

ACTIVATING FLUXUS, EXPANDING CONSERVATION

Edited by
Hanna B. Hölling, Aga Wielocho
and Josephine Ellis



Activating Fluxus, Expanding Conservation

This is the first book to address the care and preservation of Fluxus works, reimagining the afterlife of Fluxus by positioning conservation as an evolving, interpretive and generative framework.

Fluxus radically transformed artistic practice by challenging the entrenched preconception that artworks endure, unchanged and confined to a singular physical manifestation. Moving beyond conventional, object-based approaches, this interdisciplinary volume brings together artists, scholars, conservators and curators from diverse cultural and theoretical perspectives to explore how the ephemeral, participatory and intermedial forms of Fluxus demand an expanded vision of conservation—one grounded in activation. By reframing conservation as a critical, decolonial and creative inquiry, *Activating Fluxus, Expanding Conservation* redefines Fluxus as a living force continually remade through acts of care, interpretation and participation. It ultimately calls for a fundamental shift in how we preserve, interpret and transmit the experimental art practices of the recent past.

Offering fresh ways to engage with the legacy of Fluxus through the intersecting lenses of conservation, art history, performance studies and museology, this book will appeal to academics and students across these fields, as well as to curators and practitioners invested in the futures of contemporary art.

Hanna B. Hölling is research professor and principal investigator at the Bern University of the Arts, where she leads research in her area of expertise. She is also a senior fellow at Collegium Helveticum/ETH Zurich and an honorary fellow in the Department of History of Art at University College London.

Aga Wielocha is a researcher, collection care professional and conservator specializing in modern and contemporary art, with a PhD from the University of Amsterdam, awarded in 2021. Her doctoral research, conducted as part of the project *New Approaches in the Conservation of Contemporary Art* (NACCA), explored the lives and futures of contemporary art within museum collections, particularly focusing on works that are variable and unfold over time.

Josephine Ellis is a PhD candidate in the Studies in the Arts (SINTA) program of the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Bern and the Bern Academy of the Arts. Her research interests are situated at the intersections of histories and philosophies of art, science and conservation. She received her BA in history from the University of Durham and her MA in history of art from University College London.



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Routledge

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LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2026
by Routledge
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-032-96589-5 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-96613-7 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-59007-1 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003590071

Typeset in Times New Roman
by Apex CoVantage LLC

Published with the support of the Swiss National Science Foundation.

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Contributors

Bengt af Klintberg is a Swedish ethnologist, folklorist, author, poet and artist. He organized and was involved in the Fluxus concerts in Stockholm and Oslo in 1963. In addition to Fluxus, he began working with Happenings, experimental music, theater and poetry in the early 1960s. This resulted in poetry books such as *Stigar (Paths)*, 1959), *Ormkungens krona (The Crown of the Snake-King)*, 1961) and *Stockholmsspelet (The Stockholm Game)*, 1966). Today he is best known for his books on Swedish folklore, such as the bestseller *Råttan i pizzen (The Rat in the Pizza)*, 1986), *Den stulna njuren: Sagner och rykten i vår tid (The Stolen Kidney: Legends and Rumors in Our Time)*, 1994) and *Glitterspray & 99 andra klintbergare (Glitter Spray & 99 Other Klintbergare)*, 2005). He has also produced folklore programs for Swedish radio and was awarded the title of professor in 2006.

Eric Andersen is a Danish artist associated with Fluxus, and a pioneer of inter-media art. Andersen was a participant in one of Fluxus's early concerts, Festum Fluxorum, at Nikolai Kirke in Copenhagen in 1962. He then traveled to the Soviet Bloc, where he engaged with the emerging avant-garde networks. One of his journeys led to a misunderstanding among Fluxus artists, resulting in divisions and a flurry of letters that uncovered the tensions inherent in the Fluxus milieu. Andersen does not consider Fluxus as a unified network; rather, he views Fluxus as a loose association of differently thinking individuals. His *Opus*, conceived in the early 1960s and drawing on musical inspirations, exemplifies a scripted form of artwork that references action. Toying with paradoxes, and following a numerical description that rejects sequentiality, *Opus* often leaves the execution of actions to the individual.

Kit Brooks holds a PhD in Japanese art history from Harvard University, awarded in 2017. Specializing in prints and paintings of the Edo and Meiji periods, their primary research interests revolve around the re-evaluation of "eccentric" artists of the eighteenth century, the relationship between illustrated books and paintings, and special prints that emulate the visual qualities of other media, such as *surimono* and *takuhanga*. Brooks has held positions at the British Museum, Harvard Art Museums and the Children's Museum in Boston. They curated the exhibition *Uncanny Japan: The Art of Yoshitoshi (1839–1892)* at the Worcester

Art Museum (2015) and co-curated *Living Proof: Drawing in 19th-Century Japan* at the Pulitzer Arts Foundation (2017–18). Brooks is also a graduate of the CCL/Mellon Foundation Seminar in Curatorial Practice at the Center for Curatorial Leadership (2016).

Philip Corner was born in the Bronx, New York, in 1933, and lives in Italy. Corner is a visual artist, composer, vocalist, trombonist, music theorist and educator, among other things. Corner's affiliation to Fluxus can be traced to the early 1960s, born of his ties to Alison Knowles and Dick Higgins, as well as his involvement in the production of La Monte Young's *An Anthology of Chance Operations* (1961), a prototypical Fluxus publication designed by George Maciunas. Famously, Corner's score *Piano Activities* (1962) was performed at the Fluxus festival in Wiesbaden in 1962—without the artist himself. Although this performance of Corner's piece marked a canonical event in the history of Fluxus, Corner's own relationship with Fluxus is complex and his career has spanned many broad affiliations, including the Judson Dance Theater from 1962 to 1964 and, later, the Experimental Intermedia Foundation. Among other initiatives, Corner also co-founded the Tone Roads Chamber Ensemble, a contemporary music group, in 1963, and Sounds of Silent Spaces, an ensemble for music and ritual, in 1972. He is considered among the most significant composers and visual artists to have implemented unintentional sound, open forms of notation, chance operations, minimalism and non-Western instruments and tuning systems in his oeuvre.

Josephine Ellis is a PhD candidate in the research project *Activating Fluxus*, funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation, and in the Studies in the Arts (SINTA) program of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Bern and the Bern Academy of the Arts. She is also a recipient of the Charles Deering McCormick Library Research Grant from Northwestern University, Chicago. Her research interests are situated at the intersections of histories and philosophies of art, science and conservation. She received her BA in history from the University of Durham and her MA in history of art from University College London.

Ken Friedman joined Fluxus in 1966 on the invitation of Fluxus co-founder George Maciunas, as the youngest member of the group. Subsequently, he worked closely with artists and composers associated with Fluxus, such as Dick Higgins, Nam June Paik, John Cage and others. He was a director of Fluxus West, considered a gathering point for Fluxus-related activities in the western states of America. In addition to his art practice, Friedman has pursued an academic career and is currently chair professor of design innovation studies at Tongji University in Shanghai, and eminent scholar at the University of Cincinnati College of Design, Art, Architecture, and Planning. He is also a professor emeritus at Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne, where he formerly served as dean of the Faculty of Design. His research, situated at the intersection of design, management and art, focuses on strategic design and value

creation for economic innovation. Friedman has carried out research in theory construction, research methodology, philosophy of design, doctoral education in design, knowledge management and philosophy of science.

Marcus Gossolt is an artist, designer, curator, researcher and creative director of the communication agency Alltag (2005). He is the founder of the creative industry Pool Lattich (2016), the film company Drehtag (2016) and the artist duo Com&Com (1997). Com&Com's recent projects include *Bloch* (since 2011), *Nexplorer* (since 2020), *Point de Suisse* (2014–15) and *Mocmoc* (2003–8). Gossolt's work has been presented at several art biennials, including the Venice Biennale, and in exhibitions in Switzerland and worldwide. Gossolt has curated many exhibitions, such as *La réalité dépasse la fiction* (with Johannes M. Hedinger, CentrePasquArt, Biel, 2010), *Point de Suisse* (with Johannes M. Hedinger, Museum für Geschichte, Basel, 2015), the 2016 POTENTIALe design fair in Feldkirch, and the AR exhibitions *Art Brut* (Museum im Lagerhaus, St Gallen, 2013) and *Was zählt der Mensch?* (Museum Henry Dunant, Heiden, 2013), two of the first augmented reality exhibitions in Switzerland.

Natilee Harren is a scholar of modern and contemporary art history and theory, specializing in experimental, interdisciplinary practices after 1960. Her research centers on Fluxus and related avant-garde movements, intermedia, experimental scores, conceptual art, performance and the conservation of ephemeral artworks. Her critically acclaimed book *Fluxus Forms: Scores, Multiples, and the Eternal Network* (University of Chicago Press, 2020) offers a theoretically sophisticated intellectual history of the Fluxus collective, and has garnered wide citation across art history, musicology, performance studies, media studies, literature, education and design. Harren is also a contributing editor of *The Scores Project: Experimental Notation in Music, Art, Poetry, and Dance, 1950–1975* (Getty Research Institute, 2025), a major open-access volume exploring experimental notation among postwar avant-gardes. Harren's scholarship has been supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Council of Learned Societies, the Getty Research Institute and the Fulbright Program. She is a senior fellow of the Mellon Society of Fellows in Critical Bibliography at the Rare Book School of the University of Virginia, and associate professor and program head of art history at the University of Houston School of Art.

Johannes M. Hedinger is an artist, curator, educator, author and researcher. He is the artistic director of the Institute for Land and Environmental Art (ILEA), the outdoor biennale Art Safiental and the Alps Art Academy summer school. He has lectured at ZHdK Zurich since 2006 and at the Institut für Kunst und Kunsttheorie at the University of Cologne since 2010. Hedinger's curatorial work includes four iterations of Art Safiental (since 2016), ILEA Gallery (since 2020), *Tektonik* (2018), *Methods of Art* (Ural Industrial Biennale, Ekaterinburg, and Connecting Space Hong Kong, both 2015), *Point de Suisse* (with Marcus Gossolt, Museum für Geschichte, Basel, 2015) and iterations of Kunstsalon in Berlin (2007–8) and at Bard Hall, New York (2014). He is co-founder, with

Marcus Gossolt, of the art collective Com&Com. Their best-known projects are *Bloch* (since 2011) and *Mocmoc* (2003–8), and their work has been presented at several art biennials, including the Venice Biennale, as well as in over 150 exhibitions worldwide.

Hannah B Higgins is a scholar and author whose research examines twentieth-century avant-garde art, with a specific focus on Dadaism, Surrealism, Fluxus, Happenings, performance art, food art and early computer art. Her books and articles argue for the humanistic value of multi-modal sensory cognitive experience. Higgins is the solo author of *Fluxus Experience* (University of California Press, 2002) and *The Grid Book* (MIT Press, 2009), and co-editor with Douglas Kahn of *Mainframe Experimentalism: Early Computing and the Foundations of Digital Art* (University of California Press, 2012). She has received the UIC University Scholar Award, and DAAD, Getty Research Institute, Phillips Collection and Emily Harvey Foundation Fellowships. Higgins is the daughter of Fluxus artists Dick Higgins and Alison Knowles and is co-executor of the Estate of Dick Higgins and the Something Else Press. Higgins is professor in the Department of Art History and a founding director of IDEAS, an interdisciplinary arts major, at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Maggie Hire is a PhD candidate in the Department of Art and Archaeology at Princeton University, specializing in modern and contemporary art. Her research focuses on Central and Eastern Europe, with an emphasis on twentieth-century art in Germany and Poland. Hire received a BA in history of art and architecture and German studies from Brown University and an MA in the humanities program at the University of Chicago. She is the recipient of a Fulbright English Teaching Assistant Award (Berlin, 2016), a Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowship to pursue study of the Polish language at the University of Chicago (2019), and a Princeton Institute for International and Regional Studies summer study grant (2021). She has held positions with various museums and institutions, including the Grand Rapids Art Museum, The Frick Collection, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, Phillips auctioneers, Garth Greenan Gallery and the Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago. Currently, she is a curatorial assistant in the Department of Drawings and Prints at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Hanna B. Hölling is research professor and principal investigator at the Bern University of the Arts, where she leads research in her area of expertise. She is also a senior fellow at Collegium Helveticum/ETH Zurich and an honorary fellow in the Department of History of Art at University College London (UCL). Prior to her current roles, Hanna was associate professor in the Department of History of Art at UCL (until 2022) and Mellon Visiting Professor for Cultures of Conservation at the Bard Graduate Center in New York (2013–15). Hanna received her doctorate from the University of Amsterdam in 2013. She has also held the position of head of conservation at the ZKM Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe. Hanna's books include *Paik's Virtual Archive: On Time, Change,*

and *Materiality in Media Art* (University of California Press, 2017) and *Revisions—Zen for Film* (Bard Graduate Center, 2015), as well as anthologies *The Explicit Material: Inquiries on the Intersection of Curatorial and Conservation Cultures* (with Francesca G. Bewer and Katharina Ammann; Brill, 2017), *Object—Event—Performance: Art and Materiality Since the 1960s* (Bard Graduate Center, 2022), *Landscape* (with Johannes M. Hedinger; Vexer, 2020) and *Performance: The Ethics and the Politics of Conservation and Care* (with Jules Pelta Feldman and Emilie Magnin; Routledge, Vol. I, 2023, and Vol. II, 2024).

Rasmus Holmboe is a researcher and writer operating within the intersecting fields of art, curating, museum studies, sound studies and musicology. His former positions include a three-year postdoctoral fellowship at the research center Art as Forum at the University of Copenhagen, where he worked on a project with the Museum of Contemporary Art in Roskilde under the title *The Distributed Art Museum*. His PhD (2019) is titled “The Resonant Museum: Sound, Art and the Politics of Curating.” Holmboe’s work is characterized by a strong interest in the biopolitics of the material, social and political infrastructures of the art world.

Danielle Johnson is a researcher, scholar and writer whose work focuses on experimental art, music and film in the 1960s. In her role at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, she worked extensively on the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, conducting research, cataloging and planning installations.

Magnus Kaslov is curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Roskilde and is currently pursuing a PhD at SMK National Gallery of Denmark with a project on the histories of Danish sound art from 1948 to 1990. Kaslov has worked curatorially with a special focus on performance, sound and music in contemporary art for a number of years. Noted exhibitions include *Sound Painter Knud Viktor and His World* (2019) and *Henning Christiansen in High Seas* (2018). He also co-runs the independent research collective and record label Institute for Danish Sound Archaeology, releasing historic works by artist group Linien II, the artist Lene Adler Petersen and others.

Sally Kawamura is an art historian whose interests lie in 1960s Japanese experimental communities. Her doctoral thesis “Objects into Action: Group Ongaku and Fluxus” (2009, University of Glasgow) investigated the similarities and connections between avant-garde practices in Japan, Europe and America. Following a career break, she is now Daphne Jackson Fellow at the University of York, where she is focusing her attention on Japanese contemporary art, especially experimental groups in 1960s Japan and globally. Sally has published on the Fluxus artist Mieko Shiomi and loves to perform Shiomi’s pieces while out in nature.

Kate Lewis is media conservator and Agnes Gund Chief Conservator of the David Booth Conservation Center and Department at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. She earned her MA in the conservation of works of art on paper from

the University of Northumbria, Newcastle upon Tyne, and her BA in history of art from the Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London. She is currently an adjunct faculty member at the Conservation Center of the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, and serves on the board of Voices in Contemporary Art (VoCA).

Ann Noël is a British artist closely linked with the Fluxus network. Since 1980, she has resided and worked in Berlin, where she was the life and artistic partner of American artist and poet Emmett Williams. Noël's artistic expression spans various mediums, including performance, installation, painting, graphic design, printmaking and photography. She studied at the Bath Academy of Art in Corsham, graduating with a diploma in graphic art and design in 1968, whereupon she received an invitation to collaborate with Edition Hansjörg Mayer in Stuttgart. At the end of 1968, she relocated to New York to serve as an assistant to Dick Higgins at the Something Else Press. Between 1970 and 1972, alongside her own creative pursuits, she supervised the graphic workshop at the California Institute of the Arts in Los Angeles. From 1972 to 1974, Noël lectured in printmaking at NSCAD University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, where she established a silkscreen studio. From 1978 to 1980, Noël was a visiting artist at the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Peter Oleksik is a media conservator who has worked at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, since 2011 to conserve the museum's vast collection of time-based media, leveraging his extensive knowledge of analog and digital artistic practices. Oleksik received his BA in cinema studies from the University of Southern California and his MA from New York University's Moving Image Archiving and Preservation (MIAP) program. Since 2011, he has taught in the MIAP program and, more recently, at the Conservation Center of NYU's Institute of Fine Arts.

Émilie Parendeau is a researcher, artist and educator. In her artistic practice, she focuses on interpreting other artists' works and actualizing them. In taking over the process that accompanies their materialization, she brings in variations that aim to activate those works of art in the present. She has carried out most of these activations as part of the *A LOUER* project and in various exhibition venues, including Le Réfectoire (Lyon, 2009), Bétonsalon (Paris, 2010), Le Quartier (Quimper, 2011), Contemporary Art Center (Brétigny, 2011), Peep-Hole (Milan, 2012), Art 3 (Valence, 2014), Villa Arson (Nice, 2015), MacKenzie Art Gallery (Regina, 2018) and Art-Genève Fair (Geneva, 2020). For her 2016 show at MAMCO, Geneva, she reinterpreted a series of artworks from the collection, including pieces by John M. Armleder and Robert Filliou. Currently, she is working on her doctoral dissertation at the University of Valenciennes (supervised by Erik Verhagen), which looks at the production processes of the Fluxus multiples published by George Maciunas in the 1960s and 1970s.

Patrizio Peterlini graduated in modern literature and clinical psychology, and holds a DEA in conceptual and clinical psychoanalysis from Université Paris

8. He is a participating member of the Lacanian School of Psychoanalysis in Italy, and a member of the scientific committees of the Archivio Luciano Caruso in Florence, the BAU Contenitore di Cultura Contemporanea and the Comité de Suivi de l'EUR CREATES at the Université Côte d'Azur. From 2005 to 2010 he collaborated with the F. Conz Archive, taking care of its publications, exhibitions and cataloging of works and documents. Since 2013 he has been the director of Fondazione Bonotto. From 2017 to 2021 he was a permanent member of the jury of the Prix Littéraire Bernard Heidsieck-Centre Pompidou, which he helped establish. He has curated exhibitions in important international institutions and his work has been published in numerous art catalogs and psychoanalysis journals. Among his publications are *Riviste d'arte d'avanguardia. L'eseditoria in Italia negli anni 60 e 70* (with Giorgio Maffei, 2005); *Sarenco: le riviste, la lotta. Storia di un esploratore d'avanguardia* (2006); "Lo squartamento estetico. La distruzione della bellezza nella Body Art" (2006); *Fluxbooks. Fluxus Artist Books from the Luigi Bonotto Collection* (with Giorgio Maffei, 2015); *Arrigo Lora Totino. La parola come poesia segno suono gesto. 1962–1982* (with Giorgio Maffei, 2015); *Sense Sound/Sound Sense. Fluxus Music, Scores and Records in the Luigi Bonotto Collection* (with Walter Rovere and Giorgio Maffei, 2016); *Rivoluzione a parole. Poesia sperimentale internazionale dal 1946 a oggi. Manifesti e testi teorici* (2019); *Giovanni Fontana. Epigenetic Poetry* (2020); and *La voix libérée. Poésie sonore* (2019), an innovative catalog in the form of an app.

Mieko Shiomi 塩見 允枝子 (born Chieko Shiomi) is a musician, composer and visual artist. In 1957, she began her studies in musicology at the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music, where, in 1959, she formed the pioneering Group Ongaku (グループ音楽/Group Music), a free-improvisational ensemble with Takehisa Kosugi, Yasunao Tone and others. During that time and afterwards, she developed her musical ideas and appreciation for nature into objects and action-based pieces. In 1964, she joined Fluxus artists for a year in New York. Back in Japan, she continued composing and performing, and collaborated with 1960s Fluxus events in Japan. After marrying in 1970 and then having children, she altered her creative methods to be able to work at home, continuing her important mail-based work *Spatial Poem* (1965–75), begun in New York. Her tenth *Spatial Poem, Spatial Poem (2022 version)* "moving event" was exhibited at the Aichi Triennale 2022. From the 1990s onwards, Shiomi initiated and contributed to several international Fluxus festivals, exhibitions and concerts. In 2005, she produced a book entitled *Furukusasu to ha Nani ka (What Is Fluxus?)* (Tokyo: Film Art Sha). She is active today as a composer, performer and artist.

Inbal Strauss is a practice-led researcher investigating the politics of aesthetic production and reception. Trained as a product designer at Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem, and subsequently as a sculptor at Goldsmiths, University of London, Strauss questions the traditional distinction between these two creative modes of object-making, which hinges on how closely they adhere to the modernist dictum "form follows function." Accordingly, her recently completed

AHRC-funded doctoral thesis (University of Oxford), “Form Unfollows Function: Subversions of Functionality in Modern Art,” combines scholarly writing and critical object-making to explore the implications of considering art-making as a design process, and, correspondingly, artworks as designed objects. Strauss has been an A. W. Mellon Junior Teaching Fellow at the Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology and an AHRC Predoctoral Research Fellow at the Smithsonian American Art Museum Research and Scholars Center. She has taught at Oxford University, Stanford University, Sarah Lawrence College and elsewhere. Her objects and texts have appeared in numerous exhibitions and publications, including *OAR: The Oxford Artistic and Practice-Based Research Platform* (2018) and the *Document of the Testimony, Deliberation, and Reflection of the Artist Citizens Jury 2022*. Her article “‘Making Sense’ of Art through Design: Towards a Multisensory Theory of Reception Aesthetics,” appeared in 2024 in the Sorbonne’s refereed journal *Sillages critiques*.

Ben Vautier is a French artist known for his text-based paintings and involvement in Fluxus. Vautier’s Fluxus works circled around defining art as a practice that unifies life, objects and philosophy. Born Benjamin Vautier on July 18, 1935, in Naples, he moved with his mother to the South of France in 1949. In 1958, Vautier left his job at a bookstore and opened a stationery and record store. He ran Laboratory 32 (Le Magasin) from 1958 to 1973, creating a salon-like meeting place for people to discuss new ideas. During this time, Vautier met Yves Klein, John Cage and George Macunias, becoming involved in the early stages of the Fluxus art movement. The artist continued producing work surrounding everyday life over the following decades, while also working as an advocate for minority rights in France. Vautier lives and works in Nice. His works are held in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, the Centre Pompidou in Paris, and the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, among others.

Aga Wielocha is a researcher, collection care professional and conservator specializing in modern and contemporary art, with a PhD from the University of Amsterdam, awarded in 2021. Her doctoral research, conducted as part of the project *New Approaches in the Conservation of Contemporary Art* (NACCA), explored the lives and futures of contemporary art within museum collections, focusing in particular on works that are variable and unfold over time. Aga’s research interests revolve around the mechanisms and processes of institutional art collecting, emphasizing contemporary formats such as art projects, participatory art and performance. Currently, she holds a postdoctoral position at the Bern Academy of the Arts, contributing to the research project *Activating Fluxus*. Previously, Aga worked at Hong Kong’s M+ Museum, where she devised efficient documentation strategies to support the care of expanding collections encompassing visual art, design, architecture and moving images. Before pursuing her doctorate, she served as a conservator at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw and worked for many years in private practice. She holds a master’s degree in the conservation and restoration of works of art from the Academy of Fine Arts, Warsaw.

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Preface

This volume emerges from the four-year research project *Activating Fluxus*, funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation at the Bern Academy of the Arts (2022–26, grant nr. 100016_200951). Including members Hanna B. Hölling (principal investigator and project lead), Aga Wielocha (postdoctoral fellow), Josephine Ellis (doctoral candidate), the artistic collaborators Marcus Gossolt and Johannes M. Hedinger, project assistant Basile Mudry and associated researchers Elke Gruhn, Sally Kawamura, Stefanie Manthey and Émilie Parendeau, it is the first research project that, in an international setting and independent of collecting institutions—though remaining in a fruitful dialogue with them—focuses on the question of conservation, qua activation, in relation to Fluxus.

The project is deeply indebted to the many individuals, institutions and archives that have contributed to its scholarship—whether through the session “Activating Fluxus, Expanding Conservation,” organized at the College Art Association in Chicago on February 15, 2024, or through the so-called Fluxus Study Days, the project’s regular research series comprising lectures, discussions and group and individual study days in collections and archives in Colceresa, Dortmund, Bochum, Berlin, Mönchengladbach, Cologne and Wiesbaden. The invited speakers for our Fluxus Study Days and research seminar series—whose lectures have been made available as recordings on the project’s channel—as well as those who contributed to informal discussions, have proved essential to the project’s cumulative knowledge base. The contributors include, among others, Ina Blom, Judit Bodor, Horst Bredekamp, Luigi Bonotto, Lionel Bovier, Colby Chamberlain, Clémentine Deliss, Ayesha Fuentes, Alessandro Gazzotti, Elke Gruhn, Andrea Gyrody, Natilee Harren, Hannah B Higgins, Magdalena Holdar, Tim Ingold, Danielle Johnson, Sally Kawamura, Kate Lewis, Mariamargherita Maceli, Hannah Mandel, Natasha Lushetich, Laura Montanari, Megan Metcalf, Julia Elizabeth Neal, Émilie Parendeau, Patrizio Peterlini, Peter Oleksik, Henar Rivière, Julia Robinson, Heike Roms, Anna Schäffler, Inbal Strauss, Hubertus von Amelunxen, Peter Alexander van der Meijden, Caroline Ugelstad and Gregory Zinman. The “Writings” section on the project’s website features several reflections on these topics.

We have been fortunate enough to learn from several of the first generation of Fluxus artists, among them Bengt af Klintberg, Eric Andersen, Philip Corner (with Phoebe Neville), Ken Friedman, Alison Knowles and Ann Noël. In

addition, authors from diverse professional backgrounds and career stages have contributed writings, interviews and reflections to the project's website, as well as towards group meetings, including Elke Allgaier, Mattia Cavoli, Elke Gruhn, Johannes M. Hedinger, Magdalena Holdar, Danielle Johnson, Sally Kawamura, Kate Lewis, Hannah Mandel, Stefanie Manthey, Peter Oleksik, Émilie Parendeau, Felicia Rappe, Melanie Seidler, Inbal Strauss and Weronika Trojańska (along with this book's editors). Together with the contributors to the project's podcast, Radio Fluxus, which shares stories of intimate encounters with Fluxus works by authors Alice Centamore, Yann Chateigné Tytelman, Jules Pelta Feldman, Ken Friedman, Elke Gruhn, Albrecht Gumlich, Magdalena Holdar, Sally Kawamura, Sean Miller and Rachel Rivenc, these initiatives have left an invaluable intellectual imprint.

The project's realization would have been impossible without the continuous support of many individuals. We would like to acknowledge the unwavering support of our research department at Bern Academy of the Arts, led by Thomas Gartmann, and the Institute for Materiality in Art and Culture, headed by Sebastian Dobrusskin until 2025 and by Nina Mekacher from 2025 onward. We are grateful to Heidi Lowther and Chris Parry, assisted by Heeranshi Sharma and Marcia Adams, for their support in the realization of this volume. Very special thanks are extended to Bill Roberts for his invaluable editorial expertise.

Most importantly, without the generous support from the Swiss National Science Foundation—both for the project *Activating Fluxus* and through the Book Publication Fund—this publication and the dissemination of our research would not have been possible.

Our deepest thanks,
The editors

I love that legacy, and I think it can be kept alive, the sense of play.

[An] important aspect of Fluxus was taking chances and creating out of almost nothing, and especially if you have the right kind of brain for it. . . . I was married to Emmett Williams for thirty-seven years. So I guess something rubbed off over all of those years.

Ann Noël

You have to accept that the work will change. . . . This is the beauty of it. . . . So, don't ask me to define anything at all.

I would prefer to remake my works instead of using the same materials from, say, the 1960s. I want my works to become new situations based on old proposals.

Confusion certainly is much more interesting than confirmation.

Eric Andersen

If you compare Fluxus performance pieces to folklore, some of them have an obvious resemblance of traditional out- or indoor games. The participants have to follow certain rules, but they can also use their own imagination and add details which are accepted by other performers. I would not be surprised if some Fluxus pieces end up as anonymous games, played by people who have no idea about their origin.

Bengt af Klintberg

There's no great creativity in my work. I see it as discoveries of what is already in the universe, just waiting to be revealed.

Philip Corner

As far as the future for my works is concerned, I haven't concretely or clearly envisioned anything. . . . Even for my works from now, the one characteristic that won't change in the future is that they will be able to take any shape depending on the real-world conditions.

Mieko Shiomi

Arman's incredible marble
for 30 years
in front of the Élysée entrance,
and there have been more than 10 presidents.
Arman is dead,
but the marble's still there.
I look at my Swatch watch and
I hate the passage of time.

Ben Vautier † 2024
(editors' translation from French)

To activate means to take something that is quiet or still and bring it to life. To activate could be a little bit like Frankenstein's monster, assembling something from dead parts, bringing them together. . . . Other times, it could mean bringing attention to something that is potentially active, but something must happen to realize the potential.

Ken Friedman

On modes of activity and activation

An introduction

Hanna B. Hölling and Josephine Ellis

Starting with nothing?

Persistent vitality permeates these words from the Fluxus network, more than sixty years after its first manifestation. Whether it is the sense of play in Ann Noël, discovery in Philip Corner, confusion and novelty in Eric Andersen, imagination in Bengt af Klintberg, theoretical potential in Ken Friedman, openness in Mieko Shiomi or the struggle with time in the late Ben Vautier (who passed away as this book was being compiled), the radical force of Fluxus, which transformed creative practice by challenging art's boundaries and conventions, abides and remains present.

The liveliness of Fluxus forms as modes of artistic expression is often assumed to be ephemeral, transitory and elusive—an embodiment of the permanent flux at the root of its name. The term “Fluxus” derives from Latin, meaning “flowing,” while in English it refers to the action of flowing out and, in a medicinal context, the discharge of a substance from or within the body. Harnessing these associations, Fluxus came to signify “a revolutionary flood and tide in art,” aiming to “promote living art and anti-art,” in the words of its initiator, George Maciunas.¹ Fluxus, then, appears antithetical to conservation, which—at least in its Western origins—has long been grounded in the principles of material preservation, emphasizing stability and fixity as a means of ensuring the persistence of physical form.

In this book, we challenge these deeply rooted assumptions. While conservation has, for the most part, been thought to stifle the legacy of Fluxus, we argue that by embracing Fluxus's playful yet profound ethos of change, engaging Fluxus works and their wider material-conceptual worlds pushes conservation beyond its comfort zones into interpretive, imaginative and creative horizons. The paradox here, and one of the book's main contentions, is that in thinking through the ongoing trajectories and continuing life of Fluxus, ephemerality and materiality coexist. This encounter between Fluxus and conservation leaves a mutual trace. Not only does it put a finger on the matter of Fluxus—its vibrant materialism and material power propelled (rather than stilled) by the passage of time and unhalted by institutions and archives for more than half a century—but it also fundamentally reshapes the foundational assumptions of conservation.

Thinking through Fluxus vis-à-vis the idiom of expanded conservation is thus the formational story of this book. Employing the concept of “activation,”

2 *Activating Fluxus, Expanding Conservation*

Activating Fluxus, Expanding Conservation examines the lives and afterlives—the past, present and potential future—of Fluxus objects, events and ephemera created globally in the 1960s and 1970s, and thereafter. At the same time, it critically rethinks the very concept of activation itself, enriching and nuancing its meanings to better reflect Fluxus’s resonance for conservation theory and practice.

Fluxus fundamentally transformed creative practice, not least by questioning the dominant preconception of the artwork as something that endures unchanged and is confined to a singular physical manifestation. Uncomfortable with the standardized processes of musealization, conservation and display, our book considers these fundamentally transitory aspects of Fluxus forms—events, event scores and transitional objects—not destined for preservation. Anchored in a multidisciplinary lens informed by conservation, curation, art history, performance studies and museology, while also drawing on discourses as diverse as psychoanalysis, posthumanism, oral history theory, philosophy, reception aesthetics and translation studies, to name a few examples, it seeks new ways to engage with one of the richest legacies of twentieth-century art.

This volume emerges from the four-year research project *Activating Fluxus* (2022–26), supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation and shaped by the insight, dialogue and generosity of many collaborators. Bringing together scholars, practitioners and artists—those linked with the Fluxus network in both its historic and contemporary iterations—this book offers a new theoretical and practical approach to Fluxus, examining the art systems and the institutional frameworks within which it operates. It addresses key concerns for museums, private collections and foundations that house Fluxus forms by foregrounding the often-overlooked material aspects of Fluxus artworks and the concerns of artists and stakeholders that have not been at the forefront of the art world. While Fluxus began entering collections decades ago, its care continues to challenge traditional preservation practices, as well as the infrastructures of collecting and display. Moreover, relevant literature on these topics is practically nonexistent. This book explores these challenges through conceptual and practical case studies, as well as artistic interventions, offering pioneering solutions and considering their potential to transform how we collect and preserve not only Fluxus but also the art of the recent past more broadly.

“Starting with nothing is a good way to get somewhere,” Dick Higgins once said.² The present book builds on the few existing initiatives while proposing new approaches to Fluxus stewardship and theorization. Uniquely examining Fluxus through a conservation lens—while simultaneously expanding the field of conservation both critically and creatively—the contributors to this book recognize the need for both scholars and collection stewards, including curators, collection managers, librarians, archivists and conservators, to engage with this understudied and, in some cases, rare area of discourse.

Fluxus is fluxing

What exactly was—or is—Fluxus? Harry Ruhé describes Fluxus as “the most radical and experimental art movement of the sixties,” while Henry Martin dismisses

it as “a wild-geese chase into the zone of everything ephemeral”—two contrasting views presented in Clive Phillpot and Jon Hendricks’s introduction to their 1988 Fluxus catalog.³ These perspectives point to Fluxus’s layered identity and resistance to any singular definition—a view that remains relevant both despite and because of the growing scholarship and numerous exhibitions on Fluxus since the 1988 publication. For Hannah B Higgins, it is precisely because the nature of Fluxus cannot be pinned down and instead remains open to contestation and debate that “the spirit of flux in Fluxus remains alive.”⁴ “Fluxus is fluxing,” a statement by an unknown Fluxus participant, is a case in point.

Without attempting a complete definition, then, Fluxus might be loosely described as the first truly international forum of artists, composers and designers, more a state of mind than a fixed art movement, at times controversially centered around (though irreducible to) George Maciunas.⁵ Maciunas initially chose the word “Fluxus” as the title for a Lithuanian cultural club magazine in October 1960, but by 1961 it had become the name of an art-related publication.⁶ Fundamentally opposed to the elitism of traditional institutions and systems of culture, Fluxus engaged in a blending of art forms, media and disciplines in the 1960s and 1970s, with overarching aims to destabilize the boundaries between art and life, as well as to make art (and art-making) available to everybody.⁷ With partial roots in Dada, Fluxus prolifically propagated a “do-it-yourself” aesthetics that valued simplicity over complexity.⁸ More direct origins of Fluxus lie in the concept of “indeterminacy,” as explored in the experimental music of American composer John Cage in the 1950s. Implementing a variety of expressive means, such as experimental music, poetry and film, electronic media and provisional objects, as well as performance, Happenings and events, Fluxus operated—at times syncretically, at times eclectically—somewhere between the performing and the visual arts.⁹ Events, with their short “scores,” new music, Fluxboxes and kits, editions, newspapers and newsletters belong to the diversity of Fluxus’s creative output.¹⁰

An overview of the published sources—from art and cultural history, by scholars such as Owen F. Smith, Ina Blom, Peter Frank, Jon Hendricks, Clive Phillpot, Hannah B Higgins, Thomas Kellein, Julia Robinson, Dorothea Richter, Kristine Stiles and, more recently, by Natilee Harren, Magdalena Holdar and Colby Chamberlain,¹¹ through media theory, philosophy and aesthetics, to cultural sources—demonstrates that Fluxus lacks homogeneity and resists compartmentalization into preexisting concepts of art genres and media.¹² (Chapter 1, by Natilee Harren, provides a comprehensive account of the first five waves of published literature on Fluxus.) However, it is these modernist-inflected discourses of media purity that underpin the logic of how we collect, exhibit and conserve art today.¹³

To counter the modernist ideals of discrete, self-contained media, Dick Higgins, an important figure in Fluxus’s theoretical and publishing landscape, proposed the concept of “intermedia.” Widely discussed and meaningfully theorized by scholars including Ina Blom, among others, the concept of intermedia describes artistic activities such as visual poetry and performance art that dissolve the boundaries between various genres and media, and between art and life.¹⁴ Moreover, Fluxus’s musical roots and instruction-based logic,¹⁵ expressed through graphic notation and descriptive or abstract scores, played a pivotal yet historically undervalued role in

4 *Activating Fluxus, Expanding Conservation*

advancing conceptual tendencies in the 1960s.¹⁶ Postulating a basis for Fluxus in experimental and avant-garde music rather than in the visual arts—along with the difficulty of documenting early events, the anti-art character of historical Fluxus, its independent system of distribution and its inherent internationalism—might also explain why its formative influence upon other movements has remained underappreciated for so long.¹⁷ Unsurprisingly, Fluxus has also received limited attention in conservation discourses, however extended.¹⁸

Fluxus is frequently understood as primarily event- and therefore time-bound, a perspective that often sidelines deeper engagement with its material dimensions.¹⁹ Yet, through the lenses of conservation, collecting and museum practices, a more nuanced consideration of Fluxus's materiality becomes necessary—one that reveals its role not as incidental or subordinate to conceptual and performative aspects, but as an active contributor to the generation of meaning. Instead of standing in opposition to performativity, Fluxus materials enact a different mode of performance, expressing themselves on a multitude of levels and manifesting in a variety of intensities and forms. As this chapter and those that follow show, the life and liveness of Fluxus—along with activity and activation—can emerge in the most unexpected places.

The material legacy of Fluxus stems, among other sources, from the deliberate production of objects that conform to, subvert or deconstruct traditional conventions of consumer culture and commodification in the postwar world, particularly in the United States, Western Europe and Japan.²⁰ To disseminate these objects, several simulated “institutional” and “commercial” frameworks were created for presenting and distributing editions and multiples, a precedent arguably set by Daniel Spoerri's *Edition MAT* (*Multiplication d'Art Transformable*), launched in Paris in 1959. While Maciunas's “production line” of Fluxus publications—mostly manufactured for the New York Fluxshop, which opened in 1965—is most closely associated with the creation of canonical Fluxus multiples and artifacts, it was by no means the sole site of such activity. Other notable enterprises include the Fluxshop's European branch, operated by Willem de Ridder from Amsterdam; *La Cédille qui sourit*, established by Robert Filliou and George Brecht in Villefranche-sur-Mer, France (1965); Geoffrey Hendricks's and Brian Buczak's *Money for Food Press* (1980); and Barbara Moore's *ReFlux Editions* (1983), both also based in New York. Broadly speaking, these initiatives functioned as artistic schemes (or, in Moore's case, as a continuation of Maciunas's) designed to produce and distribute radically democratized art and non-art objects, in an attempt to challenge the increasing commodification of art in traditional commercial and institutional settings.

The objects produced through these and other initiatives found their way into several major collections. Among the most significant are the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection at the Museum of Modern Art in New York; the Jean Brown Papers at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles; the George Maciunas Memorial Collection at the Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth in Hanover, New Hampshire; the Archiv Sohm at Staatsgalerie Stuttgart; and the Fluxus West Collection at the University of Iowa Libraries. Other collections of Fluxus objects

include the Fluxus collection owned by Wolfgang Feelisch, the Herman Braun and Oliver-Simon Lieff Collection administered and exhibited by the Museum Ostwall in Dortmund, the Dorothee and Erik Andersch Collection at the Museum Abteiberg in Mönchengladbach and the Marie and Milan Knížák Fluxus Collection at the Kunsthalle Praha, to name just a few, as well as private collections and foundations including the Fondazione Bonotto in Colceresa, Archivio Pari&Dispari in Reggio Emilia and Archivio Conz in Berlin. This rich body of material—subject to transformation over time—offers an important means through which we access Fluxus today.²¹

The technique of conservation

But what, precisely, is conservation, and what does it mean to conserve? Encompassing terms such as “preservation,” “restoration” and “care,” conservation is a cultural technique rooted in evolving ideas and shifting contexts.²² As an intentional human activity, it has existed throughout history. Many historical objects, performances, practices and behaviors have reached us because someone chose to pass them on.

Conservation is a way of knowing, in that it actively draws out and constructs meaning from objects. Yet it has never been a universally constituted truth; rather, it is culturally contingent and historically determined.²³ To conserve, therefore, has as many meanings as there are cultures of conservation, including but not limited to the artisanal, artistic, scientific and humanistic (or value-based), as well as non-Western practices. These diverse forms have long coexisted, each emerging from and contributing to distinct ways of knowing.²⁴ The diverse cultures of practice, ways of thinking, mindsets, ethics and aesthetics, and a wide range of specializations—as well as the nonspecialist interventions in conservation, including so-called botched restorations in nonprofessional contexts—ultimately resist any attempt to define conservation narrowly or conclusively.

Conservation has traditionally been associated with the physical enhancement of both the structure and appearance of objects imbued with specific value—particularly in the West, where it has been linked with expert mending, repair and restoration—but it has now evolved beyond simply extending the material lives of objects. Today, conservation is increasingly concerned with materiality rather than only the material, investigating how an object’s identity and meaning are linked to conceptions of time, environment, values, politics, economy, norms and culture.²⁵ Conservation now extends beyond “objects” to include people, addressing the intersubjective and intergenerational transmission of tradition, memory, skills, techniques and expertise—whether tangible or intangible. The “care practice” that conservation is increasingly understood as asserts care as tending to others and/or demonstrating kindness or concern.²⁶ To cultivate conservation as a kind of care is to develop a relational ethics between the carer and cared for, underpinned by context-bound approaches toward morality, response-ability and decision-making.²⁷

However, conservation in much of the Western world—its institutions and circles of influence—remains largely governed by an ontology that still privileges

classical ideals such as authenticity, originality, singular authorial intent and expert authority. These values remain dominant in prevailing understandings of what it means to conserve in art history, museology and curatorial studies. Yet, a growing shift is underway toward a more profound conception of conservation as a textual, material, social, epistemic and, above all, critically decolonial practice. This emerging approach attends not only to the cultures it engages but also to those it helps produce. Our project positions itself as part of this movement.

To expand conservation—one of the objectives of our research project and the resulting book—is therefore to move beyond practices focused solely on repair, mending, physical integrity and the prevention of change or alteration. This expansion involves repositioning conservation within a realm of creativity and interpretation, articulating an approach that is relational, relativistic, discursive and at times disruptive. The notion of conservation that operates in this book involves both a focused hands-on and minds-on engagement: an attentiveness to the materiality of things, the continuous transformation of forms and the inherent impermanence of artistic creation. Such expansive conservation looks at the discursive potentials of upkeep, maintenance, revival, re-enactment, redoing, display, publication and research, to name but a few. In our book, we understand these practices as forms of activation.

Activation as laboratory: laying the groundwork

Coming to terms (with activation)

Activating Fluxus, Expanding Conservation deploys “activation” as a laboratory and experimental terrain to put ideas into play. It seeks to challenge prevailing conservation assumptions and, through the conservation lens, explore the potential for vitality and continuity in Fluxus social-material networks, with broader implications for artworks and material culture.

To “activate” commonly signifies a process that makes something active or operational. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, activation is defined as “the act of making something start or making it start working,”²⁸ but its meaning shifts across different contexts. For example, in biology, activation involves stimulating a cell or molecule to perform its function; in psychology, it refers to triggering a mental process or emotional response; and in technology, it denotes enabling or starting a system.

The term “actualization,” often used interchangeably with “activation,” refers to making something real, concrete or fully realized. In philosophy, psychology and self-development, it signifies—with relevance to our context—transforming potential or ideas into reality. In Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, “self-actualization” represents the fulfillment of a person’s potential and the realization of their abilities and aspirations, marking the final stage of five basic needs: physiological, safety, love, esteem and self-actualization. Closely related is the term “actuation,” which refers to initiating mechanical or physical movement, such as activating a valve or switch. In our book, these notions appear with varying degrees of interpretation.

The context of fine art offers an understanding of activation as a set of actions applied to historical performances with the aim to animate them within contemporary contexts, emphasizing an active relationship between artwork, viewer and performer.²⁹ The term has become increasingly prevalent,³⁰ often used in place of the more contested “re-enactment.” Museums use it to describe performance display strategies (a work is “activated in the gallery,” for example)³¹ and some authors go so far as to suggest that a performance work only exists “in the moment of its activation.”³² This trend has roots in the conservation of video and installation art, as well as concept-based works, where moments of reinstallation were considered the sole instances in which the works fully came into being.

In the context of broader taxonomic tendencies that give rise to notions such as re-enactment, recreation and reanimation, activation is frequently paired with the prefix “re-,” signifying a process of reckoning and return.³³ In his seminal book *Reactivations* (2018), performance scholar Philip Auslander convincingly draws on Walter Benjamin’s concept of “reactivation,” where technical reproduction detaches an object from tradition while reintroducing it to “the beholder or listener in his own particular situation.”³⁴

Theater and performance studies scholar Rebecca Schneider uses the concept of “inter(in)animation” to explore the relationship between performance and history. Leaning on her reading of Fred Moten and John Donne, she posits “inter(in) animation” as “a constant (re)turn of, to, from, and between states in animation.”³⁵ In these cross-temporal engagements, the focus is less on distinguishing between the dead and the living, or what is live and what has passed, and more on “the ways the dead play across the bodies of the living, and the living replay the dead”—a dynamic central to the concept of inter(in)animation.³⁶ Her eloquent questioning of the temporality “of intermedia, of syncopated time, and of theatrical acts,” along with the arguments by Benjamin and Auslander, are crucial in grasping activation as a process of presencing the work as the constant movement between different active—or “animate,” per Schneider—states.

In archival studies, activation is often conditioned upon memory and tacit and/or explicit knowledge, and, more tangibly, upon the presence of documentation, an archive and further sources on the basis of which a work is experienced.³⁷ Eric Ketelaar asserts every interaction and interpretation of the archive as its activation, which alters what survives.³⁸

The archive, however, is not merely a physical space housing documentary material; it also entails memory, residue and interpretation. Since Michel Foucault, contemporary theories have expanded the concept of the archive beyond a collection of records and their storage location, framing it as a quasi-transcendental, metaphysical space.³⁹ Knut Ebeling and Stephan Günzel speak of “two bodies of [the] archive”—an institution and a conception, a working space and a method.⁴⁰ As a dynamic space conditioning activation, the archive is also regulative, in that it generates and sanctions statements (Foucault)—a reason why, in postcolonial critique, archives have been critically reassessed as perpetuating and reinforcing forms of hegemonic power.

An ontology of the artwork, understood as mutually interdependent with its archive, conceives the work as a virtual potential ready to be actualized in the

present.⁴¹ Relevant in our context, and probed by Hanna B. Hölling in *Paik's Virtual Archive* in relation to media art, this ontology draws on Henri Bergson's philosophy of the virtual and the actual, as well as its Deleuzian interpretation.⁴² The virtual and the actual follow different logics. While possibility implies a state that awaits realization through limitation and resemblance, virtuality exists in a state of pure potentiality without preexistence. Actualization, distinct from realization, follows the principles of difference and creation rather than resemblance. In the archive, artworks exist in both virtual and real states, with their changeability residing in their capacity to be actualized. This transformation from the virtual to the actual does not exceed the virtual's potential but instead unfolds, resisting linearity, as one of its many possible manifestations. Conservators play an active, creative role in this process, as actualization itself is inherently creative. The identity of a work persists despite the variability of its actualizations. The archive, in its heterogeneity, accommodates both the virtual type of an artwork and the historical tokens of its actualizations. Because actualization, and, by extension, activation, always occur in the present, their only obligation is to the present.⁴³

Tracing activation

In the context of Fluxus, the potentiality of activation is perhaps what Mieko Shiomi has in mind when she states that her works "will be able to take any shape depending on the real-world conditions" (Chapter 10). Yoko Ono might similarly be understood as invoking activation when she describes her *Instruction Paintings*, first manifest in 1961, as "separat[ing] paintings in two different functions, the instructions and the realization. The work becomes a reality when others realize the work."⁴⁴ In Fluxus scholarship, this potentiality has been further explored in Harren's analysis of George Brecht's *The Case* and *The Dome* (both 1959), and their accompanying instructions, which "(with varying levels of clarity) were printed on a takeaway brown paper bag, yet another functional object potentially to be activated."⁴⁵ Elsewhere in Fluxus, "activation" has been used to describe engagements with musical instruments, such as those by Joe Jones, or interactions with performance remnants and relics, like those by Charlotte Moorman. It has also been used to signify the realization of a score by Brecht, a diagram by Maciunas or Higgins and a sensory game by Shiomi (often referred to as the "activation of senses," extending beyond vision). In addition, "activation" has been applied to a collaborative Fluxus box (which must be "activated by a viewer"), a network ("activated by anyone from anywhere") and an awareness fostered by Fluxus scores ("proposing the activation of perceptual awareness").⁴⁶

Beyond Fluxus, artists and performers frequently use "activation" to point to an event that brings a work to the public, or to document it, such as Florence Jung's "activation protocols," which the artist deliberately keeps arcane.⁴⁷ Deploying activation as intrinsic to his implements/sculptures, artist Franz Erhart Walter points to the storage form and action form of artworks in his *Werkstücke*.⁴⁸ Importantly, and implying a radical form of changeability, rather than assuming inactivity, the storage form of Walter's work is but a *different state* of the same work.

This notion of activation as a shifting state, rather than a strict passive versus active dichotomy, resonates with many Fluxus works. Letters containing scores, games including original objects, documentary photographs reified into artworks all reflect a similar oscillation and, on an institutional level, resist the standardized processes of musealization, conservation and display. As Jules Pelta Feldman, former archivist of the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection, observes, these objects, whose “identities, auras, and meanings will continue to shift,” challenge the very notion of establishing a taxonomy or a set of determinant criteria for their collection.⁴⁹ In other words, they can reside just as easily in the archive as in the collection, though with significant implications for their accessibility and the preservation of context. Even if a (Fluxus) work continues to change, it can simultaneously maintain its identity—which might even be enriched—over time. This aligns with Eric Andersen’s statement in this volume that “the work changes constantly, and there’s no limit to the number of changes” (Chapter 13), even as “the cast changes, the people change,” as Ann Noël puts it (Chapter 12). These perspectives are important, as they free the notion of activation from its traditional modality, that is, from the assumption that works are dead or inactive, or await an external stimulus to be enlivened or revived. Similar to how Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing puts it in relation to her “arts of noticing,” we look for inconspicuous instances of life, where life might be latent, but exists already.⁵⁰

Stuck in binaries?

The oppositions between life and death, activity and inertia (or dormancy), and dynamism and stasis play a significant role in conservation. Framing activation solely as a means of enlivening otherwise deadened artworks reflects such binary thinking. This perspective likely arises from conceiving objects as separate from—or even in a strict contrast to—events, on the one hand, and from a broader separation between objects and subjects, on the other. Miriam Clavir cautioned against this very point in 1996 when she addressed the separation between material and living culture.⁵¹ She warned, “One should not assume a false dichotomy by posing object conservation against cultural preservation”—highlighting the persistent tension between material and living culture at the heart of the challenges faced by museums that deal with ethnographic, anthropological and performance-based collections.⁵²

An alternative to the object/event separation lies in conceiving of all works as temporal phenomena—happening in time—with objects understood as slow performances and performances as quickly happening objects. This theory of relative duration enables us to apprehend works as existing in time, in duration, moving beyond the rigid binary of permanence and impermanence.⁵³ A further alternative challenges this binary by proposing activity as inherent to all beings (more on this shortly).

However, in practice, these dichotomies and false divisions persist. They reinforce a politics of introjection that perpetuates an unequal distribution of agency and power. The conservator is often positioned as the one who holds agency over

the work that is presumed mute, passive and in need of treatment, enlivening or activation. This dynamic upholds the Foucauldian regulative principle—the normalizing operations of power—sustaining, for example, the subject–object divide deeply embedded in dominant Western epistemologies.

Challenging these entrenched binaries requires rethinking the cultural frameworks through which matter is understood. Against the grain of classical science and modern philosophy, a growing body of scholars conceives of matter as intrinsically vital rather than inert or mechanistic. As political philosopher Jane Bennett writes in her account of “vibrant matter,” things typically considered mute objects have the ability “not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own.”⁵⁴ In this view, the human agent is no longer isolated from material forces of the natural world, but firmly embedded in an environment where agency is dispersed across and co-constitutes fundamentally relational fields with nonhumans.

Accounting for the agency of more-than-human worlds is central to posthumanism, which, in one of its multiple meanings, indicates a departure from the anthropocentric idea that humans occupy a unique, essential and exceptional position in nature.⁵⁵ This shift carries profound implications for how we conceptualize the materials of artworks and artifacts, inviting greater attentiveness to the potentials opened up by material transformation, not as a failure of preservation, but as evidence of ongoing vitality (discussed further by Josephine Ellis in Chapter 6). Anthropocentrism may lead us to overlook that life and activity occur in places we least expect them—in cracks and folds, within and beneath the surface, where insects or degradation processes sustain life-generating networks. An extreme example of such activity can be found in Albrecht Gumlich’s narration of an exploding tin of sardines in Ben Patterson’s *Hooked*,⁵⁶ the mites inhabiting Alison Knowles’s *Bean Bag* (1978)⁵⁷ and in the rotting animal cadaver collected as a Fluxus fetish by Francesco Conz (see Hölling in Chapter 3). Furthermore, this perspective may cause us to disregard that the normative subject–object relations in conservation are insufficient for understanding the complex, agential capacities of objects.

Affirming activity

Grounded in conservation, yet expanding into creative, interpretive and translatative frameworks, our project centers activation as a concept that relativizes the binary oppositions of activity versus inactivity, life versus death and similar polarities. Rather than assuming the inactivity, inertia or immobility of matter to which a force must be applied to render it alive, effective or operational, the meaning of activation is nuanced to include the varying forms, degrees and intensities in which life already operates in things. Affirming relational ontologies, activation acknowledges these states. Instead of viewing activity as an epitome of liveness in relation to death (or presence in relation to disappearance), we understand it, to paraphrase Schneider, as an ongoing movement toward, away from and between different states within activation, in which activity is never in advance of nor after a death.⁵⁸

The meanings of activation, following Ellis in this volume, are particular to the matter at hand (Chapter 6). Activation, then, draws conscious attention to the pervasive activity of matter convincingly discussed in recent conservation scholarship, including by Peter Miller and Soon Kai Poh in *Conserving Active Matter* (2022).⁵⁹ Against the conception of inert objects which have to be enlivened by external force, Ellis draws on philosopher Gilbert Simondon's critique of hierarchical relations between matter and form to further reimagine what it means to activate, "less as a 'making active' than as adding to the repertoire of the already active, another potential expression of an artwork's transformation" (p. 157).

This impetus is not exclusive to the Western line of inquiry and its knowledge institutions. Assuming, along a similar axis, the impossibility of inanimate objects, artist Rosanna Raymond introduces her neologism of "acti.VĀ.tion" (see Strauss in Chapter 4). Acti.VĀ.tion, which Raymond analyzes alongside the notion of "Conser.VĀ.tion," entails the idea of the "Vā Body," which mediates *mauli*, the cosmological life force found in all things created. Raymond's perspective is poignant in that it situates activation within networks of knowledge systems and practices outside the West. Indeed, many Indigenous ontologies have long privileged expansive forms of agencies, activity and interconnected systems of being and knowing that, according to Aaron Glass, have important implications for responsive conservation, care and custodianship.⁶⁰ In such objects, against traditional museal approaches, the material condition is believed to be less significant than their temporal and immaterial continuities bound with use—specialized knowledge and performance—without which they fall dormant.

What, then, is activation?

Activation, in our project, signals a movement—a change in circumstance. To activate is to enter into a conscious relationship with an artwork, acknowledging its lively power (its potential to change) and attuning oneself to its relational being, which is linked to social, temporal and spatial contexts. Taking seriously the inherent vibrancy of the material world as a key point of departure, rather than imposing force on the supposedly inert or deactivated matter of artworks, we conceive of activation as an intentional transformation—whether from the virtual to the actual, as in the ontological model of Deleuze and Bergson, or from one state, dimension or degree of activity to another, as in the materialist framework. This transformation, a form of "presencing" a work, is a continuous, cross-temporal movement between degrees of activity and liveness, in which activating forces are possessed by human, nonhuman or more-than-human actors. There is a consequence: while artworks can be activated by humans (such as conservators, curators and custodians), this relationship is reciprocal—humans, in turn, can also be activated by artworks.

In this (in a certain sense posthumanist) understanding, activity is synonymous with the ongoing transformation of matter on a micro level and, on a macro level, with the work's persistent changeability. Activation channels activity toward a specific aim—whether it be a new interpretation of an artwork or a novel procedure for presenting, displaying or interacting with it. Interpretation, like archival actualization, is

inherently creative—just as all conservation interventions are. Activation introduces a radical awareness of creativity in doing activation work, and an extreme form of subjectivity (for the latter, see Wielocha in Chapter 11 of this book).

While activation as defined here is considered a form of conservation, either an extended form of conservation or a mode through which it is extended, not all conservation necessarily activates. Unlike the future-oriented conservation movement—which preserves the past for the future and, in doing so, both assumes and paradoxically questions time’s linearity by attaching value to the original, initial or authentic instance of a work—activation, like actualization, is radically situated in the present. To activate a work, or to be activated by a work, is to act *in* and *on* the present.

Activation in practice

Activation can take a variety of forms and means, dependent on the availability of works for activation, which may vary across different social, temporal and epistemic settings. These forms include adaptations of Fluxus artworks through creative artistic operations, reconstructions, (re-)enactments and realizations of scores. Fluxus works are inherently suited for activation due to their heterogeneity and the historically experimental practices that brought them to life. However, not all works are equally adaptable to every form of activation.

In what follows, we discuss several activation studies, ranging from probed acts to experimental and speculative engagements.

Adaptation

The adaptation of Fluxus events and event scores, Fluxkits, Fluxfood and other Fluxus “media” provides a rich ground for experimentation, especially when pursued through artistic or other creative operations that are not bound by obligation to the original material. Adaptation transgresses the boundaries of sameness, causing a shift in what is formally and materially regarded as still the same work. In that regard, it differs from reconstruction, as understood by architectural preservationists and technical art historians—whether structural, aesthetic or both—where emphasis on an “original,” or fidelity to it, remains central.

Adaptation, as an activation strategy, can be categorized into two types: the transposition of a Fluxus work into a different medium of presentation—referred to here as *formal transfer*, where the work expresses its initial concept through a new medium—and the conversion of Fluxus works to a different physical carrier—*material transfer*, which parallels the processes of emulation and migration familiar from the conservation of source code-based or media art.⁶¹

Formal level: the transfer/transposition of a Fluxus work to a different medium

Hypothetically speaking, many Fluxus works can be transposed to a different medium, preserving their initial concept. For instance, a Fluxkit could be expressed

in the medium of film or as a non-fungible token (NFT), while *Smell Chess* could be transposed to a speech or a literary narrative. A Fluxus event score could be expressed and even orally passed on (as Yoko Ono desired of her instructional “music pieces”), and the realization of a Fluxus event, instead of being a simple action performed by the reader of the score, might take the form of music, a television program or a film.

A condition in which works are not media-specific, that is, they are not connected to a specific medium, is one of “transmediality.” Such works, whose original medium is difficult or impossible to define, may be realized as literature, art, film and/or music.⁶² The term “transmedia” deploys the Latin prefix *trans* to introduce a movement beyond a medium specified at the work’s inception. Transmedia are related to “transitional media,” a term put forward to denote works which transition fluidly from one “state” or “condition” to another and are understood as the sum of their transformations.⁶³ While the neologism “transitional media” has directly responded—and has sought a way out of—the paradigm of fixity and originality that has been pervasive in conservation over the past decade, “transmedia” presumes plurality and movement from the outset of the work’s conception.

A truly transmedial work, George Brecht’s *Exit* (1961) has manifested as an event score, enamel objects, score cards, performance and a film. While there is a certain genealogy to its later manifestations, *Exit* is difficult to define as a single work realized in a specific medium and can instead be grasped as a work activated in a variety of media. Along similar lines, Mieko Shiomi evokes the concept of transmedia in reflecting on her *Disappearing Music for Face* (1964), in which the score—“Smile, and make it disappear gradually”—took the form of a performance (by Knowles), an 8mm film (by Maciunas and Peter Moore) and a flipbook (by Maciunas).⁶⁴

The formal adaptation of the Fluxus box to the NFT format, a digital asset that can be acquired, owned and traded on a blockchain platform, offers an intriguing example of a medial transposition. Inspired by the concept of intermedia, artist Ayshia Taskin offers an NFT artwork in the form of a physical Fluxbox containing arcane, at times interactive, objects. The owner of the handcrafted and unique Fluxbox can choose whether to reveal the contents or preserve the mystery for the next collector.⁶⁵

Another example of transmediality might be seen in Ono’s concept of painting instructions, realized as *Instruction Paintings* (AG Gallery, New York, July 1961) and *Instructions for Paintings* (Sogetsu Art Center, Tokyo, May 1962). Initially presented as paintings displayed at the AG Gallery in New York in July 1961 as a part of her first solo show, organized by Maciunas, they later evolved to become instruction-based works manifesting in different languages and on a variety of physical carriers. Their transmediality has recently been further enhanced through exhibitions that present the works as spatial arrangements, where the instructions are displayed alongside reconstructions of historical paintings (rather than new realizations of them).⁶⁶ As a result, the works have taken on a threefold form: as performance-based, as instructions summarizing a painting event and as room installations.

Material level: conversion of Fluxus works to a different material/physical carrier

The conversion of a Fluxus work to another physical carrier or material support can entail a digitization of otherwise printed text. For instance, the compilation of Fluxus event scores such as *Water Yam* could be rendered digitally, showcasing a form of material migration. Migration, which often employs an adaptation of an alternative media platform to convey a work or to make it accessible to audiences, differs from emulation, which strives to preserve the primary characteristics of the initial medium. In digital preservation, emulation mimics a computer platform or program on another platform or program, preserving the original attributes; migration signifies the adaptation of an original digital document to a current computer environment, losing the original attributes. Whether used in the digital realm or for traditional media works, emulation entails the recreation of the behavior of old hardware environments on a current device (a computer or play-back system).

In our project, emulation signifies the imitative adaptation of a Fluxus artwork to a more recent support; migration, in turn, signifies a change in the material support of an artwork that does not resemble the material form in which it was historically presented. In a video sculpture such as Nam June Paik's *Zen for TV* (1963, also discussed in Chapter 5), which displays a condensed vertical line of light generated by a stream of electrons hitting the phosphoric coating on the inner side of a cathode ray tube (CRT), the migration of a work displayed on a (now obsolete) CRT monitor entails the use of a newer monitor imitating the general features of the initial device (such as image ratio), while emulation would involve the use of the same or a similar picture tube.

Fluxfoods offer another case in point. Migrating Fluxfood to a different physical carrier might involve implementing a more stable plastic surrogate that mimics the aesthetics of the otherwise perishable, organic object. This approach is not without precedent, if we consider the Japanese practice of *hokuhin sampuru*, also known as “food models” or “fake foods,” commonly used in Japan, South Korea and China to produce genuine replicas of dishes for promotional purposes in shop displays and restaurant windows.⁶⁷

A specific case of emulation can be found in the example of Ben Patterson's Fluxkit entitled *Hooked* (1980), housed in the Getty Research Institute collection. Then-object conservator Albrecht Gumlich created a surrogate of an exploding can of sardines, with a simulated label and false patina, to replace the foul-smelling, deteriorating original.⁶⁸

A notable instance of material emulation was carried out by the Getty in 2007 on Ay-Ō's *Tactile Boxes*. These works invite sensory engagement by encouraging viewers to insert a finger into a box filled with “secret materials”—often nails, foam, rubber, beads and hair. In one exhibition, a vitrine containing *Tactile Boxes* featured a set of holes designed to imitate the Ay-Ō box experience. Completing this approach, a distinct form of experiential emulation was introduced through new technologies, including the use of ultrasonic waves (UltraHaptics, as implemented

by ARTECHOUSE), as described by Kit Brooks in Chapter 7. As Brooks explains, Ay-Ö frequently modified his boxes, at times enlarging them or incorporating different sensory elements. Notably, the most recent version of an Ay-Ö box, produced by the Hong Kong museum M+, features a nostalgic toy. Reminiscent of Ben Patterson's metal toys, this iteration raises a key question: What, exactly, is being emulated here? Is it the tactile surprise offered by the toy—fundamentally different from the original box's assemblage of materials—or does it represent a further development of the idea, wherein the toy must be unpacked to be fully experienced, thereby sacrificing the box itself? The affordances of these two configurations—the box with tactile contents and the box concealing a toy—differ significantly.

In Chapter 16, Hannah B Higgins explores another recent instance of adaptation: the 2024 reprinting of the *ccV TRE Fluxus* newsletters by the New York-based publisher Primary Information. Originally issued sporadically over several years, in varying sizes and on different types of paper, the newsletters have now been reissued as a single, uniformly sized bound volume. Higgins argues that this new format reshapes how readers experience the newsletters today, rendering them more compact, portable and easier to handle. These shifts also introduce a different temporal encounter: whereas the original newsletters arrived gradually over time, the reprint delivers them all at once. This prompts a broader reconsideration of the temporality at the heart of conservation. Rather than simply preserving the past, the reprint adapts the newsletters for the present, inviting contemporary audiences to engage with the Fluxus legacy in new ways and opening fresh dialogues between historical context and present-day reception.⁶⁹

Artistic reinterpretation

The past can only be created, not recreated.

Allan Kaprow⁷⁰

But what if we allow new Fluxus works to emerge from historical sources? What if a contemporary artist reinterprets Fluxus works using entirely new methods? While artistic reinterpretation intersects with adaptation in certain ways, the key distinction here is that it serves as an artistic response to historical practice.

There are numerous instances of contemporary artists revisiting and reinterpreting historical Fluxus events—Paik's *One for Violin Solo* (1962) and Brecht's *Drip Music* (1962) are among those most frequently represented on platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo. In Chapter 9, Patrizio Peterlini describes several artistic reinterpretations, and, at times, expansions, of Dick Higgins's *Intermedia Chart* (1995). Maggie Hire offers another example in Chapter 18 by way of Polish contemporary artist Goshka Macuga's reinterpretation of Tadeusz Kantor's 1967 Happening *The Letter* into a tapestry, exhibited at the Zachęta Gallery in Warsaw between 2011 and 2012. A more recent initiative includes Weronika Trojańska's *Event Swirl* (2025–), an online interactive platform inspired by Fluxus event scores, designed to foster

communication between participants. Users can engage in “events” by responding to score-like prompts with comments, images, video and sound.

An example of an artistic-curatorial activation on a larger scale is the 2018 response to Robert Filliou’s *République Géniale* at the Kunstmuseum Bern and Dampfzentrale Bern (August 17–November 11, 2018).⁷¹ Inspired by Filliou’s revolutionary 1968 ideas on art and education, *République Géniale* reimagined art and collaboration by blending exhibition, performance and learning. Featuring international artist collectives like Forensic Architecture and Superflex, the fusion of arts reinterpreted Filliou’s concept of a constantly evolving “création permanente.” More sustained institutional efforts to carry forward the Fluxus spirit are embodied in initiatives such as the grant program Follow Fluxus—After Fluxus. Launched in 2008 as a collaboration between the Nassauischer Kunstverein Wiesbaden and the City of Wiesbaden—a city of historical significance for Fluxus, being the site of the first Festum Fluxorum Fluxus in 1962, often regarded as Fluxus’s official beginning—the program was led by Elke Gruhn until 2023 and supports contemporary artists whose practices resonate with the experimental, processual and collaborative ethos of Fluxus. Rather than serving as a retrospective homage, the grant encourages artists to engage Fluxus as a living methodology—one that adapts, mutates and intervenes in the present, enabling its continual reinvention through artistic practice.

In 2015, in response to an invitation to contribute to the exhibition *Revisions—Zen for Film* at Bard Graduate Center Gallery, New York (September 18, 2015–February 21, 2016), the artist duo Com&Com (Marcus Gossolt and Johannes M. Hedinger) created *Zen for Internet*.⁷² The work is an artistic reinterpretation of Nam June Paik’s iconic *Zen for Film* (1962–64)—an empty film leader that runs on a projector and accumulates traces. Using the iconography of the internet and the Apple computer of its time, *Zen for Internet* features an endlessly rotating “loading wheel” on a white background. Typically, the loading wheel is a temporary, in-between state before the fully loaded image appears. *Zen for Internet*, however, indefinitely freezes the in-betweenness: viewers never see the desired image. *Zen for Internet* revisits, in the digital realm, themes such as Zen, silence, nothingness, boredom, trace, chance and materiality fifty years after Paik’s intervention.

As contributing artists to the project *Activating Fluxus*, Gossolt and Hedinger reactivated foundational Fluxus concepts of the score and the network, transforming them into the *FLUXUS.GRAM* (Chapter 19). They invited artists to submit their instructions, which they then collected and curated on the online platform Instagram, along with a selection of historical Fluxus scores. *FLUXUS.GRAM* encourages users to perform these scores and to document and share their activations. Drawing on core Fluxus concepts—such as the score, the Fluxkit and decentralized distribution—their work reimagines the Fluxkit as a participatory digital platform. By embracing the participatory ethos of Fluxus and adapting it to digital culture, the project not only perpetuates but also reinvents certain Fluxus principles as a vital, networked and inclusive artistic practice—demonstrating how art can continue to challenge, connect and evolve across media, generations and lifeworlds.

Reconstruction

Reconstructions undeniably require material engagement. However, the prefix “re-” also signals a connection to the past, prompting a theoretical challenge to concepts of linear time, historical fidelity and the conservation principles of originality and authenticity. The experimental framework of reconstruction offers valuable insights into activating Fluxus works by engaging with both their matter and form.

Reconstruction refers to returning an object—such as a building or artifact—to a known earlier state, often involving the introduction of new materials.⁷³ Considered one of the methods of the discipline of technical art history,⁷⁴ reconstruction is closely related to restoration, which focuses on repairing an object’s existing fabric. Replication represents the most expansive form of reconstruction, yet reconstruction, via “construction,” implies the creation of new identity. As a mode of cultural transmission, reconstruction lacks the definitive finality associated with replication. Rather than insisting on reproducing sameness, it embraces openness, process and the contingency of making, commensurate with Émilie Parendeau’s narration of her reconstruction of Robert Filliou’s *The Futile Box* (1977) in Chapter 8.

(Re-)Enactment

They want our artifacts . . . but not the activities which produced the artifacts.

Dick Higgins⁷⁵

Fluxus scores often persist through performative re-enactments. When a performance is considered a re-enactment, it is not only the score that is activated but, moreover, the collective memory of a performance’s past, sustained through bodily transmission. Drawing on Jacques Derrida’s and Judith Butler’s theorizations of iteration as essential to the legibility of language across generations, Amelia Jones and Martha Buskirk suggest that performing bodies, too, iterate, rendering performances increasingly recognizable through repetition over time—as in Yoko Ono’s multiple stagings of *Cut Piece* (1964) and their reworked homages.⁷⁶ André Lepecki’s proposition that re-enactment doubles as a “will to archive” further accounts for the past’s persistence through bodily iterations; thus contemporary enactments are “*embodied* actualizations” of the past.⁷⁷ Tracing a common thread that runs throughout different activations in practice, Lepecki stresses the creative element of re-enactment as it actualizes the past, its necessary invention and generation of the new by virtue of the past’s contingency on the present (a tension that similarly plays out in acts of conservation figured as “translation,” as developed by Danielle Johnson, Kate Lewis and Peter Oleksik in Chapter 5).⁷⁸

In practice, the performance of a Fluxus score raises further questions. How might such scores, which permit of varying degrees of interpretive possibility, be reckoned within contemporary re-enactment? The scope for transformation is at times far-reaching (as with Eric Andersen’s *Opus 51* (1964), discussed by Rasmus Holmboe and Magnus Kaslov in Chapter 14), and at others more constrained (as Philip Corner clarifies regarding the possibilities of performing his *Piano Activities* (1962) in Chapter 17). For Bengt af Klintberg (in Chapter 15), the re-enactment

of Fluxus scores can be likened to folklore, filtered through layers of performance that, in af Klintberg's words, "takes away everything that is individual" (p. 263). Despite the oft-emphasized, unlimited potential of Fluxus scores to transform, are there perhaps, as Natilee Harren suggests in Chapter 1, implicit parameters that guide a score's performance—and who ultimately decides?

Ariane Jessulat from the Maulwerker, a Berlin-based performance ensemble that has re-enacted Fluxus works since 1999, appears somewhat in alignment with Harren: to solely engage scores based on their openness to transformation is, in her view, an oversimplification, ascribing a unity to Fluxus that never was. In the Maulwerker's practice, then, the most pressing questions are these: "Which Fluxus activities should still be performed today? Which Fluxus pieces still retain their lively allure after 50 years?"⁷⁹

Activation, chapter by chapter

Formally, the book structure integrates several distinct forms, including theoretical essays that examine the diverse discursive dimensions of Fluxus, alongside shorter interventions—to be considered as part of what we term an "activation toolkit"—featuring reports on practical, artwork- or exhibition-based case studies. In addition to this deliberate formal diversification of the chapters, artistic interventions appear in the form of conversational chapters, a visual account of artistic activation and an extended excerpt compiled from artistic newsletters. Just as the question of what Fluxus was—and, further to this, what Fluxus is today and what it might still yet be—remains animating in its open-endedness, the disparate approaches to activation evinced in the following chapters refrain from offering a coherent framework in either theory or practice. Rather than attempting to pin down the meaning of "activation," the scope of its implications and the potentialities that transpire emerge as fundamentally situated engagements, necessarily shaped by the author's subject-position, whether conservator, curator, artist or art historian, in relation to the diversity of their subject matters. Also distinct are the authors' motivations, which further shape how activation is pursued. As a result, in addition to the incorporation of theoretical, practical and artistic perspectives, activation is confronted to different ends among these various formats. At times, authors directly pick up and explicate concrete means of activation, while at other times, activation is understood as a prompt for critical reflection about what conservation means as a cultural technique more broadly.

To begin to steer the reader through the rich variety of these contributions, the book pivots around four main sections: "I. Conserving, Curating and Archiving Fluxus: Politics, Challenges and Strategies," "II. Multiplication and Reinterpretation: The Many Lives of Fluxus Art," "III. Fluxus Narratives: Storytelling, Memory and Transmission" and "IV. Preserving the Fluxus Network: Continuities, Connections and Evolutions." These sections work to signpost overarching thematic groupings that allow something of a loose narrative thread to run through the chapters. Accordingly, the combination of theoretical, practical and artistic interventions in any one chapter might first and foremost be understood as thematically

resonant with—rather than directly correlating or applicable to—that of every other. Because these sections do not function as a definitive guide, the reader is at liberty to identify resonances across the different sections.

The chapters in the first part of this volume critically and/or experimentally reflect, dissect and envision anew dominant institutional frameworks across the realms of conservation, curation and the archive. Natilee Harren begins by reconciling two important imperatives—on the one hand, the openness and indeterminacy that inhabits many Fluxus materials, and on the other hand, the ethics of transmitting what she parses as Fluxus’s “core aesthetic principles” (p. 37)—to lay the groundwork for guiding future presentations of Fluxus event scores and objects. Shifting from presentation to practices of collecting, Ken Friedman narrates personal experiences of the institutionalization of Fluxus’s material legacy as well as that of his own, more specifically. If, as becomes clear in dialogue with Friedman, collecting is a necessarily political act—for instance, in its power to shape historical narratives and govern future access—Hanna B. Hölling unravels yet another aspect of what it means to collect (also as a kind of conservation itself) through perhaps the most extreme of its affective dimensions: fetishism. To a certain extent, fetishism presumes the capacity of objects to act on subjects, which, both in but also beyond discourses of the fetish, might include an object’s affecting the subject’s senses. Insisting that we take seriously the multisensory dimensions of artworks, Inbal Strauss reconsiders display practices beyond the privileging of sight through decolonial and experimental curatorial methods. Concluding this section, Danielle Johnson, Kate Lewis and Peter Oleksik pick up the concept of “translation” to establish a theoretical framework that accounts for conservation as an actively subjective and interpretive process, and thus, in this way, far from passive stewardship.

The second part of this volume unravels the ways in which Fluxus and its relevant forms—often characterized by multiplicity rather than singularity—persist through means that promise both continuity and transformation. Identifying an underlying logic of the multiple that animates Daniel Spoerri’s various multiplication initiatives, Josephine Ellis opens up the category of the “multiple” beyond its postwar associations, revealing multiplicity as a material condition inherent even within traditional media such as painting. Digressing to the present, Kit Brooks offers a diligent report concerning the reinterpretation of Ay-Ö’s infamous *Tactile Boxes* to develop boxes that, although touchless, remain available for simulated haptic engagement. Incorporating processes of both multiplication and reinterpretation further still, Émilie Parendeau reflects on the practical-conceptual challenges that inform her artistic practice of making what she deems an “almost-replica” of Robert Filliou’s *The Futile Box* (1977). If the “almost” of the “almost-replica” gestures toward the impossibility of exact replication—and, by implication, the impossibility of returning to the past—Patrizio Peterlini’s account of his initiative to invite artistic reinterpretations of Dick Higgins’s *Intermedia Chart* (1995) affirms the past’s persistence through change, and the creativity that lies therein. The artworks and practices engaged in this section (and across the sections more broadly) arguably approximate an underlying condition of what Mieko Shiomi

calls *hengenjizai* [变幻自在]—loosely, the constant metamorphosis of things—something Shiomi further unpacks in her speculations on the futurity of her works.

The power of narrative as a form of preservation is explored in the third part of this volume, starting with Aga Wielocha, who positions storytelling as a strategy for transmitting intermedial artworks by drawing and building on the stories shared in Radio Fluxus episodes. From another angle, Ann Noël reveals storytelling as constitutive of artworks in themselves, evinced through her practice of diary-keeping and her experiments with the artist's book format. If, in correspondence with Noël, Wielocha suggests that "in storytelling, facts intertwine with fiction" (p. 234), then this is a kind of confusion Eric Andersen purposefully and productively toys with in relation to the radical openness of interpretation and performance that his works prescribe—particularly those that are score-based. Grappling with one of these scores, Andersen's *Opus 51*, Rasmus Holmboe and Magnus Kaslov address activation through a musicological lens to navigate what it means to commission its performance today (a performance that lives on as a podcast episode). Bengt af Klintberg offers a profound conclusion to this section: a well-known folklorist in addition to his artistic engagements, af Klintberg not only ruminates on the notion of storytelling but also—as all Fluxus artists in this book arguably do—sheds further light on his own story of Fluxus.

