick Higgins, *Modernism Since Postmodernism* (San Diego: San Diego State University Press, 1997). The nine points are (1) internationalism, (2) experimentalism and iconoclasm, (3) intermedia, (4) minimalism or concentration, (5) an attempted resolution of the art/life dichotomy, (6) implicativeness, (7) play or gags, (8) ephemerality, and (9) specificity.

5. Ibid.

6. This is described in detail in David Revill, *The Roaring Silence* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1992), 203.

7. The centrality of the center in establishing transnational relationships to the

United States and Europe is described in some detail in Alexandra Monroe, "Circle: Modernism and Tradition," in *Japanese Art after 1945: Scream against the Sky* (New York: Abrams, 1994), 128.

8. For details on this period, see Robert von Zahn, "'Refusierte Gesänge,' Musik im Atelier Bauermeister," in *Intermedial, Kontrovers, Experimentell: Das Atelier Mary Bauermeister in Köln 1960–62* (Cologne: Emons Verlag, 1993).

9. Wilfried Dörstel, Rainer Steinberg, and Robert von Zahn, "The Bauermeister Studio: Proto-Fluxus in Cologne, 1960–62," in *Fluxus Virus*, ed. Ken Friedman (Cologne: Galerie Schüppenhauer, 1992), 56.

10. Ibid.

11. George Brecht, Solo for Violin, Viola, Cello or Contrabass (1962), in *Fluxus Performance Workbook*, ed. Ken Friedman, special issue of *El Djarida* (1980): 16. Many, if not most, early Events are reprinted as scores in this workbook.

12. Milan Knizak, "Snowstorm No. 1" (1965), in Friedman, *Fluxus Performance Workbook*, 29.

13. Michael Kirby and Richard Schechner, "An Interview with John Cage," in *Tulane Drama Review (TDR)* 10.2 (1965): 58.

14. A copy of this program can be found at the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection Archive, New York.

15. Owen Smith, *Fluxus: The History of an Attitude* (San Diego: San Diego State University Press, 1998), 11.

16. Postcard in Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Archive, New York, dated to 1975. This was part of Maciunas's Flux Combat against Lawrence A Ravitz, the Attorney General of New York City.

17. During the years 1967–68, the collective purchased eight buildings in what is now known as SoHo.

18. These three proposals are held at the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Archive and are reprinted in *Fluxus, etc., Addenda 1*, ed. Jon Hendricks (New York: Ink &, 1983), 246–82, quotation, 260.

19. Artists' statement, "About the Map Paintings," 1991, copies in the Dick Higgins Collection, Northwestern University.

20. This list comes from Maciunas's call for contributions in *Fluxnewsletter*, April 1973.

21. Robert Filliou, *Teaching and Learning as Performance Arts* (Cologne: Koening Verlag, 1970), 196.

22. Friedman, *Fluxus Performance Workbook*, 23.

23. Hannah Higgins and Jeff Abel, eds., *A Dick Higgins Sampler* (Chicago: Columbia College Center for Book and Paper Arts, 2001), 9. This score was also published in John Cage, *Notations* (New York: Something Else Press, 1969), unpaginated alphabetical listing.

24. Friedman, *Fluxus Performance Workbook*, 15.

25. Ibid., 40.

26. Ibid., 57.

27. Ibid., 57.

28. Emmett Williams, *My Life in Flux—and Vice Versa* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992), 30.

29. Friedman, *Fluxus Performance Workbook*, 36.

30. Ibid., 17.
31. Ibid., 28.
32. Ibid., 24.
33. Walter Ong, "The Shifting Sensorium," in *The Varieties of Sensory Experience*, ed. David Howes (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 28.
34. Cited in Dick Higgins, "Intermedia," *Something Else Newsletter* (1965), reprinted in *Horizons: The Poetics and Theory of the Intermedia* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983). For Coleridge's use of the term, see *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Vol. 5: *Lectures 1808–1819: On Literature*, edited by R. A. Foakes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), "Lecture 3: On Spenser."
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid., 22.
37. I have gone into some depth about this mechanism in "Fluxing Across the Sensory," the exhibition *Fluxus* at Villa Croce in Genoa, Italy.
38. Friedman, *Fluxus Performance Workbook*, 49.
39. James Jerome Gibson, *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966), 110.

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