In the fourth and final section, the modes of preserving the Fluxus network—both past and present—are under consideration. The chapters unveil the potentials of various concepts and circulatory formats, from newspapers to newsletters, that have sustained—and, in some cases, might yet continue to sustain—relations, whether cherished or fraught. Hannah B Higgins looks to the recent reprinting of the *ccV TRE* newspapers, on the one hand narrating the embodied, experiential dimensions of their contemporary instantiation, and on the other, subjecting the context of the paper's historical emergence to further theoretical scrutiny. In addition to Philip Corner's meticulous elaboration of the musical underpinnings of his works, Corner's reflections on the continuity of his artistic legacy touch on the roles of friendship and love as fundamental driving forces behind the impetus to conserve. Moreover, as several artists in this volume do (Andersen in particular), Corner expresses a disdain for Fluxus as narrowly envisioned by George Maciunas—if not disdain, then certainly an ambivalence characterized Maciunas's reception in Eastern Europe, a region to which Maggie Hire's focus extends, through the concept of the "dead letter." In Hire's words, a dead letter "indicates a break, a space between two points in the postal system" (p. 306): rather than the "living" art of Maciunas's Fluxus, Hire suggests that it was the symbolic potential of death that held the most promise for artists across the Iron Curtain. Aiming to sustain the Fluxus network in the present, the artist collective Com&Com describe the development of the *FLUXUS.GRAM*, a reimagining of the pedagogical and interactive dynamics of the Fluxkit and its scores in a contemporary digital format on Instagram. Finally, excerpts compiled from the newsletters of the late Ben Vautier—which, until his death, circulated via email—conclude this book with his musings on the fate and future of contemporary art and culture.

Notes

- 1 George Maciunas, "Fluxus Manifesto" (February 1963), George Maciunas Foundation, <https://georgemaciunas.com/about/cv/manifesto-i/>.
- 2 Dick Higgins, "Games of Art," in *FOEW & OMB* (New York, Barton and Cologne: Something Else Press, 1969), 31.
- 3 Clive Phillpot and Jon Hendricks, *Fluxus: Selections from the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1998), 7.
- 4 Hannah B Higgins, "Fluxus Fortuna," in *The Fluxus Reader*, ed. Ken Friedman (Chichester: Academy Editions, 1998), 57.
- 5 On the "whodunit" in Fluxus, see Simon Anderson, "Fluxus: Early Years and Close Correspondences" (MA dissertation, Royal College of Art, London, 1983), 7; René Block and Tobias Berger, "What Is Fluxus?" in *What's Fluxus? What's Not! Why/O que é Fluxus? O que não é! O porquê*, ed. Jon Hendricks (Rio de Janeiro: Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil; Detroit: Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, 2002), 38; Astrit Schmidt-Burkhardt, ed., *Maciunas' Learning Machines: From Art History to a Chronology of Fluxus* (Berlin: Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection/Vice Versa, 2003); George Maciunas and Larry Miller, "Transcript of the Videotaped Interview with George Maciunas, March 24, 1978 by Larry Miller," in *Fluxus etc./Addenda I: The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection*, ed. Jon Hendricks (New York: Ink & Press, 1983); Clive Phillpot, "Fluxus: Magazines, Manifestos, Multum in Parvo," in *Fluxus: Selections from the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection*, eds. Clive Phillpot and Jon Hendricks (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1988), 9–16.
- 6 Phillpot, "Fluxus: Magazines, Manifestos, Multum in Parvo," 9.
- 7 "Everybody can be [an] artist. Everybody should be," proclaimed Fluxus artist Robert Filliou. Filliou, "GOOD-FOR-NOTHING-GOOD-FOR-EVERYTHING (c. 1962)," 854.
- 8 Maciunas's first presentation in Europe at the Parnass Gallery in 1962 was titled *Neo-Dada in den Vereinigten Staaten (Neo-Dada in the United States)*. See Jürgen Becher and Wolf Vostell, eds., *Happenings, Fluxus, Pop Art, Nouveau Réalisme* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1965).
- 9 Although Maciunas's concept of indeterminacy appears in his manifesto "Neo-Dada in Music, Theater, Poetry, Art," read by Arthur C. Caspari, in German, at the Fluxus concert *Après John Cage* in Wuppertal on June 9, 1962, a Fluxus genealogy is often traced to Cage's teaching at the New School for Social Research in New York and the interdisciplinary advances in music made during the courses for new music in Darmstadt in 1958. See Wulf Herzogenrath, "When the Future Was Now: Wulf Herzogenrath on Nam June Paik," *Tate ETC*, January 1, 2011, <https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-21-spring-2011/when-future-was-now>. Others connect the germination of Fluxus to events at Mary Bauermeister's atelier in Cologne. See Wilfred Dörstel, Rainer Steinberg and Robert von Zahn, "The Bauermeister Studio: Proto-Fluxus in Cologne 1960–62," in *Fluxus Virus*, ed. Christel Schüppenhauer (Cologne: Gallery Schüppenhauer, 1992), 56–67. Another reference is Karlheinz Stockhausen's electronic studios at WDR in Cologne. See Christopher Meigh-Andrews, *A History of Video Art* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 12.
- 10 For an analysis of the specificity of Fluxus score types, see Julia Robinson, "Parsing Scores: Application in Fluxus," *OnCurating*, no. 51 (2021): 51–63.
- 11 Ina Blom, "The Intermedia Dynamics: An Aspect of Fluxus" (MA thesis, University of Oslo, 1993); Hannah B Higgins, "Enversioning Fluxus: A Venture into Whose Fluxus Where and When" (PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, 1994); Hannah B Higgins, *Fluxus Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Thomas Kellein, *Fluxus* (Basel: Kunsthalle Basel, 1994); Julia Robinson, "Maciunas as Producer: Performative Design in the Art of the 1960s," *Grey Room* 33 (2008): 56–83; Dorothee

- Richter, "Fluxus: Kunst gleich Leben? Mythen um Autorschaft, Produktion, Geschlecht und Gemeinschaft" (PhD dissertation, University of Bremen, 2011); Natilee Harren, *Fluxus Forms: Scores, Multiples, and the Eternal Network* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020); Magdalena Holdar, *Fluxus as a Network of Friends, Strangers, and Things: The Agency of Chance Collaborations* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2023); Colby Chamberlain, *Fluxus Administration: George Maciunas and the Art of Paperwork* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2024).
- 12 Ivonne Spielmann, "History and Theory of Intermedia in Visual Culture," in *Intermedia: Enacting the Liminal*, eds. Hans Breder and Klaus-Peter Busse (Dortmund: Dortmunder Schrifte zur Kunst, 2005), 131–38; Natasha Lushetich, *Fluxus and the Practice of Non-Duality* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2014); Hanns Sohm, ed., *Happening und Fluxus: Materialien* (Cologne: Kölnischer Kunstverein, 1970); René Block, *1962 Wiesbaden Fluxus 1982: Eine kleine Geschichte von Fluxus in drei Teilen* (Wiesbaden: Harlekin Art, 1983); Ken Friedman, ed., *The Fluxus Reader* (Chichester: Wiley and Sons, 1988); Jon Hendricks, ed., *Fluxus Etc.: The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection* (Bloomfield Hills, MI: Cranbrook Academy of Art Museum, 1981); Jon Hendricks, ed., *Fluxus etc./Addenda I: The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection* (New York: Ink & Press, 1983); Jon Hendricks, ed., *Fluxus etc./Addenda II: The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection* (Pasadena: California Institute of Technology and Baxter Art Gallery, 1983); Jacquelynn Baas, *Fluxus and the Essential Questions of Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Benjamin Patterson, "Artist at the Institute" (Lecture, Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, 2013), <http://vimeo.com/79493154>; Marie Dumett, *Corporate Imaginations: Fluxus Strategies for Living* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017).
 - 13 Emma Bee Bernstein, "Medium Specificity," *The Chicago School of Media Theory*, 2020, <http://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/specificity.htm>; Pip Laurenson, "Old Media, New Media? Significant Difference and the Conservation of Software Based Art," in *New Collecting: Exhibiting and Audiences after New Media Art*, ed. Beryl Graham (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 7.
 - 14 Dick Higgins, "Statement on Intermedia," in *De-coll/age*, ed. Wolf Vostell (Frankfurt and New York: Typos Verlag and Something Else Press, 1967 [1966]); Dick Higgins and Hannah B Higgins, "Intermedia. With an Appendix by Hannah Higgins," *Leonardo* 34, no. 1 (February 2001): 49–54; Blom, "The Intermedia Dynamics: An Aspect of Fluxus," 35–46.
 - 15 Julia Robinson, "From Abstraction to Model: George Brecht's Events and the Conceptual Turn in the Art of the 1960s," *October* 127 (Winter 2009): 77–108; Anna Dezeuze, "Origins of the Fluxus Score," *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts* 7, no. 3 (2014): 78–94; Anna Dezeuze, "Brecht for Beginners," in *George Brecht Events: A Heterospective*, ed. Alfred Fischer (Cologne: Ludwig Museum, 2016), 20–32.
 - 16 Early conceptual tendencies, however distinct from the later high conceptualism, were conveyed in Henry Flynt, "Concept Art," in *An Anthology of Chance Operations, Indeterminacy, Improvisation, Concept Art, Anti-Art, Meaningless Work, Natural Disasters, Stories, Diagrams, Music, Dance, Constructions, Compositions, Mathematics, Plans of Actions*, ed. La Monte Young (New York: La Monte Young and Jackson Mac Low, 1963), n.p.
 - 17 Peter Osborne, *Conceptual Art: Themes and Movements* (London: Phaidon, 2002), 19.
 - 18 At the time the project began, there was only a single article devoted to addressing the conservation question in Fluxus; see Lynda A. Zycherman, "is fLUXUS fLUXING and/or sHOULD iT bE cONSERVED?" in *From Marble to Chocolate: The Conservation of Modern Sculpture*, ed. Jackie Heuman (London: Archetype, 1995), 121–29. More recently, new writing has emerged, either accompanying or in response to exhibitions. See Marcia Reed, "Prière de Toucher: Challenges of Conservation and Access," in *Fluxus Means Change: Jean Brown's Avant-Garde Archive* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2020), 106–25; Marcia Reed, "Killing with Kindness? The

- Challenges of Conservation and Access for Living Matter,” in *Living Matter: The Preservation of Biological Materials in Contemporary Art*, ed. Rachel Rivenc and Kendra Roth (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 2022), 114–25.
- 19 Though long overlooked, Fluxus is now recognized as having played an active and, in some respects, pioneering role in the conceptual tendencies that emerged from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s.
- 20 For the “business” of Fluxus, along with the broader discursive concerns of its organization, mediatization, routinization, automation, commodification and systematization, see Dumett, *Corporate Imaginations*.
- 21 For reflections on accessibility and its impact on Fluxus research, see Hanna B. Hölling, Aga Wielocha and Josephine Ellis, “Infrastructures of Display: A Model of Schaumagazin for Museum Abteiberg’s Fluxus Collection—A Conversation with Felicia Rappe and Melanie Seidler,” *Activating Fluxus*, July 4, 2024, <https://activatingfluxus.com/2024/07/04/infrastructures-of-display-a-model-of-schaumagazin-for-museum-abteibergs-fluxus-collection-a-conversation-with-felicia-rappe-and-melanie-seidler/>; and Josephine Ellis and Aga Wielocha, “Fluxus Study Day #2: Touring North Rhine-Westphalia: A Visual Essay,” *Activating Fluxus*, October 4, 2023, <https://activatingfluxus.com/2023/10/04/fluxus-study-day-2-touring-north-rhine-westphalia-a-visual-essay/>.
- 22 Conservation taxonomies have been subject to debate. See, for instance, the ICOM-CC proposal to split conservation into “preventive conservation,” “remedial conservation” and “restoration.” International Council for Museums—Committee for Conservation, “Terminology for Conservation,” 2008, <https://www.icom-cc.org/en/terminology-for-conservation>.
- 23 Noémie Étienne, “Can Conservation Be Decentered?” in *The Expanded Field of Conservation*, eds. Caroline Fowler and Alexander Nagel (Williamstown, MA: Clark Art Institute, 2022), 209.
- 24 Hanna B. Hölling, “The Technique of Conservation: On Realms of Theory and Cultures of Practice,” *Journal of the Institute of Conservation* 40, no. 2 (2017). We refer to “non-Western” cultures of conservation to denote the vast realm beyond the Graeco-European-American “default” mode, against the backdrop of which “Western” conservation might appear provincial. The designation “West” typically refers to countries in Western Europe, North America and other regions that have been influenced by European colonization and cultural norms, including Australia and New Zealand.
- 25 Hölling, “The Technique of Conservation.”
- 26 Care ethics demarks a philosophical positionality indebted to the pathbreaking work of scholars of feminism and disability. See Hanna B. Hölling, Jules Pelta Feldman and Emilie Magnin, “Introduction: Caring for Performance,” in *Performance: The Ethics and the Politics of Conversation and Care*, Vol. I, eds. Hanna B. Hölling, Jules Pelta Feldman and Emilie Magnin (London and New York: Routledge, 2023), 1–20; Selma Sevenhuijsen, *Citizenship and the Ethics of Care: Feminist Considerations on Justice, Morality and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1998); Joan C. Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Bernard Stiegler, “What is Called Caring: Beyond the Anthropocene,” trans. Daniel Ross, *Techné: Research in Philosophy and Technology* 21, nos. 2–3 (2017): 386–404.
- 27 Hölling, Pelta Feldman and Magnin, “Introduction: Caring for Performance,” in Hölling, Pelta Feldman and Magnin, *Performance*, Vol. I, 1–20. See also Renée van de Vall and Vivan van Saaze, eds., *Conservation of Contemporary Art: Bridging the Gap Between Theory and Practice* (Cham: Springer, 2024); Nina Owczarek, ed., *Prioritizing People in Ethical Decision-Making and Caring for Cultural Heritage Collections* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2023). Feminist theorist Donna Haraway develops the concept of “response-ability” in texts including *When Species Meet* (2008) and *Staying with the Trouble* (2016). Merging “response” and “ability,” it shifts the focus from moral responsibility (which often implies guilt or duty) to the *ability to respond*—to engage,

- attend*, and *listen* with others (human and nonhuman alike). Rather than the obligation to act from a position of mastery or control, response-ability points to the capacity to respond, and thus to an ethics of relationality and care.
- 28 “Activation,” Cambridge Dictionary, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/activation>.
- 29 David Zerbib, “Performing, Participating: The Challenge of Activation,” *Critique D’Art*, no. 52, <https://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/46203>.
- 30 While the foundational *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History*, eds. Adrian Heathfield and Amelia Jones (Bristol: Intellect, 2012), uses the word “activation” only eight times, there are 108 counts of the word “activation” in the recently published *Performance: The Ethics and the Politics of Conservation and Care*, eds. Hanna B. Hölling, Jules Pelta Feldman and Emilie Magnin (London and New York: Routledge, Vol. I, 2023, and Vol. II, 2024).
- 31 Louise Lawson, Acatia Finbow, Duncan Harvey, Héliá Marçal, Ana Ribeiro and Lia Kramer, “Strategy and Glossary of Terms for the Documentation and Conservation of Performance,” <https://www.tate.org.uk/about-us/projects/documentation-conservation-performance/strategy-and-glossary>. Tate has developed an “Activation Report” that documents new information each time an artwork is brought to the audience.
- 32 “Unlike material objects, the live artwork only exists in the moment of its activation. For most performance artworks, being absent can be considered their default state.” Pip Laurensen and Vivian van Saaze, “Collecting Performance-Based Art: New Challenges and Shifting Perspectives,” in *Performativity in the Gallery*, ed. Outi Remes (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2014), 31. For a recent framing of performance as object through repetition, see Philip Auslander and Hanna B. Hölling, “Acts and Artifacts: Performance Beyond Ephemerality,” *Arabeschi: Rivista internazionale di studi su letteratura e visualità*, no. 24 (June 2025), <http://www.arabeschi.it/acts-and-artifacts-performance-beyond-ephemerality/>.
- 33 Martha Buskirk and Amelia Jones, “The Year in ‘Re-,’” *Artforum*, December 2013, <https://www.artforum.com/columns/the-year-in-re-218592/>.
- 34 Philip Auslander, *Reactivations* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018). Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” trans. Harry Zohn, in *Illuminations*, ed. and intro. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968 [1936]), 221.
- 35 Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 7.
- 36 Rebecca Schneider in conversation with Lucia Ruprecht, “In Our Hands: An Ethics of Gestural Response-ability,” *Performance Philosophy* 3, no. 1 (2017), <http://www.performancephilosophy.org/journal/article/view/161/172>.
- 37 Auslander, for instance, analyzes the phenomenal relationship between the spectator who experiences the performance from the document and the document itself. Auslander, *Reactivations*.
- 38 Eric Ketelaar, “Tacit Narratives: The Meanings of Archives,” *Archival Science* 1, no. 9 (2001): 137. Leaning on his concepts in her recent writing on activation, Aga Wielocha challenges the notion of avant-garde archives as sites of activation. Aga Wielocha, “Instilling Liveliness: Archives of Neo-Avant-Garde Art as Sites of Activation,” *Journal of the Institute of Conservation* 47, no. 2 (2024): 166–82.
- 39 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Harper and Row, 1976).
- 40 Knut Ebeling and Stephan Günzel, eds., *Archivologie: Theorien des Archives in Wissenschaft, Medien und Künsten* (Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2009).
- 41 For the virtual and the actual as applied to multimedia works, along with a discussion of creative conservation, see Hanna B. Hölling, *Paik’s Virtual Archive: Time, Change, and Materiality in Media Art* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 156–58,

159. On the actualization of Fluxus scores based on the virtual and actual, see Hanna B. Hölling, "Unpacking the Score: Notes on the Material Legacy of Intermediality," *OnCurating: Fluxus Perspectives*, no. 51 (September 2021), <https://www.on-curating.org/issue-51-reader/unpacking-the-score-notes-on-the-material-legacy-of-intermediality.html>.
- 42 The ideas in this paragraph are based on Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Zone Books, 1991 [1966]), and Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994 [1968]).
- 43 An alternative understanding of activation has been offered by Nelson Goodman and his interpreter Jean-Pierre Cometti, who have critically assessed the conditions under which a symbol can function aesthetically (i.e., be "implemented") as activation. Jean-Pierre Cometti, "Activating Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 58, no. 3 (Summer 2000): 237–43.
- 44 Yoko Ono, quoted in Isabelle Bertolotti, Jon Hendricks and Thierry Raspail, eds., *Yoko Ono: Lumière de L'aube* (Paris: Somogy, 2016), 71.
- 45 Harren, *Fluxus Forms*, 110.
- 46 See, for instance, Weronika Trojańska, "The Ten Thousand Things of Charlotte Moorman," *Activating Fluxus*, <https://activatingfluxus.com/2024/11/25/weronika-trojanska-the-ten-thousand-things-of-charlotte-moorman/>; Harren, *Fluxus Forms*, 53, 202, 221; Natilee Harren, "The Provisional Work of Art: Brecht's Footnotes at LACMA, 1969," *Getty Research Journal*, no. 8 (2016): 187.
- 47 Hanna B. Hölling, "'Once upon a Time': Performative Ultra-Conceptualism and Storytelling as Conservation," in Hölling, Pelta Feldman and Magnin, *Performance*, Vol. II, 27–50.
- 48 See Acatia Finbow, "Franz Erhard Walther Born 1939 *Werkatz* (Workset) 2008," Performance at Tate: Into the Space of Art, <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/performance-at-tate/case-studies/franz-erhard-walther>; and Hanna B. Hölling, "Exhausting Conservation: Object, Event, Performance in Franz Erhard Walther's *Werkstücke*," in *Object—Event—Performance: Art, Materiality, and Continuity since the 1960s*, ed. Hanna B. Hölling (New York: Bard Graduate Center, 2022), 62–84.
- 49 Archivist Jules Pelta Feldman has wrestled with the unruliness of Fluxus works processed in the Silverman Collection at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. See Julia Pelta Feldman, "Perpetual Fluxfest: Distinguishing Artists' Records from Artworks in the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Archives," *Artists' Records in the Archives: Symposium Proceedings*, eds. Rachel Chatalbash et al. (New York: Archivists Round Table of Metropolitan New York, Inc., 2011), 31–34.
- 50 Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, first paperback ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).
- 51 Miriam Clavir, "Reflections on Changes in Museums and the Conservation of Collections from Indigenous Peoples," *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* 35, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 99–107.
- 52 Clavir, "Reflections," 104.
- 53 Hanna B. Hölling, "The Aesthetics of Change: On the Relative Durations of the Impermanent and Critical Thinking in Conservation," in *Authenticity in Transition*, eds. Erna Hermens and Frances Robertson (London: Archetype Publications: 2016), 13–24.
- 54 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), viii.
- 55 Posthumanism is variously defined as a move away from the values of humanism, as an account of the "more than human" character of human existence and as pertaining to the various "after humanity" dystopias of popular fiction. See Erika Cudworth and Stephen Hobden, *The Emancipatory Project of Posthumanism* (London: Routledge, 2018); Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).

- 56 Albrecht Gumlich and Aga Wielocha, "Episode 1: 'Hooked' (1980) by Ben Patterson," Radio Fluxus: Stories from the Fluxus Archives, *Activating Fluxus*, <https://activating-fluxus.com/2022/09/28/episode-1-hooked-1980-by-ben-patterson>. Fluxfood, which *Hooked* exemplifies, offers further food for thought.
- 57 Natilee Harren, "The Eternal Metabolic Network: Fluxus, Food, and Ecofeminism," in *Living Matter: The Preservation of Biological Materials Used in Contemporary Art*, eds. Rachel Rivenc and Kendra Roth (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 2022), 55–63.
- 58 In one of the most inviting discussions of modes of remaining, Schneider suggests that "keeping alive is not a liveness considered always in advance of death nor in some way after death. Rather, it is more a constant (re)turn of, to, from and between states in animation—an inter-(in)animation." Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 7.
- 59 Soon Kai Poh and Peter N. Miller, eds., *Conserving Active Matter* (New York: Bard Graduate Center, 2022).
- 60 Aaron Glass, "For the Lives of Things: Indigenous Ontologies of Active Matter," in Poh and Miller, *Conserving Active Matter*, 221.
- 61 Richard Rinehart and Jon Ippolito, *Re-Collection: Art, New Media, and Social Memory* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 2014).
- 62 For an understanding of transmedia that includes different (old and new) media platforms, audience engagement and content expansion, and as a phenomenon often seen as a recent development linked to technological advancements and globalization, see Simon Bacon's introduction to *Transmedia Culture: A Companion*, ed. Simon Bacon (Bern: Peter Lang, 2021), 1, 3.
- 63 Hanna B. Hölling, "Transitional Media: Duration, Recursion, and the Paradigm of Conservation," *Studies in Conservation* 61 (2016): 79–83, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00393630.2016.1181929>.
- 64 Mieko Shiomi, "Intermedia/Transmedia," Post: Notes on Art in a Global Context, Museum of Modern Art, July 11, 2013, <https://post.moma.org/intermedia-transmedia/>.
- 65 Ayshia Taskin, "Fluxus Boxes as NFTs?" *Medium*, July 6, 2021, <https://ayshiamuezzin.medium.com/fluxus-boxes-as-nfts-ed6a47b3e1a4>.
- 66 For an example, see MoMA's survey *Yoko Ono: One Woman Show, 1960–1971*, May 17–September 7, 2015.
- 67 Tejal Rao, "Faux Feast," *The New York Times*, April 20, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/04/20/magazine/tokyo-replica-food.html>. The food museum Alimentarium, in Vevey, Switzerland, holds a remarkable collection of food models.
- 68 In episode 1 of Radio Fluxus, Gumlich discusses how he used a new can, removing its organic contents and adding an equivalent weight. Gumlich and Wielocha, "'Hooked' (1980) by Ben Patterson." See also Reed, "Killing with Kindness?"
- 69 In an interview, the editors of the *ccV TRE* reprint, Alice Centamore and James Hoff, also cite easier storage and preservation as additional motivations behind the material adaptation. See Jennie Waldow, "The Fluxus Newspaper: Featuring Alice Centamore, James Hoff and Jennie Waldow," *The Brooklyn Rail*, September 11, 2024, <https://brooklynrail.org/event/2024/09/11/the-fluxus-newspaper/>.
- 70 Allan Kaprow, "Creating 1957," unpublished statement, 1990, Getty Research Institute Library, Allan Kaprow Papers, Box 4, Folder 12.
- 71 *République Géniale*, exhibition at Kunstmuseum Bern, August 17–November 11, 2018, <https://www.republiquegeniale.ch/en/>.
- 72 "Zen for Internet," Com&Com, 2014, Videokunst.ch, <https://www.videokunst.ch/videos/zen-for-internet>.
- 73 ICOMOS, "The Burra Charter," <https://australia.icomos.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Burra-Charter-2013-Adopted-31.10.2013.pdf>.
- 74 Erma Hermens, "Technical Art History: The Synergy of Art, Conservation and Science," in *Art History and Visual Studies in Europe*, eds. Matthew Rampley et al. (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012), 151–65.

- 75 Dick Higgins to Walter Hartmann, March 31, 1969, Collection Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, quoted in Owen F. Smith, "Speaking Personally: Some Topics of Correspondence Between Fluxus Artists on Fluxus," *On Curating*, no. 51 (2021): 306.
- 76 Jones and Buskirk, "The Year in Re-."
- 77 André Lepecki, "The Body as Archive: The Will to Re-Enact and the Afterlives of Dance," *Dance Research Journal* 42, no. 2 (2010): 31.
- 78 Lepecki, "The Body as Archive," 35.
- 79 Maulwerker (website), <http://www.maulwerker.de/programs/p-fluxustext-e.html>.

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I

Conserving, curating and archiving Fluxus

Politics, challenges and strategies



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1 Fluxus forms of activation

Natilee Harren

Following the Fluxus collective's debut festival in late 1962, leading organizer George Maciunas wrote to Nam June Paik: "One can't just perform the same single think [*sic*] over & over & over & over. We try to vary every piece in each performance."¹ Through their experimental performance and publishing practices, Fluxus artists tested how their event scores, conceptual propositions, object editions and print ephemera could be interpreted and received in unforeseen ways. Expanding on arguments presented in my book *Fluxus Forms: Scores, Multiples, and the Eternal Network*, among other conservation-related threads in my previous scholarship, this chapter addresses issues of conserving Fluxus holistically.² In what follows, I track a number of ways in which Fluxus artists and the inheritors of their legacy have activated and remade one another's works, both in the moment of the collective's emergence in the 1960s and during more recent decades as Fluxus works—both objects and events—have found their way into museum collections, conservation labs, major concert halls and the hands of the public at the very same pace at which the original participants are aging and passing away. As such, there is a marked urgency to jump-start these conversations. "If one wants to keep blood running through the veins of Fluxus's activities," art historian Julia Robinson recently wrote to me, "we (those of us who have witnessed it at the hands of the founding artists) have to keep the work alive while we're around to do so."³

There is little publicly available, high-quality moving-image documentation of Fluxus performances from the 1960s to the 1990s, making it difficult to comparatively study the range of approaches that have been taken since the group's first concerts and leading many performers to lean on the text exclusively, sometimes complemented by reference to photographic documentation that can lead to an overemphasis on iconic visual motifs.⁴ An additional complication is the original artists' resistance to making generalizations about how to treat Fluxus event scores due to the diversity of actors and works involved as well as collective values of openness to indeterminacy and the performer's choice. As Philip Corner writes, "I do not accept the existence of a Fluxus canon or a standardized performance practice. . . . I think that every artist is an individual without having to be dissolved into the fluxmash."⁵ Even so, other stakeholders are realizing that now is the time for artistic preferences—which may be unstated or even actively repressed—to be

surfaced, since refusing to articulate embodied knowledge endangers the longevity of the aesthetic core of the work. This matter is of a different order from conservation's concerns with tricky Fluxus materials like organic matter and plastics.⁶ We should be concerned, rather, with the preservation of concepts and ideas—if not ideals and ethics—and their relationship to received aesthetics. Scholar Jules Pelta Feldman describes well the complicated dance of this difficult but necessary work: “We can accept that these works are not just rooted to one moment in time and still resist the idea that they’re infinitely malleable.”⁷

In 2006, the youngest surviving first-generation Fluxus artist, Ken Friedman, published “The Literature of Fluxus,” an essay that articulates three “waves” of Fluxus scholarship, helping to orient us to Fluxus’s reception in the 1970s and beyond.⁸ According to Friedman, the first wave consists of publishing efforts by Fluxus artists, including La Monte Young’s *An Anthology of Chance Operations* (1963), which Friedman claims was the first book “to develop and present an articulate artistic and intellectual position” for Fluxus, and Dick Higgins’s *Postface* (1964), the first Fluxus monograph.⁹ Maciunas, of course, played a central role in lending Fluxus a brand-like visual identity through his publishing efforts. A second wave in the 1970s came from “Fluxfriends” including Jill Johnston, Henry Martin, René Block, Hermann Braun, Francesco Conz, Jon Hendricks, Barbara Moore, Clive Phillpot and Hanns Sohm—individuals who had close relationships with original figures through friendship, blood relation, patronage, stewardship, criticism or otherwise. Early scholars and curators mark the third wave, including Jon Hendricks, Peter Frank, Estera Milman, Stephen C. Foster and Jan van der Marck, as well as the first doctoral dissertation to discuss Fluxus, which came out of the UCLA anthropology department in 1974.¹⁰ Friedman makes special mention of Hendricks as “one man in three waves,” whose work from the 1970s to the present (including a major role in stewarding the Silverman Fluxus Collection to its permanent home at the Museum of Modern Art, New York) forms a “bridge between three eras of Fluxus scholarship.” The fourth wave, during the late 1980s and early 1990s, brought trained historians and critics into the discourse, including Marianne Bech, Ina Conzen-Meairs, Thomas Kellein, Kathy O’Dell and Kristine Stiles. Dissertations and theses were penned by Simon Anderson, Owen F. Smith, Ina Blom, David T. Doris and Hannah B Higgins, and some of these were published as books at the turn of the millennium. By the fifth wave, Fluxus began to be seen from the outside by people not intimately connected to the movement, who no longer had access to all the major figures. Such distance productively enabled radical reinterpretations such as Cornelia Lauf and Susan Hapgood’s 1991–92 New Museum exhibition *FluxAttitudes*, which mixed first-wave Fluxus artists with contemporary inheritors of their legacy.¹¹ Friedman argues that we are now “beyond” Fluxus, in an era of interdisciplinary scholarship in which the work is being written into the larger history of twentieth-century experimental art and critical theory.

As a member of this last wave of Fluxus scholarship, I am close to but not of Fluxus. I care deeply that this work retains a core of its aesthetic and ethical orientation as a message to future audiences who—if current politics point in any true direction toward what the future holds—will dearly need and benefit from

its message. Early on in my research trajectory, I decided that, because I was not an original Fluxus person, I did not have the authority to behave as the “Fluxus police,” making proclamations as to how one should program or curate Fluxus work. Now that more original Fluxus people have left us, and I have encountered high-profile cases of Fluxus work being presented (in my opinion) poorly, I have shifted my position. I have witnessed realizations that struck me not as incorrect but as “bad”—because the performers seemed to improvise, hadn’t read the score carefully, lacked historical consciousness, took too many liberties or didn’t seem to have carefully thought about what they were going to do. Realizing an event score is not hard, but you still have to proceed carefully: read the score, do what it says, and take some thoughtful liberties, but don’t improvise. I still do not wish to become the Fluxus police, but I am more comfortable—and feel an urgency, in fact—not only to articulate my own thoughts on the matter but to record others’ positions and participate in a dialogue about available models for responsible performance and exhibition practice.

One of my aims here is to sketch a rough historiography of retrospective exhibitions and performances of Fluxus, naming select events and actors that constitute a series of waves of Fluxus’s reception as a now-past, canonical movement in the history of performance art, worthy of reactivation for contemporary publics. I treat each example with a light touch, as my goal is to map the state of the field rather than to excavate any one particular case or issue. While Friedman’s historiography focuses on scholarship, my purview considers the public presentation of Fluxus work through a history and typology of exhibitions and concerts, sacrificing exhaustiveness and detail for theoretical clarity and practical utility.¹² Two of the thornier issues I address are the confusing situation of performance rights for Fluxus event scores and the possibility and limits of interacting with Fluxus objects. While there are numerous clear models for navigating the latter, the former remains an under-discussed problem for the legacy of Fluxus performance practice. I frame both issues with reference to a “Meta-Score for Fluxus Performance and Exhibition” and a “Fluxus Activation Matrix”—heuristics for thinking about presenting Fluxus works, specifically with regard to participation, interpretation, historical fidelity and preservation of the “original.” Interwoven with my narrative are the voices of Fluxus art workers including artists, curators and scholars, drawn from recent interviews and correspondence.¹³ Ultimately, this chapter registers the range of strategies that have been deployed so that curators and programmers can consider an array of tested best practices for presenting this complex material in ways that are contemporary and pragmatic yet responsible to history by honoring Fluxus’s core aesthetic principles.

Flesh meets bones: event scores and their performance

In *Fluxus Forms*, I argued against the received wisdom of a total openness, objectlessness or formlessness of Fluxus practice and toward an alternative conception of form and the object, based on the logic and ontology of notation.¹⁴ Scholars including Liz Kotz, Julia Robinson and Hanna B. Hölling have likewise offered accounts

that help us see the structuring function of the event score.¹⁵ My contribution traces the intellectual and art-historical evolution from experimental music composition to the text-based event score that enabled visual artists (along with poets, dancers and the like) to adopt scoring practices for their work. I furthermore argue for a score-like (allographic) ontology for Fluxus object production, even when a score is not explicitly present.¹⁶ This is to say that all Fluxus output is open to *activation*, from objects to performances or events. *Fluxus Forms* historicizes and theorizes the relationship between Fluxus objects and performances, regarding them as part of a continuum of rethinking relationships between authorship, labor and distribution in ways that make their afterlives in the present particularly tricky—and exciting—for curators and conservators.

George Brecht's event score *Drip Music (Drip Event)* is emblematic of Fluxus's protean and fluid guiding logic regarding form and the object.¹⁷ This brief text, written in rather generic language, describes an action to set up, a phenomenon to observe or a scenario to imagine. Its grammar courts temporal ambiguity, while being notably transparent to its context. Call it "situation-specificity." Which vessel is ready to hand? What may already be dripping around you? As part of the 1962–63 European Fluxus concert tour (in which Brecht did not participate), we can track the emergence of a performance convention in which the performer climbs a ladder to pour water from a pitcher into a vessel positioned on the ground. Brecht himself produced a number of object versions: performative sculptures or performances in sculptural form, pointing to the Fluxus notion that an event can become an object and vice versa. (As a physical chemist, Brecht was fascinated by molecular physics, especially the fact that seemingly stable matter is in fact resolutely vibrant, humming with energy and life.) A 1970 sculpture designed by Brecht for the garden of collectors Wolfgang and Ute Feelisch fits a water spigot to the top of a remarkably tall length of pipe, riffing on prior performances' visual drama.¹⁸

As the example of *Drip Music* shows, Fluxus works often metabolize their own performance history. They require repetition but avoid direct copying, making them recursive rather than simply iterative, as Hölling has argued.¹⁹ While we imagine that we come to understand a score better the more realizations of it we can know or experience, we only approach its aesthetic truth asymptotically, since no number of diverse interpretations will ever exhaust the possibilities of an essentially hypothetical form. The fundamental nature of the score enables the artwork to survive throughout myriad transformations in the hands of performers and audiences, at the same time that its variability requires us to reimagine the very meaning of aesthetic form—that kernel of an artwork's identity—along with attending notions of curation and conservation.

A similar set of concerns applies to Fluxus publications, which are situated somewhat awkwardly between unique artworks and editioned multiples: unnumbered, potentially limitless and extant with varying formats and contents. Maciunas as lead organizer and designer can be credited with much of the aesthetic that we associate with Fluxus. His "copies" of an artist's design proposal could take great liberties, lending a performative quality to his proposal and design process, with

the proposing artist as composer and Maciunas as performer-designer. Maciunas's background in architecture and design taught him that authorship and ownership are not the same thing; they are mutable, and they are imbued with the forces of law and capital.²⁰ Thus the appropriateness and brilliance behind the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection's acquisition strategy—informed by the expertise of Jon Hendricks—of gathering multiple versions of the “same” object. Appropriately, in Hendricks's landmark *Fluxus Codex*, which documents the collection, photographs typically show not one but multiple versions of each depicted edition.²¹

Dick Higgins captures this quality well in his 1976 “An Exemplativist Manifesto,” in which he invents the adjective “exemplativist” to point to the contingent relationship of the score to its individual realizations:

Any realization . . . will necessarily be to some extent arbitrary, and is therefore an example rather than a fixity. For this reason, such art can be called exemplative. The emphasis rests on precisely what the work is an example of, and not on the precise structure or realization of the work. . . . Since this process stresses not the single realization as the work, but the dialectic between any single realization and its alternates In fact in such a system all form is a process of notation, among other things. The audience sees or senses the bare bones of the work along with the flesh, so the clarity with which these bare bones are assembled becomes a criterion of the value of the work.²²

Higgins's exemplativism would seem to resonate with philosophy's type–token distinction, such that a performance might be considered a particular instance (token) of the score, or rather the spatiotemporal phenomenon or concept to which it refers (type). But this would be too static. Higgins's exemplativism leaves open a space for Fluxus artists' tendency to welcome the creative reinterpretation of their work by their peers, such that the horizon of possibility for a score is shifted or expanded. In other writings, Higgins seizes on Hans-Georg Gadamer's idea of the hermeneutic horizon to capture the mutual transformation that can occur via a composer, performer or audience member's encounter with interpreting a score. He points to the power of the individual example to alter the course of the work's reception, which should be a primary concern for curators and conservators today. In order to maintain the work's “integrity” through multiple interpretations, composer Tashi Wada (son of Fluxus affiliate Yoshimasa Wada) suggests a helpful rule of thumb to keep both the original instruction (the “bare bones,” in Higgins's mind) and the potentially influential power of individual realizations (“the flesh”) in a delicate balance of mutually reinforcing aims: “The realization comes out of the work and it can also describe the work.”²³

A well-known example of a deliberately provocative interpretation is Nam June Paik's 1962 iteration of La Monte Young's *Composition 1960 #10 (to Bob Morris)* (“Draw a straight line and follow it”), executed at the debut Fluxus performance festival in Wiesbaden in September 1962, in which Paik painted a line of ink and tomato juice with his head, hands and necktie. The performance

was so striking and singular that it took on an identity of its own: *Zen for Head*. This instructive case shows how an interpretation that is excessively expressive or individual can come to be seen as a different work entirely. If the performer's interpretation overwhelms the "bare bones" of the score, it obliterates the work (and along with it, the composer's authorship) and becomes a work of the performer's.

Ken Friedman has proposed that we disentangle notions of intention and interpretation in Fluxus scores. He notes that while his interpretations of his own scores "shed light on the intention of the work, some may say that my specific interpretation of any given piece is primarily important to those who want to know how Friedman realizes Friedman," and adds that they should not necessarily take precedence over other possible realizations.²⁴ He also distinguishes between notions of acknowledgment and approval, acknowledging (accepting) any interpretation of his score as "mine" without the expectation of formally approving every realization. According to Friedman, Fluxus embraces a sense of deflection and masking of individual identities, a position at odds with efforts to treat Fluxus artists as distinct authorial figures.²⁵ In kind, Tashi Wada suggests not using the score as a means to do one's own work "under the umbrella of somebody else" but rather to "step outside of" what one would normally do.²⁶

***Tacet* knowledge**

Now, let us recall John Cage's *4'33"*, his famous "silent" piece premiered in 1952 by David Tudor in a rustic Woodstock performance hall. As Tudor sat immobile at the piano for the duration (aside from closing and opening the keyboard lid between movements), attendees reportedly heard numerous sounds, including rain, bird song, the rustling of programs and an occasional cough. Multiple versions of the score exist—in staff notation, proportional notation and text: *Tacet*, *Tacet*, *Tacet*. This last version is a kind of proto-event score, albeit using specialized music vocabulary; *tacet* comes from the Latin, meaning "(it) is silent." Cage's silence has no doubt been analyzed by countless scholars, but I point to it here in order to draw out a reading pertinent to the historiography and conservation of Fluxus performance practice. For *4'33"* is precisely about what is *not* written in the score. It's about the situation in which it's performed. Looking beyond the frame of Cage's conceptual, readymade sound composition, Tudor himself proved to be a crucial component of the work's lasting success. As a performer, he projected an aura of earnestness and sophistication that convinced a skeptical public of the seriousness and value of Cage's provocations. Indeed, one could see Tudor's dress and demeanor as emblematic of an entire performance culture from which Fluxus drew to make its own claims of legitimacy. The lasting power of *4'33"* has depended on tacit knowledge that is silent, invisible and immaterial, a set of unwritten sensibilities and codes of performance practice that have been passed down through generations of performers. Hölling has referred to the resources of such "unstated, implicit knowledge and memory" as a "virtual archive."²⁷ To this important insight

I add the observation that the power of such tacit knowledge in a post-Cagean performance history is precisely its mode of silent—*tacet*—transmission, passed through relations of trust and understanding.

The phrasing of Brecht's scores suggests as much. The evolution of an idea proceeded from elaborate verbiage to gnostic one-word instructions: "Dripping," "Table" and "Exit." They were initially circulated through familiar networks in which performers knew Brecht personally, or via trusted contacts, and had some of the flavor of Brecht's broader compositional practice. Brecht called his scores "little enlightenments I would send to my friends who would know what to do with them."²⁸ Indeed, much of the knowledge surrounding authentic or ethical Fluxus performance practice is not written down but exists through interpersonal accountability, negotiation and life experience, in what Ken Friedman has called "communities of practice" established through "shared experience and common knowledge."²⁹ Accordingly, performance instructions may circulate in the form of conceptual image or orally transmitted folklore rather than written text.³⁰

Diana Taylor has given us the helpful notions of "archive" and "repertoire," but I wonder what might still fall out of these frameworks.³¹ With regard to Fluxus scores, do we think we don't need the repertoire because we already have the archive? And do too many of us presume that the archive tells us that we can do whatever we want with this work? The relative privacy and intimacy, the sense of like-mindedness and cohortedness, the tacit knowledge that supported early Fluxus performance practice—recall Brecht's "little enlightenments" shared with friends—these do not automatically carry along with these works. These qualities must be more openly acknowledged and discussed.

Following decades of exhibitions, concerts and scholarship, event scores have become recognizable enough as a format that we can begin to generalize about them. This step is arguably necessary from a conservation standpoint, as developing individual conservation approaches for each of hundreds, if not thousands, of the event scores in existence is simply impractical. Instead, we might adapt a general framework that accommodates the distinct approaches of individual artists. The challenge lies in the event score's fundamental nature. Due to their interdependent ontologies, it is most productive to consider the cards and realizations together rather than separately. This "temporal twofoldedness"—Hölling's term for how the Fluxus event exists simultaneously as written instruction and countless past and potential realizations—can be hard to manage institutionally.³² Responsibility for these works typically fragments across multiple departments: curators, archivists and special collections librarians care for the paper objects, while education curators, time-based media specialists and performance curators handle their activation. Who is the proper warden of this work? Whose expertise should prevail when conflicts arise? It would be both impossible and counterproductive to prescribe strict treatment guidelines for each and every Fluxus score. Instead, by observing the historiography of how these works have been presented over time, we can derive a set of best considerations and practices for presenting this complex material.

Reviewing the documentary record: a search for authors and origins

Fluxus had a complicated relationship to its own documentation.³³ Most of the photographic and audiovisual record from the first European concert tour of 1962–63 that has been reproduced in scholarship comes from television and newspaper journalists, not the artists themselves. Despite the proliferation of cleverly designed, text- and graphics-heavy Fluxus publications, it seems that Fluxus artists did not make great efforts to record the sights and sounds of their own performances. Furthermore, the audiovisual documentation that does exist was certainly not intended to be a guide for future interpretations, and artists actively worked against having their compositions interpreted in a consistent way.

Where performance documentation was disseminated, such as with Maciunas's scroll-like *Fluxus Preview Review* (1963), it was in order to circulate event scores, advertise future programs, or to register that performances had simply taken place. Fluxus artists employed photography not to create artfully composed, technically refined pictures, and not even as a way of registering a repeatable paradigm of performance. Photography was used largely as a tool for promoting future events, and most photographs of early performances that exist were taken by journalists or self-designated documentarians of the scene, such as Peter Moore. While the photographs ostensibly record and preserve Fluxus gestures for posterity, the very title of *Fluxus Preview Review* as both review and preview—alongside Maciunas's habit of referring to it as a "prospectus"—undermines the images' possible role as representing an authoritative performance of any individual score.

For a collective famous for generating mountains of ephemera, it may seem surprising that providing an accurate or replicable picture of what exactly took place in past performances was not a prime concern. Rather than photographs, Maciunas's designs for Fluxus publications more often included vintage graphics that evinced a truly countercultural anti-novelty, anti-glamor aesthetic. One important performance document, *Ekstra Bladet/Politiken* (1963), is a broadside collage of news clippings that document the 1962–63 European concert tour through reviews written by bemused or incensed critics for German, Italian and Danish papers.³⁴ Notably, the film performances gathered by Maciunas in *Fluxfilm Anthology* (1962–70) are almost all silent. And while audio recordings of early Fluxus performances made by the artists most certainly exist, they were not released in the moment under the Fluxus imprimatur.

A German newsreel broadcast by Hessischer Rundfunk covering the 1962 Fluxus Internationale Festspiele Neuer Musik in Wiesbaden is the earliest widely available moving image documentation of Fluxus performance practice, worth revisiting for clues to the tacit instructions understood but not articulated in the scores.³⁵ We observe the performers' understated yet professional attire, their deadpan focus on their tasks, their curious attentiveness and nonreactivity to the absurdity of their own gestures. If this new form of "action music" was seen to be radically theatrical in its time for its activation of visual experience alongside sound, we can now appreciate how self-effacing, even anti-theatrical, Fluxus's version of "theatricality" was. In this sense, Fluxus performance practice paralleled other strains

of experimental performance in the 1960s aligned with the Cage–Tudor axis; one thinks, for example, of the work of Judson Dance Theater, which was confrontational in its counter-spectacularity.³⁶ Reviewing Yvonne Rainer’s evening-length *The Mind Is a Muscle*, Jill Johnston noted the dancers’ neutral, matter-of-fact, work-like, anti-performative demeanor—a “tactical withdrawal underscored by an introspective self-involvement.”³⁷ Reviewed critically, one might regard this demeanor as retreating into a kind of emotionally distanced catatonia, disassociated from or disinvested in the experience of audience members.

And yet, particularly with Fluxus event scores, the cognitive dissonance or affective friction between absurdity and seriousness can beneficially heighten the work’s humorous or shocking effect. In line with Tudor’s instrumental role in the selling of Cage’s work to skeptical publics, Fluxus performances took cues from conventional concert hall performance etiquette, selling the work with seriousness rather than avant-garde passion. Such formalism reverse-highlights the extraordinariness of the gestures. As Wada puts it, “You’re not an actor, you’re a doer. There should not be any distance between you and what you are doing.”³⁸ From the beginning, however, some Fluxus artists pushed back against what we might call “the David Tudor effect,” wherein a privileged performer’s approach to the work becomes the “de facto model” for how it should be interpreted in the future.³⁹ As conductor Christopher Rountree explains, this can lead to performances that suffer from an “attachment to a mid-twentieth-century, post-classical, stark performance aesthetic”; for contemporary audiences, a radical reinterpretation may be called for or else the work will die a death of irrelevance.⁴⁰

If Fluxus artists’ goal was to “vary each piece in each performance,” as Maciunas wrote to Paik, then we might regard documentation of historic Fluxus events as evidence of what *not* to do in our present. This is, of course, at odds with how documentation typically operates within cultures of reperformance to confer authenticity on certain interpretations, especially those of the score’s original author and their allies, realized close to the date of the work’s conception or premiere. As Hannah B Higgins writes, “As the archival traces of performance have entered museums, re-performance has become a potent tool in conferring added value to the archive and imbuing the space with the impregnating aura of the artists’ emerging ghost.”⁴¹ Despite archival evidence of Fluxus artists’ intentions to the contrary, the lure of treating the earliest documented interpretations as most “original” remains strong and may grow stronger the further in time we travel away from the 1960s.

After the 1962 German newsreel, video documentation⁴² of a Fluxus concert programmed at the Kitchen, New York, in 1979 by Ken Friedman and Larry Miller offers possibly the first instance of post-first-wave self-historicization of the group’s practice, with the press release claiming for Fluxus a now-historical role in “the formation of performance art as we know it.”⁴³ According to the event’s press release, “The rapid succession of quick pieces makes for a lively presentation, with constant shifts of focus and scale. Some of the pieces are explosive, with a punchline, while others draw our attention to intimate small-scale events.” It offers a good example of the typical structure of a Fluxus concert, which Peter Frank describes as modeled loosely on chamber music, poetry recitals and talent

shows, rather than orchestral programs.⁴⁴ A notable difference from the Wiesbaden documentation, which makes much of the audience's shocked reaction, is that the Kitchen's audience seems to consist mainly of informed friends, harkening back to the milieu of early 1960s concerts held in artists' lofts and advertised among a like-minded, sympathetic subculture. In the 1979 performances we can observe more looseness, less self-seriousness and the audience seeming to gleefully anticipate what is going to happen. The performers' awareness that they are "representing" a now-historical genre of performance art suffuses the event with an aura of meta-consciousness that sets it off from the contemporary.

Throughout my interviews, the contemporary adoption of the bowler hat as a kind of standard Fluxus costume emerged as a point of irritation among many. It is seen to represent an approach to performance that is overly self-conscious, caricatured, theatrical and quotational—an attempt to revivify the past by bringing old photographs to life. To be fair, the bowler hat was both a motif in circulation among early Fluxus actors and a sartorial preference of Maciunas, calling to mind multiple references, from leading Dada organizer Tristan Tzara to vaudeville comedians Charlie Chaplin and Laurel and Hardy. In Maciunas's event score *In Memoriam Adriano Olivetti* (1962), performers refer to columns of numbers on used adding-machine tape to robotically cue simple gestures, among them donning and doffing a bowler hat. The "Fluxfest" community, a network of performers self-identified as part of the Fluxus legacy but typically operating without the collaboration of first-generation Fluxus people, has most visibly promoted this trend. The Fluxfests of this group developed out of the online Fluxlist community established via listserv in 1995 as an extension of what had previously been a paper-based international mail art community.⁴⁵ In my teaching experience, the bowler hat can be useful with novice performers for whom a bit of costuming facilitates a greater sense of freedom in their behavior, and when presenting work in public spaces, where sartorial props confer official status to the performers. This latter function for costuming was present from the beginning: Ben Vautier and Maciunas wore bowlers while performing on the streets of Nice, while lab coats facilitated the public work of Hi Red Center in Tokyo. Nevertheless, Hannah B Higgins offers this strident critique: "The version of Fluxus we find on the internet and in the curatorial mainstream is a fiction, a group of artists circling a parody of the real Maciunas that struts about in the place of Fluxus and the art world making grand gestures and totalizing statements."⁴⁶ Instead of fetishizing visual or theatrical motifs found in the historical documentation—turning the body into a photograph—Higgins proposes that interpreters take on an "ethics of interest" as a guiding principle (as opposed to aesthetic or style or medium), where the focus is on creating experiences that are genuinely engaging and thought-provoking for both performer and audience.⁴⁷

In contrast to quotational reanimations, contemporary reimaginings of original scores and performances can breathe new life into the work. An example of a profound and successful activation of Fluxus performance in the present was *Cut Piece for Pant Suits*, a public action in Madison Square Park directed by JoAnne Akalaitis and Ashley Tata in December 2016. Ten women wearing pantsuits staged

a version of Yoko Ono's 1964 *Cut Piece* at the very same time that members of the Electoral College were casting their official votes, leading to Donald J. Trump's capture of the presidency.⁴⁸ A homage rather than a sanctioned performance, it demonstrates how canny interpretations of event scores can speak powerfully to their present moment. Perpetually ripe for revisitation, they can always teach us new things.

Permission and authority

I hereby sound the alarm that the uncertain culture of permissions around Fluxus event scores will plague their future presentation. This may be perversely fitting, as irresolvable conflicts around authorship and ownership were present from Fluxus's emergence, especially around Maciunas's efforts to collectivize Fluxus publishing and performance practice in the interests of protecting and advancing the group's (tenuously held) core aims.⁴⁹ Maciunas's efforts to secure Fluxus's financial and aesthetic future were resisted by many, including George Brecht, who explained: "Copyright entails the idea of possession. And I don't at all have the feeling of possessing what I do. For example, when I say or write 'listen to the telephone,' anyone could do that."⁵⁰ The history of Fluxus performance straddled the domains of public events held in mainstream arts institutions (Museum Wiesbaden, Carnegie Hall) and informal, intimate, everyday and even accidental realizations. As such, how might we hold open space for highly visible, *unauthorized* presentations?

If the miraculous power of the event score is that its signification continuously transforms before our mind's eye, privileging a return to the score's author risks limiting our perspective to their vision (read: intention) of the text only. It is a common dynamic among neo-avant-garde work of the 1960s, as described well by Diedrich Diederichsen:

Where art takes shape peripheral to the marketplace and its commodities, the pressure that economic circumstances nonetheless continue to exert shifts emphasis from the commodity status of the object to the persons responsible for its making. Therefore, within this paradigm, it is the immaterial and process-based work, which is by nature refractory to the conventional categories of authorship, that requires an unambiguous author.⁵¹

As Michel Foucault famously articulated amid the proto-postmodern turn in which Fluxus first emerged, the author is an ambiguous "origin" for the text. Our desire to return to this origin both "constantly introduces modifications" in our understanding of the text and serves as "an effective and necessary means of transforming discursive practice."⁵² Nevertheless, many argue that returning to the author is a crucial priority given that eventually this will no longer be possible. For Wada, "any engagement with the original artists is the best possible circumstance."⁵³ Performance curator Sarah Cooper agrees, noting that while contacting the artist can be intimidating, more often than not they are delighted for the work to

be programmed, and the event subsequently benefits from the validation such approval brings.⁵⁴

Artist-authorized performances currently take place via networks of trust, which could counterproductively contribute to the ossification of works by creating a post-Fluxus convention of privileged or even restricted realizations. We are in a phase of Fluxus performance history wherein first-generation artists and their kin are called upon to realize a limited set of works that are often done in a consistent way. One thinks, for example, of Alison Knowles's #2—*Proposition (October, 1962) (Make a Salad)*, which, following its scaling up in conjunction with Larry Miller and Tom Russotti's *Flux-Olympiad* at Tate Modern's Turbine Hall in 2008, is routinely realized at grand scale with tarp and rakes. Is this way of making the salad the last, most authentic version? Will it become the favored way to realize this work after the artist's lifetime?

Here is where we seem to be with permission: You didn't need it in the past, but it seems you need it now. First-generation Fluxus artists who participate in the presentation of their work are influencing and establishing a protocol for treatment that may affect the vast swath of Fluxus-identified work for years to come. If Fluxus works were initially conceived as material or conceptual gifts, they are increasingly subsumed under a culture of ownership and authorization, a phenomenon familiar to those in conservation who observe shifts in artistic intent over time.⁵⁵ Cooper notes:

My sense is a lot of artists who created open work, not just Fluxus, but conceptual artists, were more enamored with their own liberation, their own ability to break the confines of success and visibility and systems and to give themselves a platform than they were necessarily to see everyone else re-do their work.⁵⁶

This new culture of permissions, we should observe, is emerging in an ambiguous space outside the domains of clearly articulated licensing practices of the kind we encounter with organizations such as the music industry's BMI or the art world's ARS.⁵⁷ It can be unclear when and from whom permission is needed, creating a pernicious ambiguity that could stand to kill off the work or privilege only certain kinds of activation. While some still adamantly argue that permissions are not needed, institutions may err on the side of caution and seek them nevertheless.⁵⁸ To add a further wrinkle, permissions for presenting individual events may be treated differently from those needed for documenting and recording them. Individual performances need not be authorized per se, but capturing and recirculating a recording of a realized score attributed to a certain artist calls for more careful negotiation of authorization.

As such, two tiers of performance seem to be emerging. On the one hand, there are well-resourced institutional performances that work directly with artists and artist estates, thereby achieving authorized status. The Los Angeles Philharmonic's spectacular Fluxus Festival, orchestrated in their 2018–19 season by Christopher Rountree, is one such example. The venue and presenting organization lend

automatic prestige and authority, no matter how compellingly the work is executed. On the other, Fluxus performance practice survives and evolves in DIY, experimental, pedagogical contexts of alternative spaces, artist-run spaces and classrooms—not to mention the diffuse and potentially infinite context of everyday life. In the eternal network of conceptual play proposed by these works, no special performance context is necessary. I worry that these two spheres of performance culture will increasingly diverge, leaving a permissions and authority desert in the middle for mid-tier institutions that cannot bear the financial and administrative burden of managing permissions for elaborate, multiauthored presentations. I also worry that institutions may be overly cautious about and may even avoid presenting works that do not have a clear stakeholder from whom to request permission.

Whether one has authorization or permission to perform is one thing; another is *how* the works are performed, the quality of their realization. This question of quality is, for me, a matter of ethics and method. Is there a meta-score we can compose to guide Fluxus performance practice in the future? Could such a meta-score surface the tacit instructions that exist invisibly in between the lines of the general corpus of Fluxus event scores as they are written? Recalling Hanna B. Hölling's language, can we do more proactive work to grasp the virtual archive?

With such questions in mind, I have devised two heuristic frameworks for approaching the performance of Fluxus events and the exhibition of Fluxus objects. First, I offer an opening attempt at composing a "meta-score" that condenses recommendations and preferences gleaned from archival research and interviews with Fluxus people (including first-generation artists and artists with close ties to them), researchers, curators and programmers. It speaks most directly to the performance of event scores but could guide decisions in the curation of Fluxus objects and ephemera. This meta-score represents a loose consensus from those I have learned from, though it does not claim to represent any individual voice, except perhaps my own. I offer it as a provocation to be argued with and improved upon.

Meta-score for Fluxus performance and exhibition

- Let care and curiosity drive your preparations. Fluxus works are meant to be experimented with, not abused.
- Familiarize yourself with the work's performance/presentation history, then add your twist.
- Find a balance between the work (including the author's apparent intent), the performer and the performance/display context.
- Institutions: Seek collaboration and permission if you can. Pay artists.
- Schools: If the event is part of an educational program, *don't* ask for permission but *do* present the work for free.
- Rehearsal or blocking is a good idea, but don't prepare the work to death. Preparation does take time, but much (or most) of this may be conceptual: contemplating what to do and how to do it.
- Humor will come naturally, if at all. Don't force it.
- Simplicity and clarity are best. Avoid excessive theatricality or showmanship.

- Never speed up a piece. Let it take its own time.
- Don't act; be. Don't represent; present. Don't channel the past; connect with your present reality.

Certain remarks from those I interviewed deserve individual elaboration. Peter Frank was willing to be most specific in his suggestions for how to perform a Fluxus score. Performers should approach Fluxus pieces with focus and attention, avoiding sloppiness or excessive theatricality in favor of balancing precision and playfulness.⁵⁹ The stage and attire, he says, should be minimal and self-effacing to avoid distracting from the core conceptual gesture: "The element of surprise and transformation needs to be sensed and enjoyed by the performers as well as by the audience."⁶⁰ When working with students in a pedagogical setting, Julia Robinson suggests not over-preparing them.⁶¹ Let them work through decisions on their own in order to experience the process of discovery. She also shared a common preference for gentle and open-ended performances rather than heavy-handed ones. Ken Friedman advocates for taking time to prepare, specifying that for an evening-length concert, one needs about a week to work out the approach to performance through group discussion.⁶² Tashi Wada advocates highlighting lesser-known artists and works and not just focusing on the most famous figures and pieces. He suggests leaving room to respond to the unexpected that may occur in one's moment, noting that this can be hard for institutions that desire details to be mapped out in advance. Wada also observes that these pieces can "get lost," and so performers should think about how to protect the "integrity" of the piece; it shouldn't turn into "an improvisation that can happen under any circumstances."⁶³ Wada argues that Fluxus doesn't need to be dumbed down, even for general audiences. Sarah Cooper reminds us that the score is more than a text: "Approach the work with thoughtfulness, care and an understanding of the Fluxus spirit, rather than just following the instructions. Fluxus needs a light touch."⁶⁴ She advises choosing performers who already embody a similar spirit in their own work—who already have that tacit understanding of Fluxus's stakes and aims.

Fluxus activation matrix

The second framework I offer is a "Fluxus Activation Matrix," which imagines a field of possibilities for the realization of both events and exhibitions defined by two continua of relative freedom versus relative activation (Figure 1.1). The Matrix is meant to address the material display and activation of scores, objects and print material. The vertical axis moves from the presentation of a static object or static event score card/page, in which there is no realization or intervention, to a complete recreation, reinvention or activated event, in which one might reprint a score to be openly distributed or allow people to handle Fluxus objects. The horizontal axis moves from a pole of control/constraint/copy, which points to historical recreations and faithful reproductions with little-to-no contemporary reimagination, to a pole of freedom/disavowal, which bears both positive and negative valences.

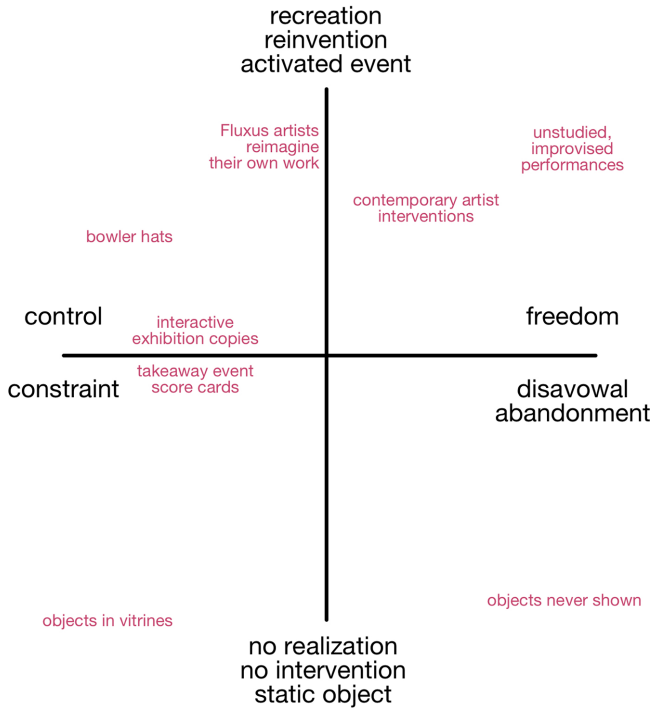


Figure 1.1 Natilee Harren, Fluxus Activation Matrix, 2022–24.

On the one hand, we can imagine the freedom to breathe new life into the work; on the other, we can imagine poorly executed presentations in which little care is taken to consider and prepare for an interpretation or to understand the work’s past life. The Matrix’s four-fold axis resonates with Hannah B Higgins’s conceptualization of performer choice as a continuum between two extremes (neither of which is preferable): the performer as absolute object (merely recreating or “revivifying” a historical photograph) and the performer as absolute subject (imposing their own interpretation without regard for the composer’s aesthetic or the work’s performance history).⁶⁵

Some brief elaborations of my terms:

- Control/Constraint: management of details to protect against the unexpected; hewing to the “original”; diligently faithful historical recreation.
- No realization/No intervention/Static object: Score not realized and/or presented as text/card only; not adding anything; vitrine display.
- Recreation/Reinvention/Activated event: Exhibition copies that prioritize fidelity to experience over visual aesthetics; remaking for the present; realizing the score.

- Freedom/Disavowal/Abandonment: Radically interpreting your own way without consideration of the work's performance/presentation history (either purposefully or through carelessness); abandoning the work, either by overriding it with a heavy-handed interpretation or by letting it die.⁶⁶

This matrix was devised with a number of display paradigms for Fluxus objects within museum and exhibition settings in mind, which I survey in an extremely condensed manner here. While Harald Szeemann's 1970 exhibition *Happening & Fluxus* at the Kölnerischer Kunstverein captured Fluxus as a living movement, it was MoMA librarian Clive Phillpot, collaborating with Jon Hendricks, who in 1988 mounted one of the first truly historical surveys of Fluxus works in an institutional setting.⁶⁷ The library was an appropriate setting at the time, as Fluxus materials were typically held by librarians rather than collections curators and are meant to be handled. In the years since, Fluxus stuff has increasingly migrated from relatively accessible library collections to rare book rooms or even more restricted storage among prints, drawings and sculpture.

From this beginning, we encounter a widely adopted approach of wall-embedded display cabinets and large vitrines stuffed with Fluxus multiples in various states of unpacking, as if to simulate physical engagement. The Walker Art Center's 1993 traveling exhibition *In the Spirit of Fluxus*, curated by Elizabeth Armstrong and Joan Rothfuss, centered a warren of impressively large custom display cases with wooden edging that cleverly highlighted rather than avoided acknowledging the viewing containers (Figure 1.2). For MoMA's 2011–12 exhibition *Thing/Thought: Fluxus Editions 1962–1978*, Gretchen Wagner and Jon Hendricks devised novel solutions to counteract the potentially deadening effect of imprisoning vitrines. First, the exhibition designers devised a secure way to exhibit two copies of a Fluxkit (from 1965) without bonnets, positioned out of reach atop a large double-sided display case containing the contents of each kit (Figure 1.3). Also notable was their invitation to Fluxus artists, including Alison Knowles and Mieko Shiomi, to rearrange the contents of the two suitcases at different points throughout the run of the show, thereby offering different perspectives on the material and giving viewers a reason to return. Fluxus-inspired artists of younger generations, including Pope.L and Anna Ostoya, staged performative interventions for video. Pope.L is shown eating an event score card and burgling a Fluxkit out of the museum. Ostoya liberates the Fluxkit's contents throughout the museum, culminating in a snow-storm of score cards let loose over the Marron Atrium, among which appears a new instruction, added by the artist, that invokes the Occupy Wall Street movement.

Exhibition copies that privilege physical interactivity and/or sensorial stimulation over visual exactitude can be a useful means of offering beholders authentic *experiences* in lieu of direct contact with original objects. The Getty Research Institute's 2007 exhibition *Art, Anti-Art, Non-Art: Experimentations in the Public Sphere in Postwar Japan, 1950–1970* included Ay-Ō's *Tactile Boxes* contained within a vitrine outfitted with its own set of accessible holes secreting materials similar to what was inside the original artworks (Figure 1.4). The label listing each



Figure 1.2 Installation view of the exhibition *In the Spirit of Fluxus*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, February 14–June 6, 1993. Photo: Walker Art Center Archives.



Figure 1.3 Installation view of the exhibition *Thing/Thought: Fluxus Editions, 1962–1978*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, September 21, 2011–January 16, 2012. Photo: Thomas Griesel. IN2170.10.

work's materials assisted beholders' imaginations and sense of touch—or was a spoiler, depending on one's view. The *Flux-Labyrinth*, a human-sized Fluxbox imagined by Maciunas and ultimately designed and built in collaboration with Larry Miller at the Academie der Kunst in Berlin in 1976, has proven wildly popular as a reconstruction. A largely faithful copy was a highlight of the 1993 Walker Art Center show (see Figure 1.2, background), while curator Cecilia Alemani's 2015 version for Frieze New York also attracted long lines. Alemani sought input from Geoffrey Hendricks and Alison Knowles, but because her project did not benefit from the direct involvement of original artists it was dubbed a “tribute” or “homage,” a strategy that may prove increasingly popular in the future as a means of opening up a space of permissibility. A most radical approach in this direction was Susan Hapgood and Cornelia Lauf's aforementioned *FluxAttitudes*, a big group show that mixed first-generation Fluxus artists with younger figures.⁶⁸ There were few attributing didactics, and you could touch just about everything.

For obvious reasons, Fluxus print ephemera has proven the best candidate for reproduction; takeaway event score card reprints are a popular, handy way to invite a subtle form of viewer participation. Initiatives such as James Hoff and Matthew Walker's Primary Information have done an admirable job of bringing scarce work back into public hands with high-quality, sensitively adapted reprints, including the full run of Something Else Press's Great Bear Pamphlet series and the Fluxus

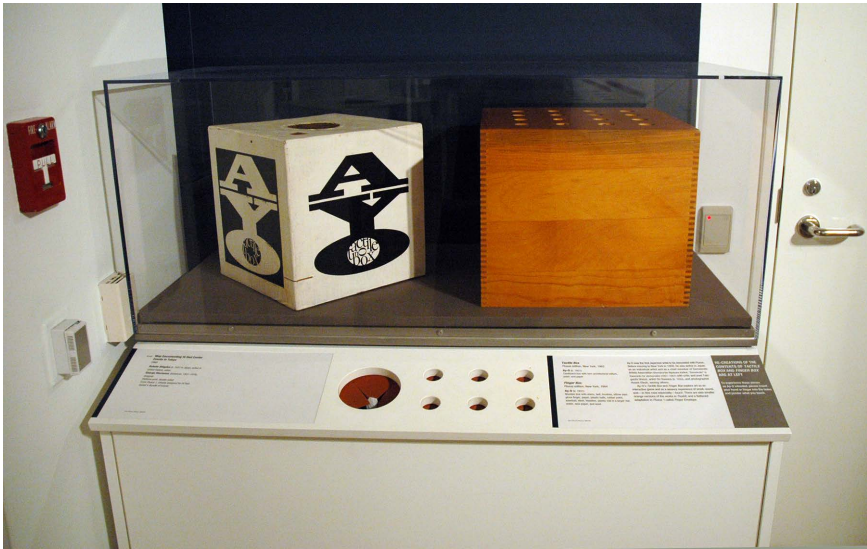


Figure 1.4 Ay-Ō's *Tactile Box* and *Finger Box* on display in the exhibition *Art, Anti-Art, Non-Art: Experimentations in the Public Sphere in Postwar Japan, 1950–1970*, at the Getty Center in Los Angeles. © Marshall Astor. In front of the case is a simulator of the artworks within, where visitors can insert their hands (for the *Tactile Box*) or fingers (for the *Finger Box*).

newspaper *ccV TRE*. Primary Information's role as a producer of quality facsimiles of historical ephemera should be seen as distinct from Barbara Moore's important initiatives Backworks (with Jon Hendricks) and ReFlux Editions, which were positioned more or less as direct continuations of Maciunas's publication project.

We have also seen numerous approaches to simulating touch or offering vicarious access to Fluxus materials. Before the internet phenomenon of unboxing videos, curators at institutions including the Getty Research Institute and Kunsthalle Bielefeld generated moving image documentation to show the manipulation of Fluxus objects. The Walker Art Center claims a leading creative role in this approach by inviting the artist Christian Marclay to explore their Fluxus collections, the outcome of which became the multichannel video installation *Shake Rattle and Roll (Fluxmix)* (2004). An artwork in its own right, each monitor shows the artist's gloved hands exploring—and sounding—a different Fluxus object. Capitalizing on the accessibility and flexibility of web design, the Fluxus Digital Collection at the University of Iowa (fluxus.lib.uiowa.edu) and Fondazione Bonotto (fondazionebonotto.org) have made extensive materials available to explore in digital form. The *Activating Fluxus* project website (activatingfluxus.com) and *The Scores Project* (getty.edu/publications/scores), with which I am involved, signal yet more innovative, multimodal approaches to digital publication of these materials. No matter the medium or métier, the "Fluxus Activation Matrix" can aid in comparing and analyzing different approaches to mounting Fluxus performances and exhibitions, empowering art workers to conscientiously approach decision-making processes with their aims and limitations firmly in mind.

Conclusion

Conversing with invested peers, I have noted increased use of the term "protocol" to describe the Fluxus score. This move reflects a desire to activate Fluxus as a forebear to new media aesthetics, language and knowledge, recognizing that avant-garde performance scores anticipatorily resonate with the techno-libertarianism of our present. Indeed, Fluxus scores may hold a key for identifying and responding in kind to the pervasive administration of everyday life in the early decades of the twenty-first century.⁶⁹ For Alexander Galloway, a protocol is "a technique for achieving voluntary regulation within a contingent environment."⁷⁰ If we return to this root definition, I would offer that Fluxus is in fact *anti*-protocological work. At the very least, Fluxus scores have an ambivalent relationship to protocol. They are not themselves protocols, but they have at times inspired a kind of protocological treatment in which performers voluntarily regulate their interpretations against a perceived standard.

This is a problem. If we do not want the legacy of Fluxus to die at the hands of protocological overreach, how can we safeguard a flexible framework—an ethic—for responsible activation? My question for future caretakers and stakeholders of this work is this: What conventionalities or best practices are acceptable without locking the work in a distant historical past? Can there be authority without

permission? Does the work's temporal twofoldedness invite us to think of a *temporal multisitedness* or *temporal multiverse* of interpretation, in which past interpretations—especially those that seem most “authentic” or “original”—are preserved in the historic record but do not foreclose infinite alternatives?

Who will get the final say? Which institutions will take the lead? Whose voices will guide Fluxus performance and display culture into the future? Who is setting precedent and what are those precedents? This discussion has been an attempt not to register final answers to these questions but to get some forms of Fluxus activation on the record. I remain hopeful that future stewards of this work will continue to consult the material and virtual archive without deriving from it a hardened protocol. Because of this, I am certain: we get the Fluxus we deserve.

Notes

- 1 George Maciunas, letter to Nam June Paik, c. 1962, Jean Brown papers, 1916–1995 (bulk 1958–1985), Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, accession no. 890164.
- 2 Natilee Harren, *Fluxus Forms: Scores, Multiples, and the Eternal Network* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).
- 3 Julia Robinson, correspondence with the author, March 3, 2025.
- 4 The reasons for this are multiple. Film and video recordings from this period, if they exist at all, appear in obsolete formats in private and public collections that can be slow and sometimes even reticent to digitize and make broadly available their holdings.
- 5 Philip Corner, email to the author, October 28, 2022.
- 6 Natilee Harren, “The Eternal Metabolic Network: Fluxus, Food, and Ecofeminism,” in *Living Matter: The Preservation of Biological Materials Used in Contemporary Art*, eds. Rachel Rivenc and Kendra Roth (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 2022), 55–63; Juliane Wattig, “Objects in Flux?” Poster presentation at POPART: Preservation of Plastic ARTefacts in Museum Collections, Centre de Recherche sur la Conservation des Collections, Paris, 2012.
- 7 Jules Pelta Feldman, video call with the author, November 21, 2024.
- 8 Ken Friedman, “The Literature of Fluxus,” *Visible Language* 40, no. 1, *Fluxus and Legacy, Part 2*, eds. Ken Friedman and Owen F. Smith (2006): 90–112.
- 9 La Monte Young, ed., *An Anthology of Chance Operations, Indeterminacy, Improvisation, Concept Art, Anti-Art, Meaningless Work, Natural Disasters, Stories, Diagrams, Music, Dance, Constructions, Compositions, Mathematics, Plans of Actions* (New York: La Monte Young and Jackson Mac Low, 1963); Dick Higgins, *Postface* (New York: Something Else Press, 1964).
- 10 Marilyn Ekdahl Ravicz, “Aesthetic Anthropology: Theory and Analysis of Pop and Conceptual Art in America” (PhD dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1974).
- 11 Cornelia Lauf and Susan Hapgood, eds., *FluxAttitudes* (Ghent: Imschoot, uitgevers, 1991).
- 12 For scholarship offering a more granular history of Fluxus activities, see, for example, Owen F. Smith, *Fluxus: The History of an Attitude* (San Diego: San Diego State University Press, 1998); Hannah B Higgins, *Fluxus Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Petra Stegmann, ed., “*The Lunatics are on the Loose . . .*”: *European Fluxus Festivals 1962–1977* (Potsdam: Down With Art!, 2012); Mari Dumett, *Corporate Imaginations: Fluxus Strategies for Living* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017); and Colby Chamberlain, *Fluxus Administration: George Maciunas and the Art of Paperwork* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2024).

- 13 Between 2022 and 2024 I interviewed or spoke informally about the present topic with Larry Miller, Sara Seagull, Hannah B Higgins, Jessica Higgins, Peter Frank, Ken Friedman, Christian Xatrec, Jules Pelta Feldman, Julia Robinson, Christopher Rountree, Sarah Cooper, Colby Chamberlain, Chris Reeves, Tashi Wada and David Dove. Admittedly, this is an idiosyncratic and limited list of subjects, and more knowledge-gathering and discourse on these issues—such as the present volume offers—are sorely needed.
- 14 Harren, “Prelude: The Artwork in Flux,” in *Fluxus Forms*.
- 15 Liz Kotz, “Post-Cagean Aesthetics and the Event Score,” in *Words to Be Looked At* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007); Julia Robinson, “The Brechtian Event Score: A Structure in Fluxus,” *Performance Research* 7, no. 3 (2002): 110–23, “From Abstraction to Model: George Brecht’s Events and the Conceptual Turn in Art of the 1960s,” *October* 127 (Winter 2009): 77–108, and “Parsing Scores: Application in Fluxus,” *OnCurating*, no. 51 (2021): 51–63; Hanna B. Hölling, “Unpacking the Score: Notes on the Material Legacy of Intermediality,” *OnCurating*, no. 51 (2021): 64–81.
- 16 Other scholarship that deploys the term “allographic,” originally theorized by Nelson Goodman, to describe work of this period includes Hanna B. Hölling, *Paik’s Virtual Archive: Time, Change, and Materiality in Media Art* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017); and Megan G. Metcalf, “In the New Body: Simone Forti’s Dance Constructions (1960–61) and their Acquisition by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA)” (PhD dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 2018).
- 17 Reproduced in Michael Gallope, Natilee Harren and John Hicks, eds., *The Scores Project: Experimental Notation in Music, Art, Poetry, and Dance, 1950–1975* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2025), <https://www.getty.edu/publications/scores/object-index/346/>.
- 18 See Gallope, Harren and Hicks, *The Scores Project*, <https://www.getty.edu/publications/scores/object-index/366/>.
- 19 Hölling, “Unpacking the Score.”
- 20 Chamberlain, *Fluxus Administration*.
- 21 Jon Hendricks, *Fluxus Codex* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1988). The collection, now known as the “Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Gift,” was acquired by the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 2009.
- 22 Dick Higgins, “An Exemplativist Manifesto,” in *A Dialectic of Centuries: Notes Towards a Theory of the New Arts* (New York: Printed Editions, 1978 [1976]), 156, 159, italics mine; reprinted in *Intermedia, Fluxus and the Something Else Press: Selected Writings by Dick Higgins*, eds. Steve Clay and Ken Friedman (Catskill, NY: Siglio, 2018).
- 23 Wada, video call with the author, November 9, 2022.
- 24 Ken Friedman, “Working with Event Scores: A Personal History,” *Performance Research* 7, no. 3 (2002): 124–28.
- 25 See, for example, Dumett, *Corporate Imaginations*, and Robinson, “Parsing Scores.”
- 26 Wada, video call with the author.
- 27 Hölling, *Paik’s Virtual Archive*, 148–53.
- 28 George Brecht, “The Origin of Events,” in *Happening & Fluxus*, eds. Harald Szeemann and Hanns Sohm (Cologne: Kölnischer Kunstverein, 1970), n.p.
- 29 Ken Friedman, “Events and the Exquisite Corpse,” in *The Exquisite Corpse: Chance and Collaboration in Surrealism’s Parlor Game*, eds. Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren, Davis Schneiderman and Tom Denlinger (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 54, 76. This essay includes a “taxonomy of ways to select, realize, and present events.”
- 30 Bengt af Klintberg, “Fluxus Games and Contemporary Folklore: On the Non-Individual Character of Fluxus Art,” *Konsthistorisk tidskrift/Journal of Art History* 62, no. 2 (1993): 115–25.
- 31 Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 16–33.

- 32 Hölling, "Unpacking the Score."
- 33 I draw some of the following discussion from Harren, "Fluxus On and Off the Record," *Fluxus & NeoFluxus/Keep Together (Part 2)*, CD/LP, Sub Rosa, October 2024; and Harren, "The Provisional Work of Art: George Brecht's Footnotes at LACMA, 1969," *Getty Research Journal* 8 (2016): 177–97. See also Liz Kotz, "Language between Performance and Photography," in *Words to Be Looked At*, 181.
- 34 Reproduced in Gallope, Harren and Hicks, *The Scores Project*, <https://www.getty.edu/publications/scores/object-index/368/>.
- 35 *Fluxus*, Hessenschau television news program (broadcast by Hessischer Rundfunk), September 11, 1962, B&W video (transferred from original film), 5:31 minutes, © Hessischer Rundfunk, in Gallope, Harren and Hicks, *The Scores Project*, <https://www.getty.edu/publications/scores/object-index/356>.
- 36 Carrie Lambert-Beatty, *Being Watched: Yvonne Rainer and the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).
- 37 Jill Johnston, "Rainer's Muscle," *The Village Voice*, April 18, 1968, 29; reproduced in Gallope, Harren and Hicks, *The Scores Project*, <https://www.getty.edu/publications/scores/object-index/459>.
- 38 Wada, video call with the author, November 9, 2022.
- 39 Colby Chamberlain, video call with the author, December 12, 2022. See also Benjamin Piekut, *Experimentalism Otherwise: The New York Avant-Garde and Its Limits* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011); and Gallope, Harren and Hicks, *The Scores Project*.
- 40 Christopher Rountree, video call with the author, November 21, 2022.
- 41 Hannah B Higgins, "Reperformance: A Typology," unpublished manuscript of lecture delivered at Bard Graduate Center, New York, 2015.
- 42 Larry Miller, *Flux Concert*, 1979, B&W video, 81:45 min, distributed by Electronic Arts Intermix. Notably, the EAI catalog description of this video describes the event as "a concert of reconstructed historical Fluxus performances." See <https://www.eai.org/titles/flux-concert>. See also the excerpt included in Gallope, Harren and Hicks, *The Scores Project*, www.getty.edu/publications/scores/object-index/353.
- 43 The quotation is from the evening's press release, *FLUXUS: Classic '60's Performances Plus the Premier of Alison Knowles' "Natural Assemblages and the True Crow"*, The Kitchen, New York, March 24, 1979, reproduced in Gallope, Harren and Hicks, *The Scores Project*, www.getty.edu/publications/scores/object-index/358.
- 44 Peter Frank, video call with the author, November 12, 2024.
- 45 Central figures of the Fluxfest cohort include Keith A. Buchholz, Allen Bukoff, Allan Revich, Picasso (Bill) Gaglione, Cecil Touchon and Bibiana Padilla Maltos; see Fluxfest.org. There exists a Fluxlist Facebook group, moderated by Revich and Padilla Maltos, and a Yahoo listserv: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/fluxlist/>. According to the Fluxlist Facebook group, the internet-based Fluxlist was originated by Ken Friedman, Dick Higgins, Joe De Marco and Jon Van Fast.
- 46 Hannah B Higgins, "Dead Mannequin Walking: George Maciunas and the History of Fluxus," in *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History*, eds. Adrian Heathfield and Amelia Jones (Bristol: Intellect, 2012), 73.
- 47 Hannah B Higgins, video call with the author, November 11, 2022.
- 48 See also Ming-Yuen S. Ma's *ReCut Project* (part of the group exhibition *Draw a Line and Follow It*) at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions in 2006, which brought together varied interpretations of Ono's *Cut Piece* by Justin Chin, Catherine Lord, Jocelyn Matsuo, Lun*na Menoh, Amitis Motevalli, Osuna and the Toxic Titties (Heather Cassius, Clover Leary and Julia Steinmetz). Ming-Yuen S. Ma, "ReCut Project," in Heathfield and Jones, *Perform, Repeat, Record*, 347–50.
- 49 Chamberlain elaborates some of these disputes in *Fluxus Administration. The Scores Project* (Gallope, Harren and Hicks) includes a number of primary documents that illuminate this history, including Maciunas, "Conditions for Performing Fluxus Published

- Compositions, Films & Tapes" (c. 1965), and correspondence between Maciunas and Dick Higgins, Jackson Mac Low, Nam June Paik and Mieko Shiomi.
- 50 Ben Vautier and Marcel Alocco, "A Conversation about Something Else: An Interview with George Brecht," in Henry Martin, *An Introduction to George Brecht's Book of the Tumbler on Fire* (Milan: Multhipla Edizioni, 1978 [1965]), 73.
 - 51 Diedrich Diederichsen, "The Primary: Political and Anti-Political Continuities between Minimal Music and Minimal Art," in *A Minimal Future? Art as Object, 1958–1968* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004), 125. This quotation is deployed by Brandon Joseph in his relevant discussion of the authorship quarrels surrounding La Monte Young and The Theatre of Eternal Music in *Beyond the Dream Syndicate: Tony Conrad and the Arts After Cage* (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 2008).
 - 52 Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977 [1969]), 135.
 - 53 Wada, video call with the author.
 - 54 Sarah Cooper, video call with the author, November 13, 2024.
 - 55 Harren, *Fluxus Forms*, 166, 191–98, 202.
 - 56 Cooper, video call with the author.
 - 57 Sandra Sykora begins to address this aporia from a legal perspective in her essay "Copyright Implications of the Preservation of Performance Art," in *Performance: The Ethics and the Politics of Conservation and Care*, Vol. II, eds. Hanna B. Hölling, Jules Pelta Feldman and Emilie Magnin (London and New York: Routledge, 2025), 199–223.
 - 58 Christian Xatrec said to me, "I am an anarchist, I am an artist, and I will say unequivocally that I will never ask for any permission. . . . You don't have to, and you shouldn't." Xatrec, video call with the author, December 5, 2024.
 - 59 Peter Frank, video call with the author, November 12, 2024.
 - 60 Frank, video call with the author.
 - 61 Robinson, video call with the author.
 - 62 Ken Friedman, video call with the author, November 21, 2024.
 - 63 Wada, video call with the author.
 - 64 Cooper, video call with the author.
 - 65 Higgins, "Reperformance: A Typology," and video call with the author.
 - 66 For a case study of the disavowal of a Fluxus artwork, see Harren, "The Provisional Work of Art."
 - 67 Harald Szeemann and Hanns Sohm, eds., *Happening & Fluxus* (Cologne: Kölnischer Kunstverein, August 1970), n.p.; Clive Phillpot and Jon Hendricks, *Fluxus: Selections from the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1988). See also Magdalena Holdar, "Doing Things Together: Objectives and Effects of Harald Szeemann's Happening & Fluxus, 1970," *Journal of Curatorial Studies* 6, no. 1 (April 2017): 90–114.
 - 68 Cornelia Lauf and Susan Hapgood, eds., *FluxAttitudes* (Ghent: Imschoot, uitgevers, 1991).
 - 69 See, for example, the event score-inspired workshops of the Strother School of Radical Attention, <https://www.schoolofattention.org/>.
 - 70 Alexander R. Galloway, *Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 7.

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2 Ken Friedman: I loved the work and wanted to make it visible—a conversation with Hanna B. Hölling, Aga Wielocha and Josephine Ellis

Ken Friedman (Figure 2.1) is an artist, author and designer who became involved with Fluxus in 1966 at the age of 16. He worked with notable artists such as George Maciunas, Dick Higgins and Nam June Paik, and worked for Higgins's Something Else Press. He is known for his body of work that includes Fluxus scores, events, objects and games. A productively active networker and facilitator, he is also, at the same time, an author who has historicized and theorized Fluxus from within. Friedman has published one of the most extensive bodies of literature on and related to Fluxus, including, among other titles, *The Aesthetics* (1972), *The Fluxus Reader* (1998), *The Fluxus Performance Workbook* (co-edited with Owen F. Smith and Lauren Sawchyn, 2002) and, more recently, *Intermedia, Fluxus and the Something Else Press: Selected Writings by Dick Higgins* (co-edited with Steve Clay, 2018). In this conversation, Friedman talks about the continuing life of his works, the question of the activation of historical Fluxus, the role of storytelling therein and his perspectives on archives and institutions.

Hanna B. Hölling: I'd like to start by asking, do you consider Fluxus as still living or active and what role does your artistic work play in this context?

Ken Friedman: That's an interesting question. You could look at it in a couple of ways. Most of the people who were alive and participating in Fluxus in the 1960s are gone now. My close friends, like Dick [Higgins] or Nam June [Paik] are gone. But Alison [Knowles] is still alive, along with Phil Corner, Bengt af Klintberg and me.

Two factors were central to the reception of Fluxus until recently. The first was "the Yoko Ono effect." The other was "the Silverman Collection effect." These drew attention away from the variety of artists in Fluxus. These effects also compounded each other.

Yoko's private curator [Jon Hendricks] was also the curator for Gil's [Silverman] collection for many years. Jon

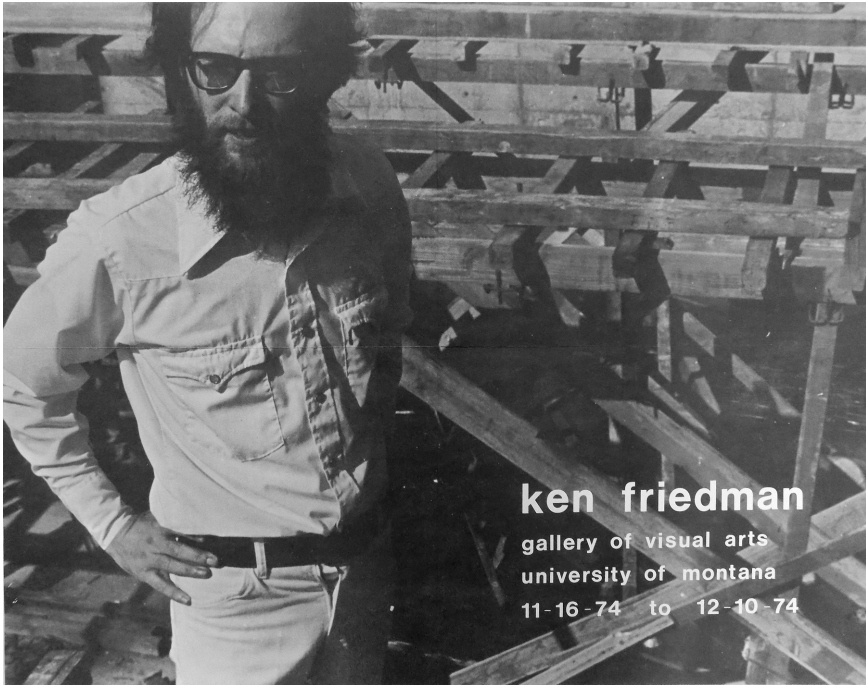


Figure 2.1 Poster from Ken Friedman's exhibition at the Gallery of Visual Arts, University of Montana, Missoula, November 16–December 10, 1974. Courtesy Fondazione Bonotto and the artist.

and Gil guided the scholarship and perception of Fluxus by deciding what to make available to scholars and by deciding who would be permitted access to the collection. They also influenced the scholarship and perception of Fluxus by the work they decided to show and the catalogs they published.

Frequently, I come across doctoral theses and books that quote me and reproduce material that I've published or edited—for example, *The Fluxus Reader*. But the same books and theses don't list me as a Fluxus artist. It's fascinating to disappear in that way.

But is Fluxus alive now? The answer is yes and no. Some of the things that made Fluxus a living community don't exist anymore. Some of the ideas about Fluxus no longer exist. For example, take George Maciunas's idea that to do a Flux Fest or Fluxconcert, at least fifty percent of the works had to be by Fluxus artists. If you met this criterion, you could perform the works and you didn't pay royalties. But if you included Fluxus

work in a concert that wasn't fifty percent or more Fluxus, then you had to pay royalties. That's gone now, and there is no one who has the right to request royalties.

Nevertheless, I think the legacy continues because of interesting historians who are looking at Fluxus now with a little bit of distance. This includes people like yourself, like Natilee Harren, Colby Chamberlain, Julia Robinson, Magdalena Holdar, Roger Rothman and Martin Patrick. Fluxus may be coming into a new light.

Hölling: From your answer, I gathered that there are several aspects of the possibility of Fluxus's liveliness: one is the Fluxus people that are still around and/or their individual legacies; the second possibility might be seen in the works that are open to interpretation; the third relates to the possibility of historicizing Fluxus work through scholarship and writing.

Friedman: Absolutely. Fluxus works were copyrighted by Fluxus, not by any individual. In addition to his own copyright control, George Maciunas authorized four people to give copyright permission for use. These were the directors of Fluxus East, Milan Knížák; Fluxus South, Ben Vautier; Fluxus North, Per Kirkeby; and Fluxus West, me. I always give permission.

What that means is that people are free to realize or activate the work, just like they can perform Mozart or Brahms or any historic composer or author whose work has come into the public domain. I would say that Fluxus is now in the public domain. George's widow and George's mother have apparently made attempts to control the Fluxus copyrights, but the Fluxus copyrights were not in George's personal estate, so George's family members have no legal claim on them.

The Fluxus work is there to be performed. It definitely has an afterlife. There's so much going on that you can't keep track of every performance. In the last ten years of his life, Ben Patterson did a couple of hundred Fluxus concerts in all kinds of places around the world.

Aga Wielocha: What are the potential avenues for the continuation of Fluxus in the works of young artists? In the catalog of the 1982 exhibition *Young Fluxus*,¹ Fluxus was expanded to embrace emerging artists. Do you envision a contemporary iteration of *Young Fluxus*—a new generation of artists embodying the Fluxus spirit in their works?

Friedman: The *Young Fluxus* book had something to do with the way that the folks at Artists Space wanted to frame it. But in fact, Jean Dupuy, Larry Miller and Yoshi Wada had all been active in Fluxus. Larry and Yoshi worked with George. Don Boyd had

been active working with Fluxus people, especially with me, and he had taken over Fluxus West. John Armleder was very active with Fluxus people. If I would choose interesting artists today that represent an elegant version of the intermedia spirit, they would be Katie Paterson, Andrea Fraser, Kay Rosen and Elmgreen & Dragset—perhaps a few more.

Hölling: Could we return to the idea of the score as an object in its own right, and as a means to performance? Scores lend themselves to different realizations, including mental realizations. They are radically contextual and allow for an afterlife of all kinds. Do you have any thoughts on specific realizations of the scores, and can there be a less successful realization of a score?

Friedman: Milan Knížák's *Killing the Books* [1972] is a score of which Milan made many versions. He wrote it to protest censorship.² There was a Fluxus performance at Le Corbusier's monastery.³ It was a wonderful concert organized by Bertrand Clavez. Under a wall on the outside of the monastery, I found several boxes full. I thought, "Let's perform." Ben Patterson was there. He was totally outraged by the suggestion. He got terribly angry. He said, "You can't do a work like this." This was when the war in Iraq had just started and George W. Bush was president of the United States. Ben saw *Killing the Books* as an act of censorship rather than a protest against censorship.

That's an interesting example of a Fluxus score interpreted completely differently by different Fluxus artists. I'm always changing my mind about what's a really good performance.

Do you know my work *Stumbling Block*?⁴ It's a cube of wood eight inches squared (Figure 2.2). I got the idea back in the 1960s. A friend of mine, Thad Freeman, found a hollow wooden block about eight inches squared. He'd take it with him to different places and he'd say, "It's my stumbling block." Everybody could have a stumbling block, I thought, so I made a score out of it.

A couple years ago, the artist Sean Miller inherited or got hold of a huge, rare tropical tree. And here it is [Friedman demonstrates a wooden object]. It's only eight inches by eight inches, but it's a heavy block of tropical wood, unlike the stumbling block that my friend had, which was hollow.

For a lot of my scores, I always think about realizing them, but I wait until somebody wants to do it. I've often thought it would be funny to have this made in granite or some heavy rock. It would be a perfect realization of the score.⁵

Hölling: And it makes me think back to your work *Zen for Record* [1966], its multiple iterations and viral presence—as a score,



Figure 2.2 Ken Friedman, *Stumbling Block*, 1968–2021. Event score realized as multiple by Sean Miller. Photo: Sean Miller. Courtesy Sean Miller and the artist.

as a physical record realized on a vinyl disc, and in other mediums, which we discussed in a previous conversation.⁶ Certain realizations of the score also impose a finitude. Any subsequent realization will always be compared only with the previous one or with the one that came thereafter. But I'd like to direct the conversation toward the idea that certain interpretations of a work get recontextualized and institutionalized—conserved, archived, musealized and somewhat fixed in their materiality.

Friedman:

The works get archived in a certain way, and the unarchived versions vanish from history. For example, Jon Hendricks and Gil Silverman were fixated on George Maciunas. For Gil and Jon, whatever George touched was a Fluxus work, and what George didn't touch wasn't a Fluxus work. Gil and Jon fetishized George. If I wrote to George with a score and George wrote back to me that he liked it or planned to make something, that score or that something was a Fluxus work, whether he made it or not. But if Jon came across a carbon copy of my

letter to George without a corresponding reply from George, the work didn't exist as a Fluxus work, not even if the work was in a letter that I sent to George, not even if they found my original letter in George's files.

Hölling: This speaks to the power of the archives, which later became part of major institutions, in determining a certain kind of story.

Friedman: I'm glad that Jon and Gil built their collection. Most people are not aware of how wealthy Gil was. Gil and his business partner inherited the firm of Holtzman & Silverman from their fathers. When Gil and his partner died, their two sons inherited the company. The two sons did not get along like their fathers and grandfathers had done, so they divided the company between them. The assets of the reorganized Silverman companies are worth nearly a billion dollars, so Gil must have been close to a billionaire. When people have that much money, they divide it up in all kinds of ways to make it vanish from taxability.

Over the years that Gil built the collection, he covered all of its costs. He paid Jon Hendricks to work with it as his curator. He covered the salaries for all of Jon's assistants. He paid to store the works and archives, moving them back and forth from the foundation in Detroit to Jon's house in New York. He did all of this through the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Foundation.

Gil bought the work at fair prices—and over the years, the value of the work he bought increased significantly. This was due, in great part, to the exhibitions, books and catalogs underwritten by Gil's foundation. Gil and Lila finally gave everything the foundation had owned to the Museum of Modern Art. I'm not privy to the details of the gift or the arrangements they made during the life of the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Foundation, but I'd guess they must have realized over fifty million dollars in tax deductions over the four decades of the foundation.

We're lucky that we had Gil. We had a major collector in the same sense that Picasso and a few modern artists were lucky that the wealthy patrons of the modern era had an interest in their work. At the same time, this meant that aspects of Fluxus have vanished from history. Recovering the vanished history of Fluxus makes projects like yours important. Gil's archive should be telling or could be telling the whole story of Fluxus, a story that isn't being told.

I'm somewhat disappointed in the way that the University of Iowa has dealt with the Fluxus material I gave them. They

didn't work with the materials as they promised to do. Instead, they kept adding and adding new stuff without developing the work in the original gift. They also haven't shared duplicates with other museums and collections as they promised.

When I made the gift, it was to a specific institution called Alternative Traditions in Contemporary Art. This was a unique organization hosted by several branches of the university. Later, the Alternative collections were moved into the library. Apparently, if you give material to the library, it can never be removed. I was told that this is a state law in Iowa. But the collection has so much material that much of it is duplicates, and some of it is simply useless. They're sitting on those things rather than sharing the duplicates or completing partially assembled works.

For example, there is a large box full of *Single Card Flux Decks*. There is another box full of decks for a multiple announced by George that I never finished making. This is a deck of cards titled *Deck*, in which every card is different. To make the set, you take all the decks apart and reassemble them so that each deck has fifty-two cards and each card in the deck is unique within the deck. I gave maybe sixty or eighty decks of cards that should be broken up and reassembled so that each deck is made up of all unique cards from other kinds of decks. Now, they are a collection of ordinary decks of cards. This archive is killing the work rather than keeping it alive.

Wielocha: I'm intrigued by the example of the incomplete deck of cards you mentioned. It seems odd that, despite being printed, it has never been fully assembled.

Friedman: These were all commercial decks of cards. Every time I found a different deck of cards for a while, I would buy one. So they're all printed. They were going to eventually be assembled in a Fluxbox, but nothing ever came of it.

Josephine Ellis: When you suggest that the decks of cards could be assembled today, who did you have in mind to do this? Were you thinking of Fluxus artists, or perhaps even institutional personnel, like curators or conservators?

Friedman: I didn't have anyone special in mind. It wouldn't be Fluxus artists. Nobody wants to assemble anybody else's work anymore. The only people who ever really spent a lot of time working with other people's work were George and Dick and myself. From time to time, Larry Miller and Yoshi Wada also helped George to assemble works. Nearly everybody else was only interested in their own work.

In this case, I'd have to find somebody who would like to assemble the decks. Iowa would have to send the cards to that person. Finally, a couple of examples would come back to Iowa.

Hölling: I'm aware that you have also been contributing your work to other archives, such as the Henie Onstad, which I was fortunate enough to visit last summer. Your work also exists in the Jean Brown Papers at the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, which I researched while in residency a few years ago. These collections' stories differ from the Silverman archive's story.

Friedman: Oh, absolutely. I worked with Jean. I spent a summer at her place in 1972. I helped her get started with her archive and I introduced her to George. For a couple other collections, I began giving the works and placing them even before Gil started collecting. I began with the hope of building a proper archive. Not being a billionaire, I couldn't pursue it properly. I gave collections to the Henie Onstad. I'd already given an enormous amount of material to Hanns Sohm [currently the Archiv Sohm at Staatsgalerie Stuttgart]. Hanns was generous and gave me a lot of duplicates. A lot of those duplicates are at Iowa now and in different places. I gave two collections to the Hood Museum of Art [at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire]. The George Maciunas [Memorial] Collection holds Fluxus materials and the Ken Friedman Collection holds other Fluxus-like or Fluxus-related things, including Eastern European art. Gifts to the Maciunas Collection have GM accession numbers. Gifts to the Friedman Collection have KF accession numbers. Now the Hood treats both the Ken Friedman Collection and the George Maciunas Collection as one collection.

This is unfortunate. In the last ten years, there's been an enormous resurgence of interest in concept art, intermedia and conceptual art from Eastern Europe, or what used to be the Eastern Bloc. There's an untold story of how that work was seen and how it traveled around the United States. That [Ken Friedman] collection tells that story, and nobody knows about it. At any rate, I must have given about eight big collections away over the years.

Wielocha: Could you provide examples of institutions that effectively engage with the materials you have provided, meeting your expectations?

Friedman: It depends on the directors. For example, the Dartmouth collection was unseen and invisible for years. I kept nudging the

directors to do something with it. Finally, about ten or fifteen years ago, the museum commissioned Jacquelyn Baas to organize a beautiful show, *Fluxus and the Essential Questions of Life* [April 16–August 7, 2011]. She showed some of the work in the collection.⁷

Jackie also borrowed a lot of stuff from elsewhere and many things in the collection were never shown. So, it would still be nice if they would eventually do something with it. But the main thing is that they should get everything photographed to make the images available. The works were photographed and on the museum website many years ago. At one point, they reorganized the website, taking the images down. For some reason, they were never restored.

Hölling: Could we discuss your publishing activities? It's obvious that writing perpetuates knowledge about Fluxus. Could you tell us about your personal motivation behind what is perhaps the richest body of literature on Fluxus generated over the years?

Friedman: I was publishing different kinds of things even before I joined Fluxus. After I joined Fluxus, I wanted to make the Fluxus work visible. I tried pitching ideas to different publishers all the time. Every now and then, I'd find someone who was receptive to the idea of a special issue. From time to time, somebody would come to me to ask, "What should I do with this?" or "What should I do with that?" Basically, it was the same kind of motive that George and Dick had: to make the work known to the greatest degree possible.

Even though there was no uniformity from one publication to the next, the idea was to make the work known as the artists themselves would like to see it written about.

I was publishing to make the work known. I loved the work. Sometimes I wonder these days if that was really the best way I could have spent my life. But anyhow, I did it. And my motive was to make the work known by artists whose work I really enjoyed and appreciated and loved. I loved some of the people too.

Wielocha: Could you elaborate on how you integrate organizing events, such as Fluxshoe [1972–73] and Fluxus Virus [1992], into your artistic practice? Do you view these events as integral to your artistic practice, or do you consider them separate from it?

Friedman: Yes and no. There's an interesting story to the Fluxshoe. There was a professor at the University of Exeter, Michael Weaver. We started corresponding and he asked, "Could we do something at Exeter?" I said, "Sure." One thing led to another

and Michael got funding for a doctoral candidate. This was David Mayor. David started to put the Fluxshoe together. Originally, I commissioned it as Fluxus West in England, but then it changed its name to Fluxshoe. Later, the Tate acquired Mayor's collection, so it's all in their archive now. Mike and I conceived the thing, but they don't mention this in the Tate catalog. I've also vanished from that part of the history, at least as far as the Tate goes.

I would write to David and Michael all the time to give advice. They didn't pay attention to half of it, but that's okay. They did the Fluxshoe.

It traveled around England with a dozen stops between 1972 and 1973. I was involved in it, but I didn't really do it. I might compare my work organizing things to the way that Leonard Bernstein wrote his own music as well as conducting music by other composers. That is probably too grandiose, but I look on organizing exhibitions and Fluxconcerts as a form of conducting. It's not my art, but I also conduct.

Wielocha: Regarding Higgins's publishing practice in *Something Else*, do you see parallels between his work and the metaphor of a conductor?

Friedman: When you're doing a Fluxconcert, you're conducting. But as a metaphor, it's hard to say, because Fluxconcerts can also be ambiguous. You could also be like a music director rather than a conductor. You could use the metaphor in a way for Dick and George, but publishing is about editing and publishing. That's the way I've thought about it. I know that Dick thought of himself as an editor and publisher, and he's also the book designer for many *Something Else Press* books. George was something else completely in the sense that usually you'd send George an idea and he would realize it in his own way.

In that sense, Jon and Gil were not entirely wrong to focus their collection on Maciunas's narrative. George would take people's ideas for work and realize the ideas in unique ways. George realized work in ways that nobody else could have done or thought of. After that, George was a skilled designer, artist and manufacturer. He both realized the work and produced it.

People keep writing the stupid idea that George was the founder of Fluxus. He wasn't. The artists existed before George met them and they were doing the work for which they became known. George did give Fluxus its name—he created the name for the first Fluxus festival. The German press began to refer to the artists as "the Fluxus people," and the name stuck. But the astonishing and unique thing that George did was to invent his

idea of an art movement, giving it a graphic form that became its corporate identity program.

George also shaped and realized works that wouldn't have existed without him. Even though I had the ideas that became my Fluxus objects, I could have never made the kinds of multiples with my work that George made of them.

Hölling: I wonder, to return to the concept of a festival, whether you regard the festivals that took place in the 1980s and 1990s on the occasion of various anniversaries of Fluxus as significant, and what their role is in perpetuating the Fluxus legacy. Would it make sense to organize—or to conduct, for that matter—a Fluxus festival in 2026, and if so, how should it look?

Friedman: To get an idea of Fluxus from many of these festivals is difficult. Often, the curator was only interested in a small group of artists. Some of the Fluxus projects that René Block put together exemplify this. You didn't get the breadth of Fluxus from them—you got René's program. These programs were interesting and lively, but they were selective. Fluxus was much larger.

The first Fluxus festival in 1962 only involved a small group of artists because not many people could afford to go to Europe. If you were to do a festival now, you could present work by people who can't come to perform their own work. Too many have died.

At some of the [1980s and 1990s] festivals, people didn't even ever perform from the full repertoire of Fluxus. They would still focus on their own work. And then several artists were very broad in what they liked to perform. For instance, Dick was very broad in what he liked to perform.

It would be wonderful to have a Fluxfest. The key would be to have a broad program. I'd invite different artists to come and perform. I'd also have different concerts with various conductors, each with distinct ideas about how the works should be realized.

Ellis: I'm curious, when you hear the word "activation," what do you think of?

Friedman: This important word can have several meanings. To activate means to take something that is quiet or still and bring it to life. To activate could be like Frankenstein's monster, assembling something from dead parts, bringing them together, and activating them. Other times, it could mean bringing attention to something that is potentially active, but something must happen to realize the potential that makes it active. The score and the libretto of *Don Giovanni* are always there. You must bring

- musicians and an orchestra together with singers and stagecraft to activate the opera.
- Hölling:* Is storytelling something that you consider as a way of preservation or as a way of continuing Fluxus?
- Friedman:* Human beings tell stories all the time. Storytelling and narration are how we relate to each other, how we keep things going. It's a human tradition in every culture. It's how people create meaning and how they create themselves.
- Hölling:* In storytelling, there are facts and fictions. Stories come through tellers as much as from them. I'm interested in how storytelling is aided by memory, and how memorization and recollection impacts what and how we tell, but this would be material for another conversation.
- Friedman:* My wife is sitting here. She just pointed out to me, as Immanuel Kant says, the brain doesn't care if something is true or false.
- Hölling:* What would be the takeaway then for our Fluxus lessons today?
- Friedman:* I think the takeaway is that it's good to meet and it's good to talk.

This is an abbreviated version of a conversation that took place on March 19, 2024.

Notes

- 1 The exhibition *Young Fluxus* was organized by Friedman, Peter Frank and Elizabeth Brown from April 10 to May 15, 1982, at Artists Space, New York. It included works by John Armleder, Don Boyd, Jean Dupuy, Valery and Rimma Gerlovin, J. K. Kocman, Carla Liss, Larry Miller, Endre Tot, Peter van Riper and Yoshimasa Wada.
- 2 Knížák's *Killing the Books* instructs a performer to defile a book in one of several ways: by shooting, burning, drowning, cutting, gluing or painting it white, red or black.
- 3 Including artists Ken Friedman, Ben Patterson and 4T FluXuS, this Fluxus concert was held on the occasion of the colloquium "Fluxus et la France," organized by Rencontres Thomas More, Centre Culturel Couvent de La Tourette, in collaboration with 4T FluXuS and the Centre de Recherches Interdisciplinaires en Art Contemporain Pierre Francastel, March 29–30, 2003.
- 4 Ken Friedman, *Stumbling Block* (1968), event score realized as a multiple by Sean Miller in 2021, reproduced in *OnCurating*, no. 51 (September 2021): 106.
- 5 After this conversation was recorded, an opportunity came up to make *Stumbling Block* in granite. The Museumsverein Abteiberg makes a multiple edition every year. This year, they invited me to do a piece while they exhibit their collection of Fluxus works. I decided to make an edition of *Stumbling Block* in granite. My original idea was a granite block 20 cm on a side. The weight would have been impossible, so we are making the granite block 16 cm on a side. The granite block will rest inside a wooden box that will be 20 cm on a side when it is closed. This will give two versions of *Stumbling Block* in one multiple—16 cm in granite or 20 cm in wood.
- 6 Friedman in conversation with Hölling, SNSF Activating Fluxus research project archive.

- 7 Jacquelynn Baas, ed., *Fluxus and the Essential Qualities of Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). The exhibition and catalog were honored as best university gallery exhibition of the year in 2011 by the International Association of Art Critics, North American Section.

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3 Fluxus fetish

Conservation, desire and affect

Hanna B. Hölling

Fetish: an obsession, fixation, mania, fascination or prepossession invested with a sense of irresistible allure. Often shrouded in darkness, at the limit of understanding, in the Western intellectual tradition it usually refers to an object of desire—such as body parts and items not considered sexual, like feet or shoes—through which individuals seek gratification, treading a fine line between merely *having a fetish* and being affected by *fetishistic disorder*. Beyond sexuality, “fetish” may refer to any object or practice marked by irrational or spiritual significance, believed to harness an enshrined power—examples include lucky charms, religious relics or any object infused with symbolic meaning beyond its intrinsic value. Fetishes frequently become the focus of obsessive devotion or a belief that permeates various aspects of life. Can collecting and conserving also be understood as affective practices driven by the fetishistic desire to accumulate, salvage and cherish material things?

This chapter explores the concept of the fetish through psychoanalytic, cultural, museological and conservation perspectives, drawing on Archivio Conz’s unique collection of Fluxus fetish objects. Endowed with agency and sometimes magical irrationality, fetishes gain the ability to influence other objects, individuals and practices, thus enabling parallels to be drawn between affectionate relationships and care practices. This raises a set of questions: Why do we desire fetishes, and what desires do fetish objects harbor? Do fetish objects define their own conditions of care? What role does touch play—and what role conservation?

I begin with the act of collecting specific objects as a form of fetishistic hoarding. Conversely, I examine how, through the ritual practices of devotional stewardship and conservation, objects themselves can become fetishized and how fetish objects shape conservation as affective practice—one that not only preserves but reinforces desire.

Fetish Tisch

Berlin, on a bleak November morning in 2023: we find ourselves leaning over a “Fetish Tisch” (German for “fetish table”), overflowing with artifacts and bric-a-brac collected by the Italian connoisseur of the avant-garde Francesco Conz.¹ It is one of the Fluxus Study Days, in the *Activating Fluxus* project’s research series. Our

modest group of Fluxus enthusiasts gathers around the table, dazzled by the fecundity of objects spread before them: an aged plastic bag filled with smelly cigarette butts (Al Hansen, Figure 3.1); a red silky underdress inscribed with a blue ballpoint pen (Charlotte Moorman, Figure 3.2); a set of used painting utensils affixed to a wooden panel (Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Figure 3.3); elements of a crushed violin, each signed (Charlotte Moorman, Figure 3.4); worn leather shoes with scribbles on the insole (Dick Higgins, Figure 3.5); an autographed handkerchief and a tie (Alison Knowles, Figure 3.6); and a cardboard box full of cut-offs of electric cables (Joe Jones, Figure 3.7)—among many others.

This varied ensemble is just a small selection of the “Fluxus fetish” objects collected and named as such by Conz, now housed on the first floor of his capacious archive in Berlin. The table assembly differs from what we expect of a conventional art collection, and the longer we dwell with it, the more it becomes unsettling. These objects not only emit scents—both acrid and alluring—but also seem to retain a latent charge, as if concealing absurdities and transgressions. Not quite fringe and inconspicuous leftovers, but not entirely discrete, inert artworks either, their material presence is animated by a residual performativity, a stubborn vitality that resists containment. To be sure, this Fetish Tisch assembly defies our expectation of a collection of artifacts designed for perpetual function.



Figure 3.1 Al Hansen, *Untitled*, undated. Archivio Conz. Courtesy Archivio Conz.



Figure 3.2 Charlotte Moorman, *Untitled*, 1984. Archivio Conz. Courtesy Archivio Conz.



Figure 3.3 Lawrence Ferlinghetti, *Untitled*, 2001. Photograph, paint, plastic, wood, textile on wood. Archivio Conz. Courtesy Archivio Conz.



Figure 3.4 Charlotte Moorman, *Untitled*, 1980. Broken violin, wood. Archivio Konz. Courtesy Archivio Konz.



Figure 3.5 Dick Higgins, *Untitled*, 1995. Leather shoes, paint marker. Archivio Konz. Courtesy Archivio Konz.



Figure 3.6 Alison Knowles, Walter Marchetti and various artists, *Untitled*, 1988. Archivio Konz. Courtesy Archivio Konz.



Figure 3.7 Joe Jones, *Leftovers from Italy 1973–1986*, 1986. Archivio Konz. Courtesy Archivio Konz.

Francesco Conz: collecting as compulsion

Francesco Conz, an Italian collector and art *appassionato*, who also ventured into publishing avant-garde and experimental art multiples, turned his accumulation of objects into an act of salvage and preservation. Beginning in 1972, Conz started inviting artists to spend time with him and create work in Asolo, Italy, where he then resided. Through the artist Hermann Nitsch, Conz became acquainted with a wide range of Fluxus artists, among them Joe Jones, Nam June Paik, Charlotte Moorman, Philip Corner, Alison Knowles, Emmett Williams, Takako Saito, Carolee Schneemann and Dick Higgins, as well as the photographer Peter Moore and his wife, Barbara, herself involved in publishing Fluxus multiples.

In effect, Conz briefly established himself as a collaborator with the artists, whom he regarded as “modern saints,” hoping their “saintliness” would rub off on him.² Not only did he relentlessly photograph his visitors, but he also amassed artistic items and simple everyday objects that the artists interacted with, later banking this immense collection in barns and other storage spaces. Though contingent and accidental at first glance, the items collected by Conz were “touched”—that is, they carried evidence of the artists’ presence and engagement, often manifesting in traces of use and, above all, inscriptions and/or signatures by their donors. Conz maintained:

You have to remember that I’m a fairly curious sort of collector. There’s an awful lot of fetishism in the way I go about it. Collecting, for me, is all for purposes of keeping things together, preserving them, keeping track of them, cataloguing them and setting them aside in a place where I can feel that they are safe. Collecting is an act of impulse, or even compulsion, that some people simply have Inside them.³

Conz felt deeply passionate about his interactions with artists and their creations: “I get to be highly involved with an artist and the work that the artist makes, and the works I collect are very intensely a part of life.”⁴ He was equally passionate about not leaving anything behind. Everything that remained from a libation, a fest or a conversation, for instance, had to be signed or otherwise adorned by its user and find a safe place—in his collection:

Some people are thieves, because they’re simply possessed by an Instinct for theft, there are other people who have saintly instincts, and then there are people whose instincts make them collectors, which means searching out things that strike them as precious and setting them aside and locking them up and spending lots of time looking at them. *It’s very much like hoarding.* I hope one day to have a great enormous house or villa or a castle where I’ll be able to house all the things I own, and I’ll set them all up which [*sic*] everything clearly *ordered* and all its proper place, with a room for this and a room for that, meaning a room for every artist, but then I’m almost certain that I’ll rig up *a curtain or drape in front of every work* so as to keep other people from looking at them.⁵

The majority of the fetish objects in Conz's collection were, in fact, created for him—whether as residual objects or other material “effects” of the artists' activities that he insisted be signed and sent to his collection. While I shall return to the topic of the signature shortly, suffice it to say for now that this compulsion to collect and preserve, so clearly expressed by the collector, was both a blessing and a curse. Keeping these items together as a means of preservation and salvage from inevitable oblivion—who else would have kept cigarette butts or a box of tangled cables?—was, for Conz, a moral duty and a way of being in the world. It was also an immediate response to his impulses.

Conz's love for artists and the things they produced disregarded whether an artifact held aesthetic value or was just a piece of scrap, a toxically disintegrating animal cadaver or a used remnant from a libation, performance or sexual act. In effect, what is now housed in his Berlin *archivio* is both intriguing and somewhat repulsive—tokens and relics of the revered and the eerie. It is also weird, rotting stuff—signifiers for which the signifieds have temporarily been removed into history, causing in the observer an uncanny desire for a moment that has passed. It is the dislocated and the rotted with unclear purpose, without conclusion.

Consider, for instance, that next to leftovers from a libation, faded lipstick on cigarette butts and a night gown (or moccasins) displaying stains of sweaty dirt, were two small animal cadavers. Briefly recorded in the archive's object inventory, these had to be removed by staff as biological hazards in the course of this research. As observers, we find ourselves in the ambiguous space between reverence and repulsion, unable to imagine what it must have been like for the archivists or conservators working directly with the collection. Although the majority of these items carry traces of the artist's body—and thus their relic value seems undeniable—we feel both drawn to them and estranged. The instinct to separate from the impure and the abject functions as a form of self-protection.

This unsettling situation may be read through the lens of Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection, developed in *Powers of Horror* (1980).⁶ Kristeva describes subjective horror (abjection) as the sensation that arises when an individual encounters or is confronted with the raw experience of what she terms one's typically repressed “corporeal reality,” or when the Real disrupts the Symbolic Order (rethinking Lacan and Freud). She locates the abject in the impure bodily functions that are unsuitable for public discourse or display. We thrust these aside as part of our survival mechanism, according to the philosopher. The abject can occur in many forms. Kristeva's paradigmatic example of the abject is the human corpse, which, “seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost abjection” and horror-causing trauma.⁷

In their heterochrony, the animal cadavers perform a double function: they are the incarnation of the dead in the deadening effect of the archive—and they sit among the archive's metaphorical dead. Any attempt at their activation in the ritual theater of preservation would stretch the conservator's performative participation beyond its norms. The carcasses exposed the *archivio*'s workers not only to an extreme form of corporeal reality but also to potential harm, since they were home, as all rotting corpses are, to disease-carrying vermin, including bacteria, viruses, pests and worms. They also demonstrate that life and death are contested and

ultimately unhelpful dichotomies: life thrives in what appears dead, while death lingers among those living. In such differing states of vitality, death might become bearable, as a radical transition between changeabilities, in a pluriverse made up of active, ever-transitional matter.

Whether a piece of clothing or simple debris, Conz, in requesting signatures and inscriptions for the majority of these collected and gifted items—on the items themselves or on the boxes holding them—ensured that there is no confusion between their scrap value and their art value (as well as their gift value—an aspect that I will leave aside for reasons of space).

One final confusion lingers within this assembly, upon closer inspection: beyond the presence of a signature, there is no immediately recognizable attribute of fetish. To a passer-by, the items remain unidentifiable as such. The category of the “fetish object” appears to reside instead in a meta-sensorial—perhaps even metaphysical—dimension of all this stuff on the table that glances back at us through the awkwardness of its rudimentary material constellation.

All this stuff

The only people who remain are the people
who leave tangible works of art behind them.

Francesco Conz⁸

A random search of a child’s pocket uncovers curious constellations of shells, stones or stickers—objects that, while precious to the child, hold little meaning for many adults. The affinity for collecting, evident from an early stage of child development, unites us as humans. Its origins may lie in the gathering and storing of food to survive lean times, a central aspect of our predecessors’ hunter-gatherer lifestyle. Ancient Egypt’s tradition of amassing items in burial chambers—which Krzysztof Pomian identifies as the oldest form of (recorded) collecting⁹—along with the Ptolemaic dynasty’s collection of books, are among the earliest recorded examples. As a human practice, therefore, collecting has a millennia-long cultural history; its communal and social roots reach back to Mesopotamia and Ancient Egypt, and forward to the Medici family in Florence, as the first to offer private patronage. The sixteenth century’s ways of explaining the world in Cabinets of Curiosities—with certain similarities to Archivio Conz’s Fetish Tisch ensemble—continued the tradition of collecting curiosities that reflected the particular interests of their curators while also performing a social role. The modern human participation in a consumer culture and the significance attached to possessions involves, according to Russell W. Belk, “an existential emphasis on having over doing or being.”¹⁰

But constructing a relationship with the world through collecting has never been a uniform practice. Susan Pearce, for instance, has distinguished between souvenir, fetishistic and systematic modes of collecting.¹¹ Souvenirs—also referred to as “personalalia” or “memorabilia”—are tokens of events that can only be remembered but not relived, according to the author. At the other end of the spectrum lies the

fetish collection, characterized by a possessive and reverential attitude on the part of the collector. These two modes converge in their shared tendency to create a private universe, with unclear rules of access. Systematic collections, by contrast, are typically conceived as forms of display: they lay out material knowledge in ways intended to be accessed and interpreted, and thus rely on the presence of a viewer. Whether or not Pearce's typology is exhaustive,¹² it is perhaps against the backdrop of a variety of modes of collecting that we can grasp the true exceptionalism of Conz's effort.

Collecting is hoarding is preserving is passing on. It is establishing orders in which time collapses into heterotopias of infinite accumulation.¹³ David Lowenthal likens humans to pack rats:

We collect. We save. We hoard. Why do we do this? Because we've learned that we need to save in order to survive. We store up food, clothing, and other goods to survive physically. We store up skills, habits, and memories to survive socially.¹⁴

Belk and Lowenthal agree: we define ourselves by our possessions.¹⁵ Artifacts of lasting value define the collector's identity and contribute to their personal growth.¹⁶ Through collected objects, collectors such as Conz become a part of something larger than their mortal selves. Ownership is, after all, as Walter Benjamin noted, the most profound relationship one can have with objects.¹⁷ Collectors not only acquire specialized knowledge and expertise but also connect with the great predecessors and events that their collectibles represent. Through deciding the rules, registers and categories of a collection, collecting—and preserving, as I will later argue—grants a sense of control and mastery over an otherwise uncaring, contingent and chaotic world.¹⁸

In our indebtedness to the past and our efforts to conserve it for the future, we make meaning of the present. We cherish what we own, not only for its inherent value but because it is ours, handed down to us by our forebears.

Each of us is the inheritor, the beneficiary, of millions of years of DNA, of thousands of years of civilized history, of tens of thousands of hours of our own life history. These legacies underlie everything we do and are essential to our lives. We could not survive without them.¹⁹

Importantly, however, and like Conz, Lowenthal connects collecting with conservation: "We collect. We save," he writes, adding, "conservation is not only innate, psychologically speaking. It's imperative, biologically, and essential to our being. There's no escaping it."²⁰

Hoarding between ordering and disorder

Fred Moten suggests that subjectivity is defined "by the subject's possession of itself and its objects," which is "troubled by a dispossessive force objects exert

such that the subject seems to be possessed—infused, deformed—by the object it possesses.”²¹ Moten points to a deformation, even a perversion, of the person who enters a relationship with objects. The thin line between collecting and hoarding, the latter being a form of disordered behavior, is not too far from what we glean from Conz’s practice.

Hoarding, otherwise defined as “amass[ing] and put[ting] away (anything valuable) for preservation, security or future use,”²² is also an extreme form of psychological ownership, accompanied by feelings of responsibility and proprietorship. In psychology, this form of ownership allows the hoarder—a person who, according to Jane Bennett, is “preternaturally attuned to the call from things”²³—to fulfill some basic needs: efficacy and effectance, self-identity and having a place.²⁴ Hoarders often display “exquisite sensitivity to the somatic effectivity of objects.”²⁵ Hypersensitive hoarders distract themselves from deeply ingrained, negative experiences and painful feelings. Defining and expressing self-identity to others and maintaining it across time, along with finding a place that is their “own,” are among their most significant motives. Taking the “call of things” seriously as a proponent of vital materialism, Bennett locates in hoarding an expression of “thing-power,” where “the appearance of the call of things seems particularly insistent.”²⁶

Hoarders express discomfort when others touch, move or displace their possessions, for fear of losing control. Conz’s devotion to his amassed artifacts and his desire to shield his collectibles from the gaze of others (recall his insistence on a curtain to protect his objects) are psychological symptoms of hoarding as a disorder *par excellence*. This condition is marked by an inability to part with saved items, whether through physical removal or by allowing others to look at them.

The ethnopsychiatrist and psychoanalyst Werner Muensterberger sees the collecting impulse as beginning when an infant realizes that they are separate from their mother.²⁷ The baby reaches for a security object, such as a blanket or toy, which provides temporary comfort (the child psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott calls this “the transitional object”).²⁸ As an adult, acquiring new objects also provides temporary relief from anxiety, loneliness and uncertainty. As the comforting impact of the object gradually diminishes, the collector must continue to add to the collection to stave off unwelcome feelings.²⁹

Preservation architect and artist Jorge Otero-Pailos proposes to apply the concept of transitional cultural objects to artworks and buildings that help us to cope with the anxieties of transitioning into the future. Preservation, he asserts, “is an attempt to hedge these risks [related to uncertainty about what comes next] by controlling the passage of a few privileged objects into the future,” or “the future anterior.”³⁰ These objects invariably reflect the specific point in time when they were chosen for preservation. The notion of transitionality extends from the object to the very process of conservation, which is, recursively, influenced by the preserved object. The transitionality of the period during which we pass on the object is also significant. Lastly, and with relevance for my discussion, Otero-Pailos identifies:

a powerful critique of preservation to be unpacked within the notion of fetishism, because heritage should help us transition from one stage of culture

into another. But when we hang on to an object beyond what should be a transitional period, then we are still stuck, and we become fetishistic toward that object.³¹

While the question of who determines the healthy duration of a transitional period for a society or culture remains open, one point is clear: preservation undertaken not for growth, but for the sake of clinging—to stagnant, overly cherished objects—makes conservation complicit in cultural stagnation. Here, fetish begins to take shape as a feat of conservation.

Collecting and conserving as a symptom

Limitless preservation, like hoarding, ultimately confronts us with the question of what to keep and what to let go. If we keep everything, we risk suffocation in the past and there is no place for the new—an argument resonating in architectural preservation (for example, in Rem Koolhaas)³² and applicable to all regimes of human-made things.

Conz found deep gratification in collecting. If Benjamin asserts that objects not only come alive in the collector but also that “it is he who lives in them,”³³ then Conz exemplifies this. His collecting eccentricities extended beyond an insatiable restlessness for accumulating objects; they resided in the very concept of the fetish, which he deliberately embraced and encouraged artists to engage with in his emotionally charged practice.

Conservation must include context. (This is a lesson best learned from folklore studies, in which *con-text* reveals that folklore is not just an isolated “text”—a story, a ritual, a song and so forth—but something deeply embedded in the situations, relationships and media that give it meaning.) In other words, no conservation—nor collecting as an act of conservation—can exist without the effort to understand the objects’ broader meaning and their surrounding world, including the material, social, political and economic conditions that brought them to life. This understanding operates in both directions and includes an awareness of the conservation process itself and the impulses that drive it. (Conservation is considered here as a discursive, epistemic and pluricultural practice.)

To study a collection such as Conz’s involves not only examining the objects extracted from their formal social life (that is, libation, walking, sex) into the abstraction machine of a collection but also analyzing the mental condition that led to their accumulation. In other words, to engage with Conz’s fetish collection—and, by extension, with the fetishization of his collection—is to diagnose the underlying condition that fueled its creation and subsequent preservation. Herein lies the subtle intrigue of the collection’s initially unrecognizable aura: engaging with it requires becoming complicit in its disorder—in the acts of compulsion and excess. (This aligns with Conz’s aspiration to one day find a home where the collection could be housed in an orderly fashion—as a heterotopic space, perhaps even a private museum that would hold the excess of his practice.)³⁴ Ordering it occurs through a process of interpretation—making sense of the collection, situating it within a broader context and empathizing with the impulses that shaped it.

Conz's compulsive hoarding sheds light on the underlying logic of other public and private collections, prompting reconsideration in the context of psychological ownership. These collections often reflect curators' and conservators' (quite often obsessive) tendencies to accumulate objects and assume exclusive responsibility for their care, simultaneously evoking feelings of protectiveness, nurturing and proactive intervention to prevent harm and ensure their "well-being." In a tour-de-force survey of conservation, Salvador Muñoz Viñas sees in such "conservation as obsession" the first symptom of what he tentatively projects as the end of conservation.³⁵

Conservation and stewardship are inherently affective acts. Conservators frequently develop an extreme protectiveness, perceiving themselves as advocates for cultural objects that cannot "speak" but must be shielded from damage caused by improper display, environmental conditions or use.³⁶ These affective dynamics become deeply problematic in institutional collections rooted in colonial looting and harm. In such cases, the resistance to repatriation often hinges on the assertion that the originating communities are unable to provide the type of care that Western museums can, according to Western-defined standards.³⁷ This scenario perhaps illustrates another layer of Otero-Pailos's critique: "When we hang on to an object beyond what should be a transitional period, then we are still stuck."³⁸ Through practices which, in the most extreme case, masquerade as acts of care, the inability to let go enforced by such fixation perpetuates unequal power structures. Lastly, the notion of the fetish, to which we now turn, offers a fertile ground for exploring the drive to collect as it relates to desire—or the absence of the object of desire. If conservation-through-collecting can be understood as a form of fetishization, might conservation itself be understood as a process of fetish formation?

Fetish, fetishism and the new saints

The collector . . . always retains some traces of the fetishist and . . . ,
by owning the work of art, shares in its ritual power.

Walter Benjamin³⁹

A piece of memorabilia—be it an article of clothing, underwear, an instrument or a handkerchief once belonging to an actress—is auctioned at an exorbitant price. The traces of the artist, often in the form of a biological substance or a mark of use, such as a lipstick stain or wear on a guitar, imbue the object with a sense of the extraordinary. This is the fundamental mechanism of the fetish object known from idolatry, where an item comes to embody the divine or the unrepresentable. In celebrity and artist worship—a modern form of sainthood as alluded to by Conz—these objects acquire symbolic significance.

One of the most unstable terms in general use, whose contingency incites etymological fantasies, "fetish" refers to any object, idea or activity to which a person develops an unusually strong and obsessive attachment or devotion. This can manifest, for example, in fixating on certain topics, collecting certain items or engaging in particular behaviors repeatedly. Fetish theory in the Western intellectual

tradition branches into three main strands: the anthropological-historical notion of the magico-religious object, Marx's concept of commodity fetishism and Freud's theory of sexual fetishism—each carrying multiple, sometimes intertwined, meanings depending on the context.⁴⁰

The arrival of the fetish in European thought dates back to the fifteenth century as a result of a deep misreading of West African religious practices and cosmologies. Much like the plundered objects from Africa and beyond that still fill Western museums—framed as proof of the “primitiveness” of their makers and the “civilized” stewardship of their collectors—the very concept of the fetish was appropriated and later mobilized to rationalize such acts of dispossession.⁴¹ Portuguese traders and missionaries used the terms *feitiço* (meaning “magic charm”) and *feitiçaria* (“sorcery”) to describe the objects and religious rituals they encountered on the African Gold Coast.⁴² Later travelers characterized African religion as a “fetish”—deviant and centered on the worship of objects—a view later rejected by nineteenth-century anthropologists such as Marcel Mauss. The fetish placed Africans in the “dark origins,” in contrast with an “enlightened,” self-aggrandizing Europe, casting non-European civilizations as primitive. Although it retained its negative connotation—a motif eruditely exposed in the recent revisitation of the term from the perspective of African American studies by J. Lorand Matory⁴³—the concept subsequently evolved and was adopted by European scholars to categorize objects believed to possess magical properties, eventually expanding into sociological and psychological contexts.

In Karl Marx's critique of capitalism, “commodity fetishism” addresses the way in which social relationships in production are obscured by the value placed on commodities.⁴⁴ People relate to goods as if they have inherent value, rather than seeing the labor and social systems behind their production. For Marx, value does not come from the object itself but from the socially necessary labor time it takes to produce it. Critics argue that Marx's framing retains Eurocentric biases and, somewhat inconsistently, oscillates between serving as a metaphor for capitalist mystification while at the same time reproducing a stereotype that casts African religions as the “irrational other.”

In psychological and sexual contexts, fetishism can be described as the act of redirecting desire and fantasy toward substitute objects or specific body parts, like a foot or a shoe, to avoid dealing directly with the complex psychological issue of castration. Further reliant on the colonial origins of fetishism as a false belief or illusion (imagined as a result of the underdevelopment of Africans), Freud's notion of fetishism signifies an effect of the fear of castration. The mental sequence of events that follow from this fear is carried out through the processes of disavowal, substitution and marking.⁴⁵ The fetish object functions as a “sign” by substituting for the maternal penis, which is perceived to be lacking. The substitute also serves as a mask, concealing and denying the distressing sight of absence, particularly if the “absence” evokes associations with the injured, bleeding body. In his essay on fetishism, Freud came to realize that individuals with fetishistic tendencies are capable of simultaneously believing in their fantasies while acknowledging them as mere fantasies.⁴⁶ Surprisingly, this recognition of the fantasy's unreal nature

does not diminish its hold over the person. Octave Mannoni characterized this contradictory mindset thus: “Je sais bien, mais quand-même” (“I know very well, but just the same”).⁴⁷

The main criticisms of Freud’s theory point to its phallogentric and patriarchal presuppositions (assuming the male experience as universal and identifying women with “lack”), as well as its pathologizing (casting non-normative sexual practices as “perversion”) and reductionist aspects (the fetish is limited to child trauma and unconsciousness), as espoused by feminist scholars such as Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva and Sandra Bartky.

Nevertheless, psychoanalysis provides conceptual tools to think about psychological and emotional relationships to objects, which will allow me to explore unconscious, symbolic and affective dimensions of collecting, beyond purely economic, historical or materialist accounts. In this chapter, I turn to psychoanalysis not to reproduce anthropological stereotypes or to ignore its reductive genealogy, but to critically probe the cultural and psychological dimensions of the fetish-like attachments to objects—both within collections at large and, more specifically, in the case of Conz. What interests me in particular are four key ideas: that the fetish substitutes for what cannot be seen, represents what is lost or feared lost, fixes meaning through a formative—often traumatic—event, and condenses contradictory feelings.

For Conz, the Fluxus artists that he invited and spent time with represent the extraordinary: “That’s simply what they are. They’re the new saints.”⁴⁸ Objects touched by these modern saints—used and stained, such as Moorman’s nightgown, Higgins’s worn leather shoes or, even more extreme, Hansen’s cigarette butts—are charged. They stand in for the artists (as relics for the saint’s body) in their absence.

When we admire something, we wish to be touched back: a handkerchief from a celebrity might reciprocate the touch, and we would probably keep it unwashed. Memorabilia from a famous convict, by contrast, causes repulsion. Fetishism, thus, is highly bound with affect: for example, Moorman’s worn nightgown feels acceptable, the animal cadaver less so, and the same can be said for the multiple *Fluxus Clippings* (c. 1968), for which Ken Friedman packaged cut nails and calluses.⁴⁹ For the connection to the object to be positive, we need to be familiar and/or establish another line of reference with the maker. Otherwise, a box of cut-off cables is simply a box of trash, rather than a charged remnant from a work by the musical poet Joe Jones.

Here is an important takeaway: an object may be “charged” or function as a fetish for one collector or individual (a curator, a conservator), but not for others. The collection of Fluxus fetishes does not stand alone on this stage; religious relics or other objects created by non-Western societies (often problematically christened “ethnographic” in the so-called World Cultures museums) function similarly. The beholder needs to be initiated to uncover what might at first be unapparent. This goes both ways: an artifact that displays certain external characteristics of a ritual or fetish object can turn out to be an “uncharged” replica fabricated in response to popular demand or tourist interest rather than a product of colonial appropriation.⁵⁰

But is loss or absence, as Freud suggests, indeed at the center of a fetishistic drive? Lacan reveals something else.

Beyond the phallogocentric economy of desire: the object of desire as *desire itself*

For Freud, the fetish object is a substitute, a stand-in, for something that cannot be represented. For Jacques Lacan, on the other hand, the object is not a stand-in but rather becomes a barrier between the subject and the object of desire, between the subject and the ideal that upholds it.⁵¹ A handkerchief by Knowles or a piece of underwear from Moorman, for instance, creates a distance between the subject (the admirer) and the object of desire (the artist). Were we to encounter Knowles or Moorman, we would conclude that they were human beings like anyone else. Conz, by asking artists to sign, give or send him pieces, anticipated the idolatry and their potential cult status.

For Lacan, desire masks the fear of achieving what one desires. For the collector of memorabilia, it is the idol itself. In Conz's case, it was the proximity and embodiment of creativity elevated to the status of saintliness. The central lesson of psychoanalysis is that we fear achieving our desire—in other words, what we truly desire is *the desire itself*.⁵²

To satisfy a desire means to lose it, which is a central mechanism of consumer culture: another new item acquired hooks us to the mechanism of upholding the desire, the enjoyment of not reaching the end because there is always something else. This factor, combined with the sense of repetition and the surplus level crucial to the oral and anal drives in psychoanalysis, might have been the ultimate logic behind Conz's years-long dedication to the amassing of objects.

***Noli me tangere?* The “autographic moment” revisited**

Whether worn shoes, stained cigarette butts bearing traces of lipstick and saliva or an underdress inscribed with words, Conz's fetish object is typically an item touched by the artist, carrying undeniable traces of their presence. These objects bear the marks of a life lived—sometimes together with the marks of the artist—and in that regard, they are akin to relics, imbued with the power of a deceased saint, whether genuine or projected—recall Conz's reference to artists as modern-day saints. This connection ties Conz's notion of the fetish to the concept of the relic.⁵³ According to Pearce, the Portuguese word *feiticos* (meaning “charm”) was not only used in the fifteenth century to describe contemporary Christian relics but also denoted that which is “made by man,” thus conveying the idea of “something ‘artful’ or ‘magically active.’”⁵⁴ Sven Lütticken, in turn, associates *feitico* with that which is “made by human hand.”⁵⁵ Conz's fetish appears to combine both of these dimensions.

Conz's encouragement of artists to send him signed artifacts points to a deliberate fabrication of fetish objects as *autographic* objects. As if traces of bodily substances were insufficient, a common object—be it a shoe, a bottle of wine or a piece of industrially fabricated attire—needed to be signed and thus transformed,

once more, into something specific to a particular person or event. For instance, Knowles's handkerchief inscription reads, "This is the handkerchief for tonight. Francesco," while an inscription on a related tie states, "This is the tie for tonight. Francesco. Alison Knowles Jan 25 88" (Figure 3.6). No guesswork is needed; the signature confirms the object's unique character and elevates it to the status of authorship, which cannot be mistaken for another's.

Here, again, the figure of the artist as modern saint emerges as the canonical persona of the artist-genius—one who creates unique artifacts.⁵⁶ The signature marks the moment when an ordinary object becomes unique and authorial, and when the artist fulfills their role as creator. By applying autographic marks with their own hands, the author draws attention to a crucial moment of determination, affirming to collectors or viewers that "this is what it is." A reminder of conventional art-making practices, the autographic mark completes the work and acts as a form of "authorization." The artist "affix[es] a seal of authenticity" to that artwork, in Jacques Derrida's words, making it a unique event—the "capitalization of an irreplaceable fetish in the age of the technical reproducibility to which it simultaneously bears witness."⁵⁷ Doubly transformed by touch and mark, these fetish objects become definitive rather than contingent and provisional.

Such transformation through touch or mark-making is not only permitted but encouraged. Touched or signed objects accrue value. They are presented for aesthetic—primarily visual—appreciation, rather than for practical use. For example, a visitor to the archive or to an exhibition is forbidden from wearing Moorman's dress or Higgins's shoes. In fact, they are not even allowed to *touch* them.

The realization of an artist's-hand-derived signature or inscription—rooted in the tactile act of creation of a fetish object—thus results in the withdrawal from touch and tangible inspection by the beholder once the object becomes a work of art, following the premise of *noli me tangere* ("touch me not," in biblical sources, or, in museum parlance, "do not touch"). In John 20:17, Jesus asks Mary Magdalene not to touch him—a motif popularized through centuries of Western painting and drawing. After the Resurrection, this act shifts the corporeal link between God and human beings to a mental one, to the act of faith. This parallels the replacement of tactile interaction by the visual appreciation of objects enclosed in museum vitrines—and the belief that this is, indeed, the unique thing that the observer must bring to their interaction with such objects. An artwork entering a collection undergoes an axiological shift: the realm of the artist's hand is left behind; the realm of touch becomes reserved solely for those considered stewards of heritage—curators, conservators, archivists and art handling professionals. Often, aside from the artist (and sometimes no longer even the artist), these are the only persons permitted to physically interact with the object once it enters a collection.

Touching is a privileged way of learning. Conservators pride themselves on their ability to touch and sense the materiality of the work—and, by extension, to develop a particular relationship with its maker. This involves a tacit, at times arcane, body of knowledge and expertise embodied in the gestures of mending, improving or simply maintaining the work. Second, marked by their exclusion

from the author's choices and creativity, the conservator affectively touches the object, and *fetishizes* it.⁵⁸ It is a second-level creation qua fetishization that alters an object by interrupting its material flow. This is not to say that, through conservation interventions, change is discontinued; rather, it is channeled. The conservator's touch turns the work/object into a "conservation object," and into a fetishized object with a quasi-perpetual function.

To be sure, touch leaves behind traces of who or what has done the touching. We touch and are touched in return. Whoever touches aspires for an afterlife—a provisional, temporary eternity, an immortalization in the face of the mortal self, for those who fall under its spell.

Conservation as desire: a Lacanian lens

If collecting things can be guided by the sustenance of desire, rather than its fulfillment, can the affective mechanism of preservation operate along a similar axis?

To recapitulate: in Freud's perspective, the focus is on the object as a substitute for loss, whereas in Lacan's, it centers on the prolongation and maintenance of desire—the sustenance of loss. Accordingly, I locate the desire of conservation in its focus on the "future," on what *may* be rather than what *is*, or on "eternity," on atemporal timelessness outside time altogether. As conservators, we preserve things to pass them on to the coming generations, aspiring for their indefinite extended life (even if the latter is only implicit). Here is where the true fetish of conservation lies: in the upholding of the concept of the future, of what is not yet—and yearning for it. We pursue objects not to satisfy desire once and for all, but to keep desire sustained. This can manifest in our projections for an artwork's extended afterlife (in the ontological model, where the event of the work's realization is followed by the timespan of its life *after*) or as its imagined future (where the work is seen as a process expanding and extending beyond the "now").⁵⁹

In conservation, following Lacanian lines, the fulfillment of desire—the arrival of future generations, future worlds and future conditions (of an artwork)—is an unachievable illusion and an allusion to conservation's attachment to a linear conception of time, as I have argued elsewhere.⁶⁰ Lacan situates the locus of anxiety in the proximity of desire's fulfillment, suggesting that the true motif of desire is that it should remain unfulfilled. Similarly, one might argue that while we conserve objects with an imagined future in mind, this desire is endlessly prolonged and extended, since the future constantly shifts within individual or social imaginaries and never really arrives (otherwise it would not be a future). Despite or even because of its remaining unfulfilled, this desire is one of conservation's primary *raisons d'être*.

Any over-approximation of the future in conservation, to put it another way, risks diminishing our longing for that future. Imagine a phantasmagoria of a museum passing before our eyes: perfectly pristine objects, devoid of biological life, encapsulated under translucent helmets of virtual vitrines. A state of terminal hyper-preservation in which the traditional function of conservation might even

become obsolete. This dystopian imaginary raises a critical question: Is conservation possible without a “future”? Is the capacity to imagine futurity a precondition for conservation itself?

If Lacan builds on Freudian anxiety of loss and transforms it into the anxiety of *lack*—to paraphrase, it is not that you want it because you can’t have it; rather, you want it *as long as you can’t have it*—the same might hold for conservation. Conservation’s “lack” becomes the very thing we desire so long as it remains unattainable. Recognizing this constitutive agency of desire is not a negative realization but an emancipatory one: the object of conservation structures the conservator’s desire. Conservation imagines a new world and seeks new incentives to reorient the excess of desire.

Through Francesco Conz, we have glimpsed a deep-seated drive to control, possess, preserve and eternalize—an impulse familiar to many contemporary collectors. Yet his obsessive accumulation of Fluxus artifacts reveals more than personal mania: it illustrates how objects, once imbued with personal and cultural meaning, are preserved not merely to safeguard their material form but to channel desire. More crucially, these objects point toward conservation itself—not as a neutral gesture, but as a practice complicit in, and perhaps even constitutive of, fetishization. Recently understood as an affective co-performance with objects—through ritualized, repetitive acts of care, or what Rebecca Schneider calls “the theater of preservation”⁶¹—conservation here emerges as a performative act that sustains and regenerates desire. In this sense, conservation is not merely shaped by desire; it actively produces the very desires it seeks to sustain.

Acknowledgments

The idea for this chapter emerged during the Fluxus Fetish event at Archivio Conz in Berlin (November 3, 2023). My sincerest thanks to Hubertus Ameluxen, Mariamargherita Maceli and Manana Potskhverashvili for their openness to our research and for co-organizing the event. I am indebted to Josephine Ellis, Marcus Gossolt, Elke Gruhn, Johannes M. Hedinger, Sally Kawamura, Émilie Parendeau and Aga Wielocha from the project *Activating Fluxus*, with whom I had the opportunity to think through the concept of fetish. Thanks to Francesca Bewer and the anonymous reviewers and friends who offered comments.

Notes

- 1 While the boxed bag of cigarette butts is not officially listed as a collection item, Hansen created two versions of *Venus*, a composition in which he employs cigarette butts to represent female forms. These works are listed in Archivio Conz’s online catalog. The bag might then have served as a leftover or a resource for these or future works, linking this category of fetish to Ferlinghetti’s utensils.
- 2 Francesco Conz and Henry Martin, “A Conversation with Francesco Conz by Henry Martin,” George Maciunas Foundation, <https://georgemaciunas.com/essays-2/a-conversation-with-francesco-conz-by-henry-martin/>. Originally published in *Lund Art Press* 2, no. 2 (1991), and re-edited for *Under the Influence of Fluxus* (Winnipeg: Plug in Editions, 1991).

- 3 Conz and Martin, "A Conversation," capitalization in the original.
- 4 Conz and Martin, "A Conversation."
- 5 Conz and Martin, "A Conversation," capitalization in the original, emphases mine.
- 6 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982 [1980]).
- 7 She continues: "It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us." Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.
- 8 Conz and Martin, "A Conversation."
- 9 Krzysztof Pomian, *Ursprung des Museums* (Berlin: Wagenbach, 1988). Many thinkers succumb to the collection of books, a well-known example being Peter Weibel's intricate ZKM library. In another instance, Hannah Arendt speaks about Walter Benjamin's bibliomania/bibliophilia as a form of collecting. Hannah Arendt, introduction to Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. and intro. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 39, 42.
- 10 Belk here addresses the "I am what I own" mentality. Following Sartre and Fromm, he adds that possessive having involves a certain form of "acquisitive doing." Russell W. Belk, *Collecting in a Consumer Society* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1995), 140.
- 11 Susan Pearce, *Museums, Objects, and Collections: A Cultural Study* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1993), 110–37.
- 12 For a nuanced account of fetish collection vis-à-vis Western objects, see Sven Lütticken, "Fetishize This! Artifacts and Other Agents at the Edge of Art," in *Curatorial Things*, eds. Beatrice von Bismarck and Benjamin Meyer-Krahmer (London: Sternberg Press, 2019), 283–309.
- 13 On the concept of heterotopia, which attempts to contain time and accumulate everything as a general archive—all time, all ages, all forms, all tastes in one place—see Michel Foucault, "Different Spaces," in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: New Press, 1998), 182.
- 14 David Lowenthal, "Conservation Past and Present," Sylvester Baxter Lecture, Harvard University Graduate School of Design, November 17, 2017, YouTube video, 1:30:57, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a4u9HWNcpKQ>.
- 15 Lowenthal, "Conservation Past and Present"; Belk, *Collecting in a Consumer Society*.
- 16 Belk, *Collecting in a Consumer Society*.
- 17 Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking my Library: A Talk about Book Collecting," in *Illuminations*, 60.
- 18 Among the collectors who cultivated their collections as a form of protection against death and demise was Henry Huntington, who amassed books and had himself buried among his possessions in a tomb at the Huntington Library.
- 19 Lowenthal, "Conservation Past and Present."
- 20 Lowenthal, "Conservation Past and Present."
- 21 Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 1.
- 22 The value ascribed to hoarded artifacts fluctuates, but for the hoarder, even the most modest artifact might be endowed with value. Oxford English Dictionary, "Hoarding," <https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=hoarding>.
- 23 Jane Bennett, "Powers of the Hoard: Further Notes on Material Agency," in *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Ethics and Objects*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Galeata, CA: Punctum Books, 2012), 241.
- 24 Charlene Chu, "Psychological Ownership in Hoarding," in *Psychological Ownership and Consumer Behavior*, eds. J. Peck and S.B. Chu (Cham: Springer Nature, 2018), 138–39, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-77158-8_8. See also Patrick W. Moran, "An Obsession with Plenitude: The Aesthetics of Hoarding in Finnegan's Wake," *James Joyce Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (Winter 2009): 434.

- 25 Bennett, "Powers of the Hoard," 246.
- 26 Bennett, "Powers of the Hoard," 237–69.
- 27 Werner Muensterberger, *Collecting: An Unruly Passion—Psychological Perspectives* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 27–28.
- 28 Donald W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 1–25.
- 29 Muensterberger supports his views with his stories of obsessive collectors who sacrificed their families and fortunes for the sake of their collecting desires. Muensterberger, *Collecting*.
- 30 Jorge Otero-Pailos, "Preservation and MoMA's Proposed Expansion," *Artforum* 52, no. 8 (April 2014), <https://www.artforum.com/columns/preservation-and-momas-proposed-expansion-219727/>. Jorge Otero-Pailos and Hanna B. Hölling, "Materials, Objects, Transitions: Jorge Otero-Pailos in Conversation with Hanna Hölling," in *The Explicit Material: Inquiries on the Intersection of Curatorial and Conservation Cultures*, eds. Hanna B. Hölling, Francesca Bewer and Katharina Ammann (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 258–59.
- 31 Jorge Otero-Pailos and Danielle Choi, "The Not-Me Creation," *Harvard Design Magazine*, no. 44 (Fall–Winter 2017), <https://www.harvarddesignmagazine.org/articles/the-not-me-creation/>.
- 32 Rem Koolhaas, "Preservation Is Overtaking Us: With a Supplement by Jorge Otero-Pailos" (New York: GSAPP Books, 2014), <https://www.arch.columbia.edu/books/reader/6-preservation-is-overtaking-us>.
- 33 "For inside him there are spirits, or at least little genii, which have seen to it that for a collector—and I mean a real collector, a collector as he ought to be—ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects. Not that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them." Benjamin, "Unpacking my Library," 67.
- 34 Patrick Moran likens the museum to Benjamin's depiction of the angel of history, facing the "the incessantly accumulating past—the pile of debris growing skyward," which represents the alienating excess of culture. Moran, "An Obsession with Plenitude," 435. See Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, 253–64; Foucault, "Different Spaces," 182.
- 35 Salvador Muñoz Viñas, "The End of Conservation?" *Studies in Conservation* 70, no. 4 (2025): 267–79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00393630.2024.2370726>.
- 36 For affective and sensory aspects of care, see the introduction to *Performance: The Ethics and the Politics of Conservation and Care*, Vol. II, eds. Hanna B. Hölling, Jules Pelta Feldman and Emilie Magnin (London and New York: Routledge, 2024), 4–5.
- 37 For critical discussions, see recent writings by Dan Hicks and Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, among others.
- 38 Otero-Pailos and Choi, "The Not-Me Creation."
- 39 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, 244.
- 40 On this topic, see E.A. Wallis Budge, *From Fetish to God in Ancient Egypt* (London: Routledge, 2014 [1934]). For general works on fetish, see Rosalind C. Morris, "Fetishism (Supposing That It Existed): A Preface to the Translation of Charles de Brosses's Transgression," in *The Returns of Fetishism: Charles de Brosses and the Afterlives of an Idea*, eds. Rosalind C. Morris and Daniel H. Leonard (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017); James Lorand Matory, *The Fetish Revisited: Marx, Freud, and the Gods Black People Make* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018); Alfonso Maurizio Iacono, *The History and Theory of Fetishism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Louise J. Kaplan, *Cultures of Fetishism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). See also Shannon Lee Dawdy, "The Antique Fetish," in *Patina: A Profane Archaeology* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2016), 137–42.

- 41 Dan Hicks, *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* (London: Pluto Press, 2020); Max Haiven, "The Fetish Revisited: Marx, Freud and the Gods Black People Make by J. Lorand Matory," *Journal of Cultural Economy* 14, no. 6 (2021): 785–89.
- 42 Roger Sansi-Roca, "The Fetish in the Lusophone Atlantic," in *Cultures in the Lusophone Black Atlantic*, eds. Nancy Priscilla Naro, Roger Sansi-Roca and David H. Treece (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 19–20. "Fetish" must be differentiated from "fetishism," as designating "the logic of the fetish," which can be traced back to the publication of *Du culte des dieux fétiches* (1760), by Charles de Brosses. See Morris "Fetishism (Supposing That It Existed)," vii.
- 43 Matory, *The Fetish Revisited*.
- 44 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. I (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 2015 [1867]).
- 45 Sigmund Freud, "Fetishism," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1927), 152–57; Laura Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 5.
- 46 Freud, "Fetishism."
- 47 Octave Mannoni, "Je sais bien, mais quand-même. . .," *Clefs pour l'imaginaire ou l'autre scène* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1969). This is also the reason why Hartmut Böhme opens his essential book, *Fetishism and Culture* (2014), with an anecdote about a horseshoe fixed to a door, whose owner, when asked whether he is superstitious and believes that it brings good luck, responds, "certainly not," but that he trusts that it helps nonetheless. Hartmut Böhme, *Fetishism and Culture: A Different Theory of Modernity* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2014), 1.
- 48 Conz and Martin, "A Conversation."
- 49 See Ken Friedman, "Flux Clippings," *Artists Books and Multiples* (blog), March 12, 2014, <https://artistsbooksandmultiples.blogspot.com/2015/03/ken-friedman-flux-clippings.html>.
- 50 This is an argument posited to assert that not all ethnographic artifacts share the violent histories of Europe's colonial past. See Nicholas Thomas, "The Museum Inside-out: Twenty Observations," in *Matters of Belonging: Ethnographic Museums in a Changing Europe*, eds. Wayne Modest, Nicholas Thomas, Doris Prlić and Claudia Augustat (Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2019), 33.
- 51 Adrian Johnston, "Jacques Lacan," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2024 edition, eds. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (April 2, 2013), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2024/entries/lacan/>.
- 52 Johnston, "Jacques Lacan."
- 53 Relics, as venerated objects, are also closely linked with reliquaries—also present in Fluxus, as in Geoff Hendricks's *Flux Reliquary (Reliquaire flux(us))* (1973–76), a collection of seven Fluxus relics including objects as diverse as nails, shit, sweat and rope.
- 54 Pearce, *Museums, Objects, and Collections*, 128.
- 55 Lütticken, "Fetishize This!," 289, 292.
- 56 On this topic, see Nelson Goodman's analysis of autographic and allographic arts, discussed at length in Hanna B. Hölling, *Paik's Virtual Archive: Time, Change, and Materiality in Media Art* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 49–50. See especially the section on the "autographic moment" (52–53) for an in-depth discussion of this topic.
- 57 Jacques Derrida, *Copy, Archive, Signature: A Conversation on Photography*, ed. Jeff Fort (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 23.
- 58 For a similar view, in the context of a discussion of ruins, see Lucas Pohl, "Aura of Decay: Fetishising Ruins with Benjamin and Lacan," *Transactions: Institute of British Geographies* 47, no. 1 (March 2022): 153–66.

- 59 “Longtermism,” which identifies our moral obligation to influence the long-term future, might be also a variant. See Fin Moorhouse, “Longtermism: An Introduction,” *Effective Altruism*, January 27, 2021, <https://www.effectivealtruism.org/articles/longtermism>.
- 60 Hanna B. Hölling, “Time and Conservation,” *ICOM-CC 18th Triennial Conference Preprints, Copenhagen, 4–8 September 2017*, ed. Janet Bridgland (Paris: International Council of Museums, 2017), 1–7.
- 61 Rebecca Schneider and Hanna B. Hölling, “Not, Yet: When Our Art Is in Our Hands,” in *Performance: The Ethics and the Politics of Conservation and Care*, Vol. I, eds. Hanna B. Hölling, Jules Pelta Feldman and Emilie Magnin (London and New York: Routledge, 2023), 54.

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4 Displays in flux

Multisensory Fluxus and decolonial display practices

Inbal Strauss

Introduction

In the ephemerality and multisensoriality of their materials and event form, Fluxus works lend themselves well to an examination of the tension between traditional display practices and contemporary decolonial display practices. The former, ostensibly concerned with the material preservation of historical artifacts, privilege visual engagement while discounting the artifacts' sensory properties. The latter, prioritizing modes of reception that are true to the artifacts' original context, encourage multisensory engagement. The historical movement's aim to challenge the elitism of the art world and democratize art closely aligns with contemporary efforts to decolonize display practices and re-embody aesthetic experiences. In prioritizing the process over the end product and employing perishable materials that engage audiences in multisensory ways, Fluxkits, multiples and other Fluxus objects continue to critique the visualist display practices that had become a supposed "universal" standard in museums and galleries that follow Western aesthetic traditions.

According to the dominant Western paradigm of aesthetic reception, what distinguishes works of art from everyday objects is that they afford aesthetic experiences exclusively through visual perception.¹ Correspondingly, many Fluxus works are exhibited on plinths and inside vitrines despite the fact that they often consist of appropriated everyday objects and were made for so-called viewers to interact with in multisensory ways. For instance, Alison Knowles's *Bean Rolls* (1962) invites audiences to shake and open tins with scrolls and dried beans. Similarly, Ay-Ö's *Finger Boxes* (1964) invites audiences to insert fingers into boxes to experience their mysterious contents, which include hair and nails. Ben Vautier's *Total Art Match-Box* (1965) goes further by inviting audiences to burn the work, which consists of a matchbox with an instruction label. All three examples are designed for audiences to interact with in visual *as well as* tactile, auditory and olfactory ways; yet they rarely, if ever, do so in today's exhibition spaces.²

Therefore, this chapter asks: how do everyday objects, which are designed for users to interact with in visual *as well as* tactile, proprioceptive, auditory, olfactory and gustatory ways, help Fluxus objects challenge the privilege of the ocular in aesthetic reception? How might they help them decenter the Eurocentric narratives

and assumptions that inform traditional conservation conventions? And how might they help them inform contemporary display practices that prioritize artifacts' sensory and experiential dimensions over their material preservation?

While art's prohibition on physical interaction is commonly considered a conservation measure aimed at arresting the material state of valuable artifacts, it is also widely criticized for being rooted in colonial and racial hierarchies of the senses that privilege sight over marginalized sensory modalities historically considered non-Western.³ In their critical historical examination of Western museum practices, "The Museum as Sensescape: Western Sensibilities and Indigenous Artifacts," Constance Classen and David Howes describe how, during the nineteenth century, an increase in the popularity of museums led to increased concern over exhibits, which, up to that time, were customarily handled by visitors.⁴ They note that "since the preservation of collections for posterity was emphasized as a *raison d'être* of the modern museum, it was deemed necessary for collections to be hands-off," yet they add that "requiring visitors to keep their hands off the exhibits was also believed to have the benefit of fostering an attitude of respect toward collections and their collectors."⁵

Significantly, this period also saw an increase in the Western association of sight with intellect and scientific reasoning.⁶ As a result, Classen and Howes observe, "the 'lower' senses of smell, taste, and touch were increasingly associated with the body, and with those peoples [i.e., non-Westerners] imagined to live a life of the body, rather than a life of the mind."⁷ Consequently, physically interacting with exhibits—often looted Indigenous artifacts—was deemed both materially damaging and "uncivilized," leaving sight as the only legitimate means of acquiring knowledge about them, and giving museums and other institutions with colonial legacies the legitimacy to retain rather than repatriate them.⁸ Such concomitant narratives and assumptions have disembodied aesthetic experiences and shaped the dominant Western paradigm of aesthetic reception, which, in turn, has shaped the conservation and display practices that remain standard to this day in what Classen and Howes dub "the Museum of Sight."⁹

In accordance with this dominant Western paradigm of aesthetic reception, traditional theories of reception aesthetics in the fine arts, which seek to understand the ways in which works of art engage audiences in the process of meaning-making, consider only visual perception. Conversely, theories of the design of everyday objects, which seek to understand the ways in which everyday objects engage users in the process of "information pick-up," consider multisensory perception. Therefore, synthesizing the two types of reception theory may illuminate the ways in which sensory Fluxus objects engage audiences in the process of meaning-making. This, in turn, might offer valuable insights into how exhibiting institutions might accommodate cultural artifacts to facilitate multisensory engagement.

To develop this synthesis, this chapter mobilizes Wolfgang Kemp's seminal account of reception theory in art and Donald Norman's seminal account of reception theory in design. Though seemingly disparate, both accounts are informed by perception psychology, allowing us to draw surprising parallels that render Norman's principles applicable, *mutatis mutandis*, to the analysis of works of art.¹⁰

Furthermore, Kemp's account acknowledges the visualism of traditional reception theories and considers the role institutional display practices play in enforcing and perpetuating it, making it especially germane to an examination of display practices and their impact on aesthetic reception.

Through this synthesis, this chapter then offers a keyhole comparison of a classic lemon battery and Joseph Beuys's *Capri Battery* (1985), whereby the functional analysis of the former enables a close multisensory aesthetic reading of the latter. This case study forms part of a larger, ongoing project that employs this analytical methodology across several texts, each focusing on an iconic work of art associated with a different movement, with a view to developing a fully fledged theory of multisensory reception in the fine arts.¹¹

Drawing on emerging decolonial museum practices and contemporary conservation theory, this chapter ultimately explores alternative display approaches that aim to reconcile institutional preservation imperatives with artists' intended modes of multisensory reception. Informed by the analysis of Beuys's *Capri Battery*, it evaluates the advantages and disadvantages of various display strategies and devices.

To be sure, this analytical framework has limitations. Since it primarily focuses on object-inherent reception cues through the lens of everyday design to illuminate object–audience interactions, it does not, as it stands, necessarily account for functions that do not arise purely from the object's perceptible features and the immediate context of its original design, such as interpretive and contextual influences and overlays accumulated over time. As Kemp notes, while the methodology of reception aesthetics differs from that of reception history or reception psychology, it “can benefit from the studies of these neighboring disciplines, and it certainly hopes to be able to contribute its share to them.”¹² Similarly, the synthesized analytical framework proposed here aims to complement rather than supplant art-historical or contextual frameworks. Future research might combine this design-based approach with art-historical and contextual analyses to propose display strategies and devices that capture more fully the layered ontologies of Fluxus objects.¹³

Works of art and their extrinsic conditions of access/appearance

Central to Kemp's 1986 essay “The Work of Art and its Beholder: The Methodology of the Aesthetics of Reception,” and to reception aesthetics more broadly, is “the conviction that the work of art is based upon active completion by its beholder (see Gombrich's ‘beholder's share,’ for example)—that is to say that a dialogue occurs between the partners.”¹⁴ Indeed, this conviction that works of art are indeterminate and meant to be completed by the beholder has rich theoretical precedents beyond Gombrich's “beholder's share.” Other closely related examples include Bertolt Brecht's “alienation effect,” John Cage's “chance operations,” Marcel Duchamp's “creative act,” and Umberto Eco's “open work”—concepts that inspired Fluxus.¹⁵ Kemp expounds:

Reception aesthetics enacts its interpretive power in a work-oriented fashion. It is on perpetual lookout for the implicit beholder, for the function of the

beholder prescribed in the work of art. The fact that the work has been created “for somebody” is not a novel insight, proffered by a small branch of art history, but the revelation of a constitutive moment in its creation from its very inception. Each work of art is addressed to someone; it works to solicit its ideal beholder.¹⁶

Yet, as Kemp then points out, the artist likely does not personally know their work of art’s addressee, and, of course, there are likely numerous addressees. Therefore, to create a work that can effectively prescribe a role in its completion and solicit the “ideal” prerequisite response from multiple viewers, artists must “carry out an abstraction from the[ir] real individuality, as it is present in the factual dialogue.”¹⁷ In other words, since artists do not personally know each individual addressee and cannot communicate with them as they would in a face-to-face dialogue, in order to effectively engage them through their art, they must make and rely on generalized assumptions about them.

Acknowledging the factual dialogue, Kemp notes that the viewer “brings more than his or her open eyes to the perception/reception of the work of art”; they also bring what he calls their *inner preconditions*.¹⁸ These may include people’s race, class, gender, age and an endless array of other characteristics and life experiences that make up an individual. Therefore, in carrying out an abstraction from the real individuality of the viewer, the artist must make “projections” regarding the viewer’s inner preconditions and, subsequently, create a work that appeals to these preconditions in order to facilitate a dialogue that elicits the “ideal” response.¹⁹ “In this respect, reception aesthetics is prepared to read the appeals and signals that a work of art directs at its beholder.”²⁰

Focusing on the particular medium of painting, Kemp describes the formal *forms of address* through which works of art engage viewers. These include framing, perspectival, representational and compositional devices: what is included in and excluded from the canvas, the viewer’s viewpoint, the depicted figures and objects and the “diegesis” (the pictorial “mise en scène” or the deictic arrangement of the aforementioned elements in relation to one another).²¹ Yet, Kemp describes a final overarching and most exercising form of address, which, following the classic literary reception theory of Wolfgang Iser, he refers to as the “blanks” or “the aesthetics of indeterminacy.”²² These blanks, or indeterminate elements or aspects, “trigger acts of ideation” that invite viewers to complete works of art, figuratively and conceptually,²³ for instance by imagining the “invisible reverse side” of the depicted elements, or the “path that is cut off by the frame,” and by generating its interpretation or meaning.²⁴ Importantly, in so doing, these blanks imply “that works of art are unfinished in themselves in order to be finished by the beholder,” meaning that Kemp considers aesthetic reception and, arguably, production as inherently participatory processes.²⁵ Together, by orienting the viewer, directing their gaze and informing their interpretation of the work, the forms of address constitute and proffer a particular *offer of reception*, “activating the beholder to take part in the construction of the work of art.”²⁶

However, reception aesthetics extends beyond the work of art itself to consider the context of reception. Kemp, therefore, draws our attention to the distinction

between *intrinsic points of reception* (the formal elements within the artwork itself) and *extrinsic conditions of access* (or *conditions of appearance* when considered on the part of the work of art)—that is, the distinction between “text” and “context.”²⁷ He contends that “before the dialogue between work and beholder can even begin to transpire, both are already caught in prearranged interpretive spheres,” which affect the viewer’s inner preconditions.²⁸ He continues:

The aesthetic objects are only accessible to both the beholder and the scholar under conditions that are mostly safeguarded by institutions and that, in themselves, require certain patterns of behavior on the part of the recipient. Extrinsic conditions of access comprise, for example, the architectural surround and the corresponding ritual behavior expected by the religious cult, the court, or the bourgeois institutions of art.²⁹

In contemporary settings, we may consider the ubiquitous “white cube” gallery space as epitomizing these conditions. We may also consider its minimalist plinths, vitrines and barrier ropes as what Kemp calls “context markers”—means of display that mediate between the space and objects of aesthetic representation, tacitly enforcing a protocol of exclusively visual perception.³⁰ Citing Brian O’Doherty’s landmark 1986 collection of essays, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, Kemp describes

what tremendous power of definition is ascribed to the “white cube,” the gallery space which supposedly recedes to the neutral background in order to let the works of art be effective “by themselves”; the same space which in reality has “created” modern art, which was the condition of its possibility, and which, unlike any other institution, has influenced the appearance and reception of modern art even down to its details.³¹

O’Doherty’s compelling critical study of this dominant modernist display paradigm shows that while the white cube space constitutes a seemingly neutral site that facilitates an objective viewpoint, its seeming neutrality imposes an ideological position that reframes and recontextualizes the work. The boundaries between “text” and “context” or—as O’Doherty refers to them—“content” and “context” become blurred, with the new context bleeding into the text and making the two inseparable.³²

O’Doherty posits that the creation of a supposedly timeless, autonomous, decontextualized environment is an attempt to give the pristine white cube “a presence possessed by other spaces where conventions are preserved through the repetition of a closed system of values,” thereby conferring upon art a quasi-religious status, elevated from the messy historical and contemporary sociocultural realities of its production.³³ In so doing, it facilitates the transformation and fetishization of works of art into scarce, eternally valuable commodities.³⁴ While the space supposedly aims to emphasize art’s autonomy, in its estrangement from the outside world, it perpetuates its heteronomous function in the service of capitalist ideologies.³⁵

Although O'Doherty does not explicitly address colonialist ideologies in *Inside the White Cube*, his institutional critique resonates with broader power structures shaped by Western Enlightenment thinking and epistemologies. Specifically, his arguments regarding the privileging of "the eye"—the objective and enlightened spectator—in modernist and capitalist gallery practices show that this is inextricably intertwined with the colonialist and supremacist ideologies that have shaped Western art institutions. The detached and "neutral" mode of viewing "high art" mirrors the colonial view that considers non-Western forms of embodied art as "primitive" or "ethnographic" and, therefore, inferior.

Furthermore, in promoting a disembodied and decontextualized mode of viewing art, the white cube continues the colonial tradition of taking cultural artifacts out of their original context of production and displaying them in ways that suppress the messiness involved in their displacement. Divorcing the eye from the physical body and decontextualizing the art from the external reality hegemonizes a Eurocentric art history that marginalizes non-Western artistic traditions. Therefore, this "eye" may be considered an extension of the disembodied colonial gaze, which decontextualizes and objectifies in order to dominate and control.

As Francesca Liuni argues, following Classen and Howes, artifacts "are subject to a subtle form of neo-colonization empowered by a system of [allegedly] depoliticized aesthetics: the claim of neutrality of the 'white cube' which allowed the Modernist aesthetic to become a celebrated paradigm."³⁶ The white cube presents as a neutral space, manifesting modernism's claim to universality; yet, in effect, it masks its ulterior intention of elevating certain artistic traditions over others. Similarly, colonialism presented itself as a neutral "civilizing" mission, bringing so-called universal values to colonized regions when, in fact, it was justifying Western dominion over Indigenous bodies and resources. In both cases, neutrality is a false claim—a mask of neutrality.

Of course, such decontextualization of artifacts, be it within the white cube or another exhibition space, is often inherent to the institutional preservation drive—which prioritizes stasis over cultural context. The white cube's supposedly neutral context is thus reinforced by a broader logic of preservation that prioritizes keeping artifacts in stasis over acknowledging their dynamic nature and allowing audiences to interact with them in multisensory ways that are appropriate to their original cultural context and function.

That said, O'Doherty does not necessarily call for the wholesale forsaking of the modernist display paradigm; rather, he calls for an acknowledgment of its ideological underpinnings and powerful influence, so that we may move on from this sterile transitional space in the historical development of modernism.³⁷ Surveying mid-twentieth-century avant-garde attempts to offer an alternative to the white cube—from Environments that rejected the space by appropriating it through to Happenings in non-institutional venues, O'Doherty prepares us for the difficulty of the task at hand: any reimagining of alternative display practices would have to grapple with the deep-seated conventions of the white cube.³⁸ Before we even begin to work through the logistics and technicalities of such alternative practices with regard to material preservation, merely conceiving an alternative context of

reception requires levels of imagination and creativity as great as those that conceived the sensory works it aims to accommodate.

In the same spirit, this chapter does not call for the forsaking of traditional reception aesthetics but rather for an acknowledgment of their ocular-centricity and underpinning ideology, so that we can continue to imagine display practices anew. To this end, Kemp's principles of visual communication, and his account more broadly, provide a solid basis for expanding reception aesthetics into a more comprehensive framework for illuminating how sensory works of art engage audiences in the process of meaning-making within the context of institutional exhibition spaces.

To reimagine how "extrinsic conditions of access" could facilitate rather than restrict multisensory engagement with works of art, it might be helpful to consider how "forms of address" might engage nonvisual sensory modalities, how "inner preconditions" might appeal to a viewer's previous sensory experiences and how the "blanks" of representation might trigger acts of completion that deploy all of the senses.

Everyday objects and their principles of interaction

In his widely influential 1988 book *The Design of Everyday Things* (originally titled *The Psychology of Everyday Things*), the cognitive scientist turned usability engineer Donald Norman describes the various ways in which designers form the requisite *discoverability* of the everyday object, which communicates to the user "what it does, how it works, and what operations are possible."³⁹ Drawing, in part, on psychologist James J. Gibson's foundational work on perception, Norman conceptualizes six interrelated "psychological concepts" or "principles of interaction."

1. *Affordances*, expanded from their original Gibsonian meaning of "actionable properties" into a more inclusive relational definition, are the "relationship between the properties of an object and the capabilities of the agent."⁴⁰ For instance, a handsaw affords sawing provided the user has a basic understanding of the physics of cutting and an able hand. In other words (borrowed from Kemp), provided users have the relevant inner and—as it were—"outer" preconditions.

Norman also discusses "anti-affordances." His key example is glass, which affords seeing through while preventing physical passage. "The blockage of passage can be considered an anti-affordance—the prevention of interaction."⁴¹ This example is particularly relevant to museum displays, where glass vitrines perfectly embody this dual function. As Classen and Howes note, "The traditional glass cases of the museum present little impediment to the eye but they are not ideologically transparent. As we have seen, glass cases are ideological framing devices within the larger frame of the museum itself."⁴²

2. *Signifiers*, which are not to be confused with semiotic signifiers, are "any perceivable indicator that communicates appropriate behavior to a person."⁴³ To use Norman's example, signifiers range from explicit, literal signs that spell out

such things as “PUSH” and “PULL” on the corresponding sides of a door to the design of its hardware—a vertical metal plate to push against and a curved ergonomic handle to pull with.⁴⁴ Therefore, when affordances are perceivable, they may act as signifiers. To continue with Norman’s example, by *affording* its opening and closing, the handle on the door signifies *how* to operate it.⁴⁵ This is why the prescription of the user’s role is often readily derived from the visibility of certain design elements, which, to that end, may have been accentuated or externalized.

To clarify, “affordances determine what actions are possible. Signifiers communicate where [and how] the action should take place.”⁴⁶ For instance, a remote control affords controlling a device remotely by pressing a button, but the graphic signifiers on or next to each button signify which one we should be pressing in order to achieve the desired result (like changing the channel or adjusting the volume). In addition, signifiers may be accidental rather than deliberate. Consider how the buttons whose graphic signifiers have been faded by repeated use signify a user’s preferences, such as a particular channel or decibel level.

3. *Constraints* prescribe the user’s role by restricting otherwise possible actions, thereby leaving only desired ones available. Physical constraints restrict “such things as the order in which parts can go together and the ways by which an object can be moved, picked up, or otherwise manipulated.”⁴⁷ Consider the classic shape-sorting children’s toy, where the distinct shapes of the openings enforce the correct placement of square, round and triangular blocks. In distinction, *cultural* constraints, which are akin to social norms, are “*learned artificial* restrictions on behavior” that govern our interactions:⁴⁸

Conventions are actually a form of cultural constraint, usually associated with how people behave. Some conventions determine what activities should be done; others prohibit or discourage actions. But in all cases, they provide those knowledgeable of the culture with powerful constraints on behavior.⁴⁹

To illustrate the distinction, consider the white cube space, which may contain physical constraints such as the context markers of the glass vitrine and barrier rope that prevent us from physically interacting with the exhibits. Yet, the cultural constraint on physically interacting with exhibits is so deep-seated that it usually suffices in order to enforce the “correct” behavior, even in the absence of these physical constraints or of literal signifiers that spell out “do not touch the art.” Indeed, these physical and cultural constraints comprise what Kemp describes as the “extrinsic conditions of access/appearance.” Visitors, conditioned by repeated exposure to modern exhibition settings, automatically adopt a hands-off approach. In fact, much like a plinth, which does not physically constrain interaction, the vitrine and rope have come to act as signifiers, discouraging physical interaction without deploying their physically constraining properties.

4. *Feedback* communicates the results of our actions.⁵⁰ What I shall call “positive feedback” confirms that we are acting correctly, thereby eliminating doubt.

Conversely, what I shall call “negative feedback,” or the lack of positive feedback when we expect it, indicates we should adjust our actions to yield the intended result or, alternatively, that there is a fault with the system. Consider a microwave oven: when we input the cooking time and press start, a display may show a countdown indicating that our request has been registered and the status of our request. If there is a display but it does not light up, that would serve as negative feedback.

In addition, feedback may be auditory, olfactory or haptic: sounds, odors or vibrations. For instance, microwave beeps indicate that a button has been pressed or that the cooking cycle is complete. Generally speaking, smooth and quiet operations provide positive feedback, whereas strident sounds, burnt odors or turbulent motions provide negative feedback. And feedback may also arise naturally rather than artificially: the mechanical sound that the microwave door makes lets us know whether it has been properly shut, a burning smell indicates that food has been overcooked, and the vibration of the appliance indicates that it is in operation.

Conveniently, natural negative feedback tends to follow inappropriate or ineffective constraints or the complete lack thereof. Consider microwaving hiccups such as the burnt odor or, alternatively, sputtering food, sparking foil or a silent magnetron (that should be humming). These indicate that we should either adjust our actions or fix the system.

5. *Mapping* refers to “the relationship between the elements of two sets of things,” which is why it is a key principle in designing controls and displays.⁵¹ Mappings may follow colors or shapes (the red square block goes through the red square opening), universal conventions (left to rewind and right to fast-forward) or spatial analogies (the left switch controls the left light).⁵² Similar to affordances and constraints, mappings may also act as signifiers. Consider Norman’s example of scissors: the shape and size of the two apertures correspond to the typical hand anatomy, thereby signifying the correct placement of our digits—fingers go in the elongated hole and the thumb in the opposing one.⁵³
6. Lastly, the *Mental model* (also known as a “conceptual model”) is “an explanation, usually highly simplified, of how something works.”⁵⁴ The model can be incomplete and inaccurate as it does not need to explain the thing’s actual mechanism of operation, only how to operate or interact with it.⁵⁵ Norman illustrates this concept with the computer “desktop” interface: by presenting a graphic analogy of a desk with files, folders and even a bin, the skeuomorphic design allows the typical user to navigate the complex software system despite their limited knowledge of the underlying computational processes.⁵⁶

Mental models can be acquired through external means, such as manuals, fellow users or previous designs we are already familiar with; yet, they should ideally be inferable from the design itself.⁵⁷ The best way to acquire a mental model is from the perceived structure of the design—its affordances, signifiers, constraints and mappings.⁵⁸ Basic hand tools exemplify this as they “tend to make their critical

parts sufficiently visible,” thus rendering their mental models largely intuitive and self-evident.⁵⁹

Capri Battery: powering alternative display practices

As we have seen, according to Kemp, artists employ forms of address that appeal to viewers' preconditions in order to form an offer of reception that guides viewers in completing the meanings of works of art. Comparably, according to Norman, designers employ principles of interaction that appeal to users' preconditions in order to form discoverability that guides users in executing the functions of everyday objects. Given that both accounts are grounded in the conviction that artifacts are designed to activate their respective agents (namely, users and viewers) in specific ways, perhaps the application of Norman's principles to the analysis of works of art might illuminate how they solicit intellectual agency through multi-sensory perception. That is, approximating "viewer" with "user" and "artist" with "designer" might explicate how artists prescribe an intellectual role through physical interaction.

I will focus on the work of Joseph Beuys (1921–86), a German avant-gardist renowned for his radical expansion of artistic practice through his theory of "social sculpture," his concept of "Actions" (performance art), his pedagogy and his environmental activism, as well as for his involvement with 1960s Fluxus. His later practice of creating multiples—editioned works produced in collaboration with publishers—aimed to make his ideas more widely accessible through reproducible formats.⁶⁰ Although not officially "Fluxus" in historiographical terms, Beuys's Fluxkit- and Fluxbox-inspired multiples raise similar concerns to those raised by Fluxus works in institutions and on display.⁶¹ Like many Fluxus and other contemporaneous avant-garde artists, Beuys frequently incorporated everyday objects and materials; yet, his distinctive combination of organic materials with manufactured items carried distinct conceptual weight, transforming them into artworks that catalyze social and political change through their actual and symbolic attributes.⁶² The organic materials he employed, such as felt, fat, fruit and beeswax, were not chosen merely for the symbolic themes of transience they represent but for their inherent capacity to transfer and transform: they could store energy, conduct heat, decay or crystallize—properties integral to the works' meaning and operation. When combined with manufactured objects and artificial materials, these organic material properties actively manifest Beuys's belief in art's capacity to reconcile natural and technological systems.

Consider *Capri Battery*, which famously features a yellow light bulb "plugged" into a lemon using a black socket adapter. It was created in 1985 on the island of Capri and displayed at Galleria Lucio Amelio inside a free-standing brass vitrine that Beuys sourced from a local Naples antique store.⁶³ Shortly after its exhibition, Beuys published the work as a multiple in an edition of 200, in collaboration with the gallery owner's publishing house (Edizione Lucio Amelio). The multiple consists of a yellow light bulb in its original retail packaging, a lemon and a black

socket adapter, accompanied by a signed card with a photo of the plugged-in prototype in a sunny outdoor setting on the reverse side (Figure 4.1), and encased in a wooden box inscribed with the tongue-in-cheek instruction “change battery every 1,000 hours” (which repeats on the card).⁶⁴

Given this variance in *Capri Battery*’s composition and configuration, and the fact that Beuys did not leave behind explicit display instructions beyond the tongue-in-cheek inscription, exhibiting institutions take varying approaches to its display. Some choose to display the work in its plugged state, others in its unplugged state. Some display it alongside the box and card, and others display it without. However, virtually all institutions exhibit the work on a plinth and inside a vitrine.⁶⁵ Furthermore, some display the work with a plastic lemon instead of a real one or opt to exclude the lemon altogether.⁶⁶ These differing institutional approaches to negotiating between material preservation and conceptual authenticity reflect broader tensions in conservation ethics, thus rendering *Capri Battery* a lens through which to examine how display decisions inevitably reflect institutional priorities.



Figure 4.1 Joseph Beuys, *Capri Battery*, 1985. Screen-printed wooden box, offset lithograph on paper, light bulb, socket adapter, lemon; 11.7 × 6.7 × 5.7 cm. Published by Edizioni Lucio Amelio, Naples. Signed and numbered 172/200. Courtesy of the RISD Museum, Providence, RI.

From a practical perspective, the preservationist display decisions prevent mold, corrosion and etching of the adapter from the acidic lemon juice, saving institutions from continually replenishing the decaying exhibit with fresh lemons.⁶⁷ However, from a critical perspective, the preservationist display decisions warrant re-evaluation because multiple copies exist, because the work is easily replicable using off-the-shelf items and because Beuys designed it for physical interaction and arguably appropriated the lemon for its perishable nature and multisensorial properties. Admittedly, the latter perspective is complicated by the institutional acquisition of the work in an art market based on rarity, authorial authenticity and auratic significance.⁶⁸ Precisely because multiple copies already exist and because the work is easily replicable using off-the-shelf items, institutions must treat *Capri Battery* no differently than they would a singular autographic artifact if they wish to maintain its value. Yet, while these complexities help explain the preservationist display decisions, they do not fully justify them. In boxing the work and, significantly, boxing it in an unplugged state, Beuys turned the ordinarily “passive” beholders viewing the prototype through glass at Galleria Lucio Amelio into active agents who were asked to unbox and “switch on” the work.

At first sight, there is something amusing about the work. Yet, surely, amusement is not the ultimate response Beuys aimed to elicit. Presumably, the twin yellow “bulbs” are a color-coded message or, rather, a form of mapping—of supporting the mental model. As the title and inscription (a type of “manual”) suggest, the work is to act as or represent a battery. In including a standard light bulb and socket adapter but swapping the socket for a lemon, Beuys’s mapping supports the mental model of a lemon battery, which we can all vaguely recall from the primary school science experiment.

Nevertheless, while the recipient may have the inner precondition of familiarity with the model of a lemon battery, and while the reception took place outside of the traditional site of reception, the cultural constraint on physical interaction with art is so deep-seated that recipients may have still been apprehensive about breaching it. In addition, they may have been apprehensive about breaching the physical constraint on plugging a two-pronged plug into a lemon rather than a corresponding socket. Yet, again, the mapping between the color, shape and size of the lemon and light bulb is Beuys’s way of “winking” at recipients to eliminate any apprehension.

That said, *Capri Battery* was not actually engineered to function as a lemon battery. Consequently, we can imagine recipients feeling bemused rather than further amused when they follow Beuys’s prescription only to encounter a lack of positive feedback when the light bulb emits no light, as well as natural negative feedback from the stinging sensation and sour smell (and possibly taste) of the lemon juice dripping down their hands. Yet, perhaps instead of considering this feedback as indicating incorrect action, we should consider that Beuys may have deliberately designed a dysfunctional lemon battery to afford a cognitive dissonance that triggers acts of ideation. By forming a *false* offer of reception, Beuys prescribed interacting agents an ultimately *intellectual* role in completing the work. Since negative feedback and the lack of positive feedback indicate that we should adjust our actions to yield the intended result, perhaps *Capri Battery* was not designed to

prescribe an action that completes it as such but, rather, to be a “*call for action*”—calling to change our actions and fix the broken energy system. We might say that the proverbial light bulb lighting up above recipients’ heads when they realized this is what filled in the “blank” and “powered” the work.

Indeed, according to the work’s accepted reading, informed by the fact that Beuys was an avid environmentalist and a founding member of the German Green Party, it calls for a reconsideration of fossil fuels as an energy source.⁶⁹ Designed on the Mediterranean island of Capri, where strong sunlight provides favorable conditions for the cultivation of lemons, the choice of the two round, bright yellow “bulbs” can be understood as another layer of mapping that validates this environmental reading by alluding specifically to solar power as an alternative, more sustainable source of energy. It does this by supporting the mental model of the sun as a renewable energy source. Consider the *Capri Battery* as a representational analogy: the lemon represents the sun’s energy in its stored form, and the light bulb represents the sun’s energy as a light source; together, they represent the circularity of the sun’s physical mechanism of operation.

On this account, the choice of a lemon and a yellow incandescent light bulb creates multilayered mapping that both prescribes physical interaction by supporting the mental model of a lemon battery and triggers a specific, environmental act of ideation by supporting the corollary mental model of the sun as a battery. If we consider works of art to be instrumental (at least insofar that they can be used as a vehicle for social change), then we could say that agents who are driven to action by *Capri Battery* take part not only in its completion but also in the literal execution of its function.

This environmental reading of *Capri Battery* gains additional resonance when viewed through the lens of decolonial critique. Beuys’s critique of the energy system parallels critiques of colonialism itself, which, like extractive capitalism, operates through a similar logic of continuous expansion into new territories for the exploitation of their natural resources and populations for profit without regard for the consequences. Through this lens, *Capri Battery*’s advocacy for *globally* available solar power as an energy source implicitly questions the colonial mentality. In this sense, agents driven to environmental action by *Capri Battery* take part not only in an ecological intervention but also in a wider emancipatory effort to challenge the ideological underpinnings of extractivist economic models.

If so, through the various design decisions embodied in this deceptively simple, conceptually layered work, Beuys prescribed physical interaction. Yet, this physical interaction ultimately led recipients to perform an indisputably intellectual role that completed the work. By prescribing an intellectual role through multisensory perception, *Capri Battery* demonstrates that intellectual agency need not be solicited exclusively through visual perception and that its customary institutional display, which *proscribes* physical interaction in favor of institutional priorities such as authenticity and material preservation, limits the potential sociopolitical and environmental impact of its intended reception.

Moreover, the institutional practice of replacing the lemon with a plastic facsimile essentially obscures Beuys’s juxtaposition of the naturally occurring, perishable

lemon with the manufactured adapter and light bulb, produced of persistent materials and through polluting processes. In negating the work's constitutive dialectical tension, this practice further limits its intended reception.

Alternative display approaches

Having considered how “forms of address” may address nonvisual sensory modalities, how “inner preconditions” may appeal to a viewer's previous sensory experiences, and how the “blanks” of representation may trigger acts of completion that deploy all of the senses, we can now attempt to reimagine how “extrinsic conditions of access”—that is, museum display practices—could facilitate multisensory engagement with works of art. That is to say, through this expanded framework of reception aesthetics, we might explore institutional strategies and devices that could display sensory works of art in ways that respect both their conservational concerns and their original contexts and intended modes of reception.

As previously alluded to, the goal is not to abandon traditional conservation measures entirely but to develop more flexible, nuanced and culturally informed approaches that can accommodate multiple ways of caring for and experiencing works of art. Like O'Doherty, Classen and Howes believe that “the ‘solution’ . . . is not necessarily to oppose the visual model of the museum,” reasoning that “it is impossible to create a museological model which is free of issues of domination and misrepresentation.”⁷⁰ The “solution,” instead, should be born from the acknowledgment that an artifact's meaning does not arise from the mere act of sensory engagement with it but from its use in a particular cultural context—a “dynamic web of sensuous and social meaning [that] is broken when an artifact is removed from its cultural setting and inserted within the visual symbol system of the museum.”⁷¹ Alternative approaches should, therefore, consider how to maintain, restore or otherwise evidence this web within the existing infrastructures of the museological model, and they should do so without being overly paradigmatic and prescriptive in order to accommodate its dynamism.

In the case of *Capri Battery*, this raises practical questions about how institutions might present the work in ways that respect both its material and conceptual aspects. Should the work be displayed in its plugged or unplugged state? Should Beuys's instruction to change the battery every 1,000 hours be prominently displayed alongside the work in those instances when the box and card are not available? Should it be displayed behind glass or accessible for visitors to physically interact with? And so on and so forth. Such display decisions profoundly affect visitors' understanding and experience of the work.

One approach is exemplified by the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen in Beuys's hometown of Düsseldorf, where *Capri Battery* is displayed as it was in its first appearance at Galleria Lucio Amelio: in its original brass vitrine, with no box and card, and with a real lemon. According to Nina Quabeck, who worked as a conservator at the museum, since acquiring the work in 2000, the museum has established a twice- or thrice-weekly routine of “unsealing the display case, removing the moldy lemon, cleaning the plug with ethanol to remove mold spores, preparing

the new lemon by pre-drilling two holes into its skin, inserting the plug, [and] sealing the case.”⁷² Quabeck has described the lemon replacement process as “a ritual that binds conservation staff to the artwork,” speculating that it is a “double twist on the artist’s part, forcing the keepers to critically and actively deal with his works and his concepts.”⁷³ Similarly, Werner Müller, the museum’s head of conservation, speculates that “Beuys was putting the institution to the test with the work and that creating a discussion might have been Beuys’s true intent, rather than categorically demanding a real fruit.” He insists, therefore, that “a well-staffed department should allocate the time to follow the routine in order to keep the idea of the energy flow alive” rather than opt for an artificial reproduction of the lemon.⁷⁴ Such an approach would locate the meaning not in the original lemon “handpicked” by Beuys, but “in the process of changing the fruit, the substitution of which demonstrates our respect for the work.”⁷⁵

However, while such an approach can be rightly perceived as an act of honoring the work’s participatory and interactive dimensions and maintaining its vitality, limiting physical engagement to museum staff may constrain the work’s intended function. Another caveat is that the lemon replacement process might seem to become a performance for its own sake instead of simply making evident and perceivable the work’s conceptual concerns regarding energy transfer, material transformation and activation.

To understand the theoretical implications of this institutional approach to *Capri Battery*, we can follow Quabeck’s lead in turning to philosopher Renée van de Vall’s identification of three key paradigms in contemporary art conservation: the traditional *scientific conservation* paradigm, which prioritizes material preservation, the emerging *performance paradigm*, in which “the essence of the work is conceptual and reliant on a score or instructions,” and the emerging *processual paradigm*, which “hinges on facilitating the process at the work’s core.”⁷⁶ While the Kunstsammlung’s regular lemon replacement ritual suggests alignment with the processual paradigm, it also suggests alignment with the scientific paradigm, and the adherence to Beuys’s instruction to change the battery every 1,000 hours suggests alignment with—or at least evokes—the performance paradigm. Aligning tangentially with all three paradigms rather than fully with just one illustrates how contemporary works of art often resist neat paradigmatic classification and require approaches that reflect their complexities, calling for the development of further alternative display approaches.

An intermediate approach, following Classen and Howes, is to provide interactive reproductions alongside works on display.⁷⁷ While they caution that sensory engagement with Indigenous artifacts requires proper contextualization to convey cultural meaning, this concern is less pressing for Western works of art, like *Capri Battery*, displayed in Western museums. Interactive reproductions will afford visitors the full sensory experience, bringing their inner preconditions and personal sensory memories into the process of meaning-making. Nevertheless, as we have learned, the institutional context indeed shapes visitor engagement and is part of visitors’ inner preconditions; thus, reproductions might be more effectively experienced outside the museum, perhaps as an affordable version of the multiple

acquired at the museum. However, for *Capri Battery* specifically, providing reproductions presents practical challenges of maintenance and cost that may render this strategy unfeasible for some institutions.

A more speculative approach could deploy emerging technologies that offer promising tools for bridging the gap between institutional care and public engagement. This has become more feasible and imperative than ever with the development and increasing prevalence of immersive technologies, accelerated by the pandemic's social distancing constraints and ensuing sensory deprivation that highlighted our over-reliance on sight and innate need for sensory stimuli. Technologies that could facilitate and enhance sensory engagement with *Capri Battery* include, for example, haptic and other sensory perception devices to allow exploration of its material properties, augmented reality overlays showing its material changes over time, or digital interfaces simulating its operation. However, while such technological tools seem to have the potential to reconcile artistic intentions with conservation concerns, their deployment should be carefully evaluated against Beuys's intent—harkening back not only to his original material choices and the sensory experiences they afford but also to their natural processes, the critical rationale underlying their choice.

Since technologies could constitute new “extrinsic conditions of access,” any technological mediation should therefore be carefully designed to support rather than supplant the work's original forms of address and intended offer of reception. Furthermore, since such technologies should serve to illuminate rather than overshadow the work, if they are deployed to facilitate the sensory and experiential aspects of *Capri Battery*, institutions should avoid reducing the work to a mere spectacle in the experience economy of the museum.⁷⁸ A more subtle technology-based approach could, therefore, involve creating simple documentary materials that make visible *Capri Battery*'s material changes, or displaying the lemon replacement process alongside interpretive materials that describe the work's history and highlight its conceptual concerns.

Finally, drawing on artist Rosanna Raymond's concepts of *acti.VĀ.tion* and *conser.VĀ.tion*, another approach involves developing collaborative activation protocols.⁷⁹ *Vā* refers to the Sāmoan concept of a relational space (physical or meta-physical) that binds together people, objects and the natural world and is deeply rooted in Pacific Islander cultures. “By putting the *vā* at the center of these words,” Raymond explains, “I put the actual relationship first, rather than the spectacle.”⁸⁰ While Raymond developed these concepts in the context of Indigenous Pacific art and refers to the conservation of Indigenous artifacts and cultural heritage through maintaining living community connections, her emphasis on relationality and ongoing activation offers valuable insights that could be adapted for contemporary Western works of art. For *Capri Battery*, this could mean establishing formal procedures for controlled physical interaction, rather than defaulting to a strict “hands-off” policy. For example, the Kunstsammlung's routine could be expanded into a more public ritual. This would align with Beuys's interest in social sculpture and democratic participation while maintaining institutional caring standards. However, by controlling or supervising visitor interactions through institutional

protocols, such a strategy risks reinforcing traditional museum practices that serve to regulate the public's bodily behavior.

Such approaches point to a broader theoretical understanding of activation through museum displays as a reciprocal process. When works of art are displayed in ways that facilitate multisensory engagement, they activate visitors' embodied responses while simultaneously being activated through this engagement. This dual activation process stands in contrast to the white cube's unidirectional ocular-centric model. When institutions restrict engagement with *Capri Battery*, they limit the agents' embodied activation and the sensory and conceptual potential of the work, thereby essentially deactivating it as a vehicle for social and environmental change.

Ultimately, since all approaches can be faulted, institutions should take a flexible, case-specific approach to developing strategies and devices that respond to each work's unique material and conceptual demands. As Quabeck suggests, institutions should "embrace the active life" of works like *Capri Battery*, where the meaning emerges through activation and material transformation.⁸¹ Drawing on conservator Robyn Sloggett's observations, as cited by Quabeck, that "issues of context and use, not condition, set parameters for the meaning of the object," institutional approaches should prioritize "excellent interpretation skills over and above excellent hands-on skills."⁸² Such case-by-case consideration offers a promising approach and is arguably the only way for institutions to faithfully balance conservational concerns with artists' intended modes of reception.

It is hoped that the expanded framework of the Kemp–Norman synthesis will equip conservators, curators and exhibition designers with analytical tools for better interpreting and evaluating the advantages and disadvantages of each approach with regard to sensory art. As O'Doherty argues, understanding the white cube's ideological underpinnings is key to moving beyond it. The expanded framework helps reveal assumptions about perception and meaning-making that shape current display practices, pointing toward and gradually reimagining alternatives that better serve sensory art.

Conclusion

This chapter suggests a possible expanded framework for reimagining museum display practices and points toward practical strategies and devices for re-embodiment aesthetic experiences. Through synthesizing Kemp's and Norman's accounts, it offers a case study that demonstrates how thinking of interactive and sensory works of art as "designed" objects may inform contemporary display practices that help decolonize the anachronistic yet still pervasive visualist paradigm of aesthetic reception/perception, which has dominated Western museums since the nineteenth century.

The analysis of Beuys's *Capri Battery* exemplifies how artists representing Fluxus concerns have historically negotiated the tensions between visual and multisensory perception, and demonstrates that physical engagement need not preclude intellectual engagement. In fact, it demonstrates how physical engagement can enhance and deepen intellectual understanding through visceral heuristics. As Classen and Howes argue, "every artifact embodies a particular sensory mix," so

artifacts “must be approached through the senses, rather than as ‘texts’ to be read or mere visual ‘signs’ to be decoded.”⁸³

Whether, as O’Doherty suggests, the white cube was “an economic construct formed by capitalist models” that then shaped art, or whether, inversely, it was “nurtured by an internal logic similar to that of its art,” it is evident that as art changes, so too can its context of display.⁸⁴ Indeed, the relatively recent (re)emergence of various forms of interactive, sensory and participatory practices is calling into question the hegemony of visual perception in exhibition spaces, and, in response, institutions have begun to adapt, both curatorially and architecturally.⁸⁵ The popularity of interactive and sensory installations in prominent institutions such as Tate Modern and the Museum of Modern Art, New York, suggests that audiences are eager for multisensory interactions with works of art and have even begun to expect a certain level of such interaction as if it were the new norm.⁸⁶

Looking to the future, as institutions continue to adapt to the trend toward sensory art, they might consider how design thinking can inform innovative display practices. As alluded to earlier, the reimagining of exhibition spaces need not compromise either their role as dedicated sites of aesthetic and intellectual contemplation or as custodial sites of material preservation. Instead, institutions might work toward accommodating more embodied, diverse and inclusive modes of aesthetic perception by considering how Norman’s principles of interaction and related frameworks for design thinking can enhance visitors’ sensory engagement in ways that respect curatorial and conservational concerns.

While the available alternative display approaches cannot fully reconcile preservation with intended modes of sensory art’s reception, institutions can begin reassessing their priorities as new solutions emerge. In *Inside the White Cube*, O’Doherty challenges the modern exhibition space that presents works of art as “untouched by time and its vicissitudes,” existing “in a kind of eternity of display.”⁸⁷ Celebrating this institutional critique, Thomas McEvelley characterizes O’Doherty’s essays as “defenses of time and change against the myth of the eternality and transcendence of pure form.”⁸⁸ These quotes echo and underscore the poignant reminder embedded in *Capri Battery* and many other twentieth-century ephemeral works of art, as though directed at the very premise of Western museum conservation, which attempts to arrest change: nothing is immune to impermanence.

Notes

- 1 Inbal Strauss, “‘Making Sense’ of Art through Design: Towards a Multisensory Theory of Reception Aesthetics,” *Sillages Critiques*, no. 36 (June 20, 2024), <http://journals.openedition.org/sillagescritiques/15782>.
- 2 For more examples of Fluxus objects that “fail to conform to a visual model of artistic practice,” see Hannah B Higgins, *Fluxus Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 46–48, 118–21.
- 3 Elizabeth Edwards, Chris Gosden and Ruth Phillips, “Introduction,” in *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums and Material Culture*, eds. Elizabeth Edwards, Chris Gosden and Ruth Phillips (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 7–22.
- 4 Constance Classen and David Howes, “The Museum as Sensescape: Western Sensibilities and Indigenous Artifacts,” in Edwards, Gosden and Phillips, *Sensible Objects*, 208.
- 5 Classen and Howes, “The Museum as Sensescape,” 206, 208.

- 6 Classen and Howes, "The Museum as Sensescape," 208.
- 7 Classen and Howes, "The Museum as Sensescape," 206. Therein, the authors illustrate their discussion with an early nineteenth-century racial sensory hierarchy thought up by the natural historian Lorenz Oken, who positioned "the European 'eye-man' at the top, followed by the Asian 'ear-man,' the Native American 'nose-man,' the Australian 'tongue-man,' and the African 'skin-man.'" Similarly, the "lower" senses were increasingly associated with the "lower" class of Western society, as opposed to the "higher" sense of sight, increasingly associated with its "higher" class of educated elites. As Edwards et al. note, "the need to ensure the security of the museum's objects was a corollary to the new disciplinary function of the museum that had been unnecessary in both practical and symbolic terms during the years when collecting institutions remained small, private, and exclusive in visitorship." Edwards, Gosden and Phillips, "Introduction," 19. For an in-depth discussion of museums' regulation of bodily behavior as part of broader class-based social reforms, see Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995).
- 8 Classen and Howes, "The Museum as Sensescape," 201, 208.
- 9 Classen and Howes, "The Museum as Sensescape," 207.
- 10 Putting aside the fact that both theories are informed by perception psychology, they are still more closely related than they might at first appear. Art and design have a long history of mutual cross-fertilization, and design played a recurring role in informing the art of many avant-garde movements, including Fluxus. In fact, George Maciunas, the principal organizer of Fluxus, who is credited as a collaborator of Knowles, Ay-Ö and Vautier in the abovementioned Fluxkit designs, was trained as a designer, and his work has been analyzed as design. For an analysis of Maciunas's work as design, see Julia Robinson, "Maciunas as Producer: Performative Design in the Art of the 1960s," *Grey Room* 33 (2008): 56–83.
- 11 For the previous text from this larger project, see Strauss, "'Making Sense' of Art through Design."
- 12 Wolfgang Kemp, "The Work of Art and Its Beholder: The Methodology of the Aesthetic of Reception," in *The Subjects of Art History: Historical Objects in Contemporary Perspective*, eds. Mark A. Cheetham, Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998 [1986]), 181–83.
- 13 For example, Maciunas's Fluxboxes and Fluxkits can be said to function not only as interactive works but also as portable, decentralized alternative "museums." This metaphorical functional conceptualization overlaid on the works may require additional analytical tools beyond those proposed here.
- 14 Kemp, "The Work of Art and Its Beholder," 182.
- 15 For a discussion of Fluxus's influences, see Owen F. Smith, "Pre-Fluxus Conceptual Developments and Generative Influences," in *Fluxus: The History of an Attitude* (San Diego: San Diego State University Press, 1998), 13–24. For discussions of the respective concepts, see Bertolt Brecht, "The Alienation Effect," in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (New Delhi: Radha Krishna, 1978), 91–103; Constance Lewallen, "Cage and the Structure of Chance," in *Writings through John Cage's Music, Poetry, and Art*, eds. David W. Bernstein and Christopher Hatch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 234–43; Marcel Duchamp, "The Creative Act," in *Salt Seller: The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, eds. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 138–40; and Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).
- 16 Kemp, "The Work of Art and Its Beholder," 183.
- 17 Kemp, "The Work of Art and Its Beholder," 183, quoting Hannelore Link.
- 18 Kemp, "The Work of Art and Its Beholder," 180.
- 19 This is also true the other way around: when reading or making meaning of a work, the viewer, although possibly familiar with the artist's reputation, oeuvre and declared

- artistic aims, carries out an abstraction from their real individuality—making projections and assumptions about their motivations and intentions. Inevitably, on the part of both the artist and the viewer, the process of abstraction is influenced by “historical and societal ideals about the function and effect of art.” And so, both are caught in an endless cycle of anticipating and reintegrating each other’s projections. Kemp, “The Work of Art and Its Beholder,” 183.
- 20 Kemp, “The Work of Art and Its Beholder,” 183.
 - 21 Kemp, “The Work of Art and Its Beholder,” 187–88.
 - 22 Kemp, “The Work of Art and Its Beholder,” 188.
 - 23 Kemp, “The Work of Art and Its Beholder,” 188, quoting Iser.
 - 24 Kemp, “The Work of Art and Its Beholder,” 188.
 - 25 Kemp, “The Work of Art and Its Beholder,” 188.
 - 26 Kemp, “The Work of Art and Its Beholder,” 186–87.
 - 27 Kemp, “The Work of Art and Its Beholder,” 186.
 - 28 Kemp, “The Work of Art and Its Beholder,” 184.
 - 29 Kemp, “The Work of Art and Its Beholder,” 185.
 - 30 Kemp, “The Work of Art and Its Beholder,” 185.
 - 31 Kemp, “The Work of Art and Its Beholder,” 185.
 - 32 Brian O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (San Francisco: The Lapis Press, 1986), 65.
 - 33 O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, 7–15.
 - 34 O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, 76, 88.
 - 35 O’Doherty notes, “The classic modernist gallery is the limbo between studio and living room, where the conventions of both meet on a carefully neutralized ground. There the artist’s respect for what he has invented is perfectly superimposed on the bourgeois desire for possession. For a gallery is, in the end, a place to sell things.” O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, 76.
 - 36 Francesca Liuni, “Politicized Aesthetics: Questioning the Neutrality of Museum Architecture and Exhibition Design,” *ICOFOM Study Series* 50, no. 2 (May 30, 2023), <http://journals.openedition.org/iss/4699>.
 - 37 He notes, “If the white wall cannot be summarily dismissed, it can be understood. This knowledge changes the white wall, since its content is composed of mental projections based on unexposed assumptions. The wall is our assumptions. It is imperative for every artist to know this content and what it does to his/her work.” O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, 79–80.
 - 38 He cites, for example, Piet Mondrian’s interior design (*Salon de Madame B., à Dresden*, 1970 [1926]), and the takeovers and rejections-by-appropriation of Yves Klein (*The Void*, 1938), Marcel Duchamp (*1,200 Coal Bags*, 1938, and *Mile of String*, 1942), Allan Kaprow (*Words*, 1962) and Claes Oldenburg (*The Street*, 1960, and *Bedroom Ensemble*, 1963). He also notes, “Genuine alternatives cannot come from within this space. Yet it is the not ignoble symbol for the preservation of what society finds obscure, unimportant, and useless. It has incubated radical ideas that would have abolished it. The gallery space is all we’ve got, and most art needs it. Each side of the white cube question has two, four, six sides.” O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, 80–81.
 - 39 Donald A. Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2013), 10.
 - 40 Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things*, 11.
 - 41 Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things*, 11.
 - 42 Classen and Howes, “The Museum as Sensescape,” 218.
 - 43 Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things*, 14.
 - 44 Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things*, 1–3.
 - 45 Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things*, 18.
 - 46 Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things*, 14.
 - 47 Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things*, 76, emphasis mine.

- 48 Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things*, 76.
- 49 Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things*, 131.
- 50 Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things*, 23.
- 51 Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things*, 20–21.
- 52 Here is another good example of the interplay between principles of interaction: in the shape-sorting toy, the mapping guides, the constraint enforces. That is, a round opening can be large enough for a square block, so the size of the opening prevents it from slotting in.
- 53 Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things*, 26.
- 54 Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things*, 25.
- 55 Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things*, 25.
- 56 Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things*, 25.
- 57 Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things*, 26.
- 58 Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things*, 26.
- 59 Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things*, 26.
- 60 Ann Temkin and Bernice Rose, *Thinking Is Form: The Drawings of Joseph Beuys* (New York: Thames and Hudson with the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1993), 20.
- 61 “The Multiples of Joseph Beuys: What Are Multiples?” Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich, <https://pinakothek-beuys-multiples.de/what-are-multiples/?lang=en>. As noted therein, “as an affiliate member of Fluxus in Europe, who worked with Maciunas on several occasions, Beuys was well aware of his colleague’s activities [with Fluxboxes and Fluxkits] and in 1965 began producing multiples of his own.”
- 62 David Adams, “Joseph Beuys: Pioneer of a Radical Ecology,” *Art Journal* 51, no. 2 (1992): 26–34, 28.
- 63 Nina Quabeck, “The Artist’s Intent in Contemporary Art: Matter and Process in Transition” (PhD dissertation, University of Glasgow, 2019).
- 64 The German instruction reads “nach 1000 Stunden Batterie auswechseln.”
- 65 For example, in its 2025 exhibition *Joseph Beuys: In Defense of Nature*, the Broad in Los Angeles displayed the work inside a vitrine with the lightbulb plugged in, alongside a closed box; the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin displayed the work plugged in but without the box or card (in its 2023 exhibition *Torn Test: Art between Politics and Society*); and the gallery Track 16 in Los Angeles displayed the lightbulb and adapter alongside the box but with no lemon (in its 2025 exhibition *Potential Goods*).
- 66 For a discussion of conservation issues relating to *Capri Battery* that references the use of a plastic lemon, see Ulrich Lang, “Das Bewusst-Sein des Materials,” paper presented at “Fabrication and Disintegration in Contemporary Art,” Fondation Laurenz Schaulager, Basel, September 7, 2017, video, 48:00 (35:00–39:00), <https://www.schaulager.org/video>. The Museum of Contemporary Art in Marseille, for example, excludes the lemon.
- 67 Quabeck, “The Artist’s Intent in Contemporary Art,” 11; and Pamela Z. McClusky, “‘Why Is This Here?’ Art Museum Texts as Ethical Guides,” in *The Routledge Companion to Museum Ethics: Redefining Ethics for the Twenty-First Century Museum*, ed. Janet Marstine (Oxford: Routledge, 2011), 305–6.
- 68 For related discussions of authorship and conservation with regard to editioned, ready-made and decaying works within collecting institutions, see Martha Buskirk, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), especially 14, 31, 70.
- 69 Adams, “Joseph Beuys,” 26.
- 70 Classen and Howes, “The Museum as Sensescape,” 218–19.
- 71 Classen and Howes, “The Museum as Sensescape,” 200.
- 72 Quabeck, “The Artist’s Intent in Contemporary Art,” 11. A similar process of periodically replenishing the lemon was adopted at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, where a member

- of staff reasoned, tongue-in-cheek, that “the stench of the rotting lemon would drive most visitors out of the Foster Gallery.” See McClusky, “Why Is This Here?,” 305–6.
- 73 Quabeck, “The Artist’s Intent in Contemporary Art,” 11, 13.
- 74 Quabeck, “The Artist’s Intent in Contemporary Art,” 13.
- 75 Nina Quabeck, “Fabrication and Disintegration in Contemporary Art,” *Voca* (blog), October 13, 2017, <https://voca.network/blog/2017/10/13/fabrication-and-disintegration-in-contemporary-art/>. The Kunstsammlung’s approach is also supported by the fact that the prototype of Beuys’s multiple *Rose for Direct Democracy* (1973), a single red rose in a slender glass measuring cylinder inscribed with the work’s title and displayed at Documenta 5, was replenished by Beuys with a fresh-cut rose every day throughout the hundred days of the exhibition. See “The Multiples: Rose for Direct Democracy,” Pinakothek der Moderne, <https://pinakothek-beuys-multiples.de/product/rose-for-direct-democracy/?lang=en>.
- 76 Quabeck, “The Artist’s Intent in Contemporary Art,” 20; Renée van de Vall, “The Devil and the Details: The Ontology of Contemporary Art in Conservation Theory and Practice,” *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 55, no. 3 (2015): 285–302.
- 77 Classen and Howes, “The Museum as Sensescape,” 219.
- 78 On museums’ deployment of interactive computer displays and multisensory exhibits as part of their return to embodied experiences—traditionally associated with popular, lower-class or “everyday” forms of entertainment for the masses (such as carnivals)—in order to attract a wider (paying) visitorship or to justify public funding, see Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, 104–5.
- 79 Hanna B. Hölling, Jules Pelta Feldman and Emilie Magnin, “Rosanna Raymond on Conser.Vā.Tion,” in *Performance: The Ethics and the Politics of Conservation and Care*, Vol. II, eds. Hanna B. Hölling, Jules Pelta Feldman and Emilie Magnin (London and New York: Routledge, 2024), 247–62.
- 80 Hölling, Pelta Feldman and Magnin, “Rosanna Raymond on Conser.Vā.Tion,” 250.
- 81 Quabeck, “The Artist’s Intent in Contemporary Art,” 14.
- 82 Quabeck, “The Artist’s Intent in Contemporary Art,” 19.
- 83 Classen and Howes, “The Museum as Sensescape,” 200.
- 84 O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, 80.
- 85 The parenthetical prefix acknowledges and alludes to the fact that prior to the modern era embodied and participatory art was the norm, even in the West. Consider, for example, how prehistoric figurines were buried with the dead or how medieval reliquaries were carried through the street in processions. See Strauss, “‘Making Sense’ of Art through Design,” note 1. As installations became increasingly complex, the need for greater structural flexibility became apparent. To support ambitious works such as Olafur Eliasson’s *The Weather Project* (2003), with its massive simulated sun, and Carsten Höller’s *Test Site* (2006), with its giant slides installed throughout the space, the Tate made adaptations to its ceiling rigging, flooring and wall mounts. Similarly, acoustic modifications, including soundproofing, have been made to support sound-based works such as Bruce Nauman’s *Raw Materials* (2004).
- 86 Notable installations include Marepe’s *Veja Meu Bem* (2007), Tania Bruguera’s *10,148,451* (2018), Kara Walker’s *Fons Americanus* (2019) and Anicka Yi’s *In Love with the World* (2021) at Tate Modern, and Montien Boonma’s *House of Hope* (1996), Ernesto Neto’s *Navedenga* (2010) and Rirkrit Tiravanija’s *Untitled (Free/Still)* (1992/1995/2007/2011) at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. As Bennett notes, museums are broadly divided into “populist” and “statist.” The former hold that “the people should be given what they want,” while the latter hold that museums “should remain means for lifting the cultural and intellectual level of the population.” See Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, 104–5.
- 87 O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, 7, 15.
- 88 O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, 12.

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5 “... Treating with a flux”

How the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection has evolved stewardship practice at the Museum of Modern Art

Danielle Johnson, Kate Lewis and Peter Oleksik

Introduction

From the outset, the 2008 acquisition of the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection (SFC) by the Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA), generated friction. For an institution fundamentally structured around the principles of a modernist medium specificity, this unruly and interdisciplinary body of works—including Fluxkits, scores, films, games and ephemera—resisted smooth absorption into the museum at even the most basic level. This is remarkable, considering that much of this art, at the time of its collection, was almost fifty years old. Further, Fluxus, with its key tenets of ephemerality, indeterminacy, process, change and decay; its aspiration to “have no commodity or institutional value”;¹ its aim to achieve accessibility through mass production; its demanding of the viewer’s active participation; its eschewing of singular authorship; and its explicit orientation against the spectacle, posed major challenges to long-standing norms of the fine art—collecting museum, from its cataloging systems to its curatorial habits. For practitioners tasked with engaging these works within institutional contexts, contending with this friction is foundational to the stewardship of Fluxus.

In this chapter, the authors Danielle Johnson, former curatorial assistant, Department of Drawings and Prints; Kate Lewis, chief conservator and media conservator; and Peter Oleksik, media conservator, use the notion of “translation” as a theoretical framework to explore the nature of Fluxus’s institutional stewardship using three case studies from MoMA’s collection: Dick Higgins’s *The Flaming City* (1961–62), Nam June Paik’s *Zen for TV* (1963) and Shigeo Kubota’s *Duchampiana: Nude Descending a Staircase* (1976). Ultimately, we argue that understanding conservation through translation helps dispel the assumption that Fluxus works become fixed upon entering an institutional collection.

Toward translation

Art historian Natilee Harren has described Fluxus as “an allographic, notation-based practice in which works are reimagined in varying situations by varying actors with varying materials—a practice thus defined by transfer, translation and transformation.”² One might also add to this list of operations the

process of *translation*. As a fundamentally transformative process, the concept of translation is arguably already embedded within Fluxus works and, in turn, offers a possible museological framework for approaching the care, treatment and presentation of these artworks today in ways consonant with the works themselves. Translation can signify the transfer of ideas from one language, discipline or medium to another, as well as ideas between practitioners. The realization of scores depends on the interpretation and translation of text into bodily experience, action, attention or performance in real time. Conservators, curators and translators alike constantly navigate the relationship between the past, its resonance in the present and its relevance for the future. They are also ceaselessly enmeshed in the complex and delicate balancing act between fidelity and freedom, sensitivity and inventiveness. What might it mean for museum practitioners engaging with Fluxus collections to frame the focus of their labor through the lens of translation, raised in the conservation literature by authors such as Paul Eggert and Zoë Miller, among others?³ How might the notion of translation provide newfound space for acknowledging the impossibility of perfect reproduction, and what kinds of possibilities might that open for our work as stewards of collections? How can caretakers of these works be faithful to their essence while actively working to translate them from the past into the present?

The rigidity of the museum's modernist structure also carries over to the conservation of the works in their collections. If the conservator is adhering to the guidelines of the American Institute for Conservation's Code of Ethics and “only recommending or undertaking treatment that is judged suitable to the preservation of the aesthetic, conceptual and physical characteristics of the cultural property,”⁴ within the structures of modernity, then complications arise when these characteristics are in flux. The argument can be and has been made that the dominant models and principles guiding the field of conservation have led to what the forward-thinking conservator Jonathan Ashley-Smith considers to be “a slow drift into unadventurous unquestioning uniformity.”⁵ He adds: “One result is that conservators are concerned with the negative effects of taking risks more than innovating at the bench.”⁶ Conservative approaches are incompatible with treating or exhibiting radically experimental works of art. Moreover, they risk failing to do justice to the works and suppress ideas that might animate and enliven their display in the present.

By situating the concept of translation in the conservation context, a more experimental conservation approach might be suggested. Most importantly, translation offers conceptual possibilities to reimagine the relationship between an original work and its “translation.” In addition, translation allows for conservation to be thought of as a creative endeavor, less so emanant from conservation's perception as an empirical science, and grounded, instead, on the impossibility of neutrality and the reality of later interventions. As we will demonstrate, the concept of translation is particularly promising for thinking through presentations of Fluxus beyond the now predictable displays. With implications for this volume's main theme of “activation,” translation invokes the possibility of enlivening, reinvigorating and animating these works and all that they have to offer to us and our

thinking in the present. To understand conservation through translation does not mean disregarding the spirit, aims or essence of a work. Nor does it mean that there are no rules or no badly conceived translations. The translation—the conservation intervention—must come from a well of thoughtful research and profound sensitivity to and understanding of the work. It must respect the concerns and ideas within it and of the artist who produced it and, at the same time, acknowledge the conservator's subjectivity, which may point toward new possibilities for how we consider the nature of conservation's relationship to the "original."

Following similar concerns of conservatism as Ashley-Smith but shifting to the realm of translation, renowned translator Susan Bernofsky, in an interview on her approach, advocates for the translator to assume a more active role in their work:

It's important to remember to not be too well-behaved, because the writers who excite us are ones that surprise us and push our minds to new places. Why should a translation not also communicate with the reader in this way, and challenge, and delight? I'm all for being weird.⁷

For Bernofsky, it is by "being weird" that the translator or conservator actually grapples with, and is arguably more faithful to, the original.

Bernofsky's conceptualization of the translation process is one that aptly aligns with many Fluxus works, providing a possible starting point for decision making that foregrounds the kind of experimentation at Fluxus's core. It reveals how conservators, stewards and other cultural workers can commit to engaging with the far-ranging potentials contained therein. In the context of Fluxus, consider Bernofsky's analogy that translation is like:

an actor interpreting a script or a musician with a score. The notes are written but they can be played in so many different ways. There really is no such thing as a neutral translation. Every translation is an intervention and an interpretation to some extent of the original. There really is no way for translators to keep themselves out of the process, so the goal is to be in the process in a way that's productive and leads to the creation of better work. . . . You don't want random intervention, but some intervention is inevitable. You've got to be really aware of what you are doing and what is showing up in the text as you work.⁸

What might putting translation into practice look like in the context of the museum? What would it mean to consider translation as an approach to conservation, curation and collection care? It would certainly concern those cultural workers accepting the responsibility of thinking comprehensively about the significance of the works in their care and explicitly acknowledging their own positionality in relation to them. In reality, no curatorial or conservation intervention is neutral or purely objective—and what is interesting about neutrality anyhow?⁹—but the framework of translation might allow for greater breadth and transparency in the interrogation of the principles and assumptions that already

guide our decision making, and so institutionally acknowledge those forces and then reinvent our practices, in ways that are more deeply connected to the artist's work and do justice to it.

To achieve a perfect translation of any kind of creative work, whether visual, sonic or textual, is an impossible activity. As Cynthia Ozik has put it:

any translation, however influential, harbors its own dissolution. Literature endures; translation, itself a branch of literature, decays. This is no enigma. The permanence of a work does not insure the permanence of its translation . . . [which] must inevitably vary with the changing cultural outlook and idiom of each succeeding generation.¹⁰

Taking Ozik's sentiments seriously, at the most basic level, understanding conservation through translation should provide further confidence and willingness to innovate, push boundaries, take risks and experiment, particularly if we are striving to make artworks truly legible to contemporary audiences. If, as Walter Benjamin stated, it is through the process of translation that “the life of the originals attains its latest, continually renewed, and most complete unfolding,”¹¹ then to use the framework of translation, as a theory and a practice, would suggest that cultural workers must interpret not only what originally motivated these works but also explicitly consider and channel the aspects of the work that reverberate most profoundly today.¹² What models of collectivity, attention and action, and what political implications, can be drawn from artworks? What significance might their depiction of everyday politics hold for contemporary viewers? What precisely is happening during translation and what concerns are guiding our translation of these works into the present?

On the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection at MoMA (SFC)

We can trace emerging threads of conservation understood in line with translation through case studies drawn from the MoMA collection and from the SFC. The SFC, curated over a span of thirty years, consists of around 3,000 works, including printed ephemera, drawings, sculptural pieces, photographs and films. In addition, the archival section contains over 4,000 files, featuring items such as artist correspondence, notebooks, scrapbooks and documents, along with photographs linked to Fluxus performances and events.¹³ In 1981, Jon Hendricks, an artist and bookshop owner, was enlisted as curator of the collection by the Silvermans. In part through his connection with Barbara and Peter Moore, renowned chroniclers of Fluxus, Hendricks played a key role in assisting the couple to assemble one of the most comprehensive collections of Fluxus in the world. To ensure the safe changing of hands and stewardship, Hendricks would remain as curator when the SFC was gifted to MoMA.¹⁴ Hendricks not only provided invaluable context for the objects throughout their initial life at MoMA but also helped to steer the collection into the more rigid aspects of the museum's structure.

In the years following, multiple generations of teams have been involved in the complex task of researching and cataloging the works and documents contained within it. The artworks in the collection were placed in the curatorial Department of Drawings and Prints, given the department's historical and sustained engagement with editions and multiples. The documents in the collection were placed in the Archives department. However, even from this initial decision, tremendous complications arose. Making such distinctions between artworks and archival material proved virtually impossible, with decisions feeling provisional and numerous works and materials being ferried back and forth between these departments. This process is still unfolding and may well continue for rest of the collection's institutional life.¹⁵

Dick Higgins: *The Flaming City* (1962)

Fluxus's vast material legacy is disparately scattered within MoMA's various departments and, moreover, beyond the SFC, across multiple institutions, collections and continents. As a result, stewardship of Fluxus demands a highly collaborative institutional approach to the understanding and conservation of this material. A potent example of necessary institutional collaboration is demonstrated by the case of the American artist, composer, poet and co-founder of Fluxus Dick Higgins's *The Flaming City* (Figure 5.1). In the early 1960s, Higgins, among the various forms of art-making he was experimenting with, focused briefly on 16mm filmmaking. This resulted in his only feature-length film, *The Flaming City*, which is now harbored in the SFC. *The Flaming City* was, in Higgins's words, "an anti-semantic love story about a marvelous part of New York City and the people who lived there as the city is destroyed, so are they, except that both are indestructible."¹⁶ Through loose vignettes, the film explores the dichotomy between the lifestyles of Higgins's SoHo friends and his own more well-heeled upbringing. A 2023 loan request prompted the museum to explore *The Flaming City* in more depth and to see what the SFC contained. To date, only minimal work had been completed on the film material in the collection and we soon found out that the collection only contained the camera-original elements of the film, and nothing that looked like the finished film.

Standard practice in film preservation requires the scouring of archives and collections for what elements still exist and, leaning on research and technical know-how, to translate the film from one technology to another, from one medium to another, as best as we can in that present moment. These translations will inevitably age and decay, as the technology and context for the translation recedes into the past and the work needs to be translated again and again, as a form of renewal in the present. The analog film material for *The Flaming City* from the SFC was closely inspected and determined to be the camera originals (Figure 5.2). While there was anecdotal documentation of screenings and receptions, the lack of a completed reference print to guide in the conservation and new presentation of the work was something that would be critical to the translation of the work into the digital format. The analog film material was first scanned to assemble a 2K digital version



Figure 5.1 Dick Higgins, still from *The Flaming City*, 1962, 00:00:30, 16mm, color, sound, 121 minutes. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Gift, 2008.

of the film, which allowed better review and understanding of the film's aesthetics as the search for a suitable reference—the finished film—was conducted. This was especially critical given the fundamentally different medium in which the film was to be translated: digital pixels differ from analog film grain. Moreover, the planned exhibition of *The Flaming City* on a digital LED projection was radically distinct from a film projection on screen, which bounces back images from light transmitted through celluloid. Such transition between media and technologies is a rigorously interpretive process.

In an effort to recontextualize *The Flaming City* in both a new medium and a new context, known film collections were canvassed, including the Filmmaker's Coop, which owns a large number of Higgins's films due to the artist's close association with them in the 1960s. Included in these holdings was a crucial exhibition print of *The Flaming City*, which served as a guide in our project. We digitally scanned the print to compare the color, contrast, duration and audio with the film elements from the SFC. The print exhibited significantly warmer saturation than the original and our goal was to digitally match the tweaks and other adjustments made by Higgins when creating the prints from these original production elements. Using modern digital post-production and coloring grading software, we translated the scans tonally from the originals to the print to approximate the look of the print



Figure 5.2 Dick Higgins, Reel 1, 16mm film case for *The Flaming City*, 1962. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Gift, 2008.

in a digital format. Side-by-side comparison between the two versions ensured that this translation was as faithful as possible. Once finalized, the exhibition file of *The Flaming City* was prepared for loan, and the conservation team began the typical process of documenting the process for future reference. This included recording decisions, cataloging the new material, and securely storing the new digital files.

By bringing together the seemingly disparate elements of *The Flaming City* within the SFC, along with the new scans from the Filmmaker's Coop, the cataloging needed to be adjusted to interconnect these components and present them as a part of a unified work—a new approach for the Department of Drawings and Prints. At MoMA, the medium-specific departments operate according to distinct models and understandings tailored to the works they collect. When these works entered the Department of Drawings and Prints, they were cataloged individually, on a single object basis, with each element assigned its own record and no association between them in the catalog. Like many other museums, MoMA uses “The Museum System” (TMS), a cataloging software for collection management. While this method of cataloging is well suited to static art objects like classical painting and sculpture, it proves inadequate for works that lack a singular “original” object.

In addition to exploring translation as a framework to grapple with these works, the Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records (FRBR), a model familiar to library science, further offers a flexible approach to capturing the similarities and differences between interrelated objects and ideas.¹⁷ The FRBR is a conceptual cataloging model that breaks information down into a hierarchy to facilitate discovery and retrieval. It defines four main entities: Work, Expression, Manifestation and Item. To illustrate this in practice: for *The Flaming City*, the Work encompasses the film in its entirety; the Expression refers to *The Flaming City* as realized through its 2023 conservation treatment (including, among others, the files, software used and editing decisions); the Manifestation represents the 2K digital files produced from the 2023 treatment; and the Item is the 2024 compressed exhibition file played in the gallery. The FRBR model, when applied as a cataloging method, captures relationships, interdependencies and, more importantly, the variables and undefined aspects of a work, enhancing its understanding within the museum’s cataloging system.

Applying this cataloging method to *The Flaming City* enabled the documentation of the work’s overall concept while capturing all the salient details of its manifestations (the 1961–62 versus the 2023 versions) and their constitutive components. This structure allows the work to be captured within the museum’s system in its entirety, emphasizing the concept of the work over its physical components. It foregrounds the work as something that materializes when these components are combined. The components, moreover, can take different forms and arrangements depending on the nature of its materialization. For example, certain components are required if the film appears as an analog film projection, and others are needed in the case of a digital, screen-based display. Within this bibliographic arrangement, future curators and conservators can engage with this work’s concept and its constitutive parts, using this information to determine how to translate it into the future.

The autoethnographic documentation of the museum worker’s various involvements in this translation provides the map for future encounters with the work. Obviously, different technologies require specific knowledge and skills, to understand not only how the technology was used at the time but also to grasp how the artist engaged with it and the context in which it was being deployed. This is where the subjective task of translation becomes fully evident.

The approach taken with *The Flaming City* poses conservation as the translation of disparate but connected materials in the restoration of film works. This invites a reflection on a remark made by Ann Temkin, chief curator of paintings and sculpture at MoMA: “In a museum, it often seems we are dedicated to preserving something larger than individual works of art; we are dedicated to preserving the fiction that works of art are fixed and immortal.”¹⁸ Might we suggest that there is value in re-evaluating the fiction that artworks are fixed and immortal by sharing information on these transformations with the public? Providing access to museum documentation allows critics, artists and art historians new insights into all versions of an artwork and the museum processes that impact them. Critical reviews of artist–museum collaborations can fuel larger public debate on authenticity and

authorship, particularly at a time when contemporary art raises urgent questions about these concepts.¹⁹ To meaningfully explore these concepts, institutions not only need to embrace the friction these debates create within established workflows and methodologies but also need to actively engage in materially realizing these works more frequently. Through acts of performance—where works are interpreted by museum staff, collaborators and the public—their translation becomes tangible. These acts allow institutions to deepen their understanding and develop more effective strategies for conserving them into the future.

Nam June Paik: *Zen for TV* (1963)

Paik's *Zen for TV* and Kubota's *Duchampiana: Nude Descending a Staircase* offer two further examples to examine different aspects of the relation between translation and conservation. Both artworks incorporate cathode ray tube (CRT) monitors and, through their respective use of this technology, allow for conservation's unpacking through translation on different levels.

In the same year that Higgins completed *The Flaming City*, Paik made one of his initial forays into manipulating CRTs, resulting in *Zen for TV* (Figure 5.3). This sculptural work, consisting of an altered black-and-white television set, eschewed notions of fixity and immortality from the very outset. The work premiered alongside twelve other altered CRTs in his groundbreaking 1963 exhibition *Exposition of Music—Electronic Television*, at Galerie Parnass in Wuppertal. The genesis of *Zen for TV* is recorded as stemming from serendipity: Paik had procured second-hand CRTs for the exhibition, with two reportedly damaged during transit.²⁰ When attempting to switch one of these on, he discovered a distorted image: a stream of electrons densely compressed into a thin white line. Embracing this chance occurrence, Paik reoriented the monitor vertically, positioning the controls at the bottom, thereby imbuing television technology with Zen.²¹

While the CRT used in 1963 was lost to time, the SFC holds edition 4/12, represented by two CRT versions, one executed in 1975 and a second in 1981. (This latter version is recorded in the collection's inventory notes as the "exhibition version.") These versions underwent deliberate manipulation by Paik and his collaborators, who manually adjusted the internal electromagnets controlling the path of the electron beam across the screen to manipulate the electrons into *Zen for TV*'s iconic white line. A self-adhesive label attached to the side of the 1981 version carries a handwritten inscription reading "TV Clock." On its glass screen, there is evidence of two different moments of electron manipulation: one diagonal, thus evidencing the CRT's use as part of *TV Clock* (1963), and the subsequent, current line—the vertical Zen line.

A seminal work, *Zen for TV*'s 1981 CRT is frequently requested for exhibition. After a period of prolonged display, however, the CRT was irrevocably altered. A series of exhibition cycles at MoMA caused a loss of phosphorescent paint in the CRT's inner glass surface, where the electrons are focused (a phenomenon commonly referred to as "burn-in"), which created a residual ghost image of the Zen line. This is especially visible when the CRT is switched off. While we understood



Figure 5.3 Nam June Paik, *Zen for TV*, 1963, executed 1981. Altered television set. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Gift, 2008. © 2025 Estate of Nam June Paik. Digital image © 2025 The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo: Peter Butler.

that displaying the CRT would accelerate this otherwise inevitable form of decay, we could not precisely anticipate the pace of change. With further requests for exhibitions, we reached a decisive moment: because of the clear signs of deterioration, as well as the risk that other parts of this CRT could soon fail, we opted to explore alternative avenues of conservation—conservation arguably conceivable as translation—with the aim of extending the work’s capacity to be displayed.

Since its acquisition by MoMA in 2008, *Zen for TV* has undergone a series of conservation campaigns. The phenomenon of burn-in on CRTs is well understood and is exacerbated by the electrons focused into a single line. Different options were considered, as it was not possible to source a monitor equivalent to the 1981 CRT model manufactured by Philips (“Philco”). Consequently, three other vintage CRT models sourced from different manufacturers were purchased in 2010 by Glenn Wharton, then media conservator at MoMA, with the assistance of Chi-Tien Lui, research technician at CTL Electronics Inc., and Raphaele Shirley, art and technology expert. These CRTs shared the same glass screen dimensions as the 1981 Philco version but had very different exterior casings and dials. In 2016, one of the three glass screens closest in size and depth to the 1963 version, also

manufactured by Philips, was prepared with the idea that, in future, the existing glass tube in the Philco might be removed and potentially replaced with one from the CRT purchased by MoMA.

In addition to this planned approach of tube replacement, given the absence of an unequivocal “original” rendition of *Zen for TV*, we contemplated the feasibility of fabricating a new version. Paik himself often sanctioned his works as capable of reconstruction. With explicit reference to MoMA’s edition of *Zen for TV*, one of Paik’s notes from the SFC reads: “4/12 can be done—redone—in any TV set!”²² In the spirit of Paik, then, in 2022 we chose to fabricate our own version, using one of the museum-sourced CRTs that we treated with “flux.” This newly fabricated version might be understood as a translation of the 1981 version: given that the new CRT was not Philco, and thus not strictly “the same” as the 1981 version, the conservation intervention here is fundamentally contingent on, and conditioned by, the contextual affordances of the present.²³

Translation theory might again be invoked to communicate such instances of fabrication to the public. In literary translation and interpretation, a translator’s note is a brief section accompanying the text where the translator directly communicates with the reader. This paratextual element serves to clarify the methods and reasons behind the translation, offering insight into the translation process itself. By openly addressing the reader, the translator makes transparent the intricacies and complexities of bridging languages and cultures in the translated text. In museum conservation, comprehensive documentation detailing the condition and treatment of artworks is typically archived around every new manifestation of the work but is not readily accessible to the public. To address this gap, we envision how a translator’s note could serve as a model for creating publicly available explanations of conservation efforts. For instance, displayed on an extended wall label, it might read as follows:

Nam June Paik
Zen for TV
 1963 (executed 1981, re-executed 2021)
 Altered television set

Zen for TV relies on a mid-twentieth-century television technology known as the cathode ray tube (CRT). The initial version of *Zen for TV* was shown only once, at Paik’s groundbreaking 1963 exhibition *Exposition of Music—Electronic Television*, at Galerie Parnass in Wuppertal, Germany, and was lost to time. Paik subsequently produced multiple versions of *Zen for TV*, ultimately creating an edition of 12 (although the full edition was never realized). This version is edition 4 of 12, created by the artist in 1981.

The television is switched on, powering it with electricity that creates the iconic glowing white line. Yet the act of turning on this altered television over a prolonged period causes deterioration typical of this technology, resulting in a phenomenon known as “burn-in,” which is the delamination of the phosphorescent paint applied to the inner surface of the glass screen.

In MoMA's archives is a handwritten letter by Nam June Paik from the 1980s, stating, “4/12 can be done—redone—in any TV set!” Drawing on the artwork's history and the artist's instructions, curators and conservators at the museum have aimed to prolong its exhibition lifespan by faithfully interpreting Nam June Paik's directives using a different CRT. Unable to locate an exact 1981 Philips “Philco” television—a black-and-white model with a cream plastic exterior—we sourced a Panasonic television from the 1980s. This Panasonic model is similarly black-and-white; its glass screen matches the dimensions and curvature of the Philips Philco model, yet it has a black plastic exterior. Following Paik's instructions, we manipulated an internal working part of the CRT known as the “deflection yoke” to collapse the picture-forming electrons into the iconic single white line and reoriented the television vertically with controls at the bottom for display, as seen here in the gallery. This museum-created version has the following date adjustment: 1963 (executed 1981, re-executed 2021).

This proposed use of a translator's note—or perhaps a “conservator's note” or “ongoing life of an artwork note”—on a gallery wall label would explicitly state the museum's initiative to actively translate the work's resonance into the present. Arguably, this is a logical next step in the autoethnographic approach to stewardship that acknowledges the museum practitioner's role in the change management of an artwork.²⁴

Shigeko Kubota: *Duchampiana: Nude Descending a Staircase* (1976)

Kubota's *Duchampiana: Nude Descending a Staircase* offers an arguably more radical dimension of translation's potential in the conservation context (Figure 5.4). *Duchampiana: Nude Descending a Staircase* (a reference to Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase No.1/No.2* [1911/1912]) is a multimedia sculpture comprising standard-definition video sequences of a naked woman ascending and descending a staircase crafted by so-called Fluxus impresario George Maciunas, displayed on four CRTs. These CRTs are integrated into another staircase made of plywood. Upon acquisition by MoMA in 1981, Kubota contributed a set of four Sony CRTs for exhibition and four Samsung CRTs intended as back-ups, none of which, notably, were used in the work's first manifestation in 1976.²⁵

For the 2021 exhibition *Shigeko Kubota: Liquid Reality* at MoMA, the four Sony CRTs supplied by the artist were used for *Duchampiana*'s construction. This was in line with the curatorial desire to exhibit this work, along with other works by Kubota, using as close to the original display technology as possible. Yet an even more radical conservation intervention might be proposed, in line with translation's provocative critique of the original. (As Bernofsky puts it, for example, “the worst thing that can happen to a translation is somebody thinking, . . . I have to represent exactly what is going on in the original, no matter what.”)²⁶ In a 2008 interview, Kubota revealed her openness to the possibility of transitioning *Duchampiana* away from CRT technology altogether, citing the arrival of the digital era: “You



Figure 5.4 Shigeko Kubota, *Duchampiana: Nude Descending a Staircase*, 1976. Standard-definition video and Super 8mm film transferred to video (color, silent; 5:21 minutes), four cathode-ray tube monitors, and plywood. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Margot and John Ernst, Agnes Gund, and Barbara Pine, 1981. © 2025 Estate of Shigeko Kubota/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. Digital Image © 2025 The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo: Thomas Griesel.

have to change because it's not my history of machines. Analog is soon over, and now gone; so, you know all digital now."²⁷ Kubota's proposed transition suggests a departure from CRT's historical significance in *Duchampiana*, permitting exploration of alternative display technologies for the work, while actively transforming the work's constitutive elements in line with contemporary means.

Duchampiana's transition from analog to digital technology might be necessary for the work's survival. As can also be said of Paik's *Zen for TV*, while the current stockpile of CRTs may suffice in the short term, their inevitable degradation, as well as the scarcity of their production, demands ongoing evaluation of *Duchampiana*, *Zen for TV* and similar works' translatability and adaptability to evolving display technologies. Might future conservators see boundless possibilities for future translations of *Duchampiana*, always shifting in line with contemporary technologies? Or will future conservators impose limits on *Zen for TV*'s technological transition when CRTs are no longer viable, ultimately leaving the work to decompose, with only remnants of

its versions and the documentation standing in for the artwork? Returning to Ozick’s point that future generations will bring their own cultural contexts to a translation, we imagine the same for future conservators, curators and other museum workers, who will continue to interpret and balance not only what originally motivated these works but also aspects of them that most resonate in the present. In light of this, might we embrace making explicit the active interpretive work of translation, that is, treatment and display decisions, by visibly confronting the notion that works are fixed and immortal, and committing fully to our role as stewards of objects and ideas?

By way of conclusion

A recent and prominent example of an allographic artwork concerning the experimental composer John Cage, a critical figure in Fluxus’s pre-history, serves to illuminate the urgency and stakes of this inquiry. In April of 2024, John McWhorter, a professor at Columbia University in New York, published an op-ed for the *New York Times*. In it, he recounts events that occurred in one of his classes:

Last Thursday [April 18, 2024], in the music humanities class I teach . . . two students were giving an in-class presentation on the composer John Cage. His most famous piece is “4’33”,” which directs us to listen in silence to the surrounding noise for exactly that period of time. I had to tell the students we could not listen to that piece that afternoon, because the surrounding noise would have been not birds or people walking by in the hallway, but infuriated chanting from protestors outside the building.²⁸

Here, McWhorter is referring to the sound of students at the Gaza Solidarity Encampment taking place at the university.²⁹ The anecdote is a powerful one, conveying the deeply negative interference of conservatism on engagements with experimental art, a political dynamic not uncommon across institutions. It represents not only a frustrating missed opportunity to explore the fundamentally radical and endlessly exciting promises of indeterminacy in composition but is also a patently incorrect reading of the work. For Cage, *4’33”* was about hearing *all* sounds in the audience’s surroundings, no matter their form or content. It is this kind of conservatism that must be accounted for and counteracted as part of the work of conservation and cultural work more broadly—translation, in its allowing for multiple possibilities of a given work to flourish and, moreover, its emphasis on transparency, arguably lays the foundation to do so.

Notes

- 1 George Maciunas, “Fluxmanifesto on Fluxamusement,” in *Fluxus etc./Addenda II: The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection*, ed. Jon Hendricks (Pasadena: California Institute of Technology and Baxter Art Gallery, 1983 [1965]), 8.
- 2 Natilee Harren, “The Crux of Fluxus: Intermedia, Rear-guard,” in *Art Expanded, 1958–1978*, eds. Eric Crosby and Liz Glass (Minneapolis: Walker Arts Center, 2015), <https://walkerart.org/collections/publications/art-expanded/crux-of-fluxus/>.

- 3 Paul Eggert, *Securing the Past: Conservation in Art, Architecture, and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 86; Zoë Miller, “Practitioner (In)visibility in the Conservation of Contemporary Art,” *Journal of the Institute of Conservation* 60, nos. 2–3 (2021): 197–209.
- 4 American Institute for Conservation, “Our Code of Ethics,” last modified August 1994, <https://www.culturalheritage.org/about-conservation/code-of-ethics>.
- 5 Jonathan Ashley-Smith, “A Role for Bespoke Codes of Ethics,” in *ICOM-CC 18th Triennial Conference Preprints, Copenhagen, 4–8 September 2017*, ed. Janet Bridgland, art. 1901. (Paris: International Council of Museums, 2017).
- 6 Glenn Wharton, “Bespoke Ethics and Moral Casuistry in the Conservation of Contemporary Art,” *Journal of the Institute of Conservation* 41, no. 1 (2018): 58–70, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19455224.2017.1417141>.
- 7 Clark Allen, “You Are the Conduit to the Book: An Interview with Translator Susan Bernofsky,” *Antenna: New Orleans, Room 220*, <https://www.antenna.works/you-are-the-conduit-to-the-book-an-interview-with-translator-susan-bernofsky/>.
- 8 Allen, “You Are the Conduit to the Book.”
- 9 Steven Rendall, “The Translator’s Task,” *TTR: Traduction, Terminologie, Rédaction* 10, no. 2 (1997): 151–65, <https://doi.org/10.7202/037302ar>.
- 10 Cynthia Ozick, “The Impossibility of Translating Franz Kafka,” *The New Yorker*, January 3, 1999.
- 11 Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Vol. I. 1913–1926, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 255.
- 12 Rendall, “The Translator’s Task.”
- 13 The Museum of Modern Art, “The Museum of Modern Art Acquires the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection of Fluxus Art,” Museum of Modern Art press release, February 13, 2009.
- 14 Jon Hendricks and Kim Conaty, “‘By the Way, What’s Fluxus?’: Jon Hendricks on the Formation of the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection,” POST: Notes on Art in a Global Context, Museum of Modern Art, November 13, 2015, <https://post.moma.org/by-the-way-whats-fluxus-jon-hendricks-on-the-formation-of-the-gilbert-and-lila-silverman-fluxus-collection/>.
- 15 On this issue, see, among others, Julia Pelta Feldman, “Perpetual Fluxfest: Distinguishing Artists’ Records from Artworks in the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Archives,” in *Artists’ Records in the Archives: Symposium Proceedings*, eds. Rachel Chatalbash et al. (New York: Archivists Round Table of Metropolitan New York, Inc., 2011), 31–34.
- 16 “Filmmaker’s Coop Catalogue,” Dick Higgins, *The Flaming City*, <https://film-makerscoop.com/catalogue/dick-higgins-flaming-city-the>.
- 17 “Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records,” Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Functional_Requirements_for_Bibliographic_Records.
- 18 Ann Temkin, “Strange Fruit,” In *Mortality Immortality? The Legacy of 20th-Century Art*, ed. Miguel Angel Corzo (Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute, 1999), 45.
- 19 Glenn Wharton, “Reconfiguring Contemporary Art in the Museum,” in *Authenticity in Transition: Changing Practices in Art Making and Conservation*, ed. Erna Hermens (London: Archetype Publications, 2017), 27.
- 20 Sook-Kyung Lee and Rudolf Frieling, *Nam June Paik* (London: Tate, 2019), 23.
- 21 For a discussion of *Zen for TV* in the context of conservation, see, for instance, Christine Frohnert, “The Conservation of Historic Cathode Ray Tube-based Artworks from the 1960s,” *Electronic Media Review* 2 (2011–12), <https://resources.culturalheritage.org/emg-review/volume-two-2011-2012/the-conservation-of-historic-cathode-ray-tube-based-artworks-from-the-1960s/>; Hanna B. Hölling, *Paik’s Virtual Archive: Time, Change, and Materiality in Media Art* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 33, 45, 71, 78–81.

- 22 Nam June Paik, “Zen for TV (Notes),” in *Fluxus etc./Addenda II: The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection*, ed. Jon Hendricks (Pasadena: California Institute of Technology and Baxter Art Gallery, 1983), 287.
- 23 The 1981 version remained in storage. Both thus physically coexisted, but only one was on display in the museum galleries at any given time.
- 24 Sanneke Stigter, “Autoethnography as a New Approach in Conservation,” *Studies in Conservation* 61, sup2 (2016): 227–32.
- 25 Interestingly, these Sony and Samsung sets were previously used in the first instances of Paik’s *TV Garden* (1974) and *TV Bed* (1972) installations.
- 26 Campbell Campbell and Molly Wagschal, “Turn Up the Volume: An Interview with Susan Bernofsky,” *Interviews: Columbia Journal of Literary Criticism* (blog), <https://c-j-l-c.org/portfolio/turn-up-the-volume-an-interview-with-susan-bernofsky/>.
- 27 Barbara London and Glenn Wharton, unpublished interview with Shigeko Kubota on *Duchampiana: Nude Descending a Staircase*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2008.
- 28 John McWhorter, “The Columbia Protests Made the Same Mistake the Civil Rights Movement Did,” *The New York Times*, May 3, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/23/opinion/columbia-protests-israel.html>.
- 29 The Spring 2024 protests on campuses at universities across the United States are part of a broad wave of activism and political engagement in response to US Foreign Policy toward the Israel–Palestine Conflict, which escalated in late 2023.

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II

Multiplication and reinterpretation

The many lives of Fluxus art



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6 Daniel Spoerri's logic of the multiple and the continuum of active matter

Josephine Ellis

Prelude: a paradox of preservation

In a short essay first published in 1967, the distinguished art critic John Berger noted a paradox inherent in the preservation of artists' multiples. "It [the multiple]," Berger argued, "does not even have a proper state in which it can be preserved: it is constantly open to change and alteration. Like a toy it wears out."¹ Importantly, Berger wrote with a particular kind of multiple in mind: those designed to move by means of the "optical or mechanical, planned or haphazard."² For Berger, such multiples seemed to expose the limitations of conservation practice, at least as conservation has traditionally—if all too narrowly—been understood: that is, as primarily a form of "mimeographic labor," or the effort of keeping artworks "the same."³ Taking up Berger's line of thought, this chapter aims to unpack the following questions: If an artwork is characterized by an innate propensity to transform, how might its "proper" state of preservation be identified—if, indeed, such a state can be said to exist at all? If the notion of an artwork's proper state departs from an ideal of material stasis, what conceptual shifts might follow if conservation departed instead from a condition of transformation? And what does it mean for an artwork to transform, particularly in light of what Peter Miller has recently described as the "pervasive activity of matter"?⁴

Viewed in the context of contemporary art conservation discourses, Berger's brief foray into preservation strikes a prescient thematic chord with recent theoretical approaches accounting for artworks since the 1960s that recur in multiple "equally genuine instances," as put by Brian Castriota (quoting the philosopher Nelson Goodman).⁵ Drawing on analytic philosophy and philosophies of music in particular, these approaches expose the outmoded assumptions of traditional conservation thinking centered on the privileging of material fixity and stasis, in particular the assumption that artworks are anchored in, and therefore should be preserved as, a singular moment in time. The persistence of time-based media installations has provided a compelling case in point: an installation's so-called work-defining properties are often subject to reinterpretation and negotiation with each exhibition.⁶ These dynamics demonstrate the fundamentally interpretive and contingent nature of conservation decisions, affirming Vivian van Saaze's observation that the "proper" state of artworks is not an intrinsic condition but one

that is “preferred” and “enacted.”⁷ Challenging the supposition that conservation is anathema to change, the survival of time-based media installations demonstrates that, to the contrary, change is often a necessary condition of survival.⁸

In what follows, I take Berger’s invocation of movement as a starting point for a more materially grounded line of inquiry into the multiplicity of artworks. While Berger’s essay is primarily concerned with works most readily associated with “kinetic art,” I suggest that any consideration of what it means for an artwork to move today cannot be separated from the recognition that matter itself is characterized by intrinsic activity—and, in this sense, by transformative processes that are self-generated. An increasing number of scholars have emphasized that the dominant tendency to disregard the active nature of matter, a disposition rooted in the foundational assumptions of Western thought, carries significant political implications in a post-anthropocentric age. There is now an imperative to rethink the foundations of human exceptionalism and to critically acknowledge the efficacy of nonhuman actants in configuring the material world, including the materials that constitute artworks and artifacts, which perform in ways that cannot be reduced to human intention alone.⁹ Within this context, Berger’s reflections on the movement and transformation of artworks take on renewed significance: if all matter exists in perpetual motion, any artwork composed of material substances necessarily changes over time. Might we then ask if all such artworks—whether “old” or “new”—lack, at their crux, a definitive state of preservation?¹⁰ In this sense, would not all material preservation be paradoxical?

Multiplicity as material condition

My intervention here is to gradually unpack the proposition that multiplicity is an inherent material condition of artworks, unfolding over time through vibrant processes such as decay and degradation. To do so, I begin by turning to the idea of the multiple as it first emerged at the end of the 1950s. More specifically, I focus on Daniel Spoerri’s Edition MAT (Multiplication d’Art Transformables), established in 1959. This was arguably the first concerted attempt to build something of a concrete infrastructure around the production and dissemination of multiples—the “multiple” in the postwar period being largely, if ambivalently, understood in opposition to the singular art object, often appearing as three-dimensional forms promised in considerable or unlimited quantities.¹¹ Though not mentioned by name, Berger was likely thinking of the MAT multiples when addressing the challenges of preservation. One of the defining features of the Edition MAT’s inaugural collection—subsequently followed by two more in 1964 and 1965—was its explicit thematization of movement: optical and mechanical, in the very terms Berger describes, as well as participatory and interactive.

For Spoerri, movement was also more than a theme: it was a prerequisite. Central to his logic of the multiple, movement—and the transformations it enabled—was the very condition that made an artwork eligible for multiplication, since such works, conceived in and through change, eluded any single, fixed state. His musings on what makes a multiple *a multiple*, on the one hand, and, on the other, what

it means to multiply, reveal a surprising theoretical dexterity. These insights point to another dimension of Spoerri's thinking on multiplication that has often been acknowledged but rarely examined in depth: an understanding of the multiple that extends beyond its usual framing as a strategy for democratizing art consumption and expanding the art market (though these aims remained significant). More fundamentally, as this chapter argues, Spoerri was concerned with the conceptual stakes of multiplication itself, specifically its capacity to enact the conditions of movement integral to the very conception of the artwork being multiplied.

Certainly, it would be inaccurate to categorize the Edition MAT as (or to conflate it with) a Fluxus initiative—though, as I briefly note, Spoerri did at times produce MAT multiples in collaboration with Fluxus affiliates, some of whom he had known well before their involvement with Fluxus. Chronologically speaking, Fluxus's canonical public debut in Wiesbaden—the opening event of the touring Fluxus festivals, widely regarded as marking Fluxus's formal beginnings—did not take place until 1962, three years after the Edition MAT had first been set in motion. It would be a further six years after 1959, from 1965 onward, before George Maciunas, Fluxus's self-styled “chairman,” fully dedicated himself to the production and publication of Fluxus multiples.¹² Yet it also cannot be overlooked that both multiplication initiatives emerged within the same cultural milieu, linked in particular by a shared sensitivity to an emergent temporal consciousness that, from an ontological standpoint, displaced the notion of the artwork as materially and semantically fixed through static objecthood, privileging instead processes of transformation and becoming.¹³ If movement played a distinctive role in Spoerri's approach to the MAT multiples, within the Fluxus context, Maciunas established his own conditions for continuous change. Fluxus editions frequently appeared with altered components, characterized by what Natilee Harren describes as an “errant allographism,” that underpinned the sanctioned slippage of works across their own iterations. Such variability was conducive to Maciunas's rejection of the regulatory standardization that underwrote the multiple's value, authenticity and increasing embrace by the art world.¹⁴

It is important to clarify that this chapter does not undertake a comprehensive historical or theoretical comparison of Spoerri's and Maciunas's approaches to multiplication, nor of the MAT and Fluxus multiples themselves, though these topics have been addressed by Fluxus scholars elsewhere.¹⁵ Rather, by probing Spoerri's logic of the multiple, I aim to expand upon his proposition that transformation is a fundamental condition of multiplicity, using this as an invitation to rethink the materiality of artworks more broadly and ultimately reach beyond both MAT and Fluxus multiples, as well as the postwar phenomenon of “the multiple” itself.

If, for example, a classical oil painting undergoes transformation at the granular level of its material, might it not also possess an inherent multiplicity, as its material states continuously unfold over time through inevitable decay and degradation? Can even the deep-rooted belief in a painting's singular and fixed condition, then, be fundamentally complicated by embracing the physical reality of its material becoming? And if so, does this not significantly broaden the understanding of what

can be considered a multiple—and, by extension, of what might hypothetically be multiplied? Though perhaps not yet present in the 1959 MAT collection, Spoerri, best known for his pioneering engagement with food as artistic material, would soon begin to experiment explicitly with decaying organic materials, foregrounding the processes of change within artworks to a still more radical extent. Food would, in fact, eventually become Spoerri's material of choice for multiplication, precisely because of its susceptibility to deterioration. Nevertheless, I suggest that material transformation, such as decay, not only finds a resonant space within Spoerri's logic of the multiple as it emerged through MAT's early articulation, but moreover, that it also extends it. Even when decay is neither deliberately embraced nor foregrounded in artistic practice, transformation inevitably unfolds within all materials, including those typically perceived as stable or inert.

In this vein, I propose that, regardless of form or substance, all materially constituted artworks exist along a continuum of active matter. This realization prompts the need for a new culture of the material in conservation, in which the very concept of the "material" and its value is not, or is not only, grounded in material authenticity, nor bound to the assumption that objects convey objective and enduring truths. To begin outlining this culture, I turn to philosopher Gilbert Simondon (1924–89) and his concept of individuation, which offers a foundational rethinking of how matter and form co-emerge through dynamic processes of becoming. Drawing on Simondon—and on contemporary theorists who extend his work—I propose a culture of the material that understands matter not as inert substance, but as energetically charged, relational and active. To conclude, I examine the theoretical implications of taking active, rather than passive, matter as a starting point for understanding activation. Reconsidering the notion of "activation" from its dominant usage in current conservation discourse, I suggest it be understood not as the external animation of an otherwise deadened object, but as an avowal and cultivation of matter's intrinsic activity as a vibrant process already underway. From this perspective, conservation may be conceptualized as an intervention within the continuum of active matter that seeks to determine, to varying degrees, the course and extent of material transformation.

Spoerri's logic of the multiple: The Edition MAT

The static objective work permits only quantitative multiplication of the fixed idea present within the model; even if it was widely disseminated, multiplication would not add anything to it. For the animated work, either by itself or through the interaction of the viewer-collaborator, multiplication is a justice done to the infinite possibilities of transformation.¹⁶

With these words, Daniel Spoerri opens the Edition MAT's first hybrid sales/exhibition catalog, published for MAT's debut at the Galerie Edouard Loeb in Paris in November 1959. This event marked the first of a six-month tour of exhibitions promoting the multiples across Europe. (In addition to Paris, exhibitions would also be held in Milan, London, Newcastle, Stockholm, Krefeld and Zurich.) The

catalog advertised multiples by, among others, Jean Tinguely, Marcel Duchamp, Victor Vasarely and Dieter Roth, to be sold in editions of 100 and uniformly priced at the modern-day equivalent of roughly 30 euros. Each multiple took the form of a portable three-dimensional object and exhibited one of three types of movement. There were mechanized works such as Tinguely's *Constante indéterminée*, a rattling, motor-powered machine that frenetically whirred and whizzed. Duchamp's *Rotoreliefs*, composed of rotating spiral discs, similarly employed mechanization, but effected a far subtler degree of movement. Forgoing the motor altogether, Vasarely's *Keiho* and *Markab* achieved movement through optical illusion, while Roth's *Book AA* redirected attention from vision to touch as a set of loose cardboard sheets, reconfigurable by the viewer to create new and shifting aesthetic compositions. In each case, movement—whether mechanical, optical or rooted in tactile encounter—meant that, for Spoerri, reproducing an artwork as a multiple offered the “means of multiplication it deserves.”¹⁷

Not yet identifying as a visual artist, but with a background in dance and theater, Spoerri assumed a largely editorial role in the Edition MAT, similar to his work for the concrete poetry journal *Material* (1958–60), which he co-founded with Claus Bremer, artistic director of the Staatstheater in Darmstadt. This involvement with concrete poetry led Spoerri to connect with Emmett Williams in the late 1950s, with whom he collaborated within the Darmstadt circle of concrete poetry, prior to their affiliation with Fluxus, and later again for the 1965 collection of the Edition MAT, alongside George Brecht and Robert Filliou. (Spoerri even imagined a further, musically themed collection of the Edition MAT with the “Fluxus people,” including Joe Jones and Nam June Paik, which never materialized.)¹⁸ While he later outsourced the fabrication and publication of the multiples to Galerie Der Spiegel in Cologne, it was largely Spoerri who, for MAT's 1959 collection, selected and commissioned the artworks to be multiplied, hand-assembled the multiples and oversaw their advertising, sale and distribution. But beyond these tasks, Spoerri's most fascinating intervention was his underlying logic of multiplication, which determined what should—and what should not—be multiplied. This logic, conceptually rooted in movement, struck an additional biographical chord. Before his training in classical ballet, Spoerri was, first and foremost, a child refugee of war, an experience that arguably instilled in him an early sense of nomadism. This sensibility perhaps helps explain his fluid navigation of what are typically regarded as distinct neo-avant-garde circles, without ever declaring absolute allegiance to any single one. In addition to his Fluxus entanglements from 1962 onward—beginning with his involvement in the “Festival of Misfits” in London, a continuation of the European Fluxus festivals—Spoerri most notably also took part in the activities of Group ZERO as it emerged in Düsseldorf in the late 1950s, before going on to become one of the founding members of the Paris-based ensemble of Nouveau Réalisme in 1960.

Understanding why and how movement functions as a unifying principle across the first collection of MAT multiples is essential to grasping Spoerri's approach to multiplication. In his highly revealing opening statements to the 1959 catalog, Spoerri distinguished his project from “classical” modes of reproduction, including lithography and bronze casting, arguing that, for reproduction to have a meaningful

effect, it must align with an artwork's own mode of operation.¹⁹ Establishing a dichotomy between the "static" and "animated" work of art—a distinction I will later complicate—Spoerri asserted that only animated artworks are enriched by multiplication, as they already contain "infinite possibilities of transformation" within themselves.²⁰ Seen in this way, movement was more than a mere formal or aesthetic device; it was considered an ontological condition fundamental to the very nature of an artwork's existence. Because movement ensures transformation, and transformation animates, artworks imbued with motion are especially suited to multiplication.

Movement also served as a means of incorporating the viewer into the work of art. At times, Spoerri even positioned viewer participation as the principal agent of an artwork's transformations. Roth's *Book AA* demanded participatory involvement most overtly, but the shifting patterns of Vasarely's optical illusions depended on active looking, while the mechanized multiples required, at the very least, that the motor be switched on. Where Spoerri writes in relation to the MAT multiples that an artwork is guaranteed to transform because it is subject to the "whims, mood, and personality" of what he calls the "viewer-collaborator," this reads as remarkably anticipatory of later theorizations surrounding the transformation of Fluxus objects and performances.²¹ I am thinking here of Owen F. Smith's influential notion of the "non-hierarchical density of experience," which Hannah B Higgins elaborates in *Fluxus Experience* (2002) in relation to the Fluxkits and other Fluxus forms.²² The Fluxkit as a work of art exists in and through participatory, multisensory engagement. Since no single experience constitutes the work *par excellence*, it resists any privileged or fixed state of being.²³ Similarly, for Spoerri, viewer participation liberates the artwork from conformity to a singular moment in space and time—not least its initial point of conception—allowing multiplication to facilitate the work's re-emergence in new spatiotemporal contexts, reconstituted with each new engagement.

This spatiotemporal fluidity marks another important distinction between static and animated artworks. As Spoerri put it, the reproduction of static artworks "feels questionable," and questionable because, he continues, the "vitality" of a static work is only ever "truly present when it first comes into being."²⁴ Writing in 1960 for the Munich-based student journal *Nota*, Spoerri clarifies the importance of an artwork's capacity to move through space and time:

When an image is in change, whether due to actual or merely apparent motion, it enters into an ongoing state of transformation, making it endlessly new and different. Because it is created through movement, multiplication can happen at any moment, as it is always changing and renewing itself over time.²⁵

Here, Spoerri appears to be suggesting that because animated artworks are already in the process of becoming "endlessly new and different," multiplication offers another means by which the work might continually transform. To make another multiple is itself a type of movement for an artwork to undergo, and another means through which the work can move across space and time. Spatiality, temporality

and multiplicity operate here in tandem: Spoerri's proposition that an artwork is "always changing and renewing itself over time" suggests that, even prior to reproduction, the animated work possesses an internal capacity for self-multiplication. This internal capacity is not entirely self-sufficient. The multiples still require a degree of "activation," as it were, to initiate an artwork's movements and, in turn, its transformation. Even so, by Spoerri's logic, this constitutive element of transformation entails a fragmentation of an artwork into successive states that cumulatively sustain an enduring condition of change—of which the new multiple is simply the latest momentary state or instantiation of the work. Each act of multiplication extends the artwork's ongoing becoming—its becoming multiple in itself—and affirms that the multiple remains perpetually open and unfinished, suspended in a protracted state of creation.

In practice, however, the editioning of the MAT multiples in limited numbers may have curtailed the hypothetical potential for spontaneous proliferation, that is, the very possibility that "multiplication can happen at any moment."²⁶ This strategy is symptomatic of what Erika Balsom has described as "the artificial imposition of scarcity," a common market-oriented tactic used to increase an artwork's desirability and exchange value.²⁷ (By contrast, Fluxus object production notably resisted this commercial orientation: Maciunas, for instance, often celebrated the essential worthlessness of Fluxus things to critique the artwork-as-commodity, and was in ways thus more radical than Spoerri.)²⁸ To fully honor what Spoerri calls an artwork's "intrinsic potential"—a potential from which multiplication emerges—would be to permit an open-ended number of multiples to proliferate, in line with Spoerri's more philosophical reflections on an artwork's boundless possibilities for change.²⁹

On internal multiplicities and decay

The idea that artworks might multiply from within themselves (even if partially dependent on the viewer) deserves careful examination to understand how the multiples unfold continuously across space and time, perhaps most powerfully visualized in Spoerri's artistic contribution to the Edition MAT. It was not until the project's second installment in 1964 that he presented his own realization of a multipliable work of art. A photograph shows Spoerri standing in front of *Spiegelobjekt*, a mixed-media collage of everyday knick-knacks—including kitchen utensils and children's toys—affixed to two mirrors, hinged together and propped open like a book. The glimpse of Spoerri's back reflected in one of the mirrors quite literally *mirrors* the immersion of a viewer whose presence is folded into the artwork itself, obscuring the boundary between observer and observed (Figure 6.1). The work functions as a *mise en abyme* of sorts: the objects caught between the mirrored panels appear endlessly multiplied, their reflections reverberating between the two surfaces in a recursive play of things that gestures toward an imagined infinity. This effect gives palpable expression to the inherent multiplicity residing in a singular artwork. Each reflection stands in as a new state of the same work, intensified by the viewer's ability to adjust the angle of the mirrors, which alters the way the objects are reflected and subsequently multiplied anew.



Figure 6.1 Portrait of Daniel Spoerri, c. 1964. Swiss National Library, Prints and Drawings Department: Daniel Spoerri archives. © 2025, ProLitteris, Zurich.

The conception of multiplicity as the dynamic unfolding of an artwork's transformations finds its conceptual origins in two of Spoerri's earlier series of works, alongside the Edition MAT, conceived in the Hôtel Carcassonne: the *Multiplicateurs d'Art* and *Tableaux Pièges*. *Spiegelobjekt* can be regarded as a later iteration of the *Multiplicateurs* under a different title. Appearing as early as 1962, Spoerri described the *Multiplicateurs* as a fusion of chance and creation: the objects glued to the mirrors constitute a "chance situation," randomly collated and positioned rather than deliberately arranged (Figure 6.2).³⁰ In a similar and anticipatory vein, the *Tableaux Pièges*, the earliest examples of which date to 1960, are likewise generated through chance, comprising ensnared tabletops rather than the mirrors used as surfaces in *Spiegelobjekt* and the *Multiplicateurs d'Art*. Often, the *Tableaux Pièges* preserved the remnants of meals, including dirty plates with leftover food, cigarette butts and loaves of bread (Figure 6.3).³¹ Importantly, though assembled from the residue of chance events, the *Tableaux Pièges* are not fixed records of a past moment, but, having emerged through chance, continue to evolve as chance situations in their own right. As Spoerri explains: "Working with chance situations implies the acceptance of chance as a collaborator after the initial result has been achieved of transformations due to time, weather, corrosion, dirt."³² In a well-known anecdote, frequently recounted by Spoerri, his embrace of chance was dramatically put to the test when rats ravaged two of his *Tableaux Pièges* stored at the Galleria Schwarz in Milan. When the gallerist Arturo Schwarz asked Spoerri to replace the rat-eaten parts, Spoerri refused and provocatively declared: "Doing without conservation involves overthrowing taboos."³³



Figure 6.2 Daniel Spoerri, *Multiplicateur d'art*, 1962. © Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI, Dist. GrandPalaisRmn/Philippe Migeat/Christian Bahier. © 2025, ProLitteris, Zurich.

Such potent statements appeared to inform the later conservation of the *Tableaux Pièges*. Among the files of Jon Hendricks, the curator of the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, is a transcript of the presentation “Food Art Beyond its Expiry Date,” given by Barbara Otterbeck, then-conservator at the Archiv Sohm, at the conference *From Marble to Chocolate: The Conservation of Modern Sculpture*, held at the Tate Gallery in 1995. In light of Spoerri’s framing of chance as his collaborator, Otterbeck questions the impulse to save bits of bread from ravenous bread beetles and to consolidate the now crumbling substance, which had, by then, partially turned to dust.³⁴ Read through this tension, the *Tableaux Pièges* aestheticize the paradox of preservation highlighted by John Berger: the attempt to trap and immortalize an otherwise fleeting moment—and the ultimate impossibility of doing so. For Spoerri, the *Tableau Piège* deliberately confronts the dynamic between the transient nature of material things and human attempts to permanently trap—as in preserve—they. Later recalling an epiphany he had on an airplane, Spoerri noticed that, though racing at some 800 or 900 kilometers per hour through the sky, everything on Earth appeared still. “Then I realized,” Spoerri continues, “that movement also includes standstill. Namely, the standstill of situations that are otherwise already moving.”³⁵ This nuanced conception of movement—not only as overt motion but also as subtle and at times



Figure 6.3 Various *Tableaux Piegès* on the walls of room no. 13, l'Hôtel Carcassonne, c. 1962. Swiss National Library, Prints and Drawings Department: Daniel Spoerri archives. Courtesy Vera Mercer.

imperceptible—invokes the gradual, easily overlooked transformations of matter underlying material processes such as decay and degradation. Working with materials, whether as an artist or a conservator, is itself a chance situation: the activity of matter and its impact on material properties can be unpredictable and difficult to control.³⁶

Spoerri's understanding of movement, however, did not always extend to processes of decay. In the 1959 collection of the Edition MAT, for instance, material transformation was not explicitly recognized as one of an artwork's three modes of movement. Furthermore, as I discuss in the following section, the inevitability of decay complicates—even collapses—Spoerri's binary between static and animated artworks. The possibility of material transformation appears more directly in Spoerri's contribution of *Abfall im Brotteig* to the Edition MAT's 1965 collection, which involved waste baked into bread dough (Figure 6.4). These bread dough multiples anticipate Spoerri's later multiplication initiative under the rubric of the Eat Art Galerie in Düsseldorf, which opened in 1970 above the Restaurant Spoerri, established two years prior. The Eat Art multiples, featuring contributions throughout the decade such as Joseph Beuys's fried fishbones and George Brecht's liquorice portraits, knowingly engaged perishable materials, offering one of the most potent challenges to conventional ideas of permanence in art of Spoerri's

generation.³⁷ Certainly, Spoerri's growing interest in food throughout the 1960s was partly because, as he recognized, "the edible is the most changeable thing there is."³⁸



Figure 6.4 Daniel Spoerri, *Abfall im Brotteig*, 1965. Swiss National Library, Prints and Drawings Department: Daniel Spoerri archives. © 2025, ProLitteris, Zurich.

Spoerri's turn to food as material for his multiples draws upon, but also intensifies, his earlier logic of the multiple, premised on an artwork's capacity for movement. As organic matter, food renders an artwork's transformations almost immediately visible—arguably making it the most “moveable” of materials—but in doing so, it exaggerates the slower, subtler processes that all matter enacts over time. A closer look at *Spiegelobjekt*, for instance—this particular instance of which shows clear signs of desilvering or “mirror rot”—exposes the changeability of what is only ostensibly unchangeable matter (Figure 6.2). On one level, this decay acts as a reminder of the more autonomous vitality of an artwork's material substrate. On another, it unveils a mode of self-multiplication unfolding at a granular scale, beyond the artist's immediate intention or the viewer's initial perception: the work multiplies internally and in itself, not only through the reflected objects or the viewer's manipulation of the mirrors but also through its own process of decay and degradation.

The continuum of active matter

With the vibrant activity—and thus movements—of matter in mind, Spoerri's dichotomy between static and animate works of art, as articulated in relation to the 1959 collection of the Edition MAT, becomes increasingly untenable: arguably, no artwork can ever be truly inert. Even if not programmed to move by an artist, the artwork—by virtue of its constituent materials—undergoes change at the level of matter. For instance, Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (c. 1503–6), by no means animate according to Spoerri's criteria, can nevertheless be said to move in terms of the ongoing chemical interactions between its layers of paint, varnish and binding agents, its poplar wood panel and the surrounding environment. Movement manifests most potently here as craquelure, an intricate network of cracks that develops on a painting's surface as the aging paint contracts and pulls apart over time. In fact, the *Mona Lisa*'s craquelure is reportedly so extensive that the panel has been at risk of splitting for at least two centuries.³⁹ In addition to craquelure, a painting may also demonstrate material transformation through phenomena such as flaking, blistering and discoloration, among others. These relatively slow yet persistent processes attest to the extent to which so-called static artworks are never completely at rest, despite the stabilizing efforts of classical conservation practices.⁴⁰ Accordingly, it becomes more accurate to understand the key distinction between static and animate artworks not as an absolute and binary difference in kind, but as a difference defined by degrees and types of animacy. Both the *Mona Lisa* and Duchamp's *Rotoreliefs* (and, to further contribute to this mix, Beuys's fried fishbones), for example, can be understood as animate—albeit to differing extents and intensities.

Of course, at their most elemental, the MAT multiples, like oil paintings, are likewise aggregations of matter. Thus, beyond movement by means of mechanization, optical illusion and tactile interaction, the MAT multiples must also transform along the axis of material decay. Upon observing Soto's multiples housed in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, librarian and archivist Friedrich Tietjen notably

draws attention to their corroded metal fittings.⁴¹ In keeping with this attention to corroding metals, it should perhaps come as little surprise to stumble across a deteriorating *Constante indéterminée*—Tinguely is, after all, best known for repurposing rusty scrap metals into self-devouring structures. One especially disheveled instance of *Constante indéterminée*, sold at auction in 2019, shows its metal support structure mangled and bent out of shape, its black paint peeling and the surface visibly mottled by oxidation.⁴² Certainly, movement—especially mechanized movements as pronounced as *Constante indéterminée*'s—accelerate the pace of decay, a paradox conservators of kinetic art have grappled with for decades.⁴³ Yet it also holds true that decay eventually sets in with or without, say, the assistance of a motor. Even the optical illusion wears out in the end. Consider Vasarely's compositions: although, as optical illusions, Vasarely's works do not physically move at surface level, conservation reports have shed light on their processes of degradation, including the emergence of craquelure and even traces of insect activity. In doing so, they point once again to the vitality of matter itself: not as a passive substrate, but as an active agent in ongoing processes of becoming, both in and of the world.⁴⁴

Characterized by movement unfolding across two planes of existence—their programmed activity on one level, and inherent material transformations on another—the early MAT multiples bring to light an otherwise implicit reality in ways akin to, yet far more subtle than, the organic processes present in food. At the convergence of these planes, the modality of movements intended by the artists—whether motorized, optical or interactive—can be read not only as foundational to Spoerri's logic of multiplication. Like the self-referentiality of the later *Spiegelobjekt*, they also function as dramatic realizations of the latent activity within their own material constitution. Exposing the illusion of material stasis, what emerges in place of Spoerri's categories of the static work of art on the one hand and the animate on the other, is a continuum of activity that denotes the field of ongoing material processes in which all matter remains dynamically in motion. These processes may be influenced or intervened in, through conservation, for instance, but never fully halted or controlled.

Expanding the realm of multiplication

It is worth asking how Spoerri's logic of the multiple might be rearticulated in light of an artwork's expanded capacity to move. It is here that Spoerri's conception of multiplication can also begin to account for the possibility of multiplying artworks far beyond the conceptual scope of the Edition MAT. If movement can be taken as a defining feature of the multiple, might the inherent activity of matter—embedded in the material of artworks themselves and signaling an internal multiplicity more fundamental than Spoerri initially conceived—also constitute grounds for multiplication? And, by extension, would this not drastically widen the kind of artworks that lend themselves to—or perhaps even initiate their own—multiplication? Pushing Spoerri's logic of the multiple to its speculative limits: do not *all* artworks, at least in principle, possess the potential for multiplication?

To deepen this proposition, it is useful to turn here to philosopher Gilbert Simondon's critique of hylomorphism. Originating with Aristotle, hylomorphism posits that all created entities are composites of matter (*hylē*) and form (*morphē*). This ontological schema was further consolidated by early modern philosophical paradigms—most notably, Cartesian dualism—which asserted a strict division between mind and matter. As a result, materials were increasingly construed as inert, passive receptacles awaiting realization by the mental or ideational force of form.⁴⁵ For Simondon, hylomorphism fails to capture the intricacies that underpin the interplay of matter and form in processes of production. To illustrate his argument, Simondon closely examines the processes involved in the fabrication of a brick from clay. To take on the shape of a brick, clay neither passively receives nor is imposed upon by a preexisting mold—rather, it becomes *individuated* through a negotiation with form. By “individuation,” Simondon means to account for the dynamic processes through which things come into being—always in relation. Clay, for instance, both sets the parameters of and imposes limits on the form it may take according to the internal tensions and capacities of its physical properties (Simondon notes that one could hardly make durable bricks from sand), even as it is simultaneously shaped by that form.⁴⁶

Crucially, Simondon understands these properties as energetically charged potentialities, as matter that inherently contains implicit forms. To mold a brick from clay, then, is not strictly to mold, but to *modulate*.⁴⁷ “Modulation”—unlike the intransigence of molding—is a reciprocal and attuned engagement with matter's potentiality: as Simondon states unambiguously, “matter is only informable matter because it can, point by point, be the bearer of an energy that becomes actualized.”⁴⁸ A mold must necessarily be responsive to matter, since form can only emerge through its co-constitution with the material it seeks to shape. Along these lines, clay ultimately assumes the form of a brick with a complexity far surpassing that which the hylomorphic model can account for: through individuation, form modulates matter as the actualization of energetic potentials incipient within the matter itself.⁴⁹

Another salient point Simondon makes is that individuation does not permanently fix matter into a final form: rather, matter continues to be individuated over time. As Simondon speculates, “at the end of several years or several thousand years, the brick turns back into dust.”⁵⁰ Accordingly, processes of de-formation—of decay and degradation—might be regarded not as a loss of form but as continued form-taking activity, modulated with and by means other than the brick mold, including environmental influences like moisture in the air and the abrasiveness of wind. If Simondon's analysis of the individuation of bricks from clay (and their eventual return to dust) can be taken as analogous to the formation and transformation of artworks, then an important insight for conservation is this: any modulation of matter into artworks and material culture more broadly represents just one possible and necessarily temporary configuration within matter's ongoing process of becoming.

For Spoerri, multiplication both affirms and extends the potential of artworks to transform. Pushing this proposition further, Simondon's critique of hylomorphism

enables a broader reading of Spoerri's conception of an artwork's transformative potential—one that incorporates material change, whether intentionally or incidentally woven into the conceptual fabric of the work, and, in this way, not wholly dissimilar from Spoerri's naming of chance as his collaborator. To clarify, what is at stake here is not whether all artworks should be multiplied on these grounds in practice, but rather, what might be gained from the suggestion that they *might* be. Reconsidering multiplicity, in this sense, also compels a rethinking of materiality itself. As alluded to in the case of the *Mona Lisa*, processes of decay disclose the most fundamental movements of all artworks, each of which, in their own way, exists along a continuum of active matter. Decay, as a kind of primordial or elemental movement, invites multiplication because it is through an artwork's inevitable unravelling that it reveals itself to be always already inscribed with an inward multiplicity. In this vein, multiplication might be understood not only as a means of reproduction but also as an avowal of matter's intrinsic generativity—a process of becoming that extends through degradation—and as itself an extension of this generativity. Pursuing this line of thought to its logical conclusion, might it be possible to ask whether the *Mona Lisa*'s aggressive craquelure can serve as the basis of multiplication—as evidence of the painting's multiplying within itself into different material states?

Toward a new culture of the material in conservation

To emphasize the transience of all material forms is not to suggest the futility of conservation, but to actively encourage its release from the burden of maintaining an illusory material stasis. Such a release calls for a rethinking of the assumptions that underlie conservation's conceptualization of matter—assumptions still largely shaped by its long-standing affiliation with the natural sciences. Scientific, or so-called material-based, conservation has historically codified matter as both truth-bearing and evidentiary, a legible substrate capable of revealing objective knowledge about the artwork's original materials and the artist's intention.⁵¹ It is important to recognize here, however, that scientific conservation represents just one tradition among many. Across more diverse conservation cultures—not all of which seek to neutralize or pacify the material—recognition of transformation as intrinsic to an object's value is well established. Even with Western traditions, theorists and practitioners have long argued for the preservation of certain material changes, such as the aesthetic and historical value of patina.⁵²

Simondon's insights provide a critical lens through which to reconsider the positivist foundations of Western conservation, as narrowly understood today. My contention is that because material thinking in conservation has long been anchored in the natural sciences, theoretical engagement with materials continues to affirm matter's subservience to form, often in direct tension with the transformative and individuating capacities of matter that Simondon foregrounds. Yet this tension also reveals a more complex relationship between conservation and the hylomorphic model. As Soon Kai Poh observes, conservators do not operate on the assumption that matter is inherently inert. On the contrary, as Poh puts it, it is precisely the

notion of activity—not passivity—that carries a distinct “material bias.”⁵³ Conservators are necessarily acutely aware of the material’s pervasive activity and its inherent propensity to change. Indeed, the very existence of conservation is symptomatic of this activity: were matter truly inert, the need for conservation—or for any human intervention in the name of repair—would not exist.

Paradoxically, then, conservation both acknowledges and disavows the vitality of matter. Its very existence is premised on material change, yet it often seeks to suppress the very transformations that call it into being. Matter is still mostly expected to conform to institutional norms of control and stability. Rather than assuming, as hylomorphism does, that matter is passive, conservation begins with the recognition of activity but then seeks to regulate and contain it within acceptable thresholds. This plays out in practice, for instance, in decisions about how much discoloration is tolerable, or whether a crack indicates acceptable aging or should be classified as damage.⁵⁴ In this way, the hylomorphic worldview persists in conservation, not as an ontological assumption, but as an aspirational endpoint. Matter may be recognized as active, but it is ultimately managed to behave as if it were passive—or at least, as close to this as possible.

The ongoing regulation and containment of matter’s activity is largely governed by what Salvador Muñoz Viñas has described as conservation’s “unspoken material theory,” grounded in the enduring influence of scientific positivism.⁵⁵ Within this framework, materials are treated as repositories of empirical truth, and conservation assumes the role of a “truth-enforcement operation,” tasked with revealing or maintaining an object’s “integrity” or “true nature.”⁵⁶ Central to this logic is the idea of an artwork’s “ideal state”: a material condition believed to best embody the work’s most authentic or authoritative instance, often associated with a privileged moment of creation. While the notion of the ideal state has roots in earlier theories of restoration, its consolidation as a professional standard was largely driven by the discipline’s alignment with scientific methodologies. Technological advances throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries enabled increasingly sophisticated analyses of materials and deterioration processes, rendering the ideal state increasingly locatable, and an artwork’s truth ever more enforceable in material terms.⁵⁷

But what kind of culture surrounding the material might emerge—if only tentatively here—if conservation were, as James Elkins provocatively suggests in another setting, to take a “short course in forgetting chemistry”?⁵⁸ Tim Ingold offers one possible starting point for consideration. Further elaborating on Elkins’s provocation, Ingold argues that the interest here is not in what materials *are* in terms of their molecular composition, but in the more alchemical concern with what they *do*.⁵⁹ Drawing on philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari—who themselves draw on Simondon—Ingold proposes that materials should be understood as dynamic processes to be *followed* in their perpetual flux: to follow “the flows and transformations of materials as against states of matter.”⁶⁰ This view of materials as generative and regenerative is reminiscent of Spoorri’s logic of the multiple, which might itself be read as a kind of “following” in Ingold’s sense, insofar as multiplication “follows” what the artworks—and, as I have argued, the

materials—"do" themselves: multiply. Taking inspiration from Ingold, the conception of materials in conservation might begin to shift away from the underlying principle of control, moving instead toward a theoretical orientation grounded in Simondon's articulation of the matter-form nexus as one of attentive accompaniment and mutual responsiveness. This shift might even refigure conservation as the facilitation of material activity—what the expanded logic of multiplication arguably exemplifies—and, in this sense, open new conceptual ground for thinking through what it means to activate.

Activation: Animating the continuum

To initiate a new culture of the material in conservation is to reconceive how the concept of "material" itself is theorized. This effort begins by following materials at the most basic level of what they do: transform. Refigured in this light, materials might be understood as always already active and in flux, however imperceptible such processes may be. As I have argued, artworks, by virtue of their material constitution, exist along a continuum of active matter—an ongoing field of transformation in which conservation efforts participate. If it can be accepted that artworks exist within this continuum, then the conventional definition of activation, as a means of "making active," no longer holds—indeed, to "make active" presupposes a prior state of inactivity or lifelessness.

This conceptual legacy still inheres in discourses and practices of contemporary art conservation. Originating more specifically in the context of performance conservation, activation is generally understood, to borrow from Tate Modern's working definition, as "the process of preparing the performance for display and presenting it in an active and live manner."⁶¹ Performance, when not on display or enacted, is frequently theorized as existing in a dormant state, potentially persisting through its material traces—props, relics, leftovers—but, lacking visibility or audience engagement, considered neither active nor live.⁶² To activate, in this sense, is to transition a performance from dormancy to activity, situating the public, the performance and, by extension, the artist within a dynamic social and temporal relation.⁶³

Conceiving artworks along a continuum of activity, however, demands a still more nuanced understanding of activation than the transition from dormancy to activation. I propose instead that what it means to activate might be reimagined less as a "making active" than as adding to the repertoire of the already active, another potential expression of an artwork's transformation. In this view, activation does not initiate an artwork's activity from a state of dormancy, as if serving as an external catalyst or a corrective to perceived stasis. Rather, to activate is to facilitate the activity of forces already incipient within the artwork itself, and to follow the trajectory of what is already unfolding with attentiveness to the layered dimensions of an artwork's materiality in its fullest articulation. Finally, returning again to the Edition MAT multiples—Duchamp's *Rotoreliefs*, for instance—activating the artwork in a conventional sense might mean switching the discs on, initiating perceptible movement. Multiplication, too, might be understood as a form

of activation—not in the literal sense of flicking a switch or button, but because it initiates an artwork’s movement across space and time, and is another process through which a work becomes active. Yet insofar as the *Rotoreliefs* are already active, they are also in a sense activated even in the absence of human intervention. Even when seemingly at rest—like the *Mona Lisa*—the *Rotoreliefs* are never entirely still: they might multiply internally, corrode, gather dust and fade away. Starting the work’s movement, then, does not presuppose that the *Rotoreliefs* were ever “off,” but rather intensifies the visibility of the *Rotoreliefs*’ movements and, moreover, diversifies their expressive potential. Understood in this way, activation can be seen as a form of conservation intervention that fosters material activity, further animating the dynamic continuum of transformation rather than seeking to arrest or stabilize it—a practice that, in Spoerri’s words, “is a justice done to the infinite possibilities of transformation.”⁶⁴

Acknowledgments

The research for this chapter was carried out in the context of the research project *Activating Fluxus*, based at Bern Academy of the Arts and funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation. My deepest gratitude goes to Hanna B. Hölling and Aga Wielocha for their thoughtful suggestions and meticulous readings of this chapter throughout its various stages. I also extend thanks to Kristina Pfister, Beat Scherrer and Fabia Hiltbrunner from the Graphische Sammlung at the Schweizerische Nationalbibliothek, Bern; Ilona Lütken from the Archiv Sohm, Stuttgart; and, the staff of the Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York, for their invaluable assistance in facilitating my research.

Notes

- 1 John Berger, “Art and Property Now,” in *Landscapes: John Berger on Art*, ed. Tom Overton (London: Verso, 2016), 163.
- 2 Berger, “Art and Property,” 163.
- 3 Fernando Domínguez Rubio, “The Arts of the Same,” in *The Expanded Field of Conservation*, eds. Caroline Fowler and Alexander Nagel (Williamstown, MA: Clark Art Institute, 2022), 142–60. For a critique of this narrow understanding of conservation, see Lotte Arndt and Noémie Étienne, “Transforming Conservation: Challenging Hegemonic Models, Broadening the Realm of the Concerned, Changing Practices,” *Museums and Social Issues* 17, nos. 1–2 (2023): 1–9.
- 4 Peter N. Miller, “Report on a Research Project,” in *Conserving Active Matter*, eds. Soon Kai Poh and Peter N. Miller (New York: Bard Graduate Center, 2022), xi.
- 5 Brian Castriota, “The Enfolding Object of Conservation: Artwork Identity, Authenticity, and Documentation,” in *Conservation of Contemporary Art: Bridging the Gap Between Theory and Practice*, eds. Renée van de Vall and Vivian van Saaze (Cham: Springer, 2024), 60.
- 6 Pip Laurenson, “Authenticity, Change and Loss in the Conservation of Time-Based Media Installations,” *Tate Papers*, no. 6 (2006), <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/06/authenticity-change-and-loss-conservation-of-time-based-media-installations>. For a recent critique of the notion of “work-defining properties,” see Castriota, “The Enfolding Object of Conservation,” 60–86.
- 7 Vivian van Saaze, *Installation Art and the Museum: Presentation and Conservation of Changing Artworks* (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press, 2013), 61–108.

- 8 As is well established, the continued existence of these installations depends on the capacity to adapt in response to a variety of factors, including the failure and obsolescence of display equipment, the degree of an artist's involvement, practical and philosophical approaches to documentation and the internal workflow, politics and organizational structure of museums. See Pip Laurenson, "The Management of Display Equipment in Time-Based Media Installations," *Tate Papers*, no. 3 (2005), <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/03/the-management-of-display-equipment-in-time-based-media-installations>; Laurenson, "Authenticity, Change and Loss"; van Saaze, *Installation Art*; Johanna Phillips, "Reporting Iterations: A Documentation Model for Time-Based Media Art," *Revista da História da Arte* 4 (2015): 168–79; Hanna B. Hölling, *Paik's Virtual Archive: Time, Change, and Materiality in Media Art* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017).
- 9 Peter Fratzl and Wolfgang Schäffner, "On the Activity of Materials," in *Active Materials*, eds. Peter Fratzl et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 37; Frank Bauer, Yoonha Kim, Sabine Marienberg and Wolfgang Schäffner, "Toward a New Culture of the Material," in *Toward a New Culture of the Material*, eds. Frank Bauer, Yoonha Kim, Sabine Marienberg and Wolfgang Schäffner (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2024), 3.
- 10 For Cybele Tom, while it is increasingly appreciated in conservation that "new" art lacks fixed material states, approaches to "old" art, including classical painting and sculpture, still hinges on the identification of a static material nature. Cybele Tom, "When the Old Was New: Rethinking Traditional and Contemporary Art and Their Paradigms of Care," in van de Vall and van Saaze, *Conservation of Contemporary Art*, 88.
- 11 According to Stephen Bury, the difficulty of defining what constitutes a multiple is one of its defining characteristics. Stephen Bury, *Artists' Multiples, 1935–2000* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), 1.
- 12 According to Owen F. Smith, 1965 marked the beginning of a "second phase of Fluxus," one largely focused on the production of Fluxus multiples. While Maciunas already issued several objects during the "first phase"—a period primarily centered on performances and festivals—it was between 1965 and 1968 that the production of Fluxus multiples reached its peak. See Owen F. Smith, *Fluxus: The History of an Attitude* (San Diego: San Diego University Press, 1998), 165.
- 13 For the emergent temporal consciousness of artists in the postwar period, see Pamela M. Lee, *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).
- 14 Natilee Harren, *Fluxus Forms: Scores, Multiples, and the Eternal Network* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 148.
- 15 Julia Robinson, "Multiple Manifestations," in *The Small Utopia: Ars Multiplicata*, ed. Germano Celant (Milan: Fondazione Prada, 2012), 137–49. Harren also touches on this briefly, suggesting that, of the postwar multiplication initiatives, Spoerri's Edition MAT best approximated Maciunas's model of production, in Harren, *Fluxus Forms*, 147.
- 16 Daniel Spoerri, *Edition MAT: Multiplication d'Oeuvres d'Art*, November 1959, GS-SPOERRI-A-04-b-1–3, Daniel Spoerri Archives, Prints and Drawing Department, Swiss National Library, Bern. Automatic translation from French.
- 17 Spoerri, *Edition MAT*.
- 18 Spoerri, "Interview mit Daniel Spoerri," by Katarina Vatsella, *Edition MAT: Die Entstehung einer Kunstform: Daniel Spoerri, Karl Gerstner and das Multiple* (Bremen: Hauschild, 1998), 183.
- 19 Spoerri, *Edition MAT*.
- 20 Spoerri, *Edition MAT*.
- 21 Spoerri, "The Multiplied Work of Art," translated by Leah Marie Chizek, in *Multiplied: Edition MAT and the Transformable Work of Art, 1959–1965* (Munich: Hirmer, 2020), 217; originally published as "Das Multiplizierte Kunstwerk," *Nota*, no. 4 (1960): 10–11.
- 22 Hannah B Higgins, *Fluxus Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), xiv.

- 23 Higgins writes, for instance, that “to account for Fluxus as experience . . . counters any move to assign specific and permanent meanings to the work,” in *Fluxus Experience*, 59.
- 24 Spoerri, “The Multiplied Work of Art,” 216.
- 25 Spoerri, “The Multiplied Work of Art,” 216.
- 26 Spoerri, “The Multiplied Work of Art,” 216.
- 27 Erika Balsom, “Original Copies: How Film and Video Became Art Objects,” *Cinema Journal* 53, no. 1 (2013): 99.
- 28 In a well-known letter to Tomas Schmit dated to January 1964, Maciunas wrote: “Fluxus is definitely against [the] art-object as [a] non-functional commodity—to be sold and to make [a] livelihood for an artist. It could temporarily have the pedagogical function of teaching people the needlessness of art including the eventual needlessness of itself. It should therefore not be permanent.” Maciunas, letter to Tomas Schmit, January 1964, in Jon Hendricks, ed., *Fluxus etc. Addenda II: The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection* (Pasadena: California Institute of Technology and Baxter Art Gallery, 1983), 166.
- 29 Spoerri, “The Multiplied Work of Art,” 216.
- 30 Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance*, trans. Emmett Williams (New York: Something Else Press, 1966), 182.
- 31 Maciunas appears to have been particularly captivated by the *Tableaux Pièges*: the *Vacuum TRapEzoid*—the fifth issue of the *Fluxus Newspaper*, released in March 1965—featured reproductions of the *Tableaux Pièges* as screen-printed linen tablemats, which were later promoted again in 1967 as part of the *Fluxfurniture* series. Jon Hendricks, *Fluxus Codex* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1988), 485.
- 32 Spoerri, *Anecdoted Topography*, 181–82.
- 33 Barbara Otterbeck, “Food Beyond Its Expiry Date,” September 1995, VII.A.167, Gilbert and Lila Silverman Archives, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
- 34 Otterbeck, “Food Beyond.”
- 35 Spoerri, interview by Sebastian Strenger, “In meiner Kindheit hatte ich nie genug zu essen,” *Die Welt*, November 18, 2024, <https://www.welt.de/kultur/kunst/plus254412282/Daniel-Spoerri-In-meiner-Kindheit-hatte-ich-nie-genug-zu-essen.html>, automatic translation from German.
- 36 Steven W. Dykstra, “The Artist’s Intentions and the Intentional Fallacy in Fine Arts Conservation,” *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* 35, no. 3 (1996): 199.
- 37 For a discussion of the conservation of Eat Art artworks, see Claudia María Coronado García, “Can We Use the Concept of Programmed Obsolescence to Identify and Resolve Conservation Issues on Eat Art Installations?” in *Living Matter: The Preservation of Biological Materials in Contemporary Art*, eds. Rachel Rivenc and Kendra Roth (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 2022), 39–46.
- 38 Spoerri, interview by Strenger, “In meiner Kindheit,” automatic translation from German.
- 39 Fernando Domínguez Rubio, “On the Discrepancy Between Objects and Things: An Ecological Approach,” *Journal of Material Culture* 2, no. 1 (2016): 65.
- 40 This line of argumentation aligns with thinking in conservation discourses that suggests, from a temporal perspective, that some artworks may be considered “slow” while others may be considered “fast.” See Hanna B. Hölling, “The Aesthetics of Change: On the Relative Durations of the Impermanent and Critical Thinking in Conservation,” in *Authenticity in Transition: Changing Practices in Contemporary Art Making and Conservation*, eds. Erma Hermens and Frances Robertson (London: Archetype Publications, 2015), 17; Miller, “Conserving Active Matter and the Historian,” in Poh and Miller, *Conserving Active Matter*, 35.
- 41 Friedrich Tietjen, “The Making of: Multiples,” in *Kunst ohne Unikat. Multiple und Sampling als Medium: Techno-Transformationen der Kunst*, ed. Peter Wiebel (Cologne: Walther König, 1999), 82.
- 42 Jean Tinguely, *Constante Indéterminée* (1959), <https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/UNTITLED--CONSTANTE-INDETERMINEE-/0E31D631E850A7CB>.

- 43 For a recent overview of debates in kinetic art, see Rachel Rivenc and Reinhard Bek eds., *Keep It Moving? Conserving Kinetic Art* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Trust, 2018).
- 44 Majda Bejić Jarić and Marta Budicin Munišević, "Encounter with the Father of Op Art, Victor Vasarely: Research in Conservation and Art History, and Conservation Work on the *Barson Collage*," *Journal of Paper Conservation* 24, nos. 3–4 (2023): 91–107.
- 45 Julian Thomas, *Time, Culture, and Identity: An Interpretative Archaeology* (London: Routledge, 1996), 11.
- 46 Gilbert Simondon, *Individuation in Light of Notions of Form and Information*, trans. Taylor Adkins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 22. For an elaboration of Simondon's hylomorphic critique in philosophical discourses, see also Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 404–15.
- 47 Simondon, *Individuation*, 21–29.
- 48 Simondon, *Individuation*, 27.
- 49 Simondon, *Individuation*, 21–29.
- 50 Simondon, *Individuation*, 33.
- 51 Alison Bracker and Alison Richmond, "Introduction," in *Conservation: Principles, Dilemmas and Uncomfortable Truths* (Oxford: Elsevier, 2009), xvi.
- 52 Salvador Muñoz Viñas, "The End of Conservation?" *Studies in Conservation* 70, no. 4 (2025): 269, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00393630.2024.2370726>. Noémie Étienne has recently identified that conservators in European museums increasingly resist the temptation to conceal traces of the past. Noémie Étienne, "Conservation," in *ABC Arts & Musées: Histoire Coloniale et Voix Autochtones*, eds. Sara Petrella and Mylène Steity (Zurich: Seismo Verlag, 2025), 96.
- 53 Soon Kai Poh, "Conserving Active Matter and the Conservator," in Poh and Miller, *Conserving Active Matter*, 2.
- 54 On the subjectivity of the decision-making over what is deemed "damage," see Salvador Muñoz Viñas, *Contemporary Theory of Conservation* (Oxford: Elsevier, 2005), 101–4.
- 55 Muñoz Viñas, *Contemporary Theory*, 81.
- 56 Muñoz Viñas, *Contemporary Theory*, 65.
- 57 Muñoz Viñas, *Contemporary Theory*, 65–90.
- 58 James Elkins, *What Painting Is: How to Think about Oil Painting, Using the Language of Alchemy* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 9.
- 59 Tim Ingold, "Toward an Ecology of Materials," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 41 (2012): 434.
- 60 Tim Ingold, "The Textility of Making," *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 34 (2010): 92.
- 61 Louise Lawson, Acatia Finbow and Hélia Marçal, "Developing a Strategy for the Conservation of Performance-Based Artworks at Tate," *Journal of the Institute of Conservation* 42, no. 2 (2019): 122.
- 62 Lawson, Finbow and Marçal, "Developing a Strategy," 122.
- 63 David Zerbib, "Performing, Participating: The Challenge of Activation," *Critique d'art*, no. 52 (2019): 71–87; Aga Wielocha, "Instilling Liveliness: Archives of Neo-Avant-Garde Art as Sites of Activation," *Journal of the Institute of Conservation* 47, no. 2 (2024): 175.
- 64 Spoerri, *Edition MAT*.

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7 Reinterpreting Ay-Ō's *Tactile Boxes* through touchless haptics in *Ay-Ō's Happy Rainbow Hell* (2023)

Kit Brooks

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, would it be possible to encourage a playful approach to touch? This was the question we hoped to answer on March 25, 2023, with the opening of *Ay-Ō's Happy Rainbow Hell* at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art (NMAA), in Washington, DC—the first ever exhibition in the US dedicated to the Japanese Fluxus artist Ay-Ō (b. 1931).¹ The exhibition included over seventy of Ay-Ō's rainbow-hued, psychedelic prints from the NMAA's own collection, complemented by two Fluxus works: *Finger Box Set* (no. 26) (1964, loaned by the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis) and a *Flux Kit* (1965, loaned by the Museum of Modern Art, New York). Although a relatively small exhibition space (approximately 2000 square foot) for that number of objects, the high object density was a deliberate curatorial choice. The goal was to suffuse the visitor's surroundings with rainbow artworks as a means to evoke the immersive, playful quality of Ay-Ō's interactive rainbow environments.

Released in several editions, the *Flux Kits* are compartmentalized attaché cases containing inexpensive readymades and printed materials contributed by different Fluxus members, which are intended to be manipulated, experienced and interacted with. The contents of the *Flux Kits* varied, but included multisensory elements, with different objects engaging with touch, smell, taste and sound in addition to their visual components. Ay-Ō's contribution to the *Flux Kits* are the *Finger Boxes*—wooden boxes of approximately 8.5 cm³ with an aperture for the participant to insert a finger, which were produced as individual objects and in sets.² Relying only on their sense of touch, the participant encounters different tactile surfaces, such as foam rubber, coins, nylon stockings and nails, provoking humorous reactions of surprise and delight on behalf of both participants and viewers. Ay-Ō expanded this essential concept through the increased size of the *Tactile Boxes*, into which a participant can insert their entire arm, and even to the dimensions required to contain an entire human body with *Orange Box* (1964), which appeared on an episode of *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson*, featuring both Ay-Ō and Yoko Ono.³ Each of these works, which—in the case of the *Finger Boxes* and *Tactile Boxes*—were produced in multiples, focused entirely on the sensation of touch; the inability to see the boxes' contents brought heightened awareness to the subtleties of the tactile experience. However, we knew that these works could not be included in the exhibition for visitor participation. It was an unacceptable conservation risk for

visitors at NMAA to interact directly with the original Fluxus pieces, which were, moreover, loan objects belonging to other institutions.⁴ Further, the initial stages of development for the *Happy Rainbow Hell* exhibition occurred in 2020, during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, when touching *any* public surface was viewed with deep suspicion. It was unclear if tactile interfaces would pose an unacceptable health and safety risk when the museum reopened.

However, the central thesis of the exhibition was to encourage visitors to encounter Ay-Ö's rainbow prints as art *objects*, rather than merely two-dimensional graphic representations, and as existing on a continuum of multisensory experience with his tactile Fluxus works. Ay-Ö explicitly linked these two modes on several occasions:

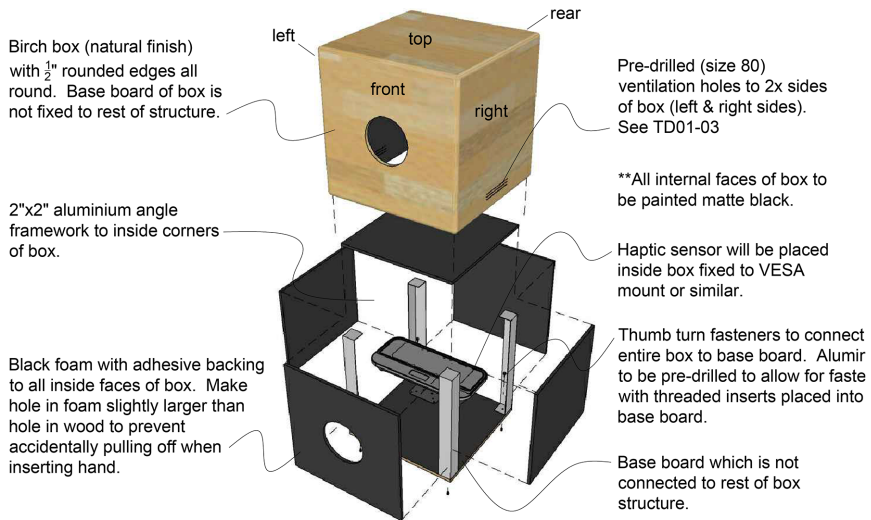
I first came to the “rainbow” from the idea that I could perceive all the colors through my sense of touch.⁵

It therefore seemed critical to include exhibition elements that provoked bodily engagement in addition to the more passive modes of viewership usually encouraged in traditional museum settings, when objects have been “institutionalized” and disabled from interaction. Although this measure prioritizes the long-term goal of preservation, objects created for tactile interaction are thereby rendered essentially nonfunctional and can be considered “deactivated.” Approaching this obstacle as an opportunity, NMAA collaborated with ARTECHOUSE, an immersive experiential art group with locations in DC, Houston and New York (as of 2024), to develop several digital interactives that would enliven the exhibition space and help communicate Ay-Ö's artistic goals to a twenty-first-century audience.

The most ambitious of these were the *Haptic Boxes*, a direct attempt to reimagine Ay-Ö's *Tactile Boxes* in terms of the visitor experience through haptic technology (Figure 7.1).⁶ Haptic systems are often used in gaming, training simulators for the military and accessibility research, though the technology is still in the early stages of its development.⁷ Whereas most haptic devices rely on direct contact, the health and safety directive not to include touch surfaces required a solution that did not require users to wear or touch anything, significantly narrowing the available options. ARTECHOUSE selected Ultrahaptics—a mid-air haptic device that uses ultrasonic waves to create touch-like sensations in the air.⁸ The two *Haptic Boxes* included in the installation also had apertures for participants to fully insert their hands and, at 50 cm³, were of slightly larger dimensions than Ay-Ö's original *Tactile Boxes* (31 cm³).⁹ However, rather than containing physically tactile materials, the inside of each box contained a mid-air haptic field generator attached to the base (Figure 7.2). ARTECHOUSE aimed to emulate the experience of using one of Ay-Ö's original boxes through an adaptation into different physical and new digital materials. The generators contain units called “actuators” that can be programmed to emit focused ultrasonic waves with custom vibration patterns to generate haptic feedback in the user, without the user coming into direct bodily contact. Rather, by holding their hand within a range of approximately 6 cm above the device, the user experiences a localized bodily sensation that emulates touch by stimulating receptors in the skin. An object label on the pedestal of each box



Figure 7.1 ARTECHOUSE, *Haptic Boxes*, 2024. Wood, aluminum, paint, vinyl, polyurethane and electronics. National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution. Photo: Colleen Dugan.



EXPLODED VIEW OF BOX

Figure 7.2 *Haptic Box* schematic. Image courtesy of ARTECHOUSE.



Figure 7.3 Visitors interact with the *Haptic Boxes* in Ay-Ō's *Happy Rainbow Hell*, March 23, 2023. National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution. Photo: Sonya Pencheva.

attributed the work to ARTECHOUSE, explained the inspiration and technology and gave instructions for interaction. Each device was programmed with a different sensation—using Ay-Ō's 1966 “Tactile List” as a guide, ARTECHOUSE chose the textures of “pin” and “ping-pong ball” as those which could be most successfully approximated using mid-air haptic technology.¹⁰ ARTECHOUSE also designed the exteriors of the boxes to resonate with Ay-Ō's originals and with Fluxus's graphic aesthetic by using paint colors that emulated known examples of the *Tactile Boxes* and by rendering the ARTECHOUSE name in a Fluxus-style font.¹¹ Deploying these intentional continuities promoted the exhibition goal of recapturing the sense of curiosity, discovery, humor and playfulness originally intended by Ay-Ō, while the technological novelty of the *Haptic Boxes* appealed to a younger audience. Fluxus's members had very deliberately chosen to use quotidian and found objects in fabricating their works. As an exhibition team, however, we thought that young visitors might not be similarly enticed by the promise of interacting with objects with commonplace textures.

We found that responses from visitors and the press aligned with those intentions and expectations (Figure 7.3). As part of NMAA's exhibition evaluation process, a visitor survey was conducted in April 2023 by Smithsonian Organization and Audience Research (SOAR) through an exit questionnaire, gathering data from 419 respondents.¹² Among other questions about the general experience of the exhibition and engagement with didactic texts, visitors were also asked whether they interacted with the boxes, whether they watched others interact with them and what

their impressions were. Many visitors expressed that the experience of the *Haptic Boxes* was surprising and joyful, even if there was some initial hesitancy. Among the comments were the following responses: "It was honestly an unexpected joy"; "Even after reading what to expect, [it] still surprised me and made me smile"; and "It was scary to put my hand in at first. But it was a fun experience."

The response from the press was similar, with several outlets remarking on the inclusion of the *Haptic Boxes* in the exhibition. Academic reviews also regarded the interactive elements of the exhibition positively.¹³ I was personally unfamiliar with mid-air haptics prior to ARTECHOUSE's presentation but was delighted by the joyfulness with which their team related their idea and the inspiration they took from Ay-Ō's works, making connections with the *Tactile Boxes* but with a twist that fit their own artistic identity. Developed specifically for the exhibition, it was a privilege to see staff and the public interact with the *Haptic Boxes* and to witness the squeals of delight and surprise that they generated. I reported on the results to Ay-Ō and his family during a visit to Tokyo in May 2023, and with their continued blessing I would want to include these or similar works in future exhibitions.

Not all visitors appreciated the interactive elements. A small number of the surveyed participants did not understand the mid-air haptics or confused the sensation of the ultrasonic waves with puffs of air. That was perhaps to be expected, as using the boxes was most visitors' first encounter with mid-air haptics. To some extent, such responses are unavoidable, as touch responses vary widely among individuals due to differences in neural sensitivity, skin structure and perception. NMAA favors a reduced design approach in terms of didactics and it is possible that more obvious and thorough signage could have addressed some of these concerns. Further, although NMAA employs security staff in the galleries, there are no gallery attendants to guide and assist visitors in their understanding of the exhibited materials, and an institution with a different visitor experience model may have addressed such confusion more successfully. In addition, actuators emitting stronger haptic sensations than those that were available for *Happy Rainbow Hell* might be helpful for visitors who are less sensitive or less patient. It is expected that higher functionality will accrue with the future development of the technology, though ARTECHOUSE's implementation offered a compelling glimpse into future possibilities for interactives. Ultimately, it is hard to engineer spontaneity while satisfying visitor need for clear explanations. There is a fine line between confusion and surprise, as what delights some visitors will frustrate others. However, these were minor issues, and, curatorially, it was preferable to keep explanations minimal to preserve the unexpected element for most participants, even if that came at the cost of a small proportion of visitors missing or misunderstanding the interactives.

Aside from those strategic concerns, the inclusion of the *Haptic Boxes* raised larger, more provocative questions concerning the fidelity of haptic activation to the physically tactile qualities of the original works and how to clearly differentiate the intellectual and artistic contributions of Ay-Ō and ARTECHOUSE. Arguably, an essential component of Fluxus artworks was their ordinariness, since they were usually made from cheap materials and found objects. For Ay-Ō's tactile works, this was an integral part of the thesis: by blocking sight and denying visual recognition,

and by limiting interaction with the textures to touch alone, Ay-Ö defamiliarized those ordinary objects to bring about a new appreciation for sensory experiences that are often taken for granted. Indeed, haptic technologies have now become part of our everyday lives, as they have been incorporated into the basic functionality of smartphones and videogame controllers. However, mid-air haptics are still novel experiences for many visitors and the high cost of the hardware (approximately 3,000 dollars per unit at the time of the exhibition) is a vast shift from Ay-Ö's use of objects found in and around his Canal Street loft. It is possible that Ay-Ö may have incorporated more ambitious textures if they had been available to him, as his 1966 "Tactile List" also included *intangible* items, including several colors and "rainbow." In a sense, the element of the unknown—interacting with an unfamiliar piece of technology—created a pleasing analog to Ay-Ö's original works, where participants did not know what they would encounter. In this way, the *Haptic Boxes* emulated both material and experiential qualities of Ay-Ö's originals while also presenting a formal transfer of a Fluxus work from a physical medium to a digital one. The only physically tactile surface in the exhibition intended for visitor interaction was a velvet-covered cushion, fabricated by NMAA production specialist John Piper, surrounding the vitrine enclosing the velvet portfolio case for *Rainbow Passes Slowly* (1971). For Ay-Ö, touching the velvet case was intended to be part of the experience of viewing the prints, so the case surround was provided to visitors as a substitute for the portfolio case itself. Other physical interactive elements were irregularly scheduled—the public programs department arranged several events where the public could build their own finger boxes from preprinted cardboard, to be decorated with stickers and filled with different tactile objects. A video was played at these events that guided visitors in the construction process (Figure 7.4). A larger exhibition space with a separate antechamber would allow for this to be a permanent activity.

The *Haptic Boxes* were labeled externally and identified on the labels as works by ARTECHOUSE, but some visitors may have been confused as to whether Ay-Ö was involved in their production—he was not, although he was kept informed of the exhibition and its scope.¹⁴ As NMAA visitors were overwhelmingly unfamiliar with Fluxus or Ay-Ö, any confusion was likely caused by the proximity of Ay-Ö and ARTECHOUSE's work. This was unavoidable, given the limited gallery space available. For future presentations of Ay-Ö's oeuvre, it would be worth considering a larger exhibition space, with divided sections, which would have allowed for spatial distinction with the digital works created by ARTECHOUSE. However, this solution would not be without its own drawbacks. Spatial division would need to be balanced with the curatorial goal of encouraging the visitor to view the prints as three-dimensional and immersive. Dividing the interactive aspects of the exhibition into a separate gallery space might encourage a similar caesura in the mind of the visitor. Given the strengths of the NMAA's holdings, the focus of *Happy Rainbow Hell* was on Ay-Ö's prints, rather than his paintings, objects, environments and performances, or his time with Fluxus, but future exhibitions may have different emphases.

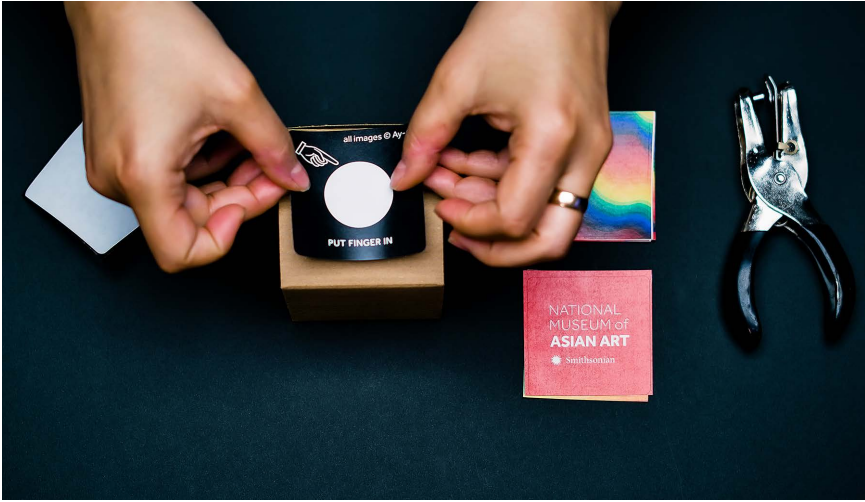


Figure 7.4 Instructional video for constructing cardboard finger boxes (2023). National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution. Photo: Hutomo Wicaksono and Demi Mohamed.

Reflecting on my experience of curating *Happy Rainbow Hell*, I believe that the *Haptic Boxes* injected a sense of fun and play into the galleries that was essential to the overall experience and impact. I imagine that it was much like watching people interact with Ay-Ō's boxes, where it could be more fun to observe other people's reactions than to participate yourself. If we consider activation as functional interactivity, it was not possible to "re-activate" Ay-Ō's original tactile works in the NMAA institutional setting by allowing direct visitor engagement, nor was the artist in a position to supervise the creation of new versions specifically for use in the exhibition. In other circumstances, the latter approach may have been possible; however, this was not considered during the development of *Happy Rainbow Hell* due to the limitations on visitor touch presented by COVID-19. In retrospect, and having had the opportunity to observe ARTECHOUSE's creative process, if I were to present a similar exhibition in the future I would frame ARTECHOUSE more explicitly as Fluxus descendants, and their works as digital experiential emulations of Ay-Ō's tactile works. As a Fluxus-inspired curatorial philosophy, I will continue to embrace the potential for confusion in my future exhibitions, as it also expands the possibilities for delight.

Acknowledgments

The author is enormously grateful to the team at ARTECHOUSE, especially executive creative director Riki Kim and senior producer Marcus D'Amelio for their creativity and enthusiasm throughout the entirety of the exhibition project,

and for their thoughtful insights here. Many staff at the NMAA helped make *Ay-Ō's Happy Rainbow Hell* possible. For the aspects involving the *Haptic Boxes*, Sonja Potter, Karen Sasaki, Sarah Yarrito and Hutomo Wicaksono were invaluable for their professionalism and support, and for the enthusiasm with which they embraced the project.

Notes

- 1 The exhibition ran from March 25, 2023, to September 10, 2023, with an accompanying exhibition catalog: Kit Brooks, *Ay-Ō Happy Rainbow Hell* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2023).
- 2 By including in the exhibition a *Finger Box Kit* of fifteen individual *Finger Boxes*, each containing a different texture, our aim was to illustrate Ay-Ō's interest in the breadth of tactile experiences available to the human senses. Displaying the *Flux Kit*, which included a single *Finger Box*, was a way to contextualize Ay-Ō's tactile work and its significance within the larger multisensory project of Fluxus. For example, another Japanese Fluxus artist, Saitō Takako (1929–2025), created *Smell Chess Set* (1964), which comprised glass vials topped with black rubber pipettes and containing a variety of different odors. Midori Yoshimoto has proposed that the uniform, cubic wooden boxes of Saitō's *Sound Chess* (c. 1977) may have been inspired by Ay-Ō's *Finger Boxes*. See Midori Yoshimoto, "Ay-Ō's Environments and Fluxus Events," in *Ay-Ō: Over the Rainbow Once More* (Tokyo: Museum of Contemporary Art and ePublishing Jp, 2012), 72.
- 3 Season 2, episode 417, aired May 26, 1964.
- 4 It is difficult to imagine a US museum that would permit visitors to interact directly with historic collection materials. Most institutional missions state a commitment to preserving objects for future generations, prioritizing collections' care over visitor experience. Interinstitutional loan contracts often demand strict environmental controls for loan objects to meet insurance requirements; for example, vitrine cases—such as those housing the Fluxus works in *Happy Rainbow Hell*—are usually only opened in the presence of staff couriers from the lending institution, to reduce possible damage from temperature and humidity changes, in addition to damage from visitors. Damage is all but certain if visitor participation is permitted. This has historically been the case with Ay-Ō works, due to the enthusiasm with which participants have engaged with the various tactile elements. I am grateful to Kristin Spangenberg, curator of prints at the Cincinnati Art Museum, for generously providing me with materials related to their 1969 display of Ay-Ō's *Environment No. 9: Rainbow Room*, including a report mentioning the damage caused by visitors at that time.
- 5 Ay-Ō, "Reinbō Manifesuto II," *Geijutsu shinchō* 23, Sōshoku bijutsu no genten, no. 5 (1972): 19, translation by the author.
- 6 In addition to the *Haptic Boxes* described in this chapter, ARTECHOUSE also developed *Rainbow Trails* (2023), an interactive wall installation that projects an undulating rainbow silhouette of the user in real-time response to their gestures, and an Instagram filter, "Rainbow Hell," by @natasianart.
- 7 I am indebted to executive creative director Riki Kim for the following insights into haptic technology and ARTECHOUSE's creative process.
- 8 The model is the Ultraleap STRATOS Inspire.
- 9 ARTECHOUSE fabricated three boxes, two for use in the gallery with one as backup in the event that the box became damaged through visitor interaction. Only the two gallery boxes contained digital hardware.
- 10 Ay-Ō's "Tactile List" was published in John Cage, *Notations* (West Glover, VT: Something Else Press, 1969). A copy was not included among the exhibits, but the list and several of the textures it contains were cited on the label accompanying the *Haptic Boxes*.

- 11 The consistency of the typeface on Fluxus works is attributable to the design acumen of Fluxus's "founder," George Maciunas (1931–78), addressed in the gallery label for the *Flux Kit* and in the exhibition catalog (Brooks, *Ay-Ō Happy Rainbow Hell*, 36, 65). Maciunas's contribution to the aesthetic of Ay-Ō's *Finger Boxes* and *Tactile Boxes* was discussed in development meetings with ARTECHOUSE, with the appearance of an orange-and-white 1965 *Tactile Box* in MoMA's collection among the examples considered for inspiration.
- 12 Smithsonian Organization and Audience Research, *Ay-Ō's Happy Rainbow Hell Evaluation* (August 2023). Overall, the exhibition was rated very positively by respondents. Using the Overall Experience Rating (OER) scale to measure the quality of visitor experience, the exhibition was rated as follows: Outstanding (31%), Excellent (44%), Good (22%), Fair (2%), Poor (0%). This rating was higher than the NMAA's benchmark for Outstanding (24%), calculated as a median of past exhibition OER results.
- 13 For example, Alison Miller, "Ay-Ō: Happy Rainbow Hell: Kit Brooks, Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian, 2023," *Japan Forum* 36, no. 3 (2024): 471–73; and Cole Calhoun, "Tickling the Senses," Getty, July 18, 2023, <https://www.getty.edu/news/tickling-the-senses/>.
- 14 For health reasons, Ay-Ō stopped producing artworks in 2017. However, as of summer 2024, he has begun producing designs for prints again (author visit to the studio of Ay-Ō's printer, Sukeda Kenryō [b. 1941], October 21, 2024).

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8 Almost-Replica

Robert Filliou's *The Futile Box* (1977)

Émilie Parendeau

Introduction

In 2010, I initiated the *Almost-Replicas* project, which involved creating replicas of Fluxus objects in preparation for *A LOUER #3*, a one-day exhibition I organized at Bétonsalon in Paris on September 18, 2010. The goal of this exhibition was to present a series of score-based works, activated in the exhibition throughout the day in various performances, alongside a collection of Fluxus objects designed to be handled by the audience. With the score-based works, I sought to explore the variations that the instructions could inspire, allowing room for interpretive freedom. Conversely, for the objects, my intent was to reproduce them as faithfully as possible, adhering strictly to their original models without any modifications.

The project of creating replicas of Fluxus objects had two primary aims. The first was to deepen my understanding of the physical composition and conceptual logic of these multiples. The act of fabricating a replica compels us to confront numerous questions about the object's materiality: How were the materials selected, and where were they sourced from? Were individuals other than the original creator involved in its production? Was the object costly to produce? In addition, the process of the object's construction raises indirect questions about its meaning: What type of experience does it aim to provide? What conditions are necessary for this experience to unfold? What intention did the creator have in proposing this experience?

The second aim of this project was to enable the public to handle and interact with these replicated objects. Although the Fluxus multiples were initially designed to be physically engaged with—played with or manipulated—such tactile experiences are now rare. Many of them are now held in public and private collections, where conservation concerns often result in their display behind protective glass cases, restricting any direct interaction.

In the framework of *A LOUER #3*, I set out to make replicas of several objects created within Fluxus circles, including George Maciunas's ping-pong paddles (such as *Can of Water Racket*, 1966; *Hole in Center Racket*, 1965; and *Very Heavy Lead Racket*, 1972) and two boxes by Robert Filliou (*The Futile Box*, 1977; and *Optimistic Box no. 3*, 1969).

This chapter centers on the replication process of one particular piece: Filliou's *The Futile Box*. Following the trajectory of my preparatory research for the replication process, I examine the sources consulted, exploring the questions, challenges and solutions that emerged along the way. It is worth noting that this research was conducted without direct access to the edition of *The Futile Box* from 1977. This account reflects my understanding of the work and the available sources at the time of my research, demonstrating how the act of replication can unlock both material and conceptual dimensions of an artwork, potentially serving as a form of activation. Although narrated in the first person, it is important to note that this process was a collaborative effort, carried out with a collaborator with strong carpentry skills and a deep understanding of art, which were instrumental for the fabrication of the final outcome.

The Adlers edition of *The Futile Box*

Upon my first encounter with *The Futile Box*, in the book *Robert Filliou, éditions & multiples*,¹ the work seemed straightforward to replicate. Without access to the original object, I began searching for reference materials to guide the design of the box. I was able to draw on two additional sources: Filliou and George Brecht's *Games at the Cedilla, or the Cedilla Takes Off* and the *Fluxus Codex*.²

Published in 2003, *Robert Filliou, éditions & multiples* serves as a key reference, providing a catalogue raisonné of the editions and multiples by Filliou between 1959 and 1985. *The Futile Box* is listed as the seventy-fourth object published by Bengt Adlers, a Swedish gallery manager based in Malmö. The catalog states that a series of thirty-five boxes was produced in 1977 for an exhibition by Filliou at the Galerie Léger, where Adlers worked.³ One of these multiples is reproduced photographically in the book, with a caption offering material details. The box is made of light-colored plywood, likely 10 mm thick, and measuring $8 \times 7.5 \times 7.5$ cm, making it small enough to fit in one hand. The four vertical sides are joined with rabbet and dado joints and secured with wood glue. The photograph, taken at an angle, does not reveal the fastening mechanism for the lid, which is shown half open. Inside the box is a green plastic ball, almost the same size as the box itself. The image alone does not explain what makes this box unique. However, beneath the image is what appears to be a description of *The Futile Box*, written by Filliou:

It is a box containing an object—a round ball, for instance.

When you close the box the bottom opens and the object falls out.

The best way to realize this is to have the object just a little too big for the box.

It is the object itself which makes the bottom open.⁴

These four sentences describe the object, provide advice on how to make it and reveal how it works. The concept of *The Futile Box* appears relatively clear: it's a

box containing an object, and when one closes the lid, the object falls out from the bottom. The title alludes to the notion of a box that is purposeless or ineffective, as it fails to perform its primary function as a container by not being able to hold the object inside.

In practical terms, creating this box requires designing a technical system that allows it to dysfunction, but Filliou's instructions are vague on this point. He only mentions that, when one closes the box, the bottom opens under the pressure of the object, which is slightly too big for it. In the accompanying photograph, the box is shown on a table; the edge of the bottom is visible and resembles the edge of the lid, suggesting that the same type of wood was used for both parts. However, no additional details are visible. As a result, neither the image nor the text offers a clear understanding of the mechanism that Filliou and Adlers employed for the box's bottom in the 1977 edition of *The Futile Box*.

Games at the Cedilla

I then decided to consult the book *Games at the Cedilla*, where Filliou's *The Futile Box* initially appeared. This little book takes the form of a collection of aphorisms, illustrations, quotations, "one-minute scenarios," game rules and other poetic suggestions scattered throughout its pages.

The Futile Box occupies a whole page, divided into a text section and a visual section. The textual part is, word for word, the text quoted in the book *Robert Filliou, éditions & multiples*. What becomes clearer upon reading *Games at the Cedilla*, however, is that *The Futile Box*'s four sentences form a score that may act as an invitation to make a material object. Indeed, much of the book offers the reader instructions to do something—play a game or perform an action, for instance.

The score can be summed up in four sentences, which are precise about the principle of *The Futile Box* but relatively vague about the technical system that makes it work. It is perhaps for this reason that Filliou included a photograph of one version above the score, with the caption: "Robert's concept designed by Takako Saito." The photographed object is Saito's version of *The Futile Box*, crafted in 1966 according to Filliou's score. However, it remains unclear if Saito—a fellow Fluxus associate renowned for her skills in object design and woodworking—designed *and* made the box or simply built it from Filliou's instructions.

For *Games at the Cedilla*, Saito's version of the box was photographed lying on its side. It is made of wood and has an almost cubic shape. The two doors forming the top and bottom of the box are open and, as in Adlers's version, the piece of wood used for the bottom is similar to that used for the lid. Unfortunately, because of how the photograph was taken and the poor quality of the reproduction, it is impossible to deduce any other material characteristics, such as dimensions, method of assembly or type of finish. However, unlike the image published in *Robert Filliou, éditions & multiples*, because Saito's version was photographed on its side, its operating mechanisms are revealed. The two doors at the top and bottom of the box open in opposite directions. In other words, when one closes the lid of the box, the ball falls through a door that opens in the opposite direction.

To determine whether Adlers based the 1977 edition of *The Futile Box* on Saito's version, I compared the images of the two boxes. One detail in particular led me to conclude that this was not the case. The most common method of attaching a door to a box is to use butt hinges, which remain visible on the outside. If Adlers had also opted for this operating mechanism, then, as with Saito's box, it would have been possible to see the hinges. Though it seemed that Adlers had opted for a different mechanism, I was unable to determine exactly what it was.

I speculated that Filliou and Adlers decided against the visible presence of the hinges so that the box might look as ordinary as possible. Presumably, this was to emphasize the fact that the box's uniqueness lay primarily in its dysfunction. Indeed, at first sight, the 1977 version appears to be an ordinary box—only upon handling does it reveal itself to be different from other boxes. The experience of this box unfolds in two stages: first through vision, with no clues as to its dysfunction, and second, through handling, which reveals that the bottom opens, letting the ball fall out. This approach, adopted by Filliou and Adlers for the 1977 version, assigns greater importance to the user's tactile experience than to the visual aspect of the box by providing a surprise when the box is handled.

The *Fluxus Codex*

The final documentary source that served as a starting point for my replica was Jon Hendricks's *Fluxus Codex* (1995). From *The Futile Box* entry (pages 241–42), we learn not only that Filliou asked Saito to make a model in 1966, and that this version was lost, but also that, in 1977, Adlers published a "new model." It is also revealed that George Maciunas was planning to publish Filliou's box as a Fluxus edition as early as February 1967, and that Saito's prototype was made with this in mind. While it is possible that Maciunas contributed to the design of this prototype and the conception of the inverted doors mechanism, the Fluxus edition of *The Futile Box* was ultimately never realized by Maciunas.

Another notable feature of the *Fluxus Codex* entry is the reproduction of a page from one of Filliou's notebooks, evincing three drawings. Stacked on top of one another, these sketches each illustrate a different idea for *The Futile Box*. The proposals are heterogeneous. Interestingly, next to the third drawing, which takes up the idea of a box containing a round object that is too big for it, but does not depict the box as a whole, Filliou capitalized the word "BETTER." In this drawing, unlike the other two, Filliou concentrates only on one detail: the mechanism that causes the box's dysfunction: when one closes the box, the ball pushes against the bottom and the bottom falls with it.

The *Fluxus Codex* does not specify when Filliou made this drawing; therefore it is impossible to decipher whether this idea was developed before or after Saito's 1966 version of the work, or around the time Adlers's 1977 version was designed. Filliou's free bottom mechanism has a special feature: it is not visible. In fact, as the box bottom is not fixed by hinges but held in place by pressure, there is nothing visible on the front, back or sides of the box to indicate that it can be opened. One might initially assume that Adlers followed Filliou's mechanism, but there is a notable difference between Filliou's drawing and Adlers's edition. In Filliou's

drawing, the bottom is recessed inside the box and therefore invisible, whereas in Adlers's version, the piece of wood that forms the bottom is visible. We can therefore rule out the possibility that Adlers used the mechanism envisaged in Filliou's sketch.

Filliou's drawing arguably reinforces the hypothesis put forward earlier: Filliou favored a system that gave the box a seemingly ordinary appearance—the box thus necessitates hands-on interaction rather than solely visual contemplation. This sketch also takes us a step further in interpreting the meaning of *The Futile Box*. The title refers to the idea of a useless box, incapable of fulfilling its primary function as a container. This drawing suggests that Filliou also envisaged *The Futile Box* as a prank. The box's appearance is designed to deceive the participant: the gag is revealed only when the user handles the box, creating the desired effect of surprise and humor. Moreover, referring to Filliou's score, which predates Saito and Adlers's versions,⁵ there is a precise description of the stages of this physical gag: "When we close the box, the bottom opens and the object falls out."⁶ The emphasis is on the falling object, which creates a surprise effect compared to the expected operation of an ordinary box. The idea that the box is dysfunctional is present in the title but not explicitly mentioned in the score. It is possible that Filliou intended *The Futile Box* as both a useless box *and* a prank.

The transition to manufacturing

All these documentary elements guided my thinking when designing the replica of *The Futile Box*. As far as the materiality of the box was concerned, I based the replica on the version published by Adlers, and thus on the photograph reproduced in *Robert Filliou, éditions & multiples*. For the material, I chose 10 mm-thick clear plywood and opted for butt joints (rather than rabbet and dado joints) to assemble the box because they are simpler to make and do not alter its external appearance. For the box's dimensions, I initially planned to use Adlers's measurements. Based on the box's internal dimensions, I needed to find a ball with a diameter of roughly 5 cm to fit inside. Unfortunately, the only ball I could find had a diameter of about 7 cm. To accommodate this, I had to adjust my replica's dimensions.

To fasten the lid, I referred to common practices for wooden boxes of that period, in which hinges were used to affix the lid to the box. The lid plays a crucial role in *The Futile Box* because when the lid is pressed, the ball is pushed. As the ball initially offered a certain amount of resistance, it was essential to choose a robust fastening system. This led me to opt for a piano hinge, which guaranteed greater solidity.

Once the four sides of the box had been assembled and the lid attached, a key question remained: What operating mechanism should be adopted for the bottom of the box? Two hypotheses remain for Adlers's version: either the bottom was attached to the box and opened in the same direction as the lid, or it was Filliou's free bottom mechanism variant. Filliou and Adlers most likely rejected the first option. With this option, the hinges are visible on the back of the box, hinting that the box is not ordinary. What's more, if we imagine holding the box in our

hands, the hinges are also perceptible by touch. To enhance user experience and playability, two essential features in the design of a prank, Filliou and Adlers most likely opted for the free bottom—an option I also chose for my replica. This was, in part, because *The Futile Box* was an object designed to provoke a gag. With this system, no visual or tactile clues are revealed. Moreover, when you try to close the lid, the ball and the bottom fall out simultaneously, creating an undeniable effect of surprise. Crucially, the free bottom seemed appropriate given the circumstances of the object's creation: in 1966, Filliou was in New York with Maciunas, and the two were developing projects together. This approach places *The Futile Box* in the field of “ball boxes,” as Maciunas called them when he mentioned his Fluxus publishing project in a letter to Ken Friedman in February 1967.⁷

The trick

In order to retain the appearance of Adlers's box while adopting the free bottom mechanism, it was necessary to invent a system that combined these two approaches. By attaching a second piece of wood to the inside of the bottom lid, it was possible to set it in place, while preserving the appearance of an ordinary box.

Once the replica was finished, a completely unexpected element appeared: by increasing the thickness of the bottom lid, the piece of wood was in practice doing the trick that enabled the box to work. Filliou mentions in the score that the trick lies in having “the object just a little too big for the box.” It is easy to imagine that when closing the box, if the object is slightly oversized, it will exert pressure on the bottom, causing it to open. However, a round ball cannot be both oversized *and* fit into the box. Reducing the height of the box by thickening the bottom lid allowed for the ball to both enter the box and be too big for it at the same time. Importantly, as with any good prank, the trick remains invisible to the user.

The question of source

One of the peculiarities of creating the replica was that I had never experienced or handled the original object firsthand. One can imagine that the process would have been very different if I had had access to the object. Possibly, I would have concentrated more on the physical aspects of the box, rather than on questions about the work's logic. This was prompted by the fact that my work was based first and foremost on a photograph (of Adlers's version) that offers only a single angle of the work, and that I then had to fill in the “gaps” by deducing and imagining the work's missing elements. My method consisted of comparing documentary sources: the photograph of Adlers's version, a textual score, a photograph of a prototype and a drawing with notes by the artist. However, these additional sources did not converge in a single direction but presented two *different* versions of the same object.

I often encountered divergent sources when making replicas of other Fluxus objects. Indeed, in the case of Fluxus objects, it is common to find different versions of the “same” work. For example, *The Spice Chess*, based on an idea by Saito, can take different forms: one iteration can be made of plexiglass, another of wood,

and yet another of a plastic board and glass pieces. Although different versions have been produced, the concept remains the same: players are asked to identify the pieces by smelling spices. The objects might convey the same idea and have the same titles, but their material form varies.

Conclusion

Making replicas provides an intimate understanding of the physical constitution and conceptual logic of an object as the process involves making choices. In order to make these choices, one has to weigh up the pros and cons of each decision according to various criteria. The essential elements that make up the object and



Figure 8.1 Robert Filliou, *The Futile Box*, 1977. Hinged wood box containing rubber ball. Publisher: Bengt Adlers, Malmö. The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Gift. 2025 © Estate of Robert Filliou. 2025 © Digital image, Scala, Florence/The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

which, consequently, must be present, have to be distinguished from the variable elements. In the case of *The Futile Box*, it seems to me that not making a rabbet and dado joint or slightly changing the dimensions of the box has little impact, not least because my approach is to see this box more as a game to be played with rather than as an object to be looked at. But regardless of what object is placed inside, I think it is important to keep the box small enough to hold it in one hand, inviting the user to manipulate it.

In the process of writing this text, more than a decade after the creation of the replica, and with access to other resources, in particular a photograph available on the website of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, I discovered that in 1977 Filliou and Adlers had indeed opted for two doors opening in the same direction (Figure 8.1). I also noticed that two pieces of wood had been fixed to each of the two doors to create an extra thickness. I felt confirmed. As I had imagined, it is this trick that made the box work and at the same time gives the illusion that the ball is in proportion to the object. In the end, although we didn't choose the same mechanism, this precise detail, present in both our versions, turned out to be an essential element.



Figure 8.2 Émilie Parendeau, *Almost-Replica* (Robert Filliou, *The Futile Box*, 1977), 2010. Wood box containing rubber ball. $9.5 \times 9.5 \times 10$ cm. 2025 © Émilie Parendeau, Photo: Émilie Parendeau.

Making replicas raises material and conceptual questions. It elevates the kind of thinking that unfolds in action. Ultimately, what counts is the replication process as a conceptual-material act—the understanding through making—rather than the creation of a faithful replica. This is how I came to call my futile box (Figure 8.2) and other Fluxus objects I made afterward *Almost-Replicas*.

Acknowledgments

My thanks first go to Cyrille Maillot, who constructed the replica. As explained, the process of making is also a space for thinking, meaning that the final result is ours. I am also thankful to François Curlet, for taking the time to discuss Filliou's *The Futile Box* with me while I was writing this text, and Serge and Chantal Paternoster for sending me images of *The Futile Box* that they own (Collection R. Patt).

Notes

- 1 Sylvie Jouval, *Robert Filliou, éditions & multiples* (Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2003), 79.
- 2 George Brecht and Robert Filliou, *Games at the Cedilla, or the Cedilla Takes Off* (New York: Something Else Press, 1967); Jon Hendricks, *Fluxus Codex* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995), 241–42.
- 3 It is specified that the series included twenty-five copies, two artist's proofs and eight non-trade, signed and numbered. Jouval, *Robert Filliou, éditions & multiples*, 79.
- 4 Jouval, *Robert Filliou, éditions & multiples*, 79.
- 5 Saito's model dates to around 1966 (Hendricks, *Fluxus Codex*, 242), suggesting that Filliou likely composed the score during his New York residency that same year.
- 6 Brecht and Filliou, *Games at the Cedilla*.
- 7 Hendricks, *Fluxus Codex*, 241.

Bibliography

- Brecht, George, and Robert Filliou. *Games at the Cedilla, or the Cedilla Takes Off*. New York: Something Else Press, 1967.
- Hendricks, Jon. *Fluxus Codex*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995.
- Jouval, Sylvie. *Robert Filliou, éditions & multiples*. Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2003.

9 Continuing *Intermedia* *Chart* (1995)

An activation

Patrizio Peterlini

On January 19, 1995, Dick Higgins sketched a diagram to explain the concept of intermedia to his Venetian friend, the collector and entrepreneur Luigi Bonotto. It wasn't easy for the two friends to communicate: Higgins spoke no Italian and Bonotto spoke little English. For Higgins, creating a drawing, then, seemed to be the simplest solution.

The diagram was initially sketched by hand and reworked by Higgins the following day using a computer. Thus was born—following a late-night conversation between the two friends—arguably the most notorious and widely published of Higgins's diagrams: the *Intermedia Chart*.

The story goes that the term “intermedia” was first formulated in 1962.¹ Higgins later elaborated on its theoretical foundations in numerous writings. Most notably, his essay “Intermedia,” written in December 1965, was published in the inaugural issue of *The Something Else Newsletter* by his own publishing house, Something Else Press, in February 1966.²

This was not the first intermedia diagram created by Higgins. In fact, there are two other graphs, both from 1976, in which he had already attempted to give a graphic structure to the concept: “Five Traditions of Art History, an Essay by Dick Higgins” and “Some Poetry Intermedia.”³ “Five Traditions” drew on two essays he had written in the same year outlining his reflections on contemporaneous shifts in art, namely, “The Post-Cognitive Era: Looking for the Sense in It All” (March 1976) and “Styles in Cognitivism” (May 1976).⁴ Forming a foundation for the chart drafted for Bonotto, both essays proposed new interpretive frameworks for understanding art that went beyond the traditional, dichotomous, philosophical-interpretive reading based on the contrast between Plato (idea determines style, or vice versa) and Aristotle (style and idea are separable). The intention was to demonstrate an overcoming of the old taxonomic scheme of the fine arts so as to better reflect the new situation—now, art seemed to be created at the interstices of different art media, contesting any semblance of strict separation between them. In “Some Poetry,” Higgins focused his analysis only on poetry, highlighting its experimental tendencies: among them, concrete, visual and objective. “Some Poetry” is perhaps thus better understood as an exemplification of the intermedia concept, rather than a mapping of the term itself.

To demonstrate the conceptual affinities between the three diagrams, in a letter to Bonotto dated January 28, 1998, Higgins gave precise indications as to how to bring them together: “The new piece [*Intermedia Chart*] would go in the middle, ‘Five Traditions . . .’ on the left and ‘Some Poetry Intermedia’ on the right, forming a triptych (trittico).”⁵ The two friends then decided to transform the *Intermedia Chart* into a 75 × 100 cm edition to be printed on cardboard and wooden panels. Printing tests were carried out, and critic and curator Henry Martin translated the *Intermedia Chart* into Italian in order to produce the edition in two versions, one in English and the other in Italian. A unique arrangement of the diagram silk-screened on a mirror conceived for Bonotto’s home concluded the operation.

Unfortunately, due to Higgins’s passing in 1998 before the project’s completion, work on the editions was discontinued. Nevertheless, several unique pieces had come to fruition: the silk-screened mirror iteration for Bonotto and several versions of the chart executed in two different colors on cardboard and one on wood. Today, all the versions are part of the Bonotto Collection located in Vicenza, together with numerous works and documents produced by Higgins and other Fluxus artists during their frequent visits and residencies with the Bonotto family.

Updates and adaptations of a historical concept

In 2019, as we approached the sixtieth anniversary of the “Intermedia” essay and the thirtieth anniversary of the *Intermedia Chart*, I invited artists associated with the Fondazione Bonotto to participate in what I conceived as an “update” and an activation of the diagram. Approximately thirty artists received a copy of the original *Intermedia Chart*, printed on 70 × 50 cm cardboard, and were encouraged to intervene on the printout both conceptually and visually. The participants included historical Fluxus members Eric Andersen, Philip Corner, Alison Knowles, Milan Knížák and Mieko Shiomi; experimental poets Alain Arias-Misson, Tomomi Adachi, Giovanni Fontana, Richard Kostelanetz, Clemente Padin and Lamberto Pignotti; and a young generation of artists including Suzana Husarova, Maja Jantar, Cia Rinne and Kinga Toth.

Higgins consistently emphasizes the descriptive, rather than prescriptive, nature of the concept of intermedia. For instance, in his 1981 addendum to the definition of intermedia, he asserts that the concept “does not praise itself or present a model for doing either new or great works. It says only that intermedial works exist.”⁶ Arguably, similar sentiments are at play in the *Intermedia Chart*. The chosen form—of intersecting circles of different sizes—endows the *Intermedia Chart* with a mobile, fluctuating character, as if to reflect the nature of the concept itself: always in flux. Following Higgins’s writings, the diagram cannot be conceived in a static way, prompting the thought that it might be time to update it. This idea arose from the belief that the concept of intermedia is crucial for the interpretation of twentieth-century art. It allows us to approach the radical change in mentality, also indicated by Higgins himself, which might be summarized as the transition from category to continuity, a transition which has also proved to question consolidated historical-artistic languages.⁷

In these terms, the concept of intermedia gains new significance, moving beyond the dominant tendency to describe a work of art solely by its formal qualities. Although Higgins initially used and introduced the concept exactly so as to have the tools for accessing and describing art forms that cross the boundaries of recognized media, which surged in the 1960s, his 1965 article “Intermedia” goes further. He likens this change in mentality to the cultural shift of the Renaissance—an epochal transformation in both cultural and social perspectives. Following this reasoning, “intermedia” would become the name of a cultural movement within which numerous currents were recognizable: environments, Happenings, video art, visual poetry, relational art and culture jamming, among others—all those tendencies with a propensity for mixing and fusing hitherto separate forms of media into a single, inseparable structure.⁸

During the Fluxus Study Day and public panel organized by the research project *Activating Fluxus* at the Fondazione Bonotto in May 2023,⁹ we observed a connection between the idea of updating the *Intermedia Chart* and the project’s focus on activation. Our discussion centered on the reconstruction, adaptation and reinterpretation of historic Fluxus works. Similarly, the artists involved in updating the *Intermedia Chart* adapted its historic concept to the contemporary context, incorporating new art forms that were absent in the 1960s. Their approach became a key starting point for our discussions.

Can one activate a concept? Corner, Agraftotis, Shiomi and Friedman

Our idea of “updating” the *Intermedia Chart* aimed to activate it by re-examining Higgins’s original concept. But what does it mean to activate a concept? The *Intermedia Chart* is not a traditional artwork; it serves as a conceptual framework rather than a Fluxus piece requiring audience participation. The question marks within the *Chart* suggest potential future art forms rather than direct calls for public input. If a concept becomes inactive—no longer relevant in art theory or history—can it be reactivated? Or does it signal a shift toward a more refined idea that better aligns with contemporary art?

Fortunately, the intermedia concept remains robust and widely utilized by scholars, retaining its invigorating quality. While it is sometimes misinterpreted as merely multimedia or mixed media, this only highlights its ongoing relevance and capacity to inspire new discussions.

In the original diagram, the empty circles indicate that future additions and integrations—possibly not by Higgins himself—were anticipated during its creation, enabling both visual and conceptual transformation.

Among artistic responses, Philip Corner’s 2009 update of the *Intermedia Chart* reacts to Higgins’s openness to additions and integrations. Corner’s intervention is quite complex, featuring new circles filled with concepts instead of specific art forms (Figure 9.1). He includes suggestions, such as “meditation,” “imagination” and “fantasy,” rather than actual manifestations of new media. Notably, in the upper part of the diagram, just below the printed title, he emphasizes “THOUGHT

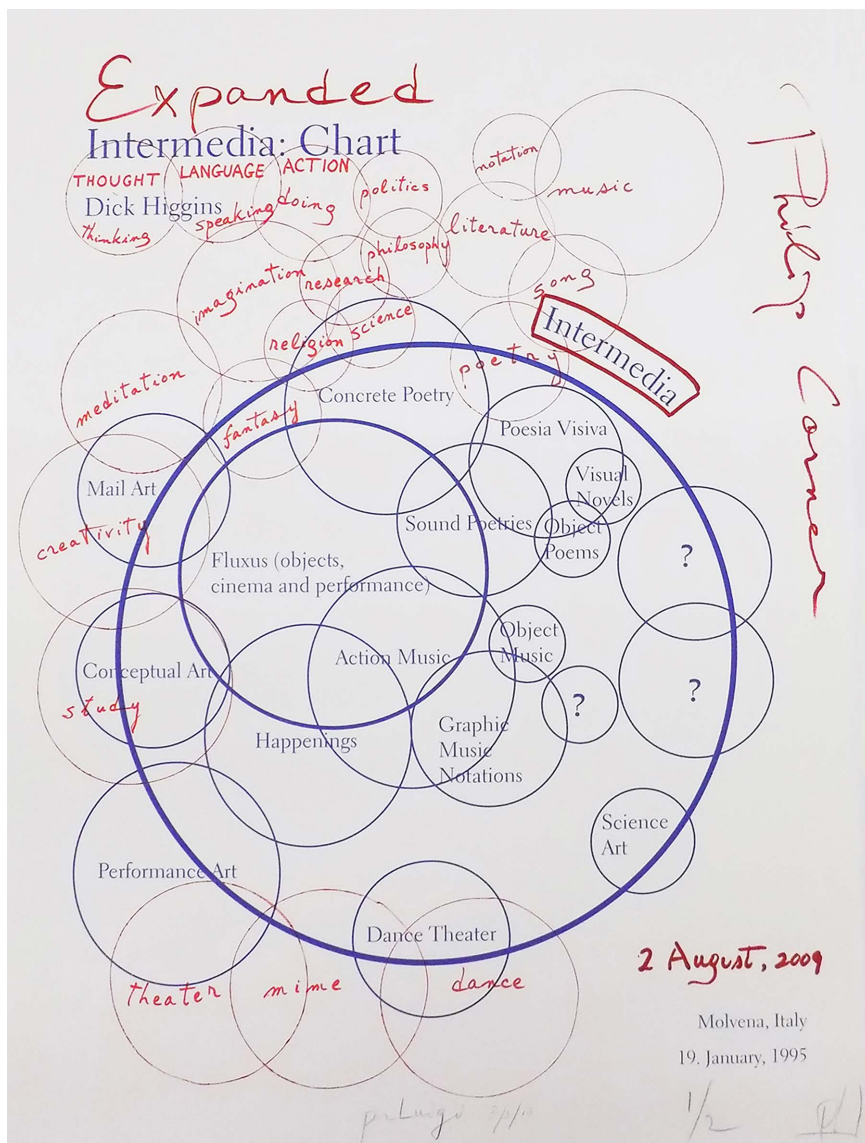


Figure 9.1 Philip Corner, *Intermedia Chart Update* (2009). Manual intervention on digitally printed cardboard, 80 × 60 cm. Courtesy Fondazione Bonotto and the artist.
© Philip Corner.

LANGUAGE ACTION” in capital letters, underscoring their significance. For Corner, these three words—thought, language and action—form a conceptual triad for understanding intermedia. They represent core elements found in all forms of intermedia, each present to varying degrees. He emphasizes their active nature by inscribing the present participles—thinking, speaking and doing—within the same

Intermedia: Chart

Dick Higgins

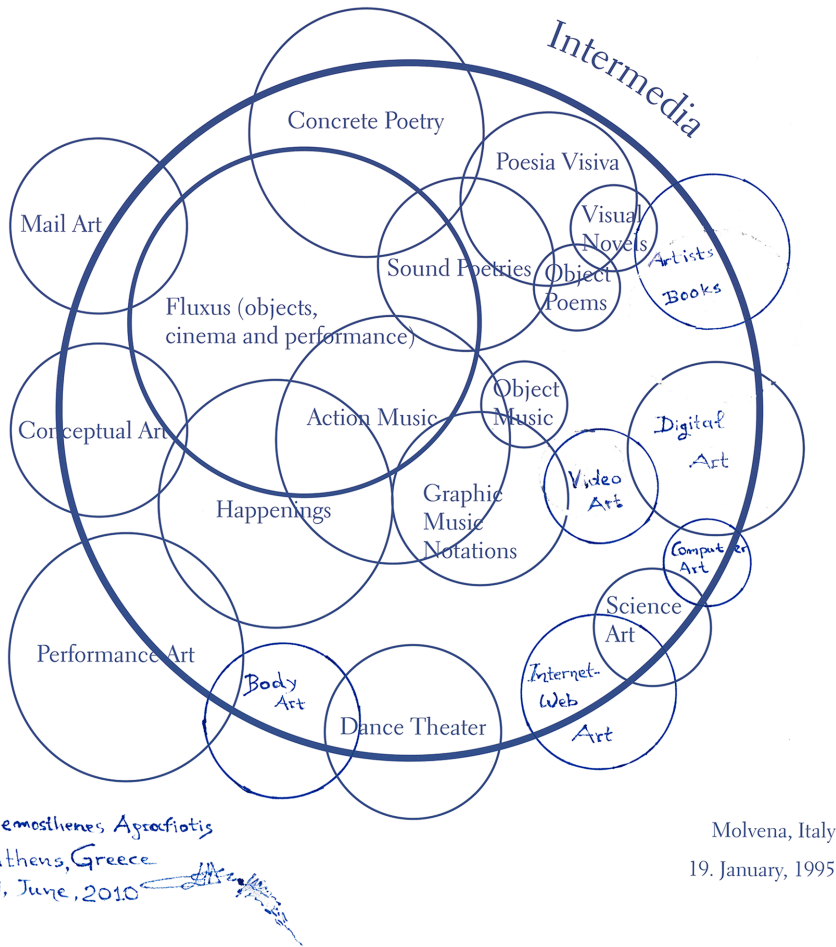


Figure 9.2 Demosthenes Agrafiotis, *Intermedia Chart Update* (2010). Manual intervention on digitally printed cardboard, 80 × 60 cm. Courtesy Fondazione Bonotto and the artist. © Demosthenes Agrafiotis.

circles. This visual intervention deepens and expands the conceptual implications of the chart.

Demosthenes Agrafiotis's update provides another example of artists expanding the *Intermedia Chart*'s visual and conceptual elements (Figure 9.2). While the

Greek poet limited himself to a few simple amendments of the diagram, he complemented this with extensive philosophical and theoretical reflections, publishing numerous articles and books on the subject. The first of these, “Reorientations, Revisions (Essay on Visual Poetry),” published in 2022, has had considerable success and has appeared in several languages, including Greek, French and English.¹⁰ In his version, the emphasis is on the fact that new technologies (computing and image generation) have contributed to the fields of poetry and art in an increasingly decisive way, opening up new trajectories and even truly new creative spaces. In fact, Agrafiotis proposes a reading that somehow goes against the basic idea supported by Higgins, according to which: “So often technical innovations are confused with ideational ones.”¹¹ For Higgins, the use of new technologies is not interesting in itself, but must respond to a need internal to the artwork in order to overcome an expressive obstacle. For Agrafiotis, the application of new technologies seems to be a value in itself.

Triggering an activation process can sometimes compel us to accept its results. Changes, second thoughts, denials and transformations of the work must be embraced without hesitation. But should such changes be fully accepted? This question becomes even more pressing when considering Mieko Shiomi’s update of *Intermedia Chart* (Figure 9.3), which dramatically alters the meaning of Higgins’s original concept by introducing the notion of “transmedia.” Shiomi refers to her speech at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, of April 29, 2012, entitled “Intermedia/Transmedia,” where she discusses the real movement, displacement and translation of the work that begins in one form and evolves into many others. These are works that migrate from one medium to another. In this lecture, Shiomi posits:

There is a travel term, “transfer” or “transit.” Just as people continue their journeys by transferring from one type of transportation to another, an artwork can continue its creative evolution by transferring from one medium to the next.¹²

Shiomi graphically represents this shift with a series of arrows added to Higgins’s chart, making it even more dynamic. In doing so, she attempts to go beyond the concept of intermedia, proposing nomadism as a central element. Interestingly, this focus on movement was already emphasized by Higgins in his original formulation. In his “Intermedia” text from April 1966, he notes that “George Brecht . . . has moved from painting through collage and the art-games into an investigation of the limits of art.”¹³

My final example is Ken Friedman’s recent intervention in the *Intermedia Chart* (Figure 9.4). Among Fluxus artists, Friedman stands out as the one most engaged with the concept of intermedia.¹⁴ He approached it from a different angle, choosing not to alter the diagram itself. Instead, he created a short text accompanied by a photo, discussing the juxtaposition of the *Intermedia Chart* and a painting, *The Coming Storm* by Edward Lamson Henry.¹⁵ In doing so, Friedman crafted an intermedia work that lies between theory, a diary entry, memory and photography,

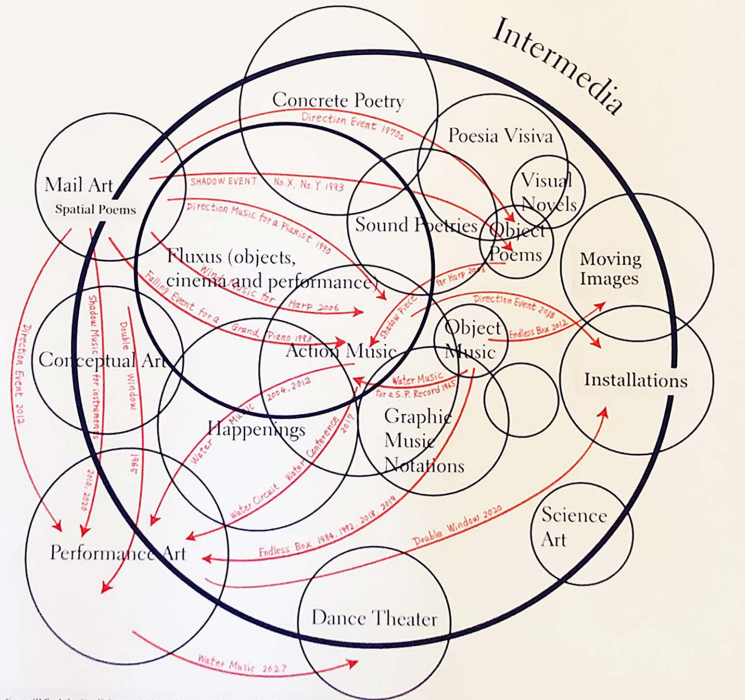
Intermedia: Chart

Dick Higgins

Transmedia: Chart

Transmedia is a method of creating artworks in various genre from the same concepts or materials by changing media to use.

Mieko Shiomi



You will find the English translation of my talk "Intermedia/Transmedia" at Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo on April 29, 2012 on the internet with [mama mieka shiomi] intermedia/transmedia

Niala-Shiomi March 2020

Molvena, Italy

19. January, 1995

Figure 9.3 Mieko Shiomi, *Intermedia Chart Update* (2020). Manual intervention on digitally printed cardboard, 80 × 60 cm. Courtesy Fondazione Bonotto and the artist. © Mieko Shiomi.

expanding the concept of intermedia itself—what might be called “intermedia cubed.” Friedman concludes his text with these words:

Dick's vision of intermedia—and the artefacts of history—appear in many forms. Occasionally they move, taking on new shapes and configurations.

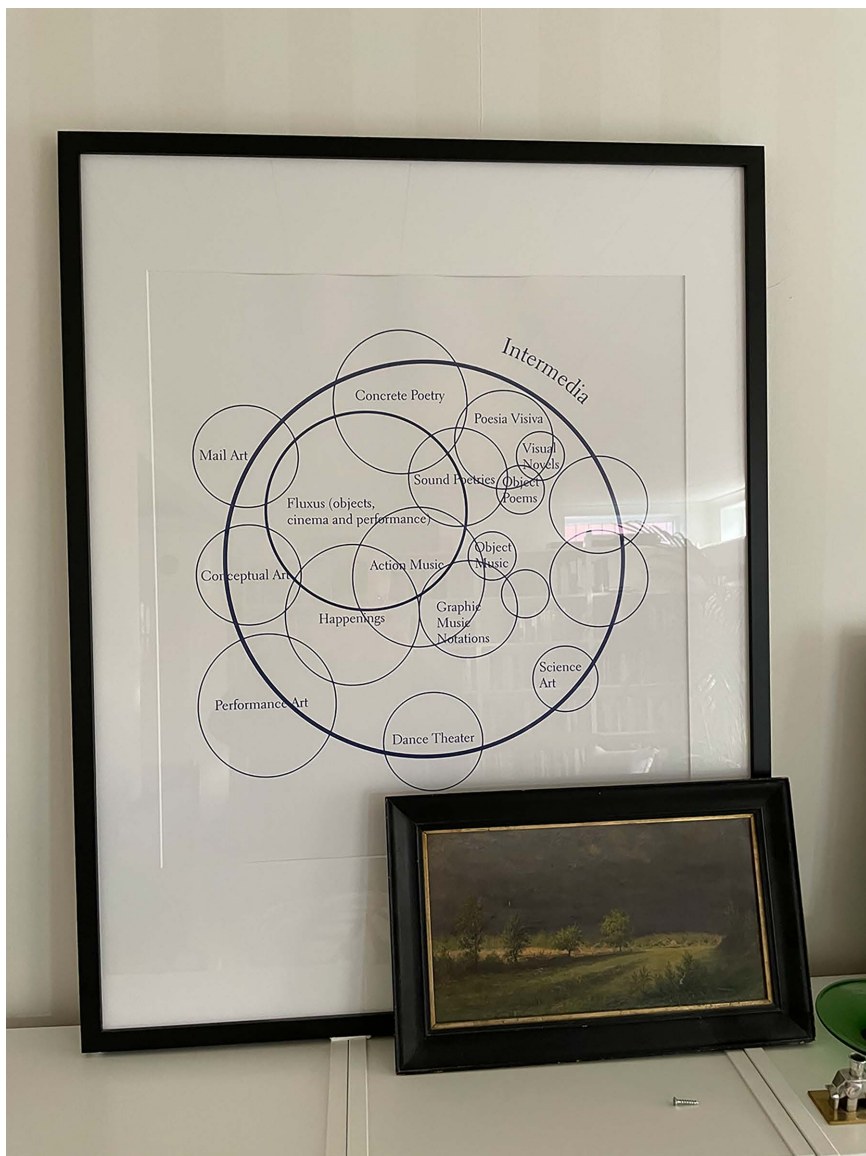


Figure 9.4 Ken Friedman, *Intermedia Chart Update* (2024). Manual intervention on digitally printed cardboard. Photo: André Lindhal. Courtesy Fondazione Bonotto and the artists. © Ken Friedman and André Lindhal.

They generate new stories and new meanings with every layer. And that, too, is the meaning of intermedia.¹⁶

Wow! I completely agree with this conclusion, which effectively summarizes all the work presented here.

Activation as curatorial practice

The idea of activation is central to curatorial practice, in both exhibition planning and historical archive management. The notion that curation is merely about selecting works for display or that conservation is limited solely to traditional methods is being increasingly challenged. Instead, curatorial practice now focuses on strategies to involve the public, enhancing both the experience of exhibitions and the dissemination of collections—both of which involve the concept of activation.

Updating the *Intermedia Chart* has revealed several facets that further support these considerations. First, it highlights the involvement of artists in rethinking and reformulating a work or a concept. The invitation to update the *Intermedia Chart* has pushed many artists toward a theoretical-conceptual reflection on their own practices and on contemporary art. From this point of view, a particular object preserved in an archive has become a stimulus and pretext for new productions, which is perhaps one of the most important and vital functions of an archive. Contrary to the very widespread idea of the archive as a stale, moldy and sterile place, this project makes the archive a propulsive, generative and fruitful space. The second aspect relates to artistic production. The initiative triggered the production of around thirty new works, enriching the archive with intellectual and aesthetic content. The third concerns the purpose of updating the *Intermedia Chart*. While it began as an effort to enhance a work within the collection—and thus the collection's history—it has also initiated a design process. The temporality of *Intermedia Chart* is not locked in the past but is projected into the future, as it paves the way for new exhibition projects related to the works produced during its activation, and for the activation of other documents in the collection.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude by revisiting a concept introduced in the title of this anthology, *Activating Fluxus, Expanding Conservation*—specifically, the notion of expansion. The activation of artworks preserved in a collection, whether Fluxus works or others, inevitably leads not only to the evolution of the concept of conservation but also to the expansion of the collection itself. Conservation can no longer be understood as pure custody, or a process that simply protects works from deterioration. With the introduction of the practice of activation, as proposed in relation to Fluxus works by the present book (but which, I insist, is not only relevant to the Fluxus world but also extendable to all artistic and cultural fields), even an accounting archive can reserve surprises if well activated. The traditional concept of conservation shifts to involve other practices, such as curation, therefore expanding its relevance to other areas, the intersections of which have only recently started to be explored.

In my role as a collection conservator and curator at the Fondazione Bonotto, I have always aimed to develop projects that adhere to the principle of activation, as demonstrated by the *Intermedia Chart* examined here. At other times, I have invited young artists to engage with the works in the collection as a stimulus for research and the development of new productions. One such project focused on

artists' books and led to the exhibition *Fluxbooks: From the Sixties to the Future*, developed in collaboration with the Atelier program of the Bevilacqua La Masa Foundation. Another project resulted in the creation of the *Roll Up* (2016) edition, a book/binder made of fine fabric that contains the artists' works. In both cases, the historical objects of the collection served as the foundation for new works and interpretations of historical pieces by young artists who were in residence at Bevilacqua La Masa. In this way, these historical objects, removed from the vitrines in which they were stored, have been revitalized in the contemporary world, becoming true propulsive agents—the catalysts and sources of stimulus and research for new generations of artists.

Notes

- 1 It is important to note that in his later writings Higgins credited Samuel Taylor Coleridge with the first use of the term "intermedium." See Dick Higgins, "Intermedia," in *Horizons: The Poetics and Theory of the Intermedia* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984 [1981]), 25. According to Centamore and Xatrec, the concept of intermedia was formulated by Higgins in 1964/5 and published on in 1966; see Christian Xatrec and Alice Centamore, eds., *Call It Something Else: Something Else Press, Inc. 1963–1974* (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, 2023), 11.
- 2 Dick Higgins, "Intermedia," *The Something Else Newsletter* 1, no. 1 (February 1966): 1.
- 3 Both essays were published in Dick Higgins, *A Dialectic of Centuries: Notes Towards a Theory of the New Arts* (New York: Printed Editions, 1978).
- 4 Dick Higgins, "The Post-Cognitive Era: Looking for the Sense in it All," in *A Dialectic of Centuries*, 3–9; Dick Higgins, "Styles in Cognitivism," in *A Dialectic of Centuries*, 93–101.
- 5 Dick Higgins, letter to Luigi Bonotto, January 28, 1998, Fondazione Bonotto, code 0092. See also "Three Intermedia Diagrams," Fondazione Bonotto, <https://www.fondazionebonotto.org/en/collection/fluxus/higginsdick/920.html>.
- 6 Dick Higgins, "Intermedia," in *Horizons*, 25.
- 7 Higgins refers to the radical societal changes that took place at the beginning of the twentieth century, marked by the breakdown of the class system cherished by the aristocracy, especially after the disintegration of secular empires following World War I. Until the nineteenth century, society was structured as a rigid system defined by social classes, a structure mirrored in scientific, artistic and philosophical taxonomies. This system began to unravel with the onset of the twentieth century. Dick Higgins, "Intermedia," *The Something Else Newsletter*: 1.
- 8 Higgins emphasizes that the term "intermedia" cannot be confined to a single historical period. He warns that "failure to understand this would lead to the kind of error of thinking that intermedia are necessarily dated in time by their nature, something rooted in the 1960s, like an art movement of the period." Dick Higgins, "Intermedia," in *Horizons*, 25.
- 9 The study day and public event "Activating Fluxus: In and Out of the Archive," co-organized by *Activating Fluxus* and Fondazione Bonotto, was held at the headquarters of Fondazione Bonotto in Colceresa, Italy, May 4–5, 2023. See "Activating Fluxus: In and Out of the Archive," *Activating Fluxus*, May 1, 2024, <https://activatingfluxus.com/2023/03/09/activating-fluxus-in-and-out-of-the-archive/>.
- 10 Demosthenes Agrafiotis, "Reorientations, Revisions (Essay on Visual Poetry)," *Otoliths. A Magazine of Many e-Things*, February 13, 2022, <https://the-otolith.blogspot.com/2022/02/demosthenes-agrafiotis-english.html>.
- 11 Dick Higgins, "Against Movements," *The Something Else Newsletter* 1, no. 6 (May 1967): 1–3.
- 12 Mieko Shiomi, "Intermedia/Transmedia," Post: Notes on Art in a Global Context, Museum of Modern Art, July 11, 2013, <https://post.moma.org/intermedia-transmedia/>.

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10 Mieko Shiomi: On ever-changing appearance—a conversation with Sally Kawamura

Mieko Shiomi is a composer, musician and visual artist. Her artistic journey began during her student years when she emerged as a pioneering free-improviser, co-founding the Tokyo-based Group Ongaku, which was active from the late 1950s. As her practice evolved, Shiomi transitioned from improvisational performance to incorporating actions and objects as music. From 1964 to 1965, Shiomi spent a formative year in New York, where she joined the cohort of Fluxus-related artists. After returning to Japan, she continued composing and performing, actively participating in numerous international Fluxus festivals, exhibitions and concerts. Many of Shiomi's works feature temporal, performative, interactive and participatory elements, characteristics shared with much of Fluxus's output. These qualities present unique challenges for the display of her work within traditional museum environments. In this conversation, Sally Kawamura, a scholar specializing in 1960s Japanese experimental art, discusses with Shiomi her perspectives on the development, presentation and continuation of her works.

Sally Kawamura: Mieko, I'd like to start by talking about some of your instruction pieces, starting with the first one you wrote, *Mirror Piece* [1963] (Figure 10.1). Could you tell me a little about this piece, its background and how you composed it? I'm also interested in your own performance of it.

Mieko Shiomi: In 1962, I finished university¹ and went back to my hometown of Okayama, Japan, and in March 1963, I held a recital to present my works at Okayama Prefectural Cultural Centre. I played tape music, performed graphic scores, had several people perform action music, et cetera. The reaction of my fellow performers and the audience was favorable; but as soon as it finished, I felt that it was meaningless to continue in Okayama the types of music that I had already experienced in Tokyo. I was driven to create something thoroughly different and completely new.

I'd always liked nature and since I was a little girl I had wanted to create something to match its beauty. If I couldn't do that, then I was driven by an irrational desire to just capture

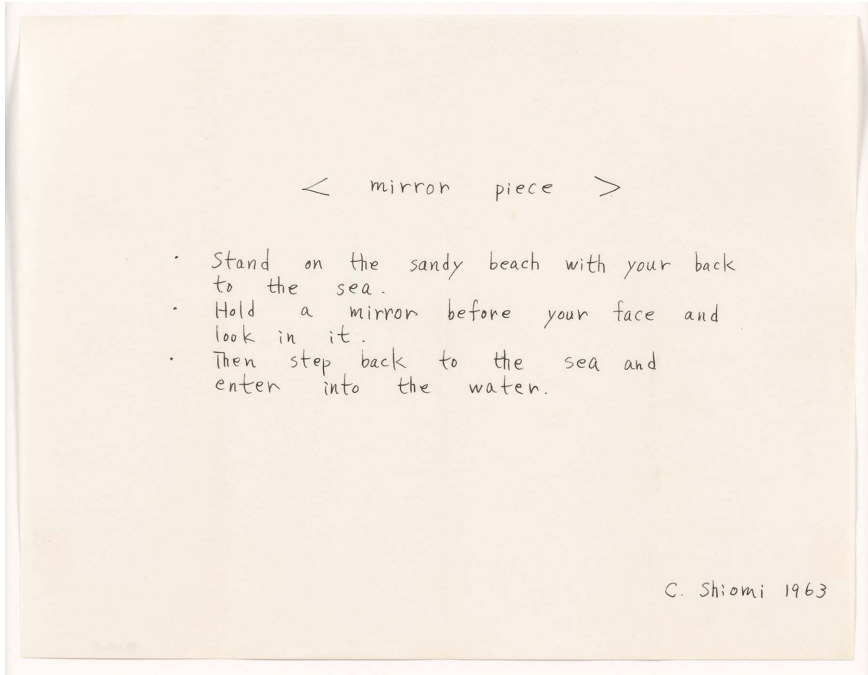


Figure 10.1 Mieko Shiomi, handwritten instruction for *Mirror Piece* (1963). Ink on paper, 17.5 × 22.8 cm. The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Gift. Acc. n.: 2711.2008 © 2024. Digital image, The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence. Courtesy of the artist and The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence.

a fragment of nature alive. In the midst of such conflict, I suddenly thought that if that was impossible, it would work if I could become a mirror that reflected the beauty of nature. As soon as I thought this, *Mirror Piece* [1963] was born. Perhaps I was a little wiser then than when I was a little girl. The debut performance in 1965 was by myself on a shoal [shallow area] of the coast of the Seto Inland Sea. I recall that, as I entered the water, I felt as though the horizon was gradually getting closer, and as the waves rocked my body, I had a dazzling feeling of becoming one with the sea. I felt I had returned to my starting point. I consider *Mirror Piece* and *Endless Box* [1963] to be my “maiden works.”

Kawamura:

Before you realized that Fluxus artists were calling their instruction works “event scores,” you called your first instruction works “action poems.” Just as music needs to be performed to exist as music, does the poem need to be performed in order

to be activated, or, like other written poems, could it simply exist as a poem composed of written actions?

Shiomi: Regarding why I chose the name “action poem,” when we were doing “improvised performance” in Group Ongaku,² we gradually included more actions, and we called this “action music.” I then wanted to do some poetic action that was not for the purpose of making sound, so I named it an “action poem.” This doesn’t mean that the poem as words is expressed with the action of the body. First, there was a “poetic act” and what was written to explain how to act it out was the instruction, and therefore the action poem. So, you asked, “does the poem need to be performed in order to be activated?” But it’s quite the opposite. As for the name, it may have been better to say “poetic action” or “action poetic,” but at the time, for me, it was the next genre I discovered after “action music,” so I ended up calling it “action poem.” The written words are definitely not a literary poem but are merely a simple scenario (script) to explain how to act out the poetic action (performance).

Kawamura: What is your opinion about exhibiting event scores in a gallery? Is it acceptable to exhibit just the scores, or do we need something else to go with them, for example, a performance, photographs or a film of a performance?

Shiomi: I think it’s fine to exhibit just the score or include some photographs or films of past performances. Visual images are very strong and have the advantage of being immediately understood, but they also contain the danger of limiting the possibilities held by the score. However, there are people who will imagine different performances from this specific visual information, so I think it’s fine to exhibit both. In other words, both ways are okay.

The writing on the original cards is quite small and difficult to read, so, in a large venue, I think it might be best to include an enlarged version alongside the original.

Kawamura: *Mirror Piece* is a startlingly powerful piece that unfolds its power when performed—enactment/embodiment is a method I frequently use in my research. When I performed it, I was jolted with a sense of being part of a large expanse of nature. I could see my own image in the mirror within the reflection of the vast sea and horizon. You have also mentioned the merger with nature as being a result of performing the piece. *Mirror Piece* exists as a score and an instruction, and there are also various films and photographs. However, watching a film, we’re watching a performer’s actions, so the viewpoint is different than experiencing it firsthand. However, of course, the instruction doesn’t specify that the merger with nature should be a particular result of the action. Would you say that the viewer of a

film can meaningfully experience *Mirror Piece*, or do they need to perform the score themselves in order to gain a deeper experience of the work?

Shiomi: A video is shot by a third party, so it doesn't convey the performer's feelings at all. This is unavoidable. So, for exhibition, why don't you add the performer's feelings beside or below the film? The performer's feelings would be displayed just as they are. Doing this would perhaps enable the viewer to understand [the work] deeply and in more detail.

Kawamura: The score holds various possibilities and, as you said, there could be a danger in limiting them. I love how in *Spatial Poem* [1965–75] you integrated different responses to various event scores.³ Could you talk more about this and the effect of displaying different responses side by side?

Shiomi: The real pleasure of *Spatial Poem* is precisely the diversity in people's responses. When I see a report from a viewpoint that I wouldn't have thought of myself, I really feel like I want to thank that person. So, when I see the various reports set next to one another, I feel a complex and splendid harmony, just like the sound of differently pitched notes played at the same time. For example, when I did *Spatial Poem No. 2: "direction event"* [1965], I sent out a table with the time difference calculated for each country, and requested reports on what direction the participants were facing, or what direction they were moving toward at the same moment in time. One person wrote, "I was spinning myself on an office chair very rapidly in the elevator, which was going up, thus facing all directions and moving upward," and another wrote, "I am going in the direction of simplification." Yet another reported, "I was going from my fourth beer glass to my fifth beer glass." There were completely different interpretations, observations and actions, resulting in a stunning panorama. It's not a matter of which ones are interesting and which are boring, but their differences seem to complement one another. So, I feel that *Spatial Poem* could be taken as a hymn to human imagination and daily life, which we all created together somewhat unintentionally.

Kawamura: It's fascinating to think about responses reverberating like sound and how each interpretation adds something new to the harmony. You've talked about your concept of "transmedia," which describes the process of taking your previous works or event scores as a starting point and creating new pieces from them. Do you think that, through transmedia, your work reverberates in time, always holding the possibility of becoming something else? Could you describe transmedia a little more and tell us about any difference or similarities between "activating" and interpreting an event score?

Shiomi:

I came up with the concept of transmedia in 2012, when I was invited to give a lecture and performance at the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo.⁴ Up until then, whenever I created a work, I would always think about whether I could make another, quite different, piece using the same concept or material. For example, from the idea of “direction” in *Spatial Poem No. 2: “direction event”* [1965], I composed the piano piece *Direction Music for a Pianist* [1990], and from the event work *Balance Poem* [1966], I made visual collage works [1991] with the same title,⁵ and produced a collaborative work with Fluxus members called *Fluxus Balance* [1993]. At the time, I didn’t have the concept of transmedia, but looking back, I realized that I had been creating works in different media using the same concept or phenomena—in other words, I had been doing transmedia. Then, at the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, I combined it with the idea of “intermedia,” which was a concept consciously created in the late 1960s [by Dick Higgins], and I titled the lecture “Intermedia/Transmedia.”⁶ In intermedia, a work is either intermedia or it isn’t, but transmedia is a concept or a method that can only be established with the existence of a series of works.

On the other hand, regarding the creative interpretation of event scores, the interpretation may be limited by the type of specification in the instruction. For example, in *Disappearing Music for Face* [1964], since the instruction is “smile—no smile,”⁷ if you add in other elements, such as a narration about something, music or video, it becomes a separate multimedia work. Of course, I’m not saying that a wide interpretation isn’t good.

However, if you put the performance of the slowly disappearing smile in parallel with a sustained sound, or a light that fades at the same time, you could say it is a work close to transmedia. This is because, although the media is different, it carries over the concept of “attenuation” from the original work. Nonetheless, Maciunas transmediated this work brilliantly. In other words, he had a performance of the smile being slowly extinguished put on film,⁸ and then took out several frames of the film to create a flipbook.⁹

However, in my creative process, I’m not really conscious of such conceptual things. As far as creation is concerned, the most important thing is the overall purpose of the project that the work is being submitted to, and the conditions of the place where it will be performed. For example, in 2018 at the White-Box in New York, there was an exhibition designed around Japanese artists who used to be active in New York,¹⁰ and they

requested a new work, so I devised an installation work, *Direction Event 2018*. The idea of the piece is that, in the past, many artists headed for New York and gathered there, but now we can do the opposite and head for various locations on the earth from New York.

The instruction I sent them was:

Write six directions such as “from WhiteBox in New York toward Indigenous Birds in Madagascar” or “from WhiteBox in New York toward Active Volcanoes in Iceland” on boards and place them high up in the venue. Pull a string from directly above each board towards the actual direction written on it and fix it where it hits the wall to create an installation where many strings are crossing overhead.

This is how I feel about the endeavor of creating: by being stimulated by the conditions, such as the project’s purpose or the type of venue, the various media and concepts that are floating inside my memory intertwine themselves and the work starts to show its form by itself. It can be said that the work is not created by a method, but when you look at it later, it looks like it has been. It’s that kind of thing. For my solo exhibition at Toki-no-wasuremono next spring [2025], I’m thinking of further developing this *Direction Event* and setting up different instructions for where the strings are headed, so that the audience can enjoy a little performance.

Kawamura: It seems that by using a transmedial approach, you enable your work to respond in a lively way in different environments, making it very fresh each time. Looking very far ahead, how do you envisage the future of your work? Do you think about it at all?

Shiomi: As far as the future of my works is concerned, I haven’t concretely or clearly envisioned anything. This is because, in my case, the concrete form of the work is determined by factors such as the location and conditions under which it is actually performed or exhibited. There is a word, *hengenjizai* [変幻自在, meaning “capable of ever-changing appearance,” “shape-shifting,”¹¹ “transformative”¹²], and even for my works from now, the one characteristic that won’t change in the future is that they will be able to take any shape depending on the real-world conditions.

However, looking back at the past and thinking particularly about music and performance works, there has been a long span of alternating between periods of tending to expand and, vice versa, periods of contraction. It’s as if it was breathing in and

out slowly. With that in mind, if I were to give a prediction, I think I'll be doing stage productions with large-scale instrumental arrangements and performances from now. I feel that my recent six-person ensemble called *The Celestial Sphere of a Spring Night* [2024] was the gateway to this. But maybe in a few years I might go back to making simple works, like I used to when I was starting out . . . but I don't know.

Kawamura: I'd like to return to the theme of the starting point of your journey and think about *Endless Box*. I think this was the beginning of your connection with Fluxus, when Nam June Paik saw a similarity between the piece and the approach of other artists already connected with Maciunas. Can I ask about how you described it to him? Did you show it to him, and, if so, how?

Shiomi: At the "New Direction—Second Concert" at the Sogetsu Kaikan Hall in Tokyo in July 1963, I was introduced to Nam June Paik by my friends from Group Ongaku. He asked, "Miss Shiomi, what kind of music are you doing?" and I told him about the *Endless Box*, which I was making at the time.

By then, I was living in my hometown of Okayama, and I was stoically thinking about what the essence of music was. One conclusion I reached was that music is perhaps the intuitive recognition of the continuum of time, and therefore it could be experienced not just in sound, but visually as well. As soon as I thought this, I remembered an origami object, a box I made when I was a child which, when you opened it, contained gradually smaller and smaller boxes inside. Right away, I decided on the size, so that I could make one with two full sheets of paper, and started making it. I met Paik right around this time.

When I told him, "I'm making this as a visual diminuendo," he was really surprised and said, "Wow! You're totally Fluxus! Please send this box to a person called Maciunas. He'd be delighted!" At the same time, I also talked about *Mirror Piece*, the performance work that I called an "action poem," and he said, "Since I'd like to read it too, send it to my place first, please, and I'll then send it on to Maciunas." At that point, he hadn't seen *Endless Box*.

After I returned to Okayama, I sent *Endless Box* to the address I had been given for Maciunas. A letter in reply came straight away: "I really love this box. I'm currently thinking of making 'Fluxkits'—trunks filled with the assorted works of Fluxus artists. I'm going to make several so please send lots [of sets of *Endless Box*] and I'll pay you twenty dollars for each set." I think I sent at least ten. Twenty dollars is about the price of a lunch now, but at the exchange rate for Japanese Yen at the time, it was close to the value of a year's worth of tuition fees at a national university.

Afterward, he wrote, "I'm going to publish your action poems, so please send them as soon as you can." We were frequently exchanging letters and works, and, after a while, he said, "Better still, won't you come to New York and work with us?" So, on Independence Day, July 4, 1964, I landed at an airport in New York, where Maciunas came to meet us.¹³ Thinking about it, *Endless Box* led the way for me to cross the bridge into Fluxus.

Also, if I hadn't been to that concert, and hadn't talked to Paik about my work, I wouldn't exist as I do now. I can't help thinking that fate is a strange thing.

Kawamura: *Endless Box* has been displayed in different ways in different settings. Did you think about exhibiting the boxes or how the piece could be shown in an exhibition when you first made it?

Shiomi: When I started making *Endless Box*, I was very focused on turning a musical idea into an object. I don't think I really thought about how it would be exhibited. After making a few of them, I got out all the boxes and lined them up and came up with the idea of making various shapes with them. For example, I could stack them up into a tower, or line them up according to size, going from biggest to smallest, or stack a few of them randomly, et cetera.

Because I grew up looking at the view of the archipelago in the Seto Inland Sea, I liked lining up large and small boxes like islands, but I had never thought of the circular arrangement by Aki Fujii of the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo (Figure 10.2).¹⁴ This arrangement has left a lasting impression on me.

Kawamura: *Endless Box* has so many wonderful possibilities for display, and it is responsive to different people's ideas and backgrounds. I think that for a person to come up with an arrangement that they like, they would have to spend time playing with the boxes.

I'd like to ask you one last question about Fluxus. Many people have wondered about how Fluxus pieces, often designed to be interacted with and played with, might still be "alive" in a museum setting. What are the challenges of keeping Fluxus works alive, or even keeping Fluxus alive? Is Fluxus alive, or does it need to be activated or revived?

Shiomi: I don't know much about how Fluxus works are exhibited in overseas art museums, but I have proposed some ideas for the past few Fluxus-related exhibitions held in Japan. In particular, at the Aichi Triennale 2022, the executive committee asked to exhibit the publications related to *Spatial Poem*, but their theme of "Still Alive" would not have come to life

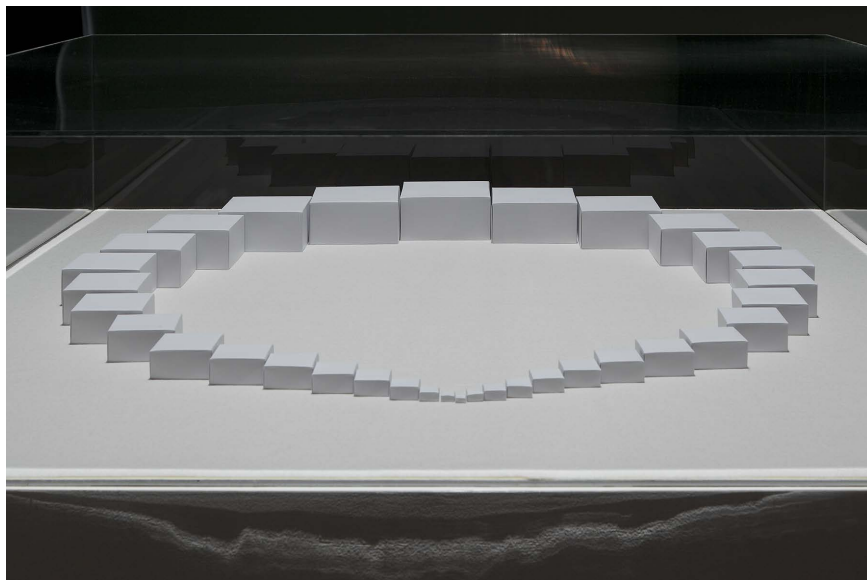


Figure 10.2 Mieko Shiomi, *Endless Box* (1963), arranged by Aki Fujii, Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, in the exhibition *Kaikan 20 shūnenkinen MOT korekushon tokubetsu kikaku kontakutsu/Twentieth Anniversary Special MOT Collection Contacts*, September 27, 2014–January 4, 2015. Courtesy of Mieko Shiomi/Aki Fujii.

if we had just exhibited past documents, so we did my newly conceived *moving event* [2022] (Figure 10.3). As long as I'm alive, I always like the challenge of new possibilities.

Generally, Fluxus works hold many possibilities for how to exhibit and perform them, so I hope that each time, those involved will use their imaginations to explore new exhibition possibilities and enjoy them themselves.

Also, I think it would be a good idea to entrust the exhibition method and realization of Fluxus works to active young artists, like they were doing at the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, Japan, and work together with them while incorporating their ideas.¹⁵ However, due to the major earthquake just before the exhibition, their building was destroyed and it was cancelled.

Recently, I have been in contact with many young people, and most of them say that they were influenced by Fluxus. In that sense, certainly, the Fluxus spirit has been passed down to them and is very much alive. I think this is because Fluxus works have been exhibited and discussed in various forms in



Figure 10.3 Mieko Shiomi, *Spatial Poem (2022 version) "moving event"* (2022). Installation view at Aichi Triennale 2022. Courtesy of Mieko Shiomi/ToLoLo studio. Photo: ToLoLo studio. Responses to the instruction: "Move something. Please inform us of when, how and what you moved from where to where. All responses will be arranged and exhibited on a world map." Performance period: April 6–20, 2022.

museums and other places, and can be seen and heard, even if only partially, on the internet. It is truly thanks to researchers, curators and collectors.

All of us [Fluxus] members will eventually pass away, but in order to pass on to future generations our attitude of rethinking things from scratch and thinking about art from its original state, so to speak, and our love of playfulness and humor, I expect it may be necessary for a third party to activate it and convey it to younger generations.

Of course, far in the future, Fluxus may be a topic that no one has heard of nor knows anything about. But that's fine. We simply took action through art to live our own lives better—and Fluxus became the result of that.

This is an edited email conversation that took place between Shiomi and Kawamura between April 26, 2024, and December 18, 2024. The conversation was originally conducted in Japanese and translated into English by the author.

Notes

- 1 From 1957, Shiomi undertook her bachelor's degree in musicology at Tokyo University of the Arts (previously known in English as Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music), then completed another year of graduate study. She returned to her hometown in March 1962. Midori Yoshimoto, *Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 142, 145.
- 2 Group Ongaku, meaning "Group Music" in Japanese, began its formation in 1958 when Takehisa Kosugi and Shūkō Mizuno, musicology students at Tokyo University of the Arts, improvised together in sessions on violin and cello. Chieko (Mieko) Shiomi, Mikio Tojima, Gen'ichi Tsuge, Yumiko Tanno and Yasunao Tone joined them over the course of the next year. Prior to this, Shiomi had also been experimenting in improvisation with two female classmates. Group Ongaku continued improvising together until 1962. Sally Kawamura, *Object into Action: Group Ongaku and Fluxus* (PhD dissertation, University of Glasgow, 2009), 2.
- 3 Mieko Shiomi's *Spatial Poems* were nine mail events carried out over ten years, from 1965 to 1975. They involved, including Shiomi, 232 people from twenty-six countries. The results were collected in various formats, including a book, *Spatial Poem*, in 1976.
- 4 Presented alongside the exhibition *MOT Collection Chronicle 1964–: Off Museum*, at Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, on April 29, 2012; see Mieko Shiomi, "Intermedia/Transmedia," Post: Notes on Art in a Global Context, Museum of Modern Art, July 11, 2013, https://post.at.moma.org/content_items/241-intermedia-transmedia.
- 5 *Balance Poem no. 1–no. 24* (1991).
- 6 Dick Higgins theorized "intermedia" as artistic production that "seems to fall between media." Dick Higgins, "Intermedia," *The Something Else Newsletter* 1, no. 1 (February 1966): 1.
- 7 *Disappearing Music for Face* is written in various forms. Shiomi explains: "The sentence I sent to Maciunas was 'smile—stop to smile.' However, this can mean 'stop in order to smile.' I really should have written 'smile—stop smiling' from the start, and I think it is a shame that my English was so underdeveloped. In addition, in *The Fluxus Performance Workbook*, Ken Friedman explains concretely in a kind and detailed manner how to actually perform the piece." Mieko Shiomi, email correspondence with the author, December 18, 2024. See also Ken Friedman, Owen F. Smith and Lauren Sawchyn, eds., *The Fluxus Performance Workbook* (Performance Research e-publication, 2002), 97.
- 8 Mieko Shiomi, *Disappearing Music for Face (Fluxfilm no. 4)* (1965), directed by George Maciunas.
- 9 Mieko Shiomi, *Disappearing Music for Face (flipbook)* (1965), designed by George Maciunas.
- 10 *A Colossal World: Japanese Artists and New York, 1950s–Present*, WhiteBox, New York, March 6–April 14, 2018, curated by Kyoko Sato.
- 11 Definitions from www.jisho.org.
- 12 Definition from www.googletranslate.com.
- 13 Shiomi traveled to New York with Shigeo Kubota.
- 14 This was exhibited by the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo (MOT), in the exhibition *Kaikan 20 shūnenkinen MOT korekushon tokubetsu kikaku kontakutsu/Twentieth Anniversary Special MOT Collection Contacts*, September 27, 2014–January 4, 2015. MOT curator Aki Fujii explains that Shiomi's work was exhibited alongside that of On Kawara and Tatsuo Miyajima, and the theme of the room was "Continue Forever," after Miyajima's work *Sore ha henka shi tsudzukeru sore ha arayuru mono to kankei o musubu soreha eien ni tsuzuku (Keep Changing, Connect with Everything, Continue Forever)*. This was the first time that Fujii arranged Shiomi's *Endless Box* in a circular format (Aki Fujii, email correspondence with the author, January 2025).

- 15 Shiomi's work was to have been included in *Collection Exhibition 2: Electricity-Sound* (November 18, 2023–May 12, 2024) at the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, Japan. Shiomi was visited by the curator and two invited artists for a discussion about the presentation of her works, with the intention of holding a second meeting. This was unfortunately cancelled because of damage caused by an earthquake (Mieko Shiomi, email correspondence with the author, December 18, 2024).

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III

Fluxus narratives

Storytelling, memory and transmission



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11 Intermedial translations

Storytelling Fluxus

Aga Wielocha

Greek painting, though largely lost to time, lives on through a tapestry of secondary sources: pottery paintings, Roman copies and creative work rendered in an entirely different format—namely, written texts. Ancient sources like the writings of the Greek traveler Pausanias (c. 110–180 CE) provide crucial documentation of Greek art and artists, preserving knowledge of notable works and the lives of their creators. In his *Description of Greece*, Pausanias meticulously depicts two paintings by Polygnotos (c. 500–440 BCE) that once adorned the walls of the sanctuary at Delphi.¹ The first, titled *Iliupersis*, represented the aftermath of the Trojan War, while the second, *Nekyia*, portrayed Odysseus’s descent into Hades.² Today, our understanding of Polygnotos’s works comes solely through Pausanias’s account and subsequent interpretations based on his descriptions.

By the time Pausanias documented these paintings, they had weathered approximately six centuries of display and most certainly showed signs of deterioration.³ Despite this, his account delivers detailed descriptions of each figure and element, likely filling gaps with his imagination, while commenting on Polygnotos’s skill in capturing the figures’ character. However, Pausanias’s report has notable omissions—he rarely mentions colors. The medium itself remains uncertain—whether fresco or wood panels. While evidence suggests that Polygnotos worked on wooden supports elsewhere—Pliny describes one such panel transported to Rome—the only indication of the use of a wooden support at Delphi is a single drill hole that might have anchored a panel to the wall.⁴ These omissions affect efforts to recreate the works, even those undertaken in the imagination. This limitation of available evidence perhaps explains art historian Susan Woodford’s observation that none of our sources on Greek painting is “entirely satisfactory.”⁵

Although Pausanias’s description is invaluable, the gaps in his account nonetheless provoke speculative questions about his perspective. Had he been a painter or a caretaker of the temple—or an ancient conservator, for that matter—his account might have included crucial information about painting techniques, pigment choices, surface preparation and the paintings’ state of preservation. Would such a description then be better and more satisfactory for future understandings of what these works were, beyond what they depicted? Would such a description be a better trigger for our imagination to recreate these lost representations? And finally,

would it be a better gateway to experiencing these pieces and perhaps a means to preserve them?

Another challenge with Pausanias's transmission of Polygnotos's paintings concerns the reliability of his accounts, which have remained contentious for centuries. While often labeled a geographer, Pausanias was primarily a writer and creative interpreter. His descriptions—identified by Donald Preziosi as the first surviving example of European art criticism—inevitably reveal subjective judgments.⁶ Before twentieth-century archaeological excavations validated many of Pausanias's accounts, classicists typically dismissed his writings as literary constructions, viewing him as a compiler of second-hand narratives rather than a first-hand observer.⁷ This uncertainty speaks to a broader challenge in art history and heritage studies: the limitations of verbal narrative as a method of cultural heritage conservation, which UNESCO describes as “extending the life of cultural heritage while strengthening transmission of its messages and values.”⁸

Conservation, as a field of study and practice, is broadly understood as the effort to perpetuate material culture by prolonging the physical characteristics of cultural heritage. Unlike the preservation of performing arts like music and theater, visual arts conservation has traditionally focused on preserving tangible objects that serve as conduits for engagement with art. Only recently has art conservation, especially in the context of contemporary art, started addressing the intangible aspects of artworks and begun to develop methods that go beyond its traditionally material-focused tools.⁹ Whether addressing the material or immaterial, conservation inherently involves decisions about what and how to preserve, with the endurance of physical objects historically being paramount. The subjective choices, perspectives and creativity inherent in conservation inevitably shape the future of objects of conservation. Yet, this subjectivity—and the framing of conservation as a creative act—remains contentious in a field long self-identified as “scientific.”¹⁰

Within this context, the afterlife of Greek painting raises compelling questions: Can verbal narrative serve as a method of collecting and preserving art, especially for intermedial works where physical artifacts often yield primacy to the work's functionality or experientiality? What limits of media translation and creative interpretation can one meaningfully negotiate in such a transformative process? Drawing from *Radio Fluxus*, a podcast series produced by the author within the research project *Activating Fluxus* (2022–26),¹¹ this chapter investigates the potential of narrative—particularly oral storytelling—as a medium of engaging with intermedial art. Each episode of *Radio Fluxus* features a narrative by a scholar, artist, curator or conservator centered on a specific Fluxus artwork. In this series, artworks are regarded as the protagonists—nonhuman entities given a voice through their human representatives.

This discussion explores the theoretical foundations of *Radio Fluxus*, where subjectivity and creativity—manifested throughout podcast production—serve as guiding principles. Beginning with an analysis of intermedial works' translatability across media formats, it explores narration as a tool for conveying experience. Within the framework of intersemiotic translation between images and words, it assesses ekphrasis—its strengths and limitations—as a tool for transmitting

intermedial works. Expanding on this foundation, the essay introduces the “conservator’s lens”—an approach that enhances ekphrasis by incorporating a work’s technical, material and sensorial dimensions. From here, it turns to storytelling’s distinct characteristics and, through oral history theory, compares podcast production with the creation of oral history sources. By investigating podcasting as a tool for sustaining Fluxus works, the chapter suggests activation as a potential method and identifies collective creativity as essential to this process.

Intermedial, notation-based and exemplativist art

The concept of “intermedia” emerged in 1966 through the writings of Dick Higgins, a founding member of Fluxus and the visionary behind Something Else Press, a publishing house dedicated to avant-garde literature and artist’s books. Higgins appropriated the term to articulate a new artistic frontier: works that deliberately occupied the space between established categories of art.¹²

Intermedia emerged from Fluxus’s development of an allographic model of iterative production¹³—a system in which artworks, whether images, objects or performances, were repeatedly created based on a score, with each iteration producing distinct results. Fluxus’s notation-based practice facilitated the translation of works across different media, where, as art historian Natilee Harren suggests, medium functions as a set of operations independent of specific materials.¹⁴ This capacity to flux between media has been expressed through the notion of “trans-media,” introduced by Mieko Shiomi to articulate a work’s ability to shift across different forms of expression.¹⁵

In the Cagean tradition, from which Fluxus scores emerged, the score was conceived as a generator of actions, allowing as many unique and unpredictable realizations as respondents could devise.¹⁶ Fluxus scores were predominantly textual or, as Julia Robinson suggests, linguistic in nature,¹⁷ and characterized by their clarity of language, modest scale, minimal formatting and simplicity.¹⁸ However, other types of scores also exist, such as those described by Hanna B. Hölling as “three-dimensional scores” and by Natilee Harren as “notational objects”—“objects that suggested score-like qualities of enaction,” as Harren puts it.¹⁹ This implies that the medium of a score is not fixed and does not necessarily rely on graphic notation or written instructions. In fact, some performances that began as interpretations of textual scores eventually became scores themselves, whether intentionally or not. One example of such a work is Nam June Paik’s notorious *Zen for Head* (1961).

Paik’s interpretation of La Monte Young’s *Composition 1960 #10 to Bob Morris* (“Draw a straight line and follow it”) evolved into a new work when it premiered in Cologne.²⁰ In *Zen for Head*, Paik, using his hair as a brush, crawled along paper spread on the floor, translating his bodily gestures into a calligraphed line. A later performance of the piece in Wiesbaden (1962) was captured on film and widely distributed, becoming a reference point for subsequent interpretations.²¹ *Zen for Head* gained new dimensions in 1964 when fellow Fluxus artist Ben Vautier performed it in Nice, presenting it as *Opera de Nam June Paik*.²² Rather than

following a straight line, Vautier created organic, quasi-circular shapes with his head on paper stretched across the floor and a wall mounted on the stage. Although preceding Higgins's formulation of the concept of intermedia, Paik's realization of La Monte Young's score serves as an example of a work born from a score that became a (nontextual) score itself, an intermedial artwork, occupying a space between theater and calligraphy.

Just as the works transitioned over time, the concept of intermedia was also in flux and was expanded by Higgins in his 1976 "An Exemplativist Manifesto."²³ Higgins suggests here that the notation-based creative process transcends singular outcomes, instead revealing a spectrum of possibilities. The work is not the single realization but the dialectic between that realization and its alternatives.²⁴ Through notation and a single instance of realization, the audience constructs mental images of the artwork's potential manifestations. When these possibilities are realized in any particular way, the result is inherently arbitrary, serving as an example rather than a definitive version. In such "exemplative art," understanding what the realization exemplifies matters more than focusing on the precise structure of any single outcome.

The distinctive qualities of Fluxus intermedial art—its score-based nature, interpretive openness, cross-media adaptability and emphasis on process, where outcomes serve merely as instances or examples—suggest broader possibilities for dissemination and alternative modes of perpetuation than conventional cultural heritage practices. Institutions, particularly museums, tend to reduce the display of these complex works to their material outcomes, privileging static objects that represent only their selected and predominantly visual aspects. This reductive tendency extends to collecting and conservation practices, which similarly struggle to encompass the works' experiential dimensions.²⁵

Consider, for instance, Ken Friedman's *Open and Shut Case* (1965), featured in episode four of *Radio Fluxus*.²⁶ The work's score instructs the creation of a box inscribed with two imperative sentences: "open me," on the lid, and "shut quick," on the inside. George Maciunas's 1966 iteration ingeniously incorporates a subpoena—a court summons—as the box's label, summoning the viewer to a hearing of the "open and shut case" (a playful nod to the legal term for a straightforward, easily resolved matter), with Friedman listed as the plaintiff. Following the score's instructions, the interior contains the directive "shut quick." One can stipulate that the work's experience lies in the gesture of opening the box and encountering the instruction within. However, this element is typically lost in common display practices, where Fluxus boxes are predominantly exhibited in vitrines.²⁷ While it might be possible to simultaneously display both the box's interior and exterior, such presentation would sacrifice the element of surprise that follows the act of opening. When it comes to collecting, this is limited to the one selected example of the work, without the inclusion of the score or any other existing or potential realizations. Conservation practices typically prioritize preserving the box's material authenticity—its plastic structure and printed label—over its interactive function. This approach assumes that, as a collection piece, the work will rarely if ever be handled, with access restricted to authorized personnel and researchers.

This emphasis on material form at the cost of experience exemplifies how institutional collecting and conservation practices inevitably select which aspects of an artwork will be presented and preserved. While the physical object endures, its experiential dimension transforms from lived reality into mere conjecture.

Since collecting and conservation inevitably involve selection, why not critically reconsider which aspects of works we choose to collect and preserve? What if, instead of prioritizing physical artifacts, we focused on their performative and experiential qualities? Following Higgins's "An Exemplativist Manifesto," an alternative approach to collecting could emphasize gathering multiple examples of a work—both physical and documented—to represent its broader possibilities. Similarly, in the spirit of Shiomis's notion of transmedia, we might explore different media that could better transmit these nonmaterial features. This approach guided Radio Fluxus's exploration of storytelling and podcasting as a means of enabling such transitions.

Prospects and perils of thinking in terms of stories

Hannah B Higgins positions Fluxus experiences as synonymous with the works themselves, asserting that Fluxus forms fundamentally "argue ontologically for the value of primary experiences over secondary experiences."²⁸ Her core claim is that this prioritization challenges attempts to assign fixed, permanent meanings to artworks.²⁹ Contemporary modes of displaying Fluxus art often fail to create space for primary experiences, instead prioritizing static, visually focused displays. This approach constrains interpretation and risks ossifying meaning. Potential remedies include using exhibition devices that emulate primary experiences, introducing participatory approaches and employing strategies of enactment. As showcased in this book, these approaches are often effective and indeed allow this primary experience and therefore the aesthetic experience of the work to take place (see Brooks, Chapter 7 in this volume). These strategies are, however, inherently situational, being produced for particular occasions and contexts (in museums, galleries, et cetera). This temporal and contextual nature raises questions: How can we ensure continuity of experiential engagement beyond single events? Which strategies might help transmit the primary experience effectively through secondary sources without calcifying their meaning? Pausanias's account of Polygnotos's painting suggests a compelling direction: storytelling—with its unique ability to transform lived experience into shared knowledge while preserving ambiguity and multiplicity of interpretation.

Narrative, whether written or oral, is a fundamental human strategy for understanding core elements of our experience, such as time, process and change. Walter Fisher, who introduced the narrative paradigm to communication theory and coined the term "Homo narrans," positions humans as natural storytellers whose narrative instinct precedes their capacity for language or logical reasoning.³⁰ Stories are told for myriad reasons and serve diverse purposes. Among these, cultural continuation emerges as a powerful yet often unintended consequence.³¹ As a performative practice, storytelling is often classified as intangible cultural heritage, while it

simultaneously acts as a vessel for transmitting other heritage forms such as rituals, traditions and ancestral knowledge. Yet this transmission is far from straightforward. Stories shimmer with ambiguity, inviting multiple interpretations and evolving with each retelling, particularly in oral traditions. They bear the imprint of every storyteller's lived experience while being reshaped by each audience's response. This very malleability—this capacity to shift and adapt—enables stories to resonate across diverse publics, cultures and generations.

Walter Benjamin observed that the storyteller “takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale.”³² Storytelling thus is “the ability to exchange experiences.”³³ Benjamin's observation finds poignant illustration in episode three of *Radio Fluxus*, which presents Mieko Shiomi's *Mirror Piece* (1963).³⁴ The story follows the narrator, art historian Sally Kawamura, to a windswept Welsh beach, where she transforms into a performer, bringing Shiomi's instructions to life. Her detailed narration—“The sensations of performing the event, the feel of the water, the wobbliness of walking backwards, and the surprise of finding just myself in the sea”—becomes a conduit for collective experience. By meticulously describing sensory details—her long skirt floating, welly boots filling with water—Kawamura converts her individual artistic exploration into a shared imaginative journey, where experience is not merely observed but co-experienced.

Storytelling organizes disconnected experiences into meaningful, interconnected parts of a larger narrative, such as a biography or history.³⁵ Though typically applied to human lives, the concept of biography can equally describe artworks, capturing their development, recontextualization and reinterpretation across different phases and pivotal transitions.³⁶ Notably, recent conservation scholarship suggests that writing an artwork's biography may itself be an act of conservation.³⁷ In making this claim, scholars also point to the subjective nature of this act, which inevitably incorporates the standpoint of the narrator. This subjectivity becomes particularly pronounced when the artist themselves assumes the role of storyteller—the biography of the work and that of the narrator may become deeply intertwined.

Individuals construct their identities and make sense of their experiences through the continuous process of telling and retelling narratives about themselves in relation to others.³⁸ When considering storytelling as a potential means for the continuation of an artwork, this narrator bias merits examination from two distinct perspectives that illuminate the complexity of this transmission process. On the one hand, an artwork's biography risks fixing variable meanings and potentials in much the same way that a static exhibition of physical remnants from past realizations can constrain interpretation. On the other hand, since these biographies are shaped by individual narrators, they inevitably tend to amplify stories that align with the narrator's self-image. In both cases, once a particular perspective becomes embedded within the story, it tends to persist through repeated retellings, even as the narrative evolves over time.

The first risk—fixing meaning in experiential works—can be mitigated by storytelling's inherent ambiguity. Unlike static information delivery, such as museum wall labels, storytelling suggests associations rather than prescribing meaning.

Benjamin argued that modern communication diminished storytelling, replacing it with information delivery, which aims to convey “the pure essence of the thing.”³⁹ By contrast, storytelling “sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again,” embracing ambiguity and inviting personal interpretation.⁴⁰ Significantly, throughout the episodes of Radio Fluxus, narrators avoid imposing their interpretations, instead offering connections and suggestions that encourage audiences to form their own readings. Perhaps this is also a consequence of Fluxus works’ inherent resistance to unidimensional reading.

This gesture of suggesting connections while avoiding interpretations is exemplified in episode seven, where Alice Centamore shares her engagement with Alison Knowles’s score *Performance Piece #8* (1965) and its graphic manifestation *The “T” Dictionary* (1965). In her account, Centamore explores the relationship between the score and its graphic interpretation by indicating which parts correspond to each other, rather than attempting to decode the score’s meaning or how the translation between media directly relates to it.⁴¹

To examine the second meaning of storytelling as a vehicle for an artwork’s continuation—specifically the narrator’s bias in crafting stories that support their personal narrative—let us revisit episode four, which considers Friedman’s *Open and Shut Case* (1965), narrated by the artist himself. His story of the work’s conception intertwines with his first encounters with the Fluxus network. As a young man, he learned about a book recently published by Something Else Press and requested a review copy. This triggered a letter exchange with Higgins, who invited Friedman to stay with him during his next visit to New York. During this stay, Friedman created a version of *Open and Shut Case* for Higgins, who suggested showing it to his artist friend George Maciunas, Fluxus’s organizer. Maciunas, impressed by the work, declared Friedman a “concept artist” and invited him to join Fluxus. This story is repeated in Friedman’s writings and those about him.⁴² It also circulates in Fluxus historiography.⁴³ Although this account is foundational for Friedman as a core member of Fluxus—he was only sixteen at the time he joined the network—it does not undermine the reliability of the artwork’s biography. Instead, it adds a personal dimension to the account of the work’s development, narrated from the creator’s perspective. The story situates the work within Fluxus mythology—and, ultimately, it’s such a good story.

Ekphrastic narration and the power of rhetorical devices

Classicist Don Paul Fowler states that “narrative is about people, description deals with things.”⁴⁴ While narratives excel at conveying the experiential aspects of Fluxus art, they may struggle when addressing its outcomes. To describe Polygnotos’s paintings, Pausanias employed a rhetorical device known as “ekphrasis.” Broadly, ekphrasis involves the description of a person, place or thing, but its scope extends beyond mere description. Aelius Theon’s *Progymnasmata* defines it as “descriptive language that brings what is portrayed vividly before the mind’s eye of the audience.”⁴⁵ By detailing physical aspects and sensory perceptions—not only visual but also acoustic and tactile—ekphrasis allows audiences to virtually

witness the scene, invoking both bodily and emotional engagement. Quintilian, a Roman teacher of rhetoric, compared ekphrasis to a journey (*periēgēsis*), where the speaker or writer guides the audience through the described scene.⁴⁶ This analogy underscores how, by directing the audience's attention, ekphrasis organizes and assigns meaning. Quintilian also highlights the emotional power of mental images created through ekphrasis, which captivate the audience and persuade them by immersing them in the speaker's perspective.⁴⁷

In a narrower sense related to the subject of this chapter, ekphrasis is a literary device in which words attempt to represent an object from the visual arts. James Heffernan succinctly defines it as "a verbal representation of visual representation."⁴⁸ Within this framework, the potential and limitations of ekphrasis have been widely debated in both literary studies and art history, notably by W.J.T. Mitchell. His concept of "ekphrastic indifference" suggests that a verbal representation cannot replicate the visual presence of its object in the same way that a visual representation can. It may refer to, describe or invoke an object, but it can never convey its visual presence as pictures do.⁴⁹ This notion is exemplified by Umberto Eco's observation that while ekphrasis allows an image to be described in words, no description of Raphael's *The Marriage of the Virgin* (1504) could fully capture the sense of perspective, the fluidity of lines or the harmony of colors as perceived by the viewer.⁵⁰

The method employed in Radio Fluxus follows what Mitchell terms "ekphrastic hope," which, when realized, allows the listener or reader to "see" the object through the narrator's voice.⁵¹ This approach assumes that intermedial works are not confined to physical objects or their aesthetic qualities. In this sense, ekphrasis transcends mimesis, that is, imitation of nature. It goes beyond merely describing what is visible to the human eye. The mental images evoked do not need to be exact replicas of the described objects or events. Instead, ekphrasis expresses associations between elements, reflecting the principles of exemplary art and notation-based interpretive practices by showing how particular creative outcomes can stand in for or represent a broader concept and the layered meanings that emerge from multiple interpretations.

Consider, for instance, episode five of Radio Fluxus, which explores *Orange Event No. 3* (1963) by Bengt af Klintberg.⁵² This narrative, as told by art historian Magdalena Holdar, guides the listener through various realizations of the work—textual, objectual, sensory and performative. It begins with the creation of the score, followed by its first published version in Swedish and its English translation. It further examines the work's visual and objectual representations, which, in the tradition of Fluxus boxes, invite user participation. As the story unfolds, the enactments of the score are discussed, including performances by af Klintberg himself and other artists. It concludes with a personal reflection from Holdar, who recounts her use of the score in teaching and describes her students' engagement with the work. Holdar's account reveals how all realizations are deeply intertwined, with the images of each iteration complementing one another to build a more complete vision of the work.

Mitchell suggests that the central aim of “ekphrastic hope” can be described as “the overcoming of otherness,” where the art of words engages with “alien” modes of representation—its “semiotic others,” such as visual art forms.⁵³ For intermedial works, however, the opposition between distinct art genres and media is already illusory, as these works inherently exist between mediums, transcending the supposed discord between them. A key aspect here is the translatability of intermedial works across the languages of art and their capacity to simultaneously inhabit various mediums. Radio Fluxus embraces this multiplicity by collecting and displaying instances and interpretations of *Orange Event No. 3*, demonstrating the diverse ways in which the work can be approached. It explores the piece as a poem, a magical formula, a formal exercise in geometry, a score for enactment, a printed word, a participatory art object, a print and an event. By bringing together these varied iterations, Radio Fluxus seeks to convey the work’s complexity and its myriad possibilities, while simultaneously acknowledging the inherent limitations of fully capturing it, as future realizations are yet to come.

The other dimensions of Mitchell’s discourse on ekphrasis are covered by the concept of “ekphrastic fear,” which emerges from the recognition that this rhetorical device can potentially misrepresent a work. This dimension poses ethical questions about the boundaries of ekphrasis, arising from the risk of transforming its object by diminishing it through oversimplification or overinterpretation. This “fear” parallels discussions in art conservation, where representational fidelity and the interpretive subjectivity of mediators are key concerns. Ekphrasis pushes the limits of the traditional notion of authenticity, which prioritizes material integrity—a concept that, despite being increasingly scrutinized and deconstructed within the field of heritage preservation, continues to function as a point of reference for conservation practice.

The final intriguing aspect of ekphrasis as a method for art perpetuation lies in its inherent uncertainty of authorship. Ekphrasis, Mitchell writes, creates a “specific image that is to be found nowhere else,” which demands consideration not merely as a description, but as an independent, authored creation.⁵⁴ As argued, ekphrasis is a complex (inter)relational process involving the speaking subject, the described object or event and the listener. This entanglement of human and nonhuman actors reveals the inherently subjective nature of representation. It also challenges traditional notions of authorship that assume a single, identifiable creator as the primary source of artistic work, something already complicated by the character of art designated as intermedial or exemplary. However, this complication, which may potentially frame the work as a complex network of interactions and an ongoing collective endeavor, aligns with the spirit of Fluxus—one that, at least in Maciunas’s vision, sought to eliminate the concept of authorship altogether.

The “conservator’s lens”: an approach

The initial suggestion that Pausanias’s descriptive accuracy might have been enhanced had he possessed the technical expertise of an artist or conservator reveals

another approach central to Radio Fluxus: practitioners with intimate hands-on experience develop unique ways of understanding art. Artist-researcher Émilie Parendeau's detailed examination of Robert Filliou's *The Futile Box*, presented in this book, exemplifies this principle (see Chapter 8). Building on this foundation and focusing on conservation, I present the concept of the "conservator's lens" as a professional perspective and analytical framework emerging from practice. In the following analysis, I argue that this distinctive mode of observation, deployed as an interpretive strategy, can potentially enhance ekphrasis and perhaps also its capacity for preservation.

The catalyst for this argument is a story circulating in the field about a conservator at a contemporary art institution who was engaged by her museum's mediation department to create tours for visually impaired visitors. Their conservation training—with its emphasis on meticulous technical analysis and systematic description—proved remarkably effective for crafting narratives that enabled nonsighted visitors to construct mental images of the artworks. Significantly, the conservator's detailed technical descriptions offered more than merely conveying the artworks' visual appearance; they provided access to the artworks' conceptual, structural and material complexities. This experience suggests that the conservator's approach to describing artworks could offer enriched modes of understanding that transcend purely visual engagement.

A foundational tenet of conservation is that any heritage item—be it a cultural artifact or an artwork—must undergo detailed analysis before any intervention begins. This detailed examination serves multiple purposes: it underpins decision-making, documents materials and techniques, reveals any physical alterations and assesses the item's current condition.⁵⁵ This analysis typically relies on visual and haptic examination, at times supplemented by scientific analytical techniques. For functional objects, such as mechanical devices, and artworks with technological components, the focus extends to understanding their operation and intended use. In art conservation, this framework also considers the work's conceptual foundations and its intended and unintended meanings. Conservators are trained in this comprehensive mode of analysis to systematically deconstruct the object of conservation across material, technical, functional and conceptual dimensions—a method I term the "conservator's lens."

The results of analysis are typically recorded in "examination and treatment reports,"⁵⁶ pointing to documentation as a cornerstone principle of conservation and yet another means of perpetuating artifacts and artworks through text. Significantly, technical analysis need not be directly linked to a planned conservation treatment but can be undertaken purely for research purposes. This approach has given rise to the field of technical art history, which, to paraphrase Erma Hermens, aims at a thorough understanding of the physical object in terms of original intention, choice of materials and techniques, as well as the context in and for which the work was created, its meaning and its contemporary perception.⁵⁷ The evolution from applied examination methodology into a distinctive field underscores the broader potential of the "conservator's lens" in understanding cultural heritage items.

The structural framework of conservation documentation exhibits considerable variation across conservation cultures and specialized domains within the field. Certain heritage items, particularly those characterized by their temporal and experiential nature, including media artworks, resist conventional documentation frameworks such as templates and databases, organized around the notions of “original materials and techniques,” “alterations” and “condition.” Due to their characteristics, they demand documentation in forms of linear narrative—an approach termed the “technical narrative” in conservation scholarship, and which is established as the documentation standard for time-based art.⁵⁸ This method comprises a comprehensive description of the work’s behavior, addressing its function and operational mechanisms. It incorporates detailed analysis of components, examining their individual roles and functional relationships while providing a high-level analysis of how they integrate to form a cohesive system.⁵⁹ The inspiring tool of “technical narrative,” combining description and narration, could possibly be applied to intermedial works, mediating between their physical manifestations and the “immaterial technicalities” of both the processes of making and resultant performative events. It also demonstrates that narrative is already recognized as a valuable tool in conservation.⁶⁰

Radio Fluxus established a distinctive approach by integrating detailed technical (material and sensory) descriptions of a work’s specific iteration as a starting point for each narrative. This approach honors the visual as a category in art, acknowledging its reliance on images, while engaging with mental rather than physical representations. Conservator Albrecht Gumlich demonstrates this approach in episode one, where he discusses Ben Patterson’s *Hooked* (1980), based on his experience with the piece at the Getty Research Institute.⁶¹ In episode six, Yann Chateigné Tytelman offers an experiential account of John Armleder’s *Dream Piece* (1976) by approaching the work as a performer rather than a traditional conservator.⁶² His enactment of the piece—considered by some as a method of performance perpetuation—is the basis for crafting a personal yet precise depiction, revealing the subtle nature of the performance:

The performer moves very little, he remains silent. The audience perhaps expects something exciting to happen but . . . the performer executes very few gestures and is a spectator himself of something else. . . . In that sense the action is close to fusional immersion of the performer in the environment.⁶³

However, many narrators—particularly art historians—often struggled to describe the objects in such intimate detail, likely due to their lack of direct physical experience with the pieces. Some contributors appeared to treat technical details as secondary, quickly pivoting to more familiar territory like the artist’s biography or broader oeuvre. Even among those more invested in providing details that might elicit mental images of objects or events, coherent structural presentation remained challenging, with descriptions often jumping inconsistently between different aspects of the object or event described. Ultimately, the “conservator’s lens” guiding and shaping these descriptions was perhaps that of the Radio Fluxus producer, editor and this chapter’s author—a conservator specialized in contemporary art.

The distinctive attributes of orality and the oral histories of art(works)

While our discussion has thus far examined narrative primarily as linguistic expression—both written and spoken—this chapter places special emphasis on oral storytelling. The privileging of the written word within artistic and cultural discourse can be credited to its perceived endurance, its potential for dissemination and its historical role as the code of educated elites.⁶⁴ Yet speech remains our most fundamental form of human connection, possessing qualities that writing cannot fully capture and remaining intrinsic to our epistemological frameworks of understanding. Moreover, text relies on sight, and, in a world dominated by visual media and saturation from visual stimuli, people increasingly seek refuge in non-visual ways of experiencing reality—alternatives to both looking and reading. This may explain the steady rise of podcasts since their inception in the early 2000s—a medium that exemplifies the resurgence of oral storytelling in digital culture and one that has transformed how we engage with narrative in our daily lives.

The art of storytelling depends on our ability to remember and retell stories, demanding a particular kind of mental receptivity that comes through listening. The biblical Hebrew word *dabar* (דבר) carries a dual meaning as both “word” and “event”—a linguistic fusion that points directly to the dynamic nature of spoken language.⁶⁵ Unlike written or printed text, which exists in a fixed, object-like state, the spoken word manifests as pure, immersive event—a temporal movement that emerges, resonates and dissolves in time.⁶⁶ Walter Ong observes that while sight creates distance and separation—placing us as external observers who must actively scan our environment piece by piece, sound envelops and integrates. As we listen, we become the center of a sensory experience. In Ong’s words, “You can immerse yourself in hearing, in sound. There is no way to immerse yourself similarly in sight.”⁶⁷

Live oral storytelling is characterized by nonverbal communication, real-time audience interaction and natural malleability—creating a dynamic interplay between speaker, listener and narrative as stories evolve with each telling. While recorded oral storytelling necessarily limits these interactive features, it introduces its own distinct advantages. This technologically mediated form retains the spontaneity and fluid narrative style typical of spoken stories, along with the intimacy of the human voice, while offering unique capabilities like the ability to pause, replay and, most importantly, to transcend the temporal and spatial constraints of live performance. It achieves a balanced compromise: maintaining the essence of oral tradition while producing content that can be easily accessed and shared by a wider audience, thereby improving the chances that the stories it tells will endure through time.

The theoretical perspective from which recorded oral storytelling as a preservation practice can be profitably examined is that offered by oral history. As a field, oral history encompasses the collection of historical information through recorded interviews with individuals who possess firsthand knowledge of past events, the scholarly analysis of these sources and their dissemination. At its core, oral history

elevates individual memory and the spoken word, offering the speaker a space where personal narratives can flourish.⁶⁸ Throughout its evolution as both method and field of study, it has come to embrace the concept of memory stories—those fluid, ever-shifting narratives that emerge from our remembrances.⁶⁹ Although oral histories are products of interviews or guided conversations, they often involve storytelling, especially when narrators are empowered to “take control” and to guide the narrative direction. Radio Fluxus adopted the philosophy of “offering space,” weaving it into the very fabric of its methodology. While each narrative originated as a dialogue between a host and a guest, the editorial process deliberately removed most questions, allowing the storytelling to flow uninterrupted. Yet, the dialogic foundation of these exchanges leaves its subtle traces in the final product.

This freedom to follow where the work leads unfolds fully in episode two, where Jules Pelta Feldman guides listeners through a playful exploration of George Brecht’s *Thursday* (1963) that meanders through cultural references from Zen Buddhism to a Terry Pratchett character’s relationship with religion. The flow of the narrative takes the audience to a magical, contemplative space that is described poetically by Pelta Feldman as “the place where my mind . . . just opens up and I start thinking about the movement of the planets, and I start thinking that every day is holy in a way, that kind of Zen light bulb flickering on.”⁷⁰

Radio Fluxus expands beyond traditional oral history in various ways as it serves a dual purpose: while it produces a historical source (as oral history does), it also offers a space to showcase art. Oral history approaches the orality of testimonies as a feature to be celebrated, as the oral utterance constitutes a communicative event that transcripts or written versions can only partially capture.⁷¹ The power of speech—the expression of thoughts and feelings through articulate sounds—lies in its rich tapestry of elements that bring narratives to life. These essential components—pace, rhythm, accent, intonation, vocal expression, emphasis and nuance—create an immediacy that captures the fleeting, present nature of the spoken word. Yet speech can also present barriers to accessibility through its natural imperfections: false starts, cut-off words, repeated phrases, fillers, mispronunciations and semi-articulate utterances. Oral storytelling, when viewed as a performance, is a skill or art form that requires training and experience. Consider the Jlaio community of Liberia, where those who mastered the art of narrating complex histories earned recognition as oral artists.⁷² This professional distinction highlights a crucial reality: effective oral communication is a skill, not a universal talent. In the contemporary media landscape, where audiences expect polished, professional content, speech that falls short of these elevated standards often struggles to maintain engagement.

Like photographs, sound recordings capture reality through direct imprints—in this case, of the spoken voice—offering listeners immediate contact with the source.⁷³ Both media can now be edited through digital technology. While in the production of Radio Fluxus the question of editing’s necessity was left open, it ultimately proved essential—not only to remove speech intricacies that disrupted the story’s coherence but also to enhance the narrative flow. Editing also enabled the integration of the work’s sonic elements, for instance, Lotte Lehmann’s interpretation of Beethoven’s *Ich Liebe Dich* (1936), which serves as Armleder’s *Dream*

Piece soundscape.⁷⁴ The process of editing added yet another creative dimension to shaping and refining the work's story. Mel Gooding, discussing William Furlong's Audio Arts project, which comprised recorded interviews with artists and art workers, describes sound editing as a form of "constructive sculpture"⁷⁵—a form of creative intervention and critical artistic control. However, Gooding distinguishes this editorial creativity from that of the artist-as-inventor, likening it instead to the role of "the Ulyssean wanderer who encounters what is happening and keeps a record."⁷⁶ On this view, the editor's creativity aligns more with that of the translator or curator than with the artist as inventor, magician or philosopher-visionary.

Radio Fluxus diverges from oral history in yet another significant way: instead of placing the narrator's personal story center stage, it transforms the narrator into a spokesperson for the artwork itself, creating what could be termed an "oral history of an artwork." This act of speaking on behalf of inanimate objects echoes another classical rhetorical device of *prosopopoeia*—literally meaning "to make" (*poeien*) a "face" or "person" (*prosopon*) through rhetoric⁷⁷—that is, giving a voice to things to which nature has denied it.⁷⁸ Historically employed by poets and writers, in Radio Fluxus *prosopopoeia* introduces yet another layer of creativity and subjectivity, animating artworks and imbuing them with a narrative presence that transcends their material form.

Despite these significant differences, examining Radio Fluxus's stories through the lens of oral history theory can enhance our understanding of how they function as vehicles for transmitting art. Oral history started as a "recovery history"—a method of documenting events and things that existed in the past through interviews when conventional historical sources fall short.⁷⁹ By capturing the perspectives and experiences of underrepresented individuals, groups and communities, this approach has played a critical role in filling gaps within historical records. This recovery function becomes especially pertinent to the Fluxus legacy, which resists traditional modes of collection. Intermedial works typically endure only as fragments or traces, or as one of many representations of far more complex experiences that often involved interaction, performance or multisensory engagement. In this context, oral histories of artworks might be seen as a way to document, preserve and transmit art that remains underrepresented or represented only partially in collections due to its distributed nature.⁸⁰

As oral historian Alessandro Portelli famously observed, "Oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they were doing, what they now think they did."⁸¹ The discipline extends beyond merely extracting factual information from oral sources. As Luisa Passerini notes, "the raw material of oral history consists not just of factual statements, but is pre-eminently an expression and representation of culture, and therefore includes not only literal narrations but also the dimensions of memory, ideology and subconscious desires."⁸² When applied to the history of artworks, this methodology yields richer outcomes than written or visual documentation alone, capturing testimonies of creation, interpretation, conservation and experience, which, while central to Fluxus's legacy, present a particular challenge for traditional conservation approaches to preserve.⁸³

The perspective of oral history also offers a fresh lens through which to reconsider the concept of collecting. While Radio Fluxus is conceived as a collection, it diverges from traditional collecting practices in the visual art world, where Fluxus's legacy indisputably belongs—practices typically associated with ownership and exclusivity. Radio Fluxus's employment of prosopopoeia transforms artworks into witnesses capable of testifying to their own presence. These testimonies function as documents meant to be archived and broadly shared, rather than precious, unique pieces to be acquired, collected and eventually displayed for the enjoyment of a select public. This raises an intriguing possibility: perhaps collecting and perpetuating art could be reimagined as precisely this—the gesture of producing narratives about artworks that weave together their tangible and intangible dimensions.

Conclusion: toward activation

Drawing inspiration from the discourses on intersemiotic translation within an interdisciplinary framework—spanning classical studies, literature, art theory and oral history—this study has sought to reveal storytelling's capacity to transmit and sustain these works over time in a manner that parallels conservation, engaging with discourses that closely resemble those of conservation itself. This perspective challenges the notion that traditional conservation is the only means of keeping and caring for visual art as heritage, pointing to the relevance of the term “activation”—the guiding notion of this book and its underlying research project. Activation implies something more than what Fernando Domínguez Rubio termed the “mimeographic work of keeping the same.”⁸⁴ This chapter suggests that the “more” encompasses a high degree of subjectivity and multiple levels of creativity— notions that, until recently, were largely contested within conservation discourses. Through this lens, activation suggests a more dynamic, open, interpretive approach to sustaining art than traditional conservation.

As conservation undergoes a radical redefinition—shifting from a discipline traditionally grounded in the hard sciences toward one increasingly aligned with the humanities—can its boundaries be stretched to include the creative gesture of activation? Salvador Muñoz Viñas aptly notes that a return to traditional conservation paradigms seems unlikely, as new forms of conservation and new kinds of conservators emerge from this epistemological shift.⁸⁵ Perhaps activation through storytelling could be regarded as such a new form of conservation. Yet, such a proposition may still seem too radical for immediate acceptance. Perhaps it is more pragmatic instead to consider activation as a concept distinct from conservation, allowing it to develop on its own terms before seeking integration, at least for now.

Applying the notion of intermedia and exemplative art to ancient Greek painting—a thought-provoking yet inherently problematic exercise, given the distinct socio-temporal dimensions—one might consider Pausanias's description of Polygnotos's work as a creative interpretation and potential realization of the artwork itself. Extending this rationale, Pausanias's description could be conceptualized as a performative score, enabling subsequent realizations that may—or may not—directly relate to Polygnotos's *Iliupersis* and *Nekyia*. Notably, Pausanias's description has not

survived in its “original” form, but primarily through later Latin translations likely replete with lacunae and omissions, with the processes of copying and translation introducing an additional layer of interpretation. The most notable attempt to reconstruct or, more accurately, recreate these paintings emerged from the German archaeologist Carl Robert in 1893, who produced a linear drawing based on pottery painting motifs.⁸⁶ While Robert, in his scientific rigor, would likely have rejected the notion of his work as a creative act, contemporary perspectives recognize it as precisely that. We can view his reconstruction as another potential realization of Pausanias’s interpretive “score”—an example of interpretation and another intermedial translation, this time from words back to image.

And perhaps that is how activation could be understood—as a generative act of transmission of a work that inherently catalyzes further creative expressions. Perhaps activation resides in this chain reaction of creativity, where one artistic work opens pathways for new interpretations and innovations, building upon or drawing inspiration from the initial work. In this context, activation embodies the potential to ignite a continuous dialogue of creative works, each responding to and expanding upon its predecessors. Through this lens, Radio Fluxus becomes more than just a channel for transmitting Fluxus works. It becomes a model and score in its own right—an open invitation that may inspire future creative interventions and reimaginings.

Acknowledgments

The research for this chapter has been conducted within the *Activating Fluxus* project supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation (2022–26). I extend my appreciation to this volume’s co-editors, whose thoughtful feedback shaped earlier drafts. The conceptual framework presented here developed during my work on Radio Fluxus, and I sincerely thank all podcast contributors, whose trust, generosity and dedication made the project possible. I experimented with Claude Sonnet 4 for light editing and proofreading of this text.

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12 Ann Noël: All we need is to keep a sense of humor—a conversation with Hanna B. Hölling, Aga Wielocha and Josephine Ellis

Ann Noël, born in England on November 24, 1944, is a British artist known for her association with Fluxus. Since 1980, she has resided and worked in Berlin. She was the life and artistic partner of American artist and poet Emmett Williams. Noël's artistic practice encompasses a range of mediums including performance, installation, painting, graphic design, printmaking and photography. Since 1968, Noël has maintained a daily diary, documenting her meetings, events, projects and exhibitions, providing an invaluable insight into the development of her ideas. She has participated in major Fluxus festivals and collaborated with Fluxus artists such as Williams, Ben Patterson, Eric Andersen and others. Her involvement in international events like the Festival of Fantastics in Roskilde and her collaborations with Francesco Conz have further enriched her artistic repertoire. The *Activating Fluxus* team spoke with Noël about the ongoing life of Fluxus, impermanence and archives.

Hanna B. Hölling: Ann, thank you so much for meeting with us. You have been involved in Fluxus for decades, since you arrived at Something Else Press in December 1968. I'm curious to ask whether we can perceive Fluxus as still alive or active, or at least as having potential for the future. Is storytelling, which is so pertinent to your activities, either through your visual diaries or through oral transmission, a means of preserving Fluxus? Can it be conveyed both through diaries and through spoken word?

Ann Noël: Last year, for the exhibition *Sex Ties*—as opposed to “sixties”—at the Nassauischer Kunstverein,¹ I made bedside tables for Fluxus women. In the drawers of bedside tables in hotels you always find a Bible, so I decided to write a Fluxus Bible (Figure 12.1) and place one in each of these bedside tables (Figure 12.2). I call it *The New Testament: The Gospel According to Saint Ann* [2022]. And I tell stories about all the Fluxus guys and the women that I met over the years. I took a lot of information from the diaries. The bedside tables are now in Wiesbaden, in the Fluxeum set up by Michael Berger.² But I have two copies at home, and I'm thinking about making a reading from them. *The Visual Diaries*

EDITION HANSJÖRG MAYER

Robert Filliou in Paris

CHAPTER 1

HANSJÖRG Mayer took me, Ann Noël, to Paris by car to meet Robert Filliou, the poet and artist, who would be having a show in his gallery. We went to the airport, but he was not on the flight from Nice at 9:30, as he had said he would be. We were staying with Mimi's friend Helga overnight.

2 I met Robert Filliou at a café at the Place de La Contrescarpe on the morning of September 1st, 1968. He took Hansjörg and me through a street market to an Arabian restaurant to eat couscous. It was a place he had frequented when he lived at a hotel nearby with Daniel Spoerri.

3 Over lunch he told me about his Danish wife, Marianne, their daughter, Martelline and the years before/during the 1950's when he lived in the USA and Korea. Although I was a shy young woman, just out of a British art college, he put me at my ease immediately and I was soon telling him all about myself.

4 We drove to the École Militaire, where Robert Filliou's brother had worked as a doctor. Robert had left a box of art objects with him, but they had thrown it out when he was transferred somewhere else.

5 Robert had an exhibition of telegrams, "Exposition Intuitive" at Jacqueline Ranson. We drove to that gallery next, but the work was no longer there and she would not be able to get it back in time.

6 All that we accomplished, was to buy postcards of many Paris monuments for a series of prints he planned to make, a development of his art in a hat, "Galerie Legitime".

7 Leaving Robert at a friend's house we went back to Helga's place. I was asked if I would stay with Mimi's daughter, Camilla while she, Hansjörg, Helga and her husband went out to dinner together.

8 We sat out for the drive back to Stuttgart the next morning, Robert, Hansjörg and myself. We stopped for a delicious lunch at a roadside restaurant near Nancy and reached the border at 4 pm.

9 Hansjörg's Citroën, which had broken down on the way there, was not ready out the garage in Strasbourg and we waited for 2 hours in a café. Robert regaled us with stories of his artist/friends and I was an attentive audience.

10 Supper was awaiting us at the Mayer home in Stuttgart, with Hansjörg's mother, step-father, the grandmother, an aunt and the dog. Robert is staying with Reinhard and Heidi Döhl, where we brought him after we had eaten.

CHAPTER 2

WORKING all day long at Staub-Mayer, the family printing factory. My job is to put the page-forms in the correct order for printing, to make films for the blocks with illustrations and for the poster. We are making a catalogue for the exhibition of publications at the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague. At 6 pm we picked Robert up and brought him to the house for an evening meal with several bottles of wine.

2 As we do most evenings, we went to the gallery afterwards. I drew ribs over the monuments on one of the postcards from Paris, and Robert was very pleased with it. He

Figure 12.1 Page one of Ann Noël's *The Gospel According to St. Ann*, 2022. Inkjet prints from original handwritten notebook, laminated protoboard cover, ring wire binding, 24 × 17 cm. Edition of 8 plus II AP. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 12.2 Installation view of the exhibition *Fluxus Sex Ties/Hier Spielt die Musik!*, with bedside tables by Ann Noël, Nassauischer Kunstverein Wiesbaden, July 15, 2022–January 8, 2023. Courtesy of the artist.

1962–2006 is a boxed edition I made for the Galerie Marlene Frei in Zurich. *CONFLUX II* is a series of five large works mounted on board, which I made about everything that happened in the 1990s; I recorded all the dates, places and names written in my diaries during that decade. And I made it because I was having an exhibition with Alison Knowles at the museum FLUXUS+ in Potsdam in 2010.³ I call the works *Conflux*, because “conflux” means “flowing with.” And my diaries flow with my life.

Aga Wielocha: In storytelling, facts intertwine with fiction, memories and recollections with anecdotes. I wonder, do you consider storytelling as a way of preserving the spirit of Fluxus?

Noël: I try not to make any fictions, but I know a lot of artists do because they simply don’t remember anymore. Fluxus really was such an important influence on me. Although I don’t consider myself a Fluxus artist, I certainly learned how to be humorous in my work. Another important aspect of Fluxus was taking chances and creating out of almost nothing, and especially if you have the right kind of brain for it. Which I seem to have!

Josephine Ellis: You don’t consider yourself a Fluxus artist, but you are also not quite non-Fluxus either.

- Noël:* Well, I was married to Emmett Williams for thirty-seven years. So I guess something rubbed off over all of those years. And I also took part in many of the Fluxus festivals that were in Europe after the 1980s when we came here. I certainly know all about most of the performance pieces that were done over and over again, because they were classics. I watched Ben Patterson, Eric Andersen and Alison Knowles perform, so I know about their peculiarities, what made them special.
- Ellis:* Returning to the Bibles in the bedside tables and their relationship to the diaries you'd written previously—did you update the diaries in any way when you drew on this information for the Bibles?
- Noël:* I tried to keep the facts the same, but of course, every time you write, you remember more details. So I just sat down and wrote out of my head, and then I checked up the facts from my diaries. But I have a pretty good memory, and I tried to write it in a Bible form with verses. Chapter one was about Robert Filliou, but then each thought was a new verse and numbered like in a Bible. So you can refer to chapter one, verse three, if you want to, and it's fun to do. I based the design of my pages on the King James Bible, the most important historical Church of England Bible, which I was given by my godmother when I was twelve. If George Maciunas can make a Fluxmass,⁴ I can make a Protestant Bible. So, when the Nassauischer Kunstverein bought old bedside tables for the exhibition, I put potties in the eight I made (for the Fluxus shit) and pasted the outsides of the boxes with pictures from my diaries about the women involved, and then we put catalogs, books and objects inside the cupboard part of the bedside tables. We filled the drawers up with whatever we had from these women, so that it was like a real voyage of discovery to look through one table and then the next one, and they were all different sizes and shapes and heights, and I think we had about thirty cabinets in the exhibition toward the end. It was a great participative exhibition. People could come in and they could open the drawers and open the cupboards and look inside and pick out the pieces. Because my Bibles were worth stealing, they put them on a chain so people couldn't take them.
- Hölling:* You were with Emmett for forty years—it's a lifetime. Could we speak about the moment when important people all of a sudden are no longer around, when things change? I imagine that the story, and how it's being told, changes too. It's first and foremost a divorce from the person one loves and then a divorce from the archive.
- Noël:* I had everything here in the flat. I mean, I had to give up the studio because I couldn't afford to pay for both the studio and

the flat after Emmett died. Everything came back here, and this whole flat was just stuffed with papers, books and work. I was happy to send it to the Getty Research Institute, where it would be taken care of.⁵ It was a relief. I was always afraid that there would be water damage, or there'd be a fire or something, and these things would be lost. The Getty's building cannot be destroyed by fire or earthquakes.

It took me ten years to work on getting the archive together. I didn't mind doing that at all because I knew it was worth it to list all those artists' books and papers and letters and photographs, and also to identify the people in the photographs, because I knew them. People now wouldn't be able to identify them so easily.

The people from the Getty wanted to know exactly what they were getting—how many letters from [Daniel] Spoerri, from the concrete poets, because Emmett was not only a Fluxus artist but was also a poet, and he wrote great letters. They wanted to know what letters we had. With the invention of the fax machine, he would write a letter and then fax it. So, I had the original letters still. And then people also gave back letters he wrote.

And now that I had space at home for me, I could take all of my work out of the boxes from under the bed and behind the furniture and wherever it was stored and put it out on these empty bookshelves, you know, so that now I can reach all of my work and even my diaries. I can reach up onto the bookshelf and go to any year and take one down. This is very good for me personally.

Wielocha:
Noël:

I wonder about your personal view on keeping Fluxus alive. I love that legacy and I think it can be kept alive, the sense of play. The cast changes, the people change. A lot of artists today are too deadly serious; they should have a little more fun with their work because life is to be enjoyed. I was asked to go to performance festivals after Emmett died, and I did that very willingly and performed Fluxus pieces with my own pieces. Especially the ones that people really love to perform, like Emmett's *Four Directional Song of Doubt [for Five Voices]*, c. 1964], for example. I often have done that. And there's also the *Alphabet Symphony* [1962], which I have taken over and done myself. When I was with Ben Patterson and Eric Andersen, Ben was also taking lots of ideas from other Fluxus artists and recycling them into his own performance pieces, which is okay, but he didn't always give people credit for that. I try to give people credit. If they had a genius idea or I really liked it, I do mention their names when I'm performing the pieces.

- I don't pretend it's my piece. Eric [Andersen] does pieces that nobody wants to participate in. But I love those too, because he deliberately tries to make the audience uncomfortable [e.g., Andersen's performance *Please Leave* (1985); see also Chapter 15 in this volume], but they won't go away because they paid to come in—it's a wonderful psychological trick, and I enjoy the playfulness of it. And he has a great sense of humor.
- Wielocha:* Could you speak about the reperforming of Fluxus pieces by other Fluxus artists, also across generations?
- Noël:* I've worked with the Maulwerker in Berlin.⁶ They're excellent Fluxus performers and composers, and performers in their own right. We have done a number of things together, and they've even performed my work. I'm a rather reluctant performer; I don't beg to be included in performance festivals. I go when I'm invited. And if people say, "Will you make a performance?" then I'll do it. But I don't push myself in that direction. I would prefer to be making books, frankly—I love the idea of the book. I love the idea of the box. George Maciunas's boxes include items that you can explore privately in your home. I love that; that's why those black boxes back there [pointing behind Hölling] are so intriguing for me. I'd love to have a look in one of those boxes, you know? In my back room now at home, I not only have the books and the diaries, but I have the boxes. And sometimes I forget what's in the box, and then I can take it out and look at it and surprise myself.
- Ellis:* Another related phenomenon is that, in addition to performing historic Fluxus works, new pieces are being created by contemporary artists in direct response to Fluxus scores.
- Noël:* When Ben [Patterson] died, he was supposed to be going to a performance festival in Spain, and I was invited too. So, I went alone. I made a performance for Ben using Morse code in 2016. I was communicating with Ben in the sky with my voice, and then I got the whole audience to join in blowing whistles or using flashlights to make the Morse code signals. It's great to be able to take these ideas and expand them.
- Hölling:* I'd like to return to the idea of re-enactment and unfold it a bit. One re-enactment concerns the historical work re-enacted/revived by the artists themselves who are still here. Then, there is a delegated re-enactment, especially in score-based works. Finally, but not exhaustively, there is a more remote interpretation of the work by contemporary artists, an homage being perhaps a subgenre of this interpretation. What are the potentialities in those three different encounters with historical work, in your view?

Noël: I enjoy watching the Maulwerker doing very precise and beautiful performances of old Fluxus pieces. They are magnificent performers. It's fun to see someone take an idea and develop it further and, in another way, make it part of their own work. That's perfectly legitimate. Ideas are there to be thrown around. I don't think we should say, "Oh, you can't do that because that's a piece by Ben Patterson." He would love it to know that someone was using an idea of his and expanding it. He'd probably join in and do it too.

Hölling: Could you speak to the role of the audience in historical works compared to the audience in these works' contemporary re-enactments?

Noël: I want to engage the audience when I'm performing. I feel I like to share the joy, to have people performing with you and finding out that it's fun. And that they laugh, and you say, "No, you're not supposed to laugh during the performance," but they are enjoying themselves. I don't think it's very helpful to stand up and treat the work as a set piece that should never, ever be done any other way. Fluxus scores were written in such a way that you can interpret them whichever way you want to. Like "draw a line" [La Monte Young, *Composition 1960 #10*, "Draw a straight line and follow it. October 1960"]. So, "draw a line" can mean the way Nam June Paik did it as a *Zen for Head* [performed in Wiesbaden in 1962]. Or it can mean, literally, as the illustration goes in the Fluxus newspaper, drawing a white line on a football field.⁷ So whichever way you want to draw a line, it's your way of interpreting that score, and the scores were deliberately made that way so that they could be different—ever changing and ever more interesting.

Ellis: Can I ask a more general question about the exhibition and display of your works? Does it matter to you how your works are presented? I am thinking of your books in particular.

Noël: I mean, I really feel books should be looked at. There were book collectors, you know, who bought two copies of every book, one to put in the vitrine and one for people to look at. I really feel that art is something that is hands on. You should be able to touch it and look at it and play with it. It's the same with performance, that you can take part in it, that it's not something to be elevated and put behind glass. That's exactly what Fluxus was not about, but now people want to put that in museums, right? They're setting up museums because people want to save the work. They want to think that what they have is worth a lot of money. The Archivio Francesco Conz here in Berlin are trying to restore pieces made from materials that weren't made to last. People were making canvases using

leaves and stuff that they picked up off the streets. And you can't really restore that, and I don't think you should.

George Maciunas wanted to print newspapers with ink that would fade completely so that your newspaper would disappear over a number of years, and you wouldn't be able to read it anymore. These original Fluxus newspapers, the paper is so brittle and brown that it just falls apart, but now they've reprinted it, so you can't get rid of anything these days. Some people just have this thing about making everything for posterity.

Hölling: You mentioned Maciunas's notion of the vanishing print used in a newspaper, and the idea that certain art should disappear. I find this paradoxical and intriguing, especially as you also create self-portraits that you paint with anti-aging makeup.

Noël: So, this is perfect, right? I used anti-aging makeup to smear over the portrait. I used real lipstick and real eyeshadow and real "Age Reperfect" makeup in five shades for the face. But of course, it is not made to last. We're not supposed to wear the same makeup for ten years. So, the colors fade. And then I remade the portrait about five years ago in another performance where I applied new makeup, and I learned all the new slogans, because part of my performance is to use the TV slogans for selling this stuff. It's all very expensive, lipstick with jojoba oil and things like this. I make it nice and interesting and a bit funny, but the portrait is not going to last. Soon I'm going to have to take it down and throw it away because it's going to be just an outline with no color in the face whatsoever.

Hölling: Could I ask you about Williams's books of concrete poetry, such as *Sweethearts* [1967]? Is there a favorable way of engaging with it?

Noël: *Sweethearts* is a book that you must hold in your hand. That's a very important thing, how the book is held in the hand, and looked through, one page at a time. The first version Hansjörg Mayer did was paperback so you could flip to the last part of the book to make a visual orgasm. When Dick Higgins printed it for the Something Else Press, he made a softback version and a hardback version, which was completely ridiculous. How can you flip a book with a hardcover? You can't flip it at all. He complained to Emmett because he couldn't sell it, then he remaindered it. This is Dick Higgins for you. I think he was a bit jealous. I have three versions of *Sweethearts* now. I have the Hansjörg Mayer one, the Dick Higgins softcover version, and the one by Walther König as a reprint.⁸ I think it's a wonderful book. It's a prime example of what a book should be. Something held in the hands, not put behind glass in a bookcase.

- Wielocha:* *Sweethearts* has been reprinted three times. A reprint adds another dimension to the material life of a book.
- Noël:* Artist's books were usually printed in very small numbers. You were lucky if you had a run of 300. That was already a lot. But if it's an interesting book, and at some point, it's no longer available and you can't even find it on the internet, then it's very nice if you can have it reprinted. I've had two of my books reprinted now. *You* [1982] has been reprinted by every-edition in Zurich, and *Arabics* [1989] has been reprinted in Berlin by Argobooks, who also printed a book which was never published by Rainer Verlag, but which I had made, a handwritten book.⁹ I like that because if ideas are worth preserving, it's good to be able to get hold of a copy of a book. I would like to get reprints of books by early poets who probably only had 100 copies made of their book. That would be great. I just spent three weeks in this rehabilitation center where they advertised that they had a library, and I went looking for the library, and I found out that they'd closed it because all that the patients there want to read are romance novels. The old ladies were over eighty in this rehabilitation center. All they wanted to read was Rosamunde Pilcher. Terrible. I had an awful time. The women I was sharing a room with were picking up gossip magazines that were lying around all over the place to do the crossword puzzles in them, and you can't read them. I mean, there was nothing interesting to read. I had to look at my iPad and try to find films and videos on YouTube that I wanted to watch. Libraries are so important. Books are so wonderful.

This is an edited excerpt from a conversation that took place on March 8, 2024.

Notes

- 1 *Fluxus Sex Ties/Hier Spielt die Musik!*, Nassauischer Kunstverein Wiesbaden, July 15, 2022–January 8, 2023.
- 2 The Fluxum is a private museum in Wiesbaden-Erbenheim, founded in 1986 by Ute and Michael Berger, entrepreneurs and collectors of art and everyday objects.
- 3 *In and out the window*, museum FLUXUS+, Potsdam, June 25–August 29, 2010.
- 4 Fluxmass has been performed many times, with its initial iteration at Voorhees Chapel, Douglass College, New Brunswick, New Jersey, in 1970, with Ay-Ö, Geoffrey Hendricks, Dick Higgins, Joe Jones, Milan Knížák, Alison Knowles, George Maciunas, Larry Miller, Yoshi Wada, Robert Watts and others.
- 5 See "Emmett Williams Archive," The Getty Research Institute, https://www.getty.edu/research/special_collections/notable/emmett_williams.html.
- 6 Founded by Dieter Schnebel in 1977, the Maulwerker is a collective of composer-performers and an ensemble specializing in experimental vocal music. Rooted in the spirit of John Cage's work, they have collaborated with a variety of contemporary composers, including

Fluxus artists Alison Knowles, Ben Patterson and Emmett Williams. See <https://www.maulwerker.de/ensemble-e.html>.

- 7 Alice Centamore and James Hoff, eds., *The Fluxus Newspaper 1964–1979* (New York: Primary Information, 2024), 10.
- 8 Emmett Williams, *Sweethearts* (Stuttgart: Edition Hansjörg Mayer, 1967); Emmett Williams, *Sweethearts* (New York: Something Else Press, 1967); Emmett Williams, *Sweethearts* (Cologne: Walther König, 2020).
- 9 Ann Noël, *You* (Zurich: everyedition, 2019); Ann Noël, *Arabics* (Berlin: Argobooks, 2020); Ann Noël, *Spirale* (Berlin: Argobooks, 2020).

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13 Eric Andersen: On change, confusion and amazement—a conversation with Hanna B. Hölling, Aga Wielocha and Josephine Ellis

Eric Andersen (Figure 13.1), a Danish artist associated with Fluxus, is regarded as a pioneer of intermedia art. During the Festum Fluxorum at Nikolaj Kirke in Copenhagen in 1962, Andersen participated in one of Fluxus's early concerts.¹ In the summer of 1963, he traveled to the Soviet Bloc, where he engaged with the emerging avant-garde networks. One of his journeys led to a misunderstanding among Fluxus artists, resulting in divisions and a flurry of letters that uncovered the tensions inherent in the Fluxus milieu. Andersen does not consider Fluxus as a unified network; rather, he views Fluxus as a loose association of differently thinking individuals. His *Opus*, conceived in the early 1960s and drawing on musical inspirations, is a series of works that exemplify a scripted form of artwork that references action. Toying with paradoxes, and following a numerical description that rejects sequentiality, *Opus* often leaves the execution of actions to the individual. Andersen discusses his notion of intermedia, his attitude toward change and the potential for activating historical Fluxus with the research team of *Activating Fluxus*.

Hanna B. Hölling: Eric, what does it mean to activate Fluxus today?

Eric Andersen: It's very interesting. Yesterday I got an email from Weronika Trojańska. She's writing a thesis on Fluxus intermedia at the Academy of Art and Design in Wrocław, Poland. She wants to make a chain of events as a part of her thesis. I think she started by making a survey asking people what they associated with Fluxus. She received several very strange answers—one of them stated that Fluxus was a politician. Weronika considers these answers to be scores and wants to send them out to different people who should elaborate on them, and then send them further on to other people who could also elaborate on them, and so on. I think this is a very fine definition of a Fluxus score, that it is a never-ending chain of events.

I prefer to call Fluxus "intermedia." To change Fluxus to "intermedia" would be difficult because Fluxus has become so well known. It will confuse everybody, which is a good thing. Fluxus was never anything but a group guided by the principle to try and be as different as possible. There was

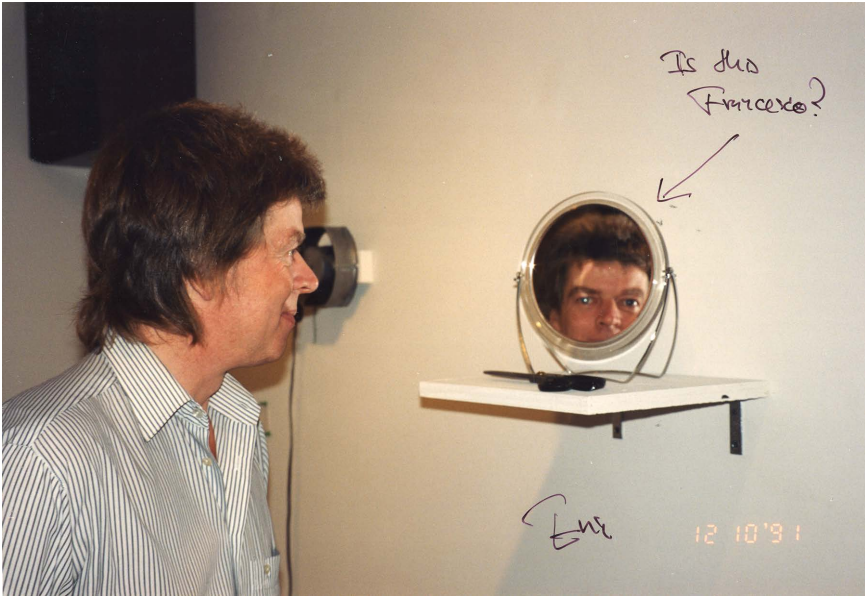


Figure 13.1 Eric Andersen in 1991. Photo: Francesco Conz. Courtesy of Archivio Conz, Berlin, and the artist.

no identity in Fluxus. Fluxus was just something in time that happened from 1958 and continued up to . . . maybe yesterday, maybe today. And few people have survived or have a clear mind. Most of us are dead. I'm still a little alive, but I'm also half dead. So it doesn't make sense to talk about a Fluxus network anymore because Fluxus was connected to specific persons at a specific time. But it still makes sense to talk about intermedia, even though it will not outcompete Fluxus.

Hölling:

Let's pick up on Trojańska's proposal to continue the spirit of Fluxus and intermedia through her project. She sends out scores that can be rewritten, realized or interpreted anew. These works are time-based. Could you speak about their time-basedness and how works like Trojańska's are continuing Fluxus or intermedia?

Andersen:

Art can be anything. It can be propaganda, therapy, entertainment or research. But intermedia differs from all other art forms. It has no final or solid form, nor is it a commodity to be consumed. Intermedia changes all the time; it can differ in appearance from day to day and from hour to hour. It invites you to participate, to change the artwork yourself.

- Hölling:* You once expressed that, in a changeable intermedia work, no iteration of the work is the same since the work is interpreted anew every time. How can we actually recognize the artwork as still the same, and when does it become something different? In other words, how much change in an artwork is allowed?
- Andersen:* There's absolutely no way to define the work, because the work changes constantly and there's no limit to the number of changes. You can only make a statement that won't really be valid in the next moment. Still, you can comment and define the work's substance. But you have to accept that the work will change the moment you have stopped talking about it. This is the beauty of it. The very essence of the word "inter-media" is that it is changing. It is between media. So, don't ask me to define anything at all.
- Aga Wielocha:* These artworks evolve over time, leaving various traces behind—both physical and less tangible, such as memories. What are your thoughts on these traces and their value?
- Andersen:* All of it is relevant and nothing should be excluded. There's no right or wrong way to see art. We need to accept all the impressions and memories of a work. Memories are flexible—two people won't remember the same things, even if they sit next to each other at the same event. Especially after some time, they will have very different memories of what happened. And that's okay, we should accept this. What we should not accept is the rather primitive idea that art takes a final shape. In fact, art never takes a final shape, even if it is a painting hanging on the wall. People will see new things in that painting over time. I mean, people in the Renaissance didn't perceive the *Mona Lisa* in the same way that we do today. And we should have an open mind instead of insisting that works have substance or identity.
- Josephine Ellis:* Could you say more about how your scores contest the notion of identity? It seems as though you consciously make it difficult for a score to be performed the same way twice. They can be so open-ended.
- Andersen:* The more difficult the score the better—and the more interesting. You shouldn't take the score too literally. Don't accept the score as it is; don't do what the score tells you to do. Use the score as a point of departure. And don't ever start considering if there is a right way to perform it. There are different ways to perform the score, and all of them are okay. Of course, if I happen to see your performance of the score, I can criticize you. But just do what you want to do—you are the performer. The score is only a starting point for elaborations. So just start participating, evolving and elaborating. And please remember

to involve the audience and ask them to work with you. That's always the most interesting situation. One mind is less interesting than two minds. And if you do the same thing next time, you will have an entirely different outcome.

Ellis: So it's the involvement of the audience that is so important because they are what makes each performance different. Is it the audience that brings the change?

Andersen: The important thing is that there is no audience. Well, at least not like in a theater piece or in a concert where a group of people are pacified by being told not to speak, shout, get up off the chairs or do anything but just sit there like a bunch of cows listening and looking. Don't put people into that situation. That is disrespectful to their imagination. Involve people, get them out of the chairs and included in the work. They will be amazed by what they can do. And they could do things far beyond your own imagination. Sometimes it gets boring, but boredom is also an important phenomenon.

Hölling: I'd like to return to the simultaneity of truth and untruth, and, as an extension, to the idea of confusion as a productive force.

Andersen: Confusion certainly is much more interesting than confirmation. When people approach art, they are looking for something they already know to be confirmed. They want to feel happy, safe and confident. Very few people look for confusion. If you're just looking for something to confirm your views, something you have observed already, then you become a little silly because all you want is to be safe.

Hölling: You title your works *Opus*, which evokes musical associations.

Andersen: And as you know, "opus" means "work." *Opus* is a work. And the wonderful thing about *Opus* is that it is followed by a number.²

Hölling: And these numbers aren't sequential.

Andersen: Yes, I change them all the time. If you start to study my work and you find *Opus 100*, it is certainly *Opus 20* in another case, and *Opus 80* in another case, and then you have total confusion. And you don't know when this work was written or performed or even named. Sometimes I don't title a work at all.

Hölling: That's intriguing. On the one hand, you choose numerals to name your work, while on the other, you reject sequentiality. There is a different kind of time-basedness at play here, one that confuses chronology and rejects the linearity of time.

Andersen: If you call something *Opus* and a number, then you are dealing with quantities and not qualities. It's very interesting to understand a work through its quantity—as a number, rather than it being *about* anything. And what is a number? A number is a sequence in time. And if you continue changing the number, then you change time.

Generally, when people speak about art, they don't speak about quantity. They never say, this painting is two meters times one meter, but they speak about the so-called content. And I think the quantity of the work is much more interesting than the quality. That applies as well to the performance of the single work. You can make it in any dimension. I mean, you can have a score performed by one person or by thousands of them—the quantity becomes much more interesting than whatever they do.

Hölling: Some of us have backgrounds in conservation and conservators look at materials, weights, densities, you know . . . We can imagine quantifying, say, a performance in terms of weight and space probably more easily than any other profession.

Andersen: I think conservators do a very interesting job. In fact, I have often worked with conservators to remake something. Their minds are very interesting.

Hölling: Is this the future of your works, Eric? Do you see remaking as a strategy for continuing your works?

Andersen: I would prefer to remake my works instead of using the same materials from, say, the 1960s. I want my works to become new situations based on old proposals. I have a very good example. In 1966, I was one of the first artists to work with artificial intelligence.³ I worked with a computer firm in Copenhagen called Regnecentralen, one of the most advanced institutions working with digital technology at the time—they later went bankrupt because they were too experimental. Then Hannah Higgins found this work and asked me to remake it at the University of California.⁴ There I proposed not to just repeat the work, but to turn it into a choir piece—a musical piece. In this work, thirty-two parts should be singing, including the computer.

That's the way I like to work. You take an old piece, and then you change it entirely into a new piece through collaboration with other people. And I never want to make all the decisions myself. One mind is too boring. Every time you do an artwork, you have to put your minds together with other people to make it special.

Wielocha: Do you consider the new iteration a different work? Does it have a different title?

Andersen: No, it's entirely different but it carries the same title. The first version is a poem printed by the computer. The second version is an entirely different piece, with a computer singing songs. Both pieces are called *Opus 1966*.

Wielocha: There is a specific continuity within the process of interpretation. If someone were to interpret this piece again in the

future, is it important for you to reference its first version, or does it not matter to you?

Andersen: It doesn't matter. What happens is that you take the structure of an old piece and interpret it so that the structure appears entirely differently. But basically, the structure is the same, and what remains unchanged is also the way you work with aleatoric elements and chance operations. But when I worked with Regnecentralen in 1966, they had their own ideas of how to elaborate on the chance operations and aleatoric processes. And then last year, it was other people in Los Angeles that had new ideas, and, of course, an entirely different technology to interpret the principles of the first work. So the recent interpretation became entirely different, though there are certain elements—such as all the basic elements of artificial intelligence, indeterminacy and the lack of full understanding of the process—that resemble the old piece.

Hölling: I'm intrigued by the concept of remaking as a radical form of activation, where pieces can retain some elements but not all. Essentially, the piece doesn't have to maintain a fixed identity or preserve its original form.

Andersen: There's no identity. There are only circumstances. The understanding of identity is that something doesn't change. But this doesn't exist. Everything changes all the time. We are just trying to arrest change and make the world solid, and we will never succeed at this. If you, for example, ask me how old I am, or when and where I was born, I will give you a new answer every time. The answers will never be the same. And that goes for artworks, too.

Hölling: I wonder whether there is a piece which does not lend itself to activation? Or could you imagine an intermedia piece that has to die? Remaking as radical activation actually presumes that everything can last because it can change.

Andersen: In 1964, I was asked by the Danish Symphony Orchestra to make a symphony. And I made a score, Opus 51, and the graphics of the score were different for each instrument group. So, the violins had one graphic, the trumpets had another and so on. But the text was the same: "I have confidence in you," and then the alphabet was written in English.⁵ And if you count the number of letters and spaces in the sentence "I have confidence in you," it's exactly the same number as the number of letters in the English alphabet.

I asked the musicians to rehearse the score. Of course, they had to imagine what I wanted them to play, and I had to have the confidence that they could do this. They couldn't ask me questions of any kind. I also told them that they could never

repeat themselves from one rehearsal to the next, that they should never play the work in the same way. They hated that, of course, because musicians tend to be conservative people. But the conductor told them, “You have to do it or you’ll be fired.”

Musicians are disciplined. They tried their best to do what they thought I had in mind. The score prescribed that the orchestra should play the score for twenty minutes, but when they started to play, they couldn’t play it for more than seven minutes. They had to do the performance three times then put them together to make one twenty-minute performance. I never thought of this idea myself, that you could perform it three times and then edit it together, but it turned out wonderfully. The performance took place, and it was broadcast by the Danish state radio, DR. And this piece has been performed hundreds of times all over the world by small and big orchestras, and even non-orchestras. No two performances can ever be compared and nobody would say these performances are the same piece. I’ve never seen it performed anywhere without a very interesting result.

Maybe the three of you should perform *Opus 51*. That would be wonderful. You have to do it.

Hölling:

We have to try it. It’s a fantastic answer because it offers an example of both continuity and discontinuity. Could I ask whether there is a medium that you would identify as the one you primarily work in?

Andersen:

I have made recordings and books. I never really wanted to do it, which is, of course, connected to the fact that I don’t want my work to have a final shape. But I also don’t want to be trapped by my principles—I think that’s very boring. I wouldn’t do it on my own accord. But sometimes, somebody you appreciate asks you to make a recording or a book, so, for them, I have made objects that take solid forms.

I want to be floating instead, and never stop time. And I don’t consider my work to be one “media,” I consider it to be an intermedia, so it can never be pinned down and truly understood. And I prefer it that way. I’m wondering about what I’m actually doing. It’s still amazing to me to see what I’m doing, and that’s my motivation—to be amazed. It’s not to achieve anything. I haven’t stopped being amazed. I mean, even this conversation I’m having with you is amazing. I’m enjoying it a lot.

This is an edited excerpt from two conversations conducted on February 23, 2023, and March 24, 2024.

Notes

- 1 A detailed description of the event is featured in Magdalena Holdar, *Fluxus as a Network of Friends, Strangers, and Things: The Agency of Chance Collaborations* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2023), 78.
- 2 A collection of Andersen's *Opuses* is accessible online at "Eric Andersen," Avantgarde Museum, <https://www.avantgarde-museum.com/en/museum/collection/authors/eric-andersen~pe5685/>.
- 3 Titled *Opus 1966* (1966), this work is mentioned in Hannah B Higgins and Douglas Kahn, eds., *Mainframe Experimentalism: Early Computing and the Foundations of the Digital Arts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 11.
- 4 For the exhibition *Computational Poetics*, co-curated by Hannah B Higgins and David Familian at the Beall Center for Art + Technology at the University of California, Irvine, October 1, 2022–January 14, 2023.
- 5 See "Eric Andersen, *Opus 51*, 1964," The Museum of Modern Art, New York, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/127297>; and "Eric Andersen: Opus 51. I have confidence in you (1964)," Intuitive Music, <https://intuitivemusic.dk/iima/ea51.pdf>.

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14 “I have confidence in you”

Activating Eric Andersen’s *Opus 51*

Rasmus Holmboe and Magnus Kaslov

Introduction

This chapter discusses the scored piece *Opus 51*, written by the Danish intermedia artist Eric Andersen (b. 1943) in 1964. In particular, we address the central element of trust involved in performing the piece and how this leads the work to adapt to and, indeed, be shaped by the institutional codes that frame its performance. We do this by discussing elements of the research and exhibition project *Eric Andersen Exhibition Lab*, held at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Roskilde, Denmark, in 2018, and in light of the colorful circumstances surrounding the first performance and the subsequent reception of *Opus 51* in 1964–65.¹

Context and background

The *Eric Andersen Exhibition Lab* was organized by the authors, together with art educator Fillip Danstrup, and revolved around a paper archive with materials by Andersen, housed in the Eric Andersen Archive at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Roskilde. With the exhibition lab format, the project attempted to turn traditional research and exhibition practices upside down by using a preliminary exhibition as a space for conversation to host a series of open workshops and talks about the archive and Andersen’s practice. In a recursive manner, the workshops and conversations looped back into the research process and curation of the physical exhibition. A central part of this strategy was the production of a five-episode podcast series, for which we commissioned a new performance of *Opus 51* by the Danish artist group Union for Open Vocalism.² In this performance, the artists focused on the central statement of trust in Andersen’s score for *Opus 51*—the short sentence “I have confidence in you”—as a way to activate the composition.³ The commission was carried out without the involvement of Andersen, who experienced the new version of his work only at its premiere. The curatorial decision to prioritize the production of the series of podcasts was motivated by a wish to use narration and anecdote as central keys to unlock Andersen’s practice, and because it allowed us to gather different sources of information, such as interpretations, archival recordings, interviews and other elements that would be complementary to the physical exhibition and outlast it as a form of audio catalog.

As part of this project, we tested strategies to engage with the paper archive that had recently been gifted to the museum from the estate of Danish artist William Louis Sørensen (1942–2005).⁴ The archive consists of two brown cardboard folders filled to the brim with Andersen's scores, instruction pieces, newspaper articles, flyers, mail art, press releases, paper performance props, project descriptions, letters and other paper miscellanea related to the artist's performances, works and exhibitions, amounting to more than 600 pages in total.

The wealth and diverse nature of the material in the two folders bears testament to the wealth and diverse nature of Andersen's practice, which he himself describes with the term "intermedia."⁵ After taking private classes in musical composition around 1960, and specifically in the wake of the successfully scandalous 1962 Fluxus festival in Copenhagen,⁶ Andersen quickly became a central member of international Fluxus. From initially working mostly with instructions and scores that underpin and/or generate unusual social situations by slightly altering and shifting everyday occurrences, Andersen's works expand across media and have often taken form as elaborately staged events with many different components.

Opus 51

In its most elemental form, *Opus 51* consists of the radically open and rather opaquely written instruction:

I have confidence in you:
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

The piece rose to Danish national fame and infamy in 1965, when it was performed on national public radio, after being submitted by Andersen—in a slightly more elaborated version—to a national music competition proposed by the Danish Broadcasting Corporation. The competition ran for the entire year of 1964 and invited composers to submit works of five to ten minutes duration, which could be toured or performed on-air by the radio symphony orchestra. Taken together, the submission of *Opus 51*, its acceptance into the competition and, perhaps most importantly, its on-air premiere on August 16, 1965, sparked controversy in the intellectual music milieu, which subsequently spilled into public conversation. Here, in heated debates on the rising prominence of so-called new music, *Opus 51* quickly became both a reference point and a scapegoat as opinions ricocheted in newspapers and on national public radio.⁷

The score for *Opus 51* exists in four different versions among the materials held in the archive at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Roskilde. In two of these versions, the deceptively simple instruction appears as part of Andersen's so-called operas from the early to mid-1960s, where several instruction pieces are gathered in sequence on one or several sheets of paper.⁸ In one of these "operas" or program sequences, the work appears under the title *Opus 51* followed by a colon, and in the other, it appears without a title. The piece also appears in a third "stand-alone" version, where the phrase "I have confidence in you:" (with a colon) is typewritten

onto a standard sample sheet of the kind a print shop would use to showcase all the variations of letters, numbers and signs of a particular typeface. The uncapitalized name of the font, “free hand,” is added in typewriting below the sample letters (Figure 14.1). The paper is perforated along one edge, indicating that it has been torn from a pad of sample sheets. By most accounts,⁹ this version seems identical to one of the sheets handed in to the composers’ competition.¹⁰ The last version of *Opus 51* within the archive appears to be a later printed edition issued on stock card material (Figure 14.2). This version seems to have been more widely distributed.¹¹



Figure 14.1 Eric Andersen, *Opus 51*, 1964. Archival number 144, The Eric Andersen Archive, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Roskilde, Denmark. 2025 © Eric Andersen. Used with permission from The Museum of Contemporary Art, Roskilde, Denmark.

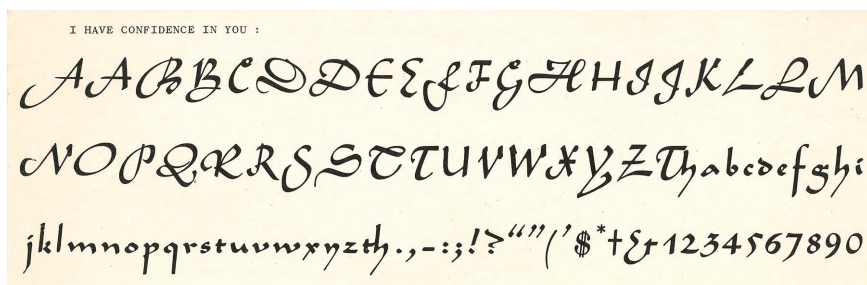


Figure 14.2 Eric Andersen, *Opus 51*, 1964. Archival number 143, The Eric Andersen Archive, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Roskilde, Denmark. 2025 © Eric Andersen. Used with permission from The Museum of Contemporary Art, Roskilde, Denmark.

The "original" moment

With its title, *Opus 51* presents itself in the vernacular of music. Although it does not employ traditional musical notation, the noun "opus" signals the historical, institutional and social context of classical music as the proper code with which to decipher the statement of trust and the letters following it. In this code, "opus" literally means "work," and as such it prompts us to read it as an instruction that is to be worked out as a musical performance.

The version of *Opus 51* that Andersen submitted to the composers' competition appropriated the requirements of the competition as the formal parameters of the work itself. The score consisted of twenty-one pages (twenty for the musicians and one for the conductor), all ripped from a printer's sample book of standard typefaces (Jim Crow, Free Hand and Legend), with the added statement of trust, "I have confidence in you," typewritten at the top of each page. Andersen's submission further comprised a cover letter that specified how the piece was set precisely to match the call for entries in the competition: the required duration, the number of musicians and the exact instrumentation to be present in the orchestra. Other instructions were sparse: the score was to be distributed among the musicians and then played.¹² In this very literal way, Andersen had instrumentalized the context to give the piece its formal shape.

On these grounds, *Opus 51* was accepted as a valid entry to the competition and was premiered by the Danish Broadcasting Corporation Symphony Orchestra. On August 31, 1965, in an on-air debate held two weeks after the premiere,¹³ Andersen discussed and defended his piece in conversation with Francesco Cristofoli, who had conducted the performance. The conductor clearly regarded *Opus 51* as a provocation and a joke—"an exploding cigar,"¹⁴ as he put it—and had instructed his orchestra to perform it as such by using any tropes of "modern music" they could think of.

Andersen clarified that the piece was not intended as a joke, but rather as a completely new form of score work, what he called "an idea score or a situation score," where the musicians themselves are faced with having to "formulate," rather than express the material or content of a traditional musical score.¹⁵ After dismissing the need to discuss whether the score was music or not, Andersen explained:

The moment, it [*Opus 51*] is submitted to a composers' competition and a musician relates to it—when it is presented in a performance situation in the context of a composers' competition—it is to be perceived as music. The moment it is presented in a literary magazine, it is to be perceived as a poem, if one wants to operate with these categories at all. Unfortunately, there isn't any forum today for the vast amount of activity that unfolds across all previous categories of artistic activity. As long as this forum does not exist, the usual, limited departments may have to take turns in taking care of it, or I don't know how it should be arranged.¹⁶

In the debate, Cristofoli articulated his reservations about *Opus 51*, highlighting what he saw as an inconsistency in how the piece addressed the theme of trust:

It is a question of trust between people, trust between the composer and the musicians that perform the piece, but that presupposes that one can trust the composer. And that is not possible when presented with such material.¹⁷

In the context of the composers' competition, *Opus 51*, like other works by Andersen, displays a keen attention to the codes that act to co-determine how an object or utterance acquires meaning in a specific social setting—here, the social institution of the classical orchestra. Conversely, it also demonstrates how the piece allows for the social institution to shift its perspective on its own practice. Functioning as interactions, interfaces or even interferences between objects, processes, utterances and institutions, Andersen's works are deeply engaged with social codes—investigating how one social code, such as music, can be embedded within another, like art or literature, or even within the social codes of everyday life. As such, Andersen is interested in how social codes and their syntax co-determine the way things come to acquire meaning, perform and operate in the world.

Temporal interplays and institutional determinations

It is obvious how *Opus 51*, as well as many of Andersen's other works, is fundamentally reliant on context. Presenting this score to musicians today yields significantly different results compared to 1965, both in terms of auditory outcome, and, even more so, in terms of the social codifications tied to its historical significance and contemporary relevance, as well as the complex interplay between the social and art-historical contexts.

With reference to the principles of the history of effect contained within Hans-Georg Gadamer's concept of *Wirkungsgeschichte*, it is clear that the reception history of *Opus 51* profoundly co-determines our understanding of what an authentic performance or expression of the piece might sound or look like.¹⁸ Had it been accepted as a valid piece of music in 1965, it would most probably have lived a different institutional life and it would probably have met us today in another setting and with an entirely other set of ascribed values and connotations—perhaps even as a piece of music in the musical canon of classical concert hall music. As Erling Kullberg documents, *Opus 51* received considerable attention in the Danish media around the time of its initial performance. As such, it was an important ideological component in the aforementioned debate between progressive and conservative forces within the Danish contemporary music scene of the time.¹⁹ To our knowledge, however, it has never been performed in a classical concert hall setting since 1965, and any performance history, which would help to support and build its historical effect and reception history in the context of this particular musical canon, is absent. Rather, the elongated reception of *Opus 51* has unfolded outside the institution of classical music and mainly in the context of performance and contemporary visual arts institutions.²⁰

Opus 51 will appear differently in each institutional scenario, according to situated institutional traditions and codes that co-determine the becoming of the work. As Andersen states in the radio interview of August 31, 1965, none of these scenarios are to take precedence and the historical institutions we are left with—musical, art-historical, literary—should perhaps take turns in caring for works like this.²¹ Reading *Opus 51* in the context of classical music, with its sparse performance history, would mean lifting it from the archive and into the canon—from passive to active memory, to put it in Aleida Assmann's words.²² In the period between 1966 and today, *Opus 51* has had its most substantial reception in the context of visual art, as a piece of intermedia art, and it would seem that it has appeared to be most easily legible and meaningful within the visual arts institution. In the scenario of the visual arts and their institutions (such as museums), a radically different temporal regime of eternal life is activated. As sociologist Fernando Domínguez Rubio has noted, the art museum is the one institution in modern society that allows for "the image of permanence," understood as the deferral of the decay of things in the passage of time.²³ This is significantly different to the ways that various forms of music are preserved, in part by the transmission and development of their performance traditions and practices within conservatories and concert halls.²⁴ While it is true that these forms of music most often have scores that can be conserved, it is central that scores alone do not constitute the artworks that are preserved in the musical tradition. This is all the more important in the concrete case of *Opus 51*, as the many different and interchangeable versions, together with Andersen's aforementioned concepts of the "idea score" or "situation score," support the point that a contingent but coherent conceptualism is more important to Andersen than the concrete materiality of any one version of the score.²⁵ And this has deep implications for the responsibility that comes with the simple statement of trust that Andersen places on the performer by saying "I have confidence in you."

Introducing musical understandings to the art museum

Looking at Andersen's piece in the tradition of classical music, this trust is fundamental to any interpretation of any score. Just consider how, at music conservatories, future generations of musicians learn how to honor such trust by maintaining and developing performance traditions, by learning and augmenting historical playing techniques and by imitating historical interpretations in ways that (however slightly and slowly) develop and transform such deeply sedimented traditions. This shows that even in the Western tradition, musical preservation is wrought through and through with notions of interpretation and performance in ways that underpin how identity and change are two sides of the same coin when it comes to maintenance of the musical tradition.²⁶

Introducing this musical understanding within the context of the art museum, as we have done in this project, also highlights the opposite, namely, how the museum can be understood as a machine that enables an opposing idiom of thinking connected to the deferral of change and the drive toward the preservation of identity, with the aim of promoting an "image of permanence," as proposed by Domínguez

Rubio.²⁷ A processual approach vis-à-vis an object-oriented approach: on the one hand, a musical tradition that allows for more sediment to flow through the river and to gradually (however sometimes reluctantly) reshape *practice*; on the other hand, a museum tradition that tries to slow down the flow of the river itself in order to make *things* remain as identical to themselves as possible.²⁸ On a very general level, this binary is what Fluxus staged as a problematization of ideas of stability and identity within the art institution.

By making the distinction between musical and museal attitudes toward preservation, we do not mean to suggest that Andersen's *Opus 51* falls more properly into the one category than the other. This would be counter to his intention as stated in the radio interview. However, by making the distinction, we wish to point to the simple observation that musical preservation is always a form of interpretation that activates some sort of (written or orally or otherwise transmitted) performance script or repertoire that is performed and reperformed,²⁹ whereas traditional visual arts conservation has more often focused on the preservation of discrete objects and less on the processes these objects involve.

I have confidence in . . . ?

In this light *Opus 51* can make itself meaningful in our present in different ways. Deciphered through the (social) code of visual art, it tends toward patterns of thought that favor a meticulous reconstruction of its original context. Deciphered as a piece of music, it foregrounds how it is intended for performance and hence always already in a complex interplay between past and present. And since there is not much else specified in the score, the central element in this interplay is the notion of trust.

For the new commission of *Opus 51*, we invited Union for Open Vocalism—an open form artist and music group established by Danish artist and composer holger hartvig (b. 1994). *Opus 51*'s play with distributed agency seemed to fit well with Union for Open Vocalism's previous works, in which collective vocal manifestations involving a high degree of distributed agency had been shared between a changing group of vocalists. We hoped that Andersen's work would resonate with the group and that their approach would result in a performance that would take *Opus 51* to a contemporary place envisioned by neither Andersen nor us. When commissioning the performance by Union for Open Vocalism, no instructions were given other than the multiple versions of the score we held in the archive and the information that the performance would be part of the five episodes of the podcast.

Union for Open Vocalism's performance of *Opus 51* took shape as a ten-minute recorded piece of music incorporating vocal performances of spoken and sung text, field recordings and samples from a Hollywood movie in an experimental pop music production.³⁰ And while the resulting piece of music honors *Opus 51*'s central statement of trust, it also comments and complicates it by adding more doubtful statements such as: "The confidence you lay in me is only real if I lay the same, the same confidence, in myself";³¹ and "You have given us an old map of the world. Kind of hard to navigate, kind of hard to find a way."³²

This presents an understanding of the central theme of trust as predicated on interdependence and mutual contingency. Union for Open Vocalism's trust in the composer and in Andersen's composition is somewhat ambiguous: it seems that the historical distance between the score and its contemporary performance is difficult to overcome in terms of being confident of any autonomous artist's subject and the institutional legitimacy that such subjectivity is predicated upon. Activating the score by performing it anew necessitates rethinking the relation between original and present-day social and institutional contexts in a more direct way than a mere reading of it as a text or exhibition of it as a piece of visual art would.

The enormous interpretive freedom offered by the score of *Opus 51* is in many ways emblematic of both Andersen's and much other Fluxus work from this period. Even if it often seems to operate in ways are subversive or antithetical to the art institution, at the same time such work presupposes a strong relation to and belief in the very same institution—as the very thing that guarantees and generates the meaningfulness of the work. As we saw in the debate between Andersen and Christofoli, you simply have to believe that it is meaningful as art (or music) in order for it to show its meaningfulness.

By incorporating their doubts and reservations in their performance, Union for Open Vocalism emphasizes how such confidence in the institution has withered and changed fundamentally since the 1960s. In their case, a legitimate performance of confidence can only be achieved as a contingent and critical response to the authoritative distribution of trust and agency laid out in the score and renegotiated in the present moment of performance. Accordingly, *Opus 51* is a piece which is in need of such activation in order to preserve its critical edge and the ways that it wrestles with the social codes of institutional convention.

Notes

- 1 The project ran between June 17, 2018, and October 1, 2018; see Museet for Samtidskunst, "Udstillingslaboratorie. Eric Andersen," <https://mfsk.layered.dk/udstillinger/udstillingslaboratorie>.
- 2 For the introductory episode of the podcast series (in Danish), see Rasmus Holmboe, Jan Høgh Stricker and Magnus Kaslov, "Eric Andersen_del 1: Introduktion," *Podcast for Samtidskunst*, December 19, 2019, podcast, 22:59, <https://www.podbean.com/ew/pb-2pfje-a2460d>.
- 3 The context for this research setup and for the commission of the new performance of *Opus 51* by Union for Open Vocalism was the cross-institutional research project *Museums and Art in the Information Age*, which, besides the Museum of Contemporary Art in Roskilde, included SMK National Gallery of Denmark, the University of Copenhagen and Aalborg University, and was funded by the Velux Foundation.
- 4 The archive was collected by William Louis Sørensen between 1966 and 1992 on the basis of his collaborations and correspondence with Eric Andersen.
- 5 For an elaboration of Andersen's concept of intermedia, see Eric Andersen, "On Change, Confusion and Amazement—A Conversation with Hanna B. Hölling, Aga Wielocha and Josephine Ellis," Chapter 13 in this book.
- 6 The festival ran from November 23 to 28, 1962, in Nikolai Kirke and Allé Scenen in Copenhagen and was organized by Det Unge Tonekunstnerselskab, Galleri Køpcke and Kunstbiblioteket, Nikolai.

- 7 See Erling Kullberg, *Nye Toner i Danmark. Dansk Musik og Musikdebat i 1960'erne* (Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 2003), 72–80.
- 8 Eric Andersen, *Opus 51*, archival nos. 41, 65, 143 and 144, The Eric Andersen Archive, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Roskilde.
- 9 Per Brunsog, *The Glorious Ways of Unproductivity: Lærebog i Intermedia* (Aarhus: Systime, 2017). See also Kullberg, *Nye Toner i Danmark*.
- 10 A similar version is found in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York (The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Gift, object number 2042.2008), albeit featuring the Jim Crow font instead. MoMA also holds a version where *Opus 39*, *Opus 51*, *Opus 52* and *Opus 53* are aggregated on a single typewritten sheet (The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Gift, object number 2048.2008). This is identical to the one in the Roskilde archive (archival no. 41, The Eric Andersen Archive, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Roskilde), indicating that it is material meant for duplication and distribution.
- 11 The same version was already part of the museum's collection of artworks prior to the acquisition of the archive, framed and inventoried as MSK–51. As our research into the existence of multiple versions of the work shows, Andersen sees his work as a contextual and situational script to engender social situations, rather than as an object that fits neatly into standard museum or art-historical categories.
- 12 Mogens Andersen, "Vor tids musik," Danmarks Radio, August 31, 1965, <https://www.danskkulturarkiv.dk/dr/vor-tids-musik/>, at 00:58. The letter in Danish is read out by the host of the radio show, Mogens Andersen. All translations from the Danish are by the authors of this chapter.
- 13 Andersen, "Vor tids musik."
- 14 Andersen, "Vor tids musik," at 10:19–10:47.
- 15 Andersen, "Vor tids musik," at 11:47–12:33.
- 16 Andersen, "Vor tids musik," at 31:23–32:10.
- 17 Andersen, "Vor tids musik," at 13:30–14:00.
- 18 Hans-Georg Gadamer. *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004), 298–304.
- 19 Kullberg, *Nye Toner i Danmark*, 72.
- 20 Other documented performances of *Opus 51* are scarce. However, the piece was performed by a group of music students together with Mieko Shiomi under the title *Opus 5190* during the exhibition *Ubi Fluxus ibi Motus*, a collateral event to the 1990 Venice Biennale. A recording of this is available online at Eric Andersen, "Opus 51," http://what-is-eric-andersen.net/audio/010_Opus_1990_audio.mp3. See also Brunsog, *The Glorious Ways of Unproductivity*, 120, for information on this event.
- 21 Andersen, "Vor tids musik."
- 22 Aleida Assmann, "Canon and Archive," in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, eds. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008).
- 23 Fernando Domínguez Rubio, *Still Life: Ecologies of the Modern Imagination at the Art Museum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 17.
- 24 If we look beyond these quite narrow Western modernist contexts for classical music, much music is indeed preserved solely by the interpretation and transmission of tacit performance practice knowledge.
- 25 See, for instance, Eric Andersen, "In Mezzo a Quattro Tempi," in *Fluxus Scores and Instructions: The Transformative Years, "Make a salad."*, eds. Jon Hendricks, Marianne Bech and Media Farzin (Roskilde: Museet for Samtidskunst; Detroit: The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, 2008), 23, where a score identical to *Opus 51* appears under the title *Opus 77*.
- 26 Within conservation theory, ideas of stability and identity have come to be challenged in recent decades. See, for instance, Hanna B. Hölling, *Paik's Virtual Archive: Time, Change, and Materiality in Media Art* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017).

Here, in the context of Paik's work, Hölling develops the notion of changeability in relation to multimedia art, to account for and work constructively with artworks where identity is closely connected to change.

- 27 Domínguez Rubio, *Still Life*, 17.
- 28 From a recent conservation point of view, the metaphor of the river has been mobilized to describe how artworks are not just stable objects but must be understood as unfolding processes that have "various diverging timelines." See Renée van de Vall, Hanna B. Hölling, Tatja Scholte and Sanneke Stigter, "Reflections on a Biographical Approach to Contemporary Art Conservation," in *ICOM-CC: 16th Triennial Conference, Lisbon, 19–23 September 2011: Preprints*, ed. Janet Bridgland (Almada: Critério, 2011), 6.
- 29 Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).
- 30 Union for Open Vocalism, "LYDVÆRK: Union for Open Vocalism plays Opus 51," *Podcast for Samtidskunst*, December 19, 2019, podcast, 09:25, <https://www.podbean.com/ew/pb-3abat-a2462c>.
- 31 Union for Open Vocalism, "LYDVÆRK," at 1:21.
- 32 Union for Open Vocalism, "LYDVÆRK," at 2:57.

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15 Bengt af Klintberg: On Fluxus, folklore and collecting butterflies—a conversation with Hanna B. Hölling, Aga Wielocha and Josephine Ellis

Bengt af Klintberg (Figure 15.1), born in 1938, is a Swedish folklorist, author, poet and artist closely linked with Fluxus. Af Klintberg participated in the Festum Fluxorum in Düsseldorf in 1963 and in several Fluxus concerts in Stockholm and Oslo as both organizer and performer. In 1967, Dick Higgins's Something Else Press published *The Cursive Scandinavian Salve* (as part of the Great Bear Pamphlet series)—a compilation of event scores and scenarios that weaves Sweden's rich oral traditions with a lyrical dialogue. Outside of the visual arts, af Klintberg is primarily renowned for his contributions to Swedish folklore studies and for his involvement in curated folklore programs for Swedish radio, bringing these traditions to a wider audience. The book *Råttan i pizzan* (*The Rat in the Pizza*, 1986) stands out among his other works in this field. His bilingual book *Svensk Fluxus/Swedish Fluxus* (2007) recounts the story of how the Fluxus phenomenon spread throughout Sweden and its neighboring countries. In the following conversation, af Klintberg shares his perspective on the continuity of his works within historical Fluxus as well as his avid practices of documentation. Together with Hanna B. Hölling, Aga Wielocha and Josephine Ellis, he explores the role of storytelling at the intersection of art and folklore.

Aga Wielocha: Bengt, you are both an artist and an academically trained folklorist. Do you think folklore could help us think about the future of Fluxus? Your 1993 article titled “Fluxus Games and Contemporary Folklore” could provide a starting point for our conversation.¹

Bengt af Klintberg: When I wrote that article, I was thinking about a definition of Fluxus put forward by George Maciunas. To him, the quintessence of Fluxus was Spike Jones, vaudeville, children's games, gags and Marcel Duchamp.² Three of these five are folklore genres. Vaudeville is a kind of traditional theater—you could call it a folklore genre because it is folksy and open to improvisation. Gags are sometimes written and performed in the mass media, but most of them are anonymous and transmitted orally, like jokes. Lastly, children's games are



Figure 15.1 Bengt af Klintberg mounting sheets of ice in trees for his *Ice Exhibition* (1965).
Photo: © Jan Friedlund. Courtesy Fondazione Bonotto.

100 percent oral and transferred from children to other children globally. Though Maciunas identified Fluxus as something with close ties to folklore, he never used the term to describe his own rituals and gags, perhaps because, although they resembled traditional folklore items, they were also so innovative.

Dick Higgins was, like Maciunas, aware of this connection, which he showed through his Something Else Press. There he published a facsimile edition of *Dick's 100 Amusements*,³ a hilarious collection of games and do-it-yourself theater, on the back cover said to be “startlingly contemporary, ancestors of such modern avant-garde theater forms as the Happening or the Event Piece.” He also published Jerome Rothenberg’s *Ritual: A Book of Primitive Rites and Events* as a Great Bear Pamphlet.⁴ When he edited my own Great Bear Pamphlet, he advised me to include traditional Swedish riddles and magic rites. Our mail correspondence contains several examples of contemporary joke fads, and when he visited me in Sweden, he was eager to go to fiddlers’ rallies in the countryside.⁵

There is no individuality in folklore since you can't identify the person who created it. It's something shared, a common heritage that we pass on to the people we meet. What was interesting about Fluxus was that it was so social despite its being "avant-garde." The notion of "avant-garde" evokes something elite, with very few people involved, but you can't see much of this individuality in Fluxus art. From folklore theory, the linguist Roman Jakobson tells us that folklore never starts as folklore—it *becomes* folklore.⁶ It starts as literature or a funny sentence. Then, after some time, when many people know about it—the original stories, jokes, songs and so on—it goes through a filter which takes away everything that is individual. I think many Fluxus pieces, particularly performance pieces, have gone through this filter. They've spoken to and been shared by many people.

Hanna B. Hölling: If you compare Fluxus performance pieces to folklore, some of them have an obvious resemblance to traditional outdoor or indoor games. The participants have to follow certain rules, but they can also use their own imagination and add details which are accepted by other performers. I would not be surprised if some Fluxus pieces end up as anonymous games, played by people who have no idea about their origin. I'm interested in your approach to Fluxus through folklore from two perspectives. The first concerns the concept of conservation as passing on intangible cultural heritage. The second is concerned with de-individualization, since, as you mention in your writings, the first Fluxus concerts were performed collectively. There was significant exchange between the artists, and pieces were freely picked up, adapted and passed along. It might be said that the return to individualization is taking place via the commodification and institutionalization of Fluxus, which puts emphasis on a singular author and the unique result of their creative process.

af Klintberg: I suppose Fluxus artists, at least those that I met, were individualists from the very beginning. It is also true that the early performances resemble each other, since they are all based on a set of implicit rules or agreements. But when you say that commodification makes their individual character more obvious, I would say that this is truer of some artists than others. The art scene understood that artists like Joseph Beuys and Nam June Paik could fill big museum halls and galleries with exciting art, but this was not the case with those who were first and foremost poets, like Higgins and Emmett Williams, or composers, like Mieko Shiomi and Philip Corner. Over the years, their ties to the early Fluxus agenda have become

clearer. There is no doubt that the art world's concentration on works suitable for exhibitions or on "big names" has pushed the social character of the network called "Fluxus" into the background.

When I, as a young folklorist, poet and Happening organizer, read Maciunas's definition of Fluxus as an alternative to the art market, I was filled with enthusiasm. After some time, however, I lost contact with him because his political ideas were too wild. It was much easier for me to accept the theoretical foundations of Fluxus as formulated by Higgins and Ken Friedman, which I think are still valid today.

Hölling: If intangible cultural heritage can be passed on through oral traditions, such as speaking, singing songs and reciting poetry, do you think this might offer a mode of transmission of Fluxus to the future?

af Klintberg: Yes, I do indeed. We must not underestimate the power of direct communication, whether this happens from the stage or through conversations around a table, or even projects performed with the help of mail and cell phones. An important task for art institutions is to keep the magic of these activities alive in their exhibitions. As a folklorist, I became interested in magic formulae and rituals. If there is a strong vision, a strong idea behind a performance piece, those objects and photos that remain after the fact have a magical quality about them. They still have this possibility to make a spectator, one who might never even have been there, experience and feel what might have happened.

I think magic is too romanticized nowadays. What I like is magical thinking in a modern context. One of my own pieces, from a series titled *Calls*, asks you to take an envelope, talk into it, glue it together, put a stamp on it and then send it to someone.⁷ I sent several of these letters to the dead, like to Maciunas, for example. When he died in 1978, I still had his address. Sending him a letter—attempting to communicate with him—was an act of magic, of magical thinking.

I felt that this was a performance piece people liked to experience. People would sit and listen to me talking into an empty envelope, see me gluing it together, running to the mailbox outside and then back to the scene of the concert. They understood that I was adapting an old way of thinking to our time.

Wielocha: It's a kind of magic that is very much needed in today's hypertechnological society. Did the envelopes come back to you?

af Klintberg: No, of course not. I hadn't written my address on them. But some Danish friends of mine performed this piece many times, so I received a lot of empty envelopes from Denmark.

For me—and this is something that both Higgins and Friedman stress when they try to identify what is typical of Fluxus—many of my event pieces have a research aspect and a research attitude toward life. For example, I made a series of pieces with oranges, and in one of them you just peel the orange and then you take the slices and arrange them into a row [*Orange Event No. 3* (1963)]. This has to do with exploring form. The orange is a sphere—it's round like a ball—and you can transform this sphere into a straight line by peeling it and arranging the individual orange segments into a line. Form isn't fixed; we develop our sense of it. The results don't need to be put in a museum for someone to acquire knowledge and experience about what is typical of forms.

Wielocha:

In 1992 Edition Hundertmark published a multiple under the same title, *Orange Event No. 3* (1992), a Fluxus-like box containing the wrapping paper of an orange, a photograph of the orange slices as you describe, arranged in a row, and a sheet of paper with the score and additional instructions that illustrate the process of converting a sphere into a line (Figure 15.2). Could you share more about this process of transforming a score into a physical object that you can interact with—that you can touch, open and place on your shelf? Is it worth noting that Radio Fluxus featured a podcast that engaged with *Orange Event No. 3* (1963), with Magdalena Holdar?⁸

af Klintberg:

I think Maciunas's boxes were one of his most significant contributions to art history. Up till then [in the history of the visual arts] there had been sculptures and paintings, but the box was quite a novelty. Marcel Duchamp was among the first who employed the idea of the box, but Maciunas tried to systemically produce them. His little store in New York was filled with boxes and all sorts of things to go in them.

When Hundertmark invited me to make a box, I did it with Maciunas in mind. It was a great disappointment for me in the end. I had kept those papers, the ones you wrap around oranges, which are very thin and have pictures on them. I added orange essence so that the box was filled with the scent of oranges. I wanted people to experience this wonderful smell when they opened the box. Unfortunately, by the time other people had the opportunity to open the box, the smell had already disappeared. That's just the way artists work. You do an experiment; sometimes it's successful, other times you learn something. In this case, I learnt that the smell of oranges doesn't last. It's a short-lived phenomenon.

Josephine Ellis:

It is interesting to think about how a Fluxus box might be conserved through word of mouth—what kind of changes and transformations this might allow for that, say, a classical, materials-based kind of conservation would not.



Figure 15.2 Bengt af Klintberg, *Orange Event No. 3* (1963/1992). Edition 13/50, published by A. Hundertmark. Courtesy Fondazione Bonotto. Photo: © Aga Wielocha/Activating Fluxus.

af Klintberg:

Nordiska Museet [The Nordic Museum], where I worked as a young man, had exhibitions of magical objects. What made them even more magical was a powerful sense that they came from another time. Not everyone experiences this, but for the more sensitive spectator, it's as though the age of the objects signals something to you. Aging Fluxus objects have a similar effect; they almost have a language of their own. Even dirt, for example, might tell a story. Don't try and clean them—show the objects as they are, with many years behind them.

We had a totem pole in the Ethnographic Museum of Stockholm that originally came from the northwestern region of Canada. The Haisla community wanted it back, and, when they eventually got it, they went out into the forest and laid it there to rot. That was how they traditionally treated their totem poles. In Sweden, we just had to accept this. That was their way of having a relationship with this object.⁹

Wielocha: The story of the G'psgolox totem pole circulates in conservation scholarship as an example of a non-Western approach to preservation. It was the will and vision of the originating community to allow the totem to slowly decompose in nature instead of being kept forever in a museum environment. Is there a will and vision for how the future of Fluxus objects should unfold? What do you think about Fluxus objects designed for interaction that are protected from touch in a museum setting?

af Klintberg: I'm glad that I don't need to have a concrete answer to this because it's not my responsibility. I admit it is a tricky problem. The museums have a responsibility to keep the art chosen for later generations in good condition. It is understandable that fragile art objects have to be protected from touch, but I'm against arrangements where Fluxus art is presented as something almost sacrosanct. The presentation must give the same feeling of ephemerality as the original actions. If possible, the presentation also should express that Fluxus protests art as a valuable commodity. As a citizen of a capitalistic Western country, I have to accept that some art becomes expensive. But at the same time, I'm not interested in being part of this system myself. I've even forgotten many of my own art pieces. I haven't kept them, and I don't know where they are now.

Hölling: You didn't keep many of your objects. Nonetheless, I wonder whether you had a vision for how the material culture of Fluxus, including your creations, should be preserved. Did you gesture toward conservation in any way?

af Klintberg: I am not against conservation when conservation is needed. But we must not forget that an important part of the Fluxus legacy consists of books and photos. I'm a documentation freak. My dad started to write a diary when he was sixteen and he did this every day until he was about ninety-one. I have also kept a diary since I was sixteen—I will write about this very conversation in the one that sits behind me in this room. I also take many photos. Photo documentation of my own pieces is very important for me. Most people have photos on their mobile phones, but for me it's important to make paper versions of my photos because I'm afraid of the future. A future crash will destroy all this pictorial material that doesn't exist as paper. I trust the paper copy.

I have a lot of photo documentation for *The Forest Diver* (1974), for example.¹⁰ I also kept the diver's suit you see hanging from the trees somewhere in my house, but eventually I felt that it had become so dry that it was of no use to

keep. When it comes to objects, I'm not sentimental, so I just put it in the bin. For me, the important thing is documentation, pictures or texts that show what was going on at that time.

There is an exception. I once had very little money, but what I did have was a postcard from Beuys for which someone was willing to give me a very considerable sum. So I sold it to him. Today I'm a little better off, so I can say it was stupid to not keep it. But at the time, I needed the money more than I needed this postcard.

Wielocha: So there is no physical archive of your objects? Do you keep only visual documentation and your diary?

af Klintberg: There are Fluxus archives that harbor everything that has to do with Fluxus art. I'm represented in perhaps half a dozen of these archives, but there is no "Bengt af Klintberg Archive" as far as I know. My correspondence with friends and colleagues, around 1,500 letters from, among others, Dick Higgins, Alison Knowles, Ken Friedman, Eric Andersen and Mieko Shiomi, has been donated to the Royal Library in Stockholm. If you ask about my identity, I will say that I identify first and foremost as a folklorist and writer, not a Fluxus artist.

When I was twelve, thirteen or fourteen years old, I started to catch and collect butterflies in the summer. I had a big glass bottle with strong-smelling ether to keep the butterflies in. When the butterflies were dead, I took them out, spread their wings, put the needle in them and arranged them in little boxes like they do in natural history museums. One night I woke up and realized that I hadn't actually killed the butterflies. They were trying to get away with the needle in their bodies. Since then, I have never collected anything. This is how I turned from a collector of absolutely everything, as a child, to a grownup who collects only books needed for research.

Hölling: Your story about the butterflies makes me wonder about the idea of storytelling and about stories as conveyors of meaning.

af Klintberg: If you ask storytellers why they tell their stories, the answer would be that it's not because they just want to entertain the audience. Stories that don't have a meaning, whether hidden or open, become uninteresting after a while. Those stories that become a part of your repertoire all have a resonance in your own thinking and worldview. The Dutch Fluxus artist Willem de Ridder was also a fascinating storyteller. He invited me to a storytelling festival in Amsterdam where we told modern urban legends to a big audience. The whole situation, the two of us exploring contemporary fears and wishes in an artistic storytelling form, was in a way reminiscent of Fluxus performance pieces that we had both performed.

Hölling: How we learn about Fluxus is quite often from those stories that are being told.

af Klintberg: Exactly. And the stories tend to become better and better. I have heard and told stories that I heard again later but in a different version. Lots of details have changed.

When I participate in storytelling, I am a collector in many respects—I collect stories. In Sweden, most people know me as the author of a book, *Råttan i pizzan* [*The Rat in the Pizza*, 1986], that contains 100 modern urban legends, rather than as an artist. That book has reached many people. In Swedish encyclopedias, there is one word, *klinberger*, which means a modern urban legend, told as true but folklore. Those who know about my Fluxus activities in Sweden belong to an art-interested minority.

Hölling: Would there be a story about your involvement in Fluxus, and what would it be like?

af Klintberg: I think that story would be about the early phase of Fluxus: when ideas, posters, letters and stage contacts united a bunch of young people in Europe, and I became a Nordic outpost. I was deeply influenced by George Brecht's event scores, and for some years I tried to do something similar. I participated in an exhibition in Cologne in 1970, *Happening & Fluxus*, where the Fluxus people were presented as a new art movement. The temptation to continue on that track was strong, but my commitment to the world of Swedish folklore was stronger. So I ended up as a folklorist with a lasting inclination to the avant-garde.

This is an edited excerpt from a conversation that took place on July 15, 2024.

Notes

- 1 Bengt af Klintberg, "Fluxus Games and Contemporary Folklore: On the Non-Individual Character of Fluxus Art," *Konsthistorisk tidskrift/Journal of Art History* 62, no. 2 (1993): 115–25.
- 2 The original quote from Maciunas's manifesto reads: "Fluxus . . . is the fusion of Spikes [*sic*] Jones, Vaudeville, gag, children's games and Duchamp." George Maciunas, "Manifesto on Art/Fluxus Art—Amusement," in Jon Hendricks, ed., *Fluxus etc./Addenda II: The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection* (Pasadena: California Institute of Technology and Baxter Art Gallery, 1983 [1965]), 9.
- 3 Originally published in 1873 by Dick & Fitzgerald Publishers and enlarged in 1879; see William Brisbane Dick, Fred W. Miller and Clarence Satterlee, *Dick's 100 Amusements for Evening Parties, Picnics and Social Gatherings: Including an Entirely New Version of Mrs. Jarley's Wax-Works* (New York: Dick & Fitzgerald, 1879). The book was reissued in 1967 by Something Else Press as William Brisbane Dick, *Dick's 100 Amusements* (New York: Something Else Press, 1967).

- 4 With twenty issues published between 1965 and 1967 by Something Else Press, the Great Bear Pamphlet was a series of small brochures compiling and disseminating artists' essays, musings and poems, among other things.
- 5 Fiddlers' music—historically associated with medieval and early modern peasant culture—is among the most renowned styles of folk music in Sweden and Scandinavia more broadly.
- 6 Roman Jakobson and Petr Bogatyrev, "Folklore as a Special Form of Creation," trans. John M. O'Hara, *Folklore Forum* 13 (1980 [1929]): 1–21.
- 7 Bengt af Klintberg, *Calls, Canto 6 (Letter)* (December 1965–June 1966). The score reads: "Open an empty envelope with both hands and talk loudly into it. Then close the envelope quickly and post it to anyone whom it may concern." Ken Friedman, Owen F. Smith and Lauren Sawchyn, *The Fluxus Performance Workbook* (n.p.: Performance Research e-publication, 2002), 60.
- 8 Magdalena Holdar and Aga Wielocha, "Episode 5: 'Orange Event No. 3' (1963) by Bengt af Klintberg," *Radio Fluxus: Stories from the Fluxus Archives, Activating Fluxus*, May 23, 2023, podcast, 21:00, <https://activatingfluxus.com/2023/05/23/episode-5-orange-event-no-3-1963-by-bengt-af-klintberg/>.
- 9 The story of the Haisla totem pole's return to its community from the Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm is described in detail in Noémie Étienne, "Can Conservation Be Decentered?" in *The Expanded Field of Conservation*, eds. Caroline Fowler and Alexander Nagel (Williamstown, MA: Clark Art Institute, 2022), 196–209.
- 10 Bengt af Klintberg, *Forest Diver (Skogsdykaren)* (1974). See Magdalena Holdar, *Fluxus as a Network of Friends, Strangers, and Things: The Agency of Chance Collaborations* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2023), 92.

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IV

Preserving the Fluxus network

Continuities, connections and evolutions



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16 Now that you're ready for the real thing

Hannah B Higgins

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 human 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.

Edward S. Reed, *The Necessity of Experience* (1996)¹

In his 1996 book *The Necessity of Experience*, Edward S. Reed argued for the importance of primary information, meaning direct sensation, as a cornerstone of education understood as a framework for living in a broader social and environmental ecology. Without it, he wrote, the political ideals of empathy and mutual respect could not form. Secondary knowledge, he argued, is inherently objectifying, because it exists at one remove from direct sensation. In other words, the information produced about the world, whether mediated in the form of an image, a text, a video or all the above, does little to train the educated subject to “meaningful communication among people.”² He couldn’t have been more correct. The resulting “marked rise in nationalism, sectarianism, and violence against persons” characterizes contemporary life and has risen in tandem with our collective reliance on information technology.

The multisensory explorations of handling the contents of a Fluxbox, smelling the pieces of *Smell Chess* (Takako Saito, c. 1965), eating a can of *Flux Food* (George Maciunas, c. 1969) or taking a *Flux Tour* of New York from 80 Wooster Street (Bob Watts, Alison Knowles, Robert Filliou, George Brecht, George Maciunas, Larry Miller, Geoff Hendricks, Pater Van Riper and others, May 1976) all engage primary sensory information along the lines theorized by Reed. It could be said that sensory experience is foundational for much of the most engaging Fluxus work. In *Fluxus Experience* (2002), I wrote as much. However, the argument has certain

limitations, which are also limitations in Reed's argument. Recent scholarly work on Fluxus places language at the center of this framework, particularly in recent benchmark books by Natilee Harren on event scores and Colby Chamberlain on Maciunas's Fluxus bureaucracy.³ These excellent forays into expanded readings of Fluxus complicate my multisensory, experiential model for Fluxus. Or, rather, they enrich it by opening up Fluxus texts to primary experiences.

The year 1962 is often treated as the founding moment of Fluxus because of the first European tour. It is also the year when Marshall McLuhan published *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*.⁴ His "typographic man" had a consciousness shaped by the regularity of the printed word and the forms of specialization and sensory regulation embodied in moveable type. Centuries of war in Europe followed the invention of the printed word. The democratization and standardization of knowledge that followed in its wake shook European culture to its foundations. Like Reed, McLuhan theorized the limits of this technology. For McLuhan, the beginning of the end of typographic man dates to the rise of the telegraph and telephone at the turn of the twentieth century. Both technologies compress space while creating communities of cultural affinity whose inability to agree would break cultures and governments apart. However the global village might be imagined today, McLuhan's famous invention of the idea in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* theorized an age of electronic interdependence and dystopian miscommunication.⁵ McLuhan and Reed were fundamentally aligned on this, albeit some fifty years apart.

The Fluxus artist Dick Higgins republished McLuhan's edited issue of *Explorations, Verbi-Voco-Visual* (1956), as part of his Fluxus-adjacent imprint, Something Else Press, in 1967.⁶ By then, McLuhan's famous phrase "The medium is the message," which is associated with his 1964 book *Understanding Media*, was seeping into public discourse.⁷ *Verbi-Voco-Visual* offers something of an experimental solution to the objectifying and linear, specializing and reifying habits of conventional printed text. The inside cover depicts a face with an ear in place of the eye. The book theorizes a multisensory, audiovisual textuality, moving types of experiment now routinely associated with the avant-garde into academic, scholarly, philosophical and even televisual contexts. Instead of marching lockstep and same-sized across the page, letters and words in this tradition are bent, warped, subject to scalar explosion and compression, overlapped, underlapped, woven and turned inside out.

What follows is an attempt to place the direct sensory realm promoted by Reed into direct engagement with the expanded texts of the time. To be sure, avant-garde typography and experimental writing long predate Fluxus; however, there was a need to model new ways of reading at the moment when the information technologies of mainframes and satellites (paving the way for the internet and cell phones) were ascendant. To be clear, the point is not that we should stop reading texts like the one you are reading now (in conventional layouts that make topical linearity possible), but rather that many in Fluxus understood the limits of this habitual framework and sought pedagogical frameworks that would model exploratory forms of literacy for an emerging sensibility.

Across the sixty-plus years since Fluxus began, reprints and facsimiles of Fluxus texts, events and Fluxkits have (with varying degrees of success) kept the experiential potential of Fluxus both vital and in print. As I hope to demonstrate, publishing is an essential act of conservation because published and facsimile materials can be handled and explored by new generations of users/readers for their first time. Particularly when the published material is intended for handling, publishing, conceived (as I suggest) as a form of conservation, is critical to the art history of Fluxus and related avant-garde and neo-avant-garde movements.

In 2024, the New York-based publisher Primary Information reissued the *ccV TRE* newsletters of Fluxus as a reprint edited by Alice Centamore and James Hoff (Figures 16.1–16.4).⁸

To be sure, the facsimile experience is imperfect as a direct copy. The newly reprinted newsletters are bound and one size and arrive all at once as a single publication. The originals were different sizes and papers and arrived over the course of years. But reprinting does something remarkable, nevertheless. Reading is a learned behavior associated with secondary forms of experience, already theorized here as formally at odds with the world as we experience it. This was Reed's point.

Fluxus writing and reading demonstrate that reading produces primary experiences, even when the reader is reading about something. This was a central thesis of Marshall McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy* and *Understanding Media*: "The medium is the message." When its material aspects make clear the limits of seemingly objective knowledge, the medium of typography is asserting its primary aspect. When the text directs my attention from one page to another in a way that does not require reading my way to the next page from top left to bottom right, then typography is primary. When typography calls itself out through scale, waving lines and weird interactions with images, then texts become images and vice versa, and the reading experience becomes primary, or at least exists on an equal footing with whatever information is being communicated. My experience reading the *ccV TRE Fluxus* newsletters worked this way. I had never spent enough time imagining their making to think much about how they looked and what they said as dialectical. I read these pages as if I had never seen them before. I found myself imaginarily boring holes through pages, skittering across word and image games, and attending to the shapes of letters and sounds of words in ways that deepened what I see as the relevance of Fluxus for what ails us, as contemporary readers conditioned to scroll and hop down and around texts on screen without necessarily attending to how the movement actively shapes what we think. We do so at our peril.

In the following, I explore one *ccV TRE Fluxus* newsletter from the Primary Information anthology. The front page of the February 1964 issue of the *ccV TRE Fluxus* newsletter models for this framework (Figure 16.1).

At the upper left, "FLUXUS" appears in white letters in a black box. At the right, "FLUXUS" appears in black letters that form a sort of block. Beginning here, it is clear that Fluxus is both a conceptual and a material, positive and negative, mediated and mediating space. *ccV TRE* anchors the masthead. This is the second issue of the publication, edited by the Fluxus artist George Brecht and the "Fluxus Editorial Council," meaning George Maciunas, the Fluxus artist, designer

what mechanism. This lead story is, for want of a better term, unreadable. That seems to be its point. It is either obtuse, unknowable or boring. Maybe all of the above. Moving further down the left side, the "Latest" boring, obtuse, unknowable "News" is followed by "Moanin' High," which humorously recounts the pain of tummy flattening girdles at altitude, where bellies tend to bloat. Below that are some existential questions posed, perhaps, by Maciunas. They concern boredom, work and anger—sort of.

"Do you ever find yourself . . . 1. Not staying alert to what you're doing? 2. Failing to use the right equipment for the job? 3. Throwing things?" This section doesn't appear clipped from another source. It is written in the "voice" of the paper. Having just tried to understand the numbers in the "Latest News" or the ill-conceived tool of a girdle for flight, who could blame the reader for a touch of rage? Below this editorial comment, a story about thieves getting locked in a women's bathroom because they cut through the ceiling and ended up in a locked ladies' room. Wrong equipment I guess. At the lower left, financials: Flux-Bucks, "How I came into money" (which Maciunas did not!), and a cheeky solution, "Send those \$ to Fluxus."

A half-column appears next to the "Latest News" numbers. At the top, a picture followed by a description of a bean dealer, Adolf Koshland, from San Francisco, taken from Alison Knowles's bean research for the bean rolls. Below the story of this successful merchant, a collection of knots, followed by an article: "700 Mosquito Men to Gang Up on Pest." We imagine men in mosquito suits ganging up on the hapless capitalist! Instead, what follows is an article that describes a Justice Tom C. Clark of the US Supreme Court coming out against the death penalty. Maybe the judicial system is the swarm of mosquitos ganging up on . . . what? The death penalty. At the bottom of this half-column is an article about some British youths arrested for pushing a piano—Fluxus style—over a cliff.

But papers aren't usually read this way, along the columns. We might as easily read across the top, from the blizzard of numbers to the bean-counter, or, rather (this time), bean merchant. The "Girdled Girls" who "Suffer in Altitude" might be read across a threshold of binding knots (what are girdles if not binding knots for women?) to the second major lead article. Reading left to right above the fold, the reader would slam head on (so to speak) into the lead article, "fashions with the custom-comfort for executives, diplomats, businessmen, lawyers," which depicts something far more comfortable than the binding girdle. This 1896 patent for a tipping hat advertises comfort that is both physical and social, a marker of elevated status, a "saluting device."

The reader keeps going. The eye is directed by a Victorian pointing finger that appears in the printed forms of many George Brecht events and in association with the work of his friends in *ccV TRE*. Here, the reader finds an official cadre—maybe a building committee, a city commission or some such—flipping the switch on a building project. Their hats are construction hats, presumably without the "saluting device," but otherwise shaped basically the same way—albeit in hard hat plastic instead of felt. They protect the wearer. They also speak of class mixing, albeit of the staged kind. For these men in suits don't normally wear them. This is a photo

op. An American flag hangs to the left of the leftmost man. Instead of a description of who is in the picture, the words: "Will you be one of the privileged Americans to share in this unique experience?" A man gets a special haircut with enormous scissors, and the bottom of this column ends with a warning: "Be suspicious!"

Maybe it makes sense, in a world where newspaper articles were conceived as columns, that I might begin that way—looking at the columns topically and formally, and then maybe read across and among the articles. This slide is kind of a joke, but it's a joke I mean in earnest. The man in the self-saluting hat clearly takes center stage. The image is the largest. The lead story presents us with a machine. From here, my eye is drawn to the largest rectangular blocks: the dollar bill, men in hard hats and, at the lower right, "WOW!" Across this surface, like newspapers in general, the reader scans and chooses what to read, makes their own connections. Design emphasis notwithstanding, the reading experience is also a seeing experience that produces real visual tensions. Glancing from topic to topic by font size, image, attention-grabbing headline, et cetera, matters of reading habit (left to right, top to bottom) are both emphasized and toyed with.

It has often been said that Maciunas was an all-over designer who squeezed every inch of content into whatever scraps of paper were at his disposal from other design jobs. That attitude is certainly in place in this dizzying array, which is nevertheless formed of clever, small-scale associations by topic and by political critique. As if to make this last point clear, the "World Wide General Strike for Peace" appears dead center, at the bottom, a few clicks below a traffic light and an absurd comment (perhaps a Fluxus performance) by an attorney general.

The point is that how the page is read is an exploratory exercise designed to teach the reader something—about reading, the world, mass media and the avant-garde. From a design standpoint, the "quietest" part of this front page is tucked along the right-hand side. It would likely be seen or read rather late in the game. This means the reader might likely have experienced some of what I've laid out. I can't of course be certain, but this is how the page works for me visually.

When Maciunas writes: "Now that you're ready for the real thing," this is what I take him to mean. The reader has been prepared for what's coming. The far right-hand side of this *ccV TRE* is all Fluxus, in a clean column in the IBM Universe typeface from the Executive 065 Composer Typewriter. Maciunas lists Fluxus publications for sale that "can be viewed and purchased at George Wittenborn 1018 Madison Ave." Wittenborn was a dealer in art books, a refugee of World War II, and had a gallery up among the advertising companies where Maciunas made his living as a graphic designer. A consummate designer, Maciunas understood this relationship between seeing and reading and design accordingly. The method of primary reading modeled here encourages the reader to return to make new points of comparison, new frameworks for thinking and knowing, and to have fresh insights into the myriad of economic, political and social interjacentcies that make up a world, or in this case the world of Fluxus (or Fluxus in the world) as Maciunas understood it. The "real thing" he has in mind is clearly, must be, Fluxus, since what follows is a list of Fluxus materials for sale and a mention of the March–May Fluxus Festival of 1964.

Particularly when we account for the relationships between linear reading and dynamic scanning-as-reading of the remarkable *ccV TRE* newsletters, being “ready for the real thing” speaks to what comes next when we turn the page. But it also speaks to the world we live in, which the first page tells us is rife with class, gender and professional hierarchies that are carefully constructed using clothing, the production of architecture, the creation of laws that seamlessly span from the silly (burglars locked in a ladies’ toilet and youths arrested for performing a high-speed version of Philip Corner’s *Piano Activities*) to capital punishment, at the other extreme. Which “unique experience” does the headline “Will you be one of the privileged Americans to share in this unique experience?” refer to? Joining the cadres of architects and planners? Capital punishment? Wearing a girdle? Or the gentleman’s hat?

Before turning the page to whatever “the real thing” is that we’re “now ready” for, I hope you’ll tolerate a detour. Astrit Schmidt-Burkhardt’s brilliant 2004 examination of the diagrams of the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection is titled *Maciunas’ Learning Machines: From Art History to a Chronology of Fluxus*.⁹ The book details three dozen physical charts designed by Maciunas from 1953 to 1973. These charts form folded, layered, spatial and temporal systems of ideas, historical events, revolutions and artistic interactions. As she writes, these diagrams depict “a network of tightly interwoven political, cultural-historical, economic, poetic, aesthetic elements, which then itself calls for universal significance.”¹⁰ Some of them unfold in space as well as time, meaning they are three- and four-dimensional elements. Given my description of reading the opening page of *ccV TRE*, it should be clear that these Fluxus newsletters are also learning machines and are designed to be folded (Figure 16.2).

When the page is flipped, this aspect of the publication is emphasized. Underneath a picture of Fluxus artist Joe Jones wearing a motorized “Radio Hat,” adapted from a construction hat, a caption appears: “SCIENCE PROJECTS joe jones.” In case the reader doesn’t get the point, a headline reads: “Unique New Teaching Machine.” Following Schmidt-Burkhardt, this is a site for learning—exactly what isn’t clear, though we have been prepared for something on page one. Direct connectivity to page one occurs via the association with hats that links this image to the hats on the previous page. They relate at the level of design as well, as if the motor had broken through to the outside of the gentlemen’s hat on page one, to combine forces with the construction hats below, forming a consolidated symbol of the Fluxus and non-Fluxus elements on page one: fashion, art, economy, mass media, radio and labor. This “Unique New Teaching Machine,” Joe Jones’s hat, slips and slides across the thresholds of art and non-art as it is clearly meant to be read through to page one; it is placed almost exactly on the obverse—the reverse side—of the same sheet of paper. Moving from page one, where non-art elements take up the left two thirds of the page and Fluxus the right third, Fluxus event performances dominate. The real things of Fluxus, the materials of the kits, have been largely jettisoned for performance. A very different kind of real Fluxus thing, but no less strange.

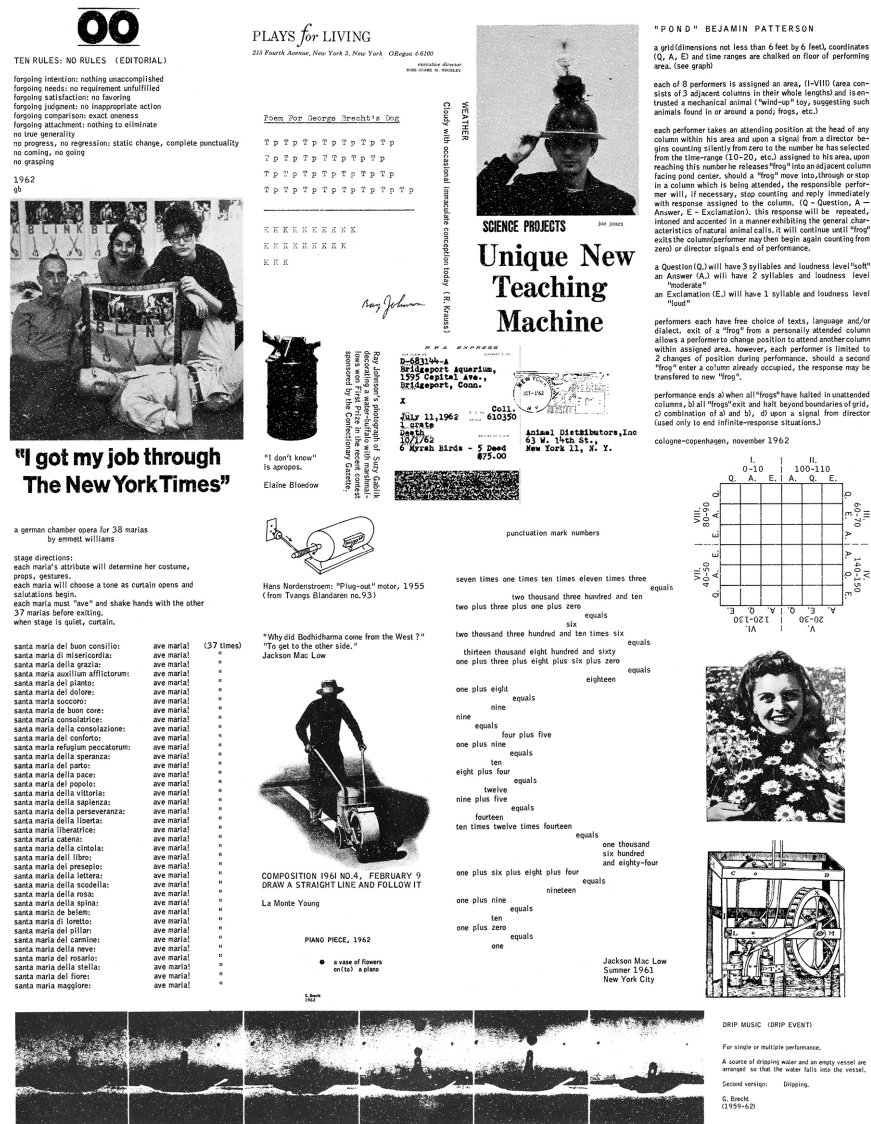


Figure 16.2 *ccv TRE Fluxus*, February 1964, George Maciunas, p. 2, in *The Fluxus Newspaper*, edited by Alice Centamore and James Hoff (New York: Primary Information, 2024), 10.

“Now that you’re ready for the real thing” is a preamble for all that is possible if Fluxus, and especially the newsletter, is taken as a pedagogical and political tool, a source of primary information. Being ready for the real thing (for Fluxus kits, performances and some different way of being in the world) sets the stage for Maciunas’s pedagogical and political commitments as much as the phrase is

also a play on everyday idioms: get real, be real, the real deal, for real and real life. Maciunas's much discussed, debated, adored and reviled "Purge Manifesto" of 1963 committed Fluxus (against the wishes of some of the artists) to non-art reality and to being a "united front and action" of political revolution. Being "ready for the real thing" implies engagement with the reality theorized by Maciunas, in his manifesto, to "Promote living art, anti-art, promote NON ART REALITY to be grasped [scratch that, just "grasped"] by all peoples, not only critics, dilettantes and professionals."¹¹ The *ccV TRE* papers may be read as the "Unique New Teaching Machine" on Joe Jones's head, which is both a regular machine on a hat (as with the hat we saw on page one) and a teaching device using the public medium of radio—a medium of deep interest to the historic avant-garde and governments of all stripes since World War I.

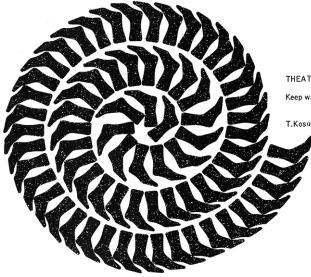
The manifesto includes elements of "flux" from science, whose textual logic appears on page two of this issue of *ccV TRE* as a descriptor not just of Joe Jones's hat but also of the page. It matters that "NON ART REALITY" appears in the manifesto without punctuation. It could mean "non art–reality," meaning Fluxus is distinct from the many efforts to bridge the art–life divide, but it could also mean "non-art reality," meaning those forms of reality that have nothing to do with art or aesthetic experience of any kind. The "real" in non-art reality represents a horizon, a framework offered to the Fluxus artists and friends who take up the challenge, to explore how the threshold to experience operates. To be sure, nothing irritated the teacher of the Fluxus masterclass, George Maciunas, more than a tilt too far into the forbidden territory of "critics, dilettantes and professionals" policing the border.¹² But even if both art and reality (especially the non-art reality preferred by Maciunas) are dialectical to their core, human experience occurs at the threshold of what is sensorially shared as a basis of how we engage with each other. As theorized by Reed, everything else is interpretation, but interpretation is also everything, since culture happens there.

Within the visual logic of modernist painting, a critical and display apparatus was necessary as a bulwark against the idea that art shouldn't be abstract—that is what Maciunas is challenging when he attacks abstract art. Similarly, within a community of a chemist, a designer, several musicians and even artists, the question of what was "real" and what was art opened the horizon of possibility described by Schmidt-Burkhardt as "learning machines," or, here, as a teaching machine. Reading and seeing the *ccV TREs* provides a key mechanism for accessing "NON ART REALITY" in all senses of the term. As a "Unique New Teaching Machine," the paper activates the objective and subjective components of the real as something requiring preparation to experience.

On the lower half of page two, a man paints a stripe down a road. Below him, the caption is an event by La Monte Young, "Draw a straight line and follow it," which was most famously performed by Paik in Wiesbaden in 1962 using his head. It is possible to get something from the sequence, even without any knowledge of Fluxus as art. Across the spread, on page three, Takehisa Kosugi's "Theatre Music/ Keep walking intently" results in a circle (Figure 16.3). "O-O-O-O" appears just to the right. Those tired feet need relief? They need "Quick relief!" Or maybe



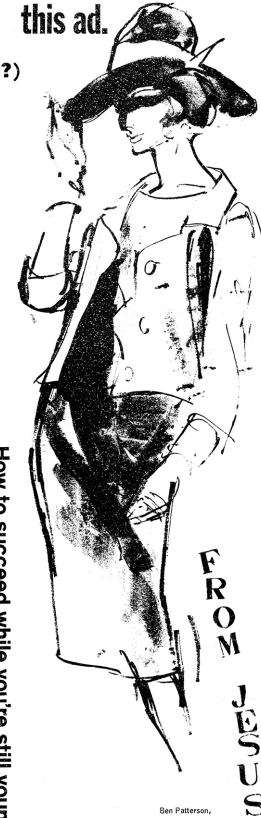
**COUPS DE PIEDS :
CRÉATIONS (1961)**



THEATRE MUSIC
Keep walking intently
T.Kosugi

MY FEET
TERRY
SEAR, BEL
COMES &
CALLOUSES
HOP, JUMP, STOMP
PEDESTAL
QUICK RELIEF

**Tear out
this ad.**



How to succeed while you're still young

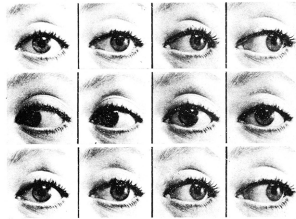
Ben Patterson,

**IN
WHICH
THREE
WAYS
DO
YOU
DIFFER**



SOLO FOR BRASS, by Dick Higgins

1. Before performance a brass musical instrument is heated up very hot
2. It is carried into the performance area on a cushion.
3. A volunteer is found to perform the piece.
4. The instrument is given to the volunteer -
5. - who now performs the piece.



EVENT FOR THE MIDDAY IN THE SUNLIGHT

- | | |
|-----------|---|
| 12:00 | - Shut your eyes |
| 12:03 | - Open your eyes |
| 12:03'05" | - Shut your eyes |
| 12:04 | - Open your eyes |
| 12:04'04" | - Shut your eyes |
| 12:04'30" | - Open your eyes |
| 12:04'33" | - Shut your eyes |
| 12:04'50" | - Open your eyes |
| 12:04'52" | - Shut your eyes |
| 12:05 | - Open your eyes |
| 12:05'01" | - Shut your eyes |
| 12:05'05" | - Open your eyes |
| 12:05'06" | - Shut your eyes |
| 12:07 | - Open your eyes and look at your hands |



Chieko Shiomi, 1963

- EVENT: 13**
provide two vertical slits in curtain
behind slits on left release 13 black helium filled balloons
behind slits on right drop 13 white balls (or eggs)
eggs may be packed in mailing tube and aimed at
object below
time interval by chance
performers should be invisible

Robert Watts, 1962

- EVENT: Washroom**
local national anthem or other appropriate tune
supervised by uniformed attendant in washroom

Robert Watts

- paradise**
11—Three Stooges
13—Studio 99½
— 5:55 A. M. —
4—News, Weather
— 6:00 P. M. —
2—President Kennedy
4—President Kennedy
5—Felix and Friends
7—President Kennedy
11—Popeye the Sailor
13—President Kennedy
— 6:30 P. M. —
2—People's Choice
4—News: Gabe Pressman



FLV
INSTRUCTION
Instructions from the 66

Collection of works by Yoko Ono
\$3,000 below \$5,000 after activation
Kosugi, Biehn, 53 Kenwood
Shibuya, Tokyo, Japan.

Figure 16.3 *ccv TRE Fluxus*, February 1964, George Maciunas, p. 3, in *The Fluxus Newspaper*, edited by Alice Centamore and James Hoff (New York: Primary Information, 2024), 11.

there's some erotic moaning here, on whose behalf we will never know. To the left of Kosugi's feet? Two feet that say "kick," *coups de pieds*. We have entered the realm of walking. For those attuned to everyday life, walking may stand alone. Or become a meditation. Or rise to the level of a Situationist-inspired *dérive* or Baudelaire-inspired wandering, a tradition Lori Waxman has explored with real insight in her book *Keep Walking Intently: The Ambulatory Art of the Surrealists*,

the Situationist International, and Fluxus.¹³ The rhythm of the step brings up the matter of time, of music, the stone stuck in my sneaker, a puddle, the stubborn Lorax of Dr. Seuss's children's story. On further reflection, those feet look an awful lot like gears. How free are we, really, to walk as we wish? How do mechanical time and the human gait resonate or not resonate with each other? And what happens when the rotating circle of feet and the straight line interact? Or, rather, when this open spread is closed, how do those gears of feet pick up on the shape of the mechanical hat on Joe Jones's head and of the hat on page one? A fashion spread of a woman just below this; she seems to be tipping her hat near an instruction: "Tear out this ad." The drawing represents what Fluxus does not (fashion and commerce) and includes an instruction that is also a label (in case the reader misses the point). This is an ad. It should be removed.

Of course, most readers receiving the *ccV TRE* would have been in on the material. I've maybe made a mistake by assuming the reader didn't know what they were getting ready for or being prepared for. I'd like to make a detour by way of the emphasis in this spread on walking. As already noted, on the lower half of page two, a man paints a stripe down a road. Below him, the caption is an event by La Monte Young, "Draw a straight line and follow it." The image of a man painting a stripe down a road using a road painter shows that he is both drawing a straight line and following it. This is an image taken out of context as one possible way to perform Young's instruction. The man would not have known, of course, that he was performing the piece. He is from an earlier time and another place. But someone with knowledge of Young's score (Maciunas, in this case, or someone else with knowledge of it) would see the action that way in hindsight. The past and elsewhere in the world are clearly shaped by what we know and by what we've learned. That is one of the great pleasures of engaging with this work, especially with others who know it well.

To be sure, the same person may also be performing the score next to the spiral of feet, Takehisa Kosugi's *Theatre Music*, with the instruction "Keep walking intently." But since the image of the man rolling the road painter is closer to the Young, and the Kosugi is closer to the feet spiral, I'll go with the assumption that the images are being used to illustrate some way of thinking about the two different walking scores (even if there is some useful slippage).

With Robert Dunn, Young performed the same instruction thirty times in succession over two evenings, with the aid of a plumb bob and yard stick, at his and Yoko Ono's benchmark Chambers Street Loft Series in 1960–61, according to Natilee Harren's important analysis of Fluxus scores in her book *Fluxus Forms*.¹⁴ The piece lasted over three hours as the line was carefully drawn then followed, drawn then followed, again and again. Robert Morris, to whom the piece is dedicated, was married to the dancer Simone Forti. At some level, this reflects his encounter with dance. In any case, the event at the Chambers Street series would have looked nothing like what Maciunas imagines here.

But there is an important distinction to be made. They are not the same piece despite being the same instruction. The instruction means one thing when it is dedicated to Bob Morris in 1960, and something else in 1961, when it is published with

a sequence of dates. Young's book, *Compositions 1961*, consists entirely of this instruction, but with different dates. It was published by George Maciunas's Fluxus imprint and appears on page one as one of the things to see at George Wittenborn's shop.¹⁵ As a sequence of actions taken over the course of different days, the reader or performer might take note of the fact that the same instruction on different days would be quite different (to state the obvious). Or, more precisely in some ways, the same (text) but in other ways very different (where, when, how long, what season, with what tools?).

The distinction between how we might read the same instruction, or the same words, framed a little differently, lies at the core of Maciunas's elastic, context driven, liberatory but disciplined pedagogy. Much of the joy in reading and seeing *ccV TRE* lies in this collaging effect from the real world. But the moving about and changing nature of this score produces the effect of changing contexts from within Fluxus itself. For the sake of argument, let's take the score in the *ccV TRE* as a speech act situated next to the thing it describes. The score describes the action of the man painting a straight line and following it. As used here, it is a constative speech act, meaning that it is a statement that can be true or false. In this case, it is true. If I used Young's text, "Draw a straight line and follow it," to describe the spiral feet, the statement would be false, even though (for example) Kosugi's "Keep walking intently" might fit the image designated for Young's instruction—that is, unless the person following a straight line circumambulated the globe or some other large spherical object.

The fact that the same text can describe two different pictures in Fluxus works has led to much useful confusion. The reverse is also true. Similar pictures might occur as expressions of more than one event. What fun! This is because there is a gap between a constative statement and a performative statement, which is an instruction, as I'm using it here. What the performative text "Draw a straight line and follow it" means hinges on many things. To whom is the instruction directed? Where, when, using what implement and for how long? Performative speech acts result in different outcomes, as when Young and Robert Dunn executed the instruction versus how it is depicted in *ccV TRE*. Maciunas is clearly playing with the gaps here between constative statements (facts) and performative ones. This happens all over the publication.

But there's more. There are three types of force typically cited in speech act theory: locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary. Locutionary force asserts the referential value (meaning the code). In this case, Young's role as a composer interested in single notes impacts how we see, or maybe even hear, this instruction. The same text issued as #9 in 1960 has no addressee—it isn't to anyone and can be represented as a simple line on a card. If a musician executed the instruction while playing an instrument, they would play the single note for which Young is best known. Directing the same performative to Morris changes what it means—in this case, introducing the tonal line to space by way of a sculptor married to a dancer. Placed in the *ccV TRE*, but without the reference to Morris or as part of the 1960 series, the same instruction shifts meaning again, joining the code context of Fluxus.

In speech act theory, illocutionary force reinforces the intermedial character of this directive. The instruction is by La Monte Young. This has a performative function by virtue of the implication of a speaker, and of what someone might imagine the instruction to mean coming from him, which takes us to perlocutionary force, the perceived effect inference by a particular addressee. When Nam June Paik famously (and in Harren's wonderful analysis "errantly")¹⁶ performed this piece in 1962, the perlocutionary force, the powerful inference of its addressee (also a musician), was sufficiently powerful that the piece changed form.

Using his tie, his head and eventually his feet to perform the piece, Nam June Paik shifted the sequential nature of the instruction to "Draw a straight line and follow it" to an additive. Instead of making a sequence, Paik's version creates a simultaneity. Paik introduces the idea of doing both at precisely the same time. The constative status of the text is unchanged. It is still true to describe the action this way. The performative action remains intact, but the playful adaptation of the instruction foregrounds perlocution. The piece, simplified to contain only the dipped head and painted with the hairline, became a standard event at Fluxus concerts ever since and is now generally known as Paik's *Zen for Head*. Luigi Bonotto's Fluxus Collection (Fondazione Bonotto) has a collection of documentation of this event from 1962 to 2012.¹⁷ There is, of course, as much variety as would be found in the original instruction executed at different places and times, but the use of the head has been a near constant for sixty years.

This now common version was already established when Maciunas placed his street painter above the score in 1964. He would have had pictures of Paik's 1962 performance but chose this image instead. He, too, is responding to Young's instruction in terms that foreground perlocution—that seek new ways of interpreting the same score, not to foreground his cleverness (or not exclusively so), but to offer evidence of the truly vast potential of the event as a performance structure. Maciunas's version of the score, his perlocution, produces a simultaneity (like Paik's), but introduces another aspect, one appropriate to Maciunas's interests in mechanical devices and labor—particularly as time passes. This is where I see the power of the event as a performance structure. The mind should be activated, inventive in the face of, seeking ways to rethink, the specific event text at hand in terms that are simultaneously constative (true to what's written down) and performative (as instructions), while working with the types of force that build bridges between the locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary forces of the actors.

Having been made "ready for the real thing" and using the newspaper as a teaching machine that contains this one event in two, maybe three, forms (if we count the publication), I turn the page one more time (Figure 16.4).

The dominant text here reads: "Wood [then in parentheses:] World famous founder of reading dynamics [larger:] will show you how to read [then in tiny print:] and comprehend [then larger again:] 3 to 10"). That's it. It doesn't say three to ten what. Shall we comprehend numbers? Or, maybe ("comprehend" being writ small), the point is that the system is so stupid that it prioritizes speed over knowing, well, anything. What are we to make of the "Photo of Diter Rot by Christer Christian" with a hole in it that's just to the right of the text? The image dominates

the page. Rot's poem machines consisted of pages with holes that could be turned to the world or pages to collect poetic content. Can the head/mind be both an empty vessel and a bracketing or framing device for a world conceived as poetic?

Maciunas is clearly making fun of the normative model of education, where the mind is—or may be—treated like an empty vessel to be filled. But the news isn't all bad on this last page of the newsletter. An observant reader might notice

the score, up top, for George Brecht's direction to "travel in the indicated direction" or "travel in another direction." The direction is followed by a double row of pointing fingers, all going in one direction, except for the one that seems to say, "go back." In Maciunas's terms, it might mean "go rear-garde," as he sometimes described Fluxus. Stop advancing. Traveling in a different direction is also allowed as part of the piece's performative statement. Maciunas's use of the fingers makes his illustration "true." All humor aside, the retro stylization and directionality of these hands remind us that progress is an illusion. Or, if not an illusion, a convenient temporal framework for a society hegemonically conceived. Things don't work that way, though we may make progress here and there. By asking the user to either "travel in the indicated direction" or "travel in another direction," the score builds deliberation and a variety of outcomes into itself. The point is the deliberation. Thoughtful deliberation, versus blind following, is the point. Brecht was not an explicitly political artist, not at all. But nevertheless, this event hovers at the intersection of revolution and evolution or movement and stasis.

In case the reader misses the point, Jackson Mac Low's *One Hundred* is literally a hundred ones written out in letters on this page. Another Victorian hand points, this time up, and offers an instruction. "Pick the 'fun' number," it says. They are, at first glance, all the same. All ones. Or I might follow a different direction. Perhaps the "one" at the edge is more fun, means something different from a "one" in the middle. Or maybe oneness is the point. Can I have it both ways? Is this desire a marker of progress or the opposite?

How does the "Teaching Machine" interact with the "Poem Machine"? This last image of a head sits on that same part of the printed page as the gear/feet spiral, the Joe Jones radio hat and the "Saluting Device" on page one. The dotted line, an instructional device for cutting, invites this three-dimensional read—the reading Schmidt-Burkhardt discovered in her analysis of the charts. If this *ccV TRE* were sitting on a table, a reader might notice topical and ludic connections from the first through to the last page.

At their best, the sensory-cognitive range of Fluxus events and Fluxkits opens the world up to dialectical encounter at the level of:

The word versus the real.
My real versus your real.
Reality versus art.
Non-art versus art reality.
The rhythm of my footstep versus your machine.
My machine versus your footstep.
A straight line versus following versus not following.
The unique experience versus the shared experience.

These insights are a product of reading this *ccV TRE* as a teaching and learning machine. There is no one path, just as there is no one Fluxus. As a dialectic, these oppositions are resolved in that knottiest of human projects, experience, which is, by definition, made of a rhythmic totality that is inherently sensory.

The source for this reflection on how to read the *ccV TRE* is a reprint recently published by Primary Information in New York. That reprint is part of a time-honored tradition internal to Fluxus. Maciunas made Fluxkits throughout his lifetime (which is why they often differ one from the next). The challenge of keeping Fluxus material alive and inexpensive was taken up by Maciunas's associate, Barbara Moore, in the early 1980s. Moore made editions using Maciunas's left-over materials, re-editioning materials as needed with the intention of keeping his Fluxus editions in print forever. Reproduction is a hedge protecting Fluxus materials from becoming just another form of scarcity-driven, expensive art objects. With Moore, Maciunas desired to keep his publications, all of them, in print. These ReFlux editions and the facsimiles published by Primary Information and others prepare the reader for encounters with "the real thing" in a material sense that is simultaneously sensory, formal, literary, political, economic and linguistic.

In their era, each original *ccV TRE* would have been received every month or so, then every year or so, then by decade. It would have been almost impossible for an everyday user to have all the *ccV TREs* in one place, even after 1979. In this 2024 volume, all the newspapers are bound together. They can be read through. This means that, while they take the literal form of the *ccV TRE*, their history—the history of reading them as they appeared—is compressed, their time rendered almost instantaneous. They become artifacts of a bracketed timeline that might have felt open-ended until one was designated as "the last"—the Maciunas memorial issue. The reprints are also physically smaller. They are easier to handle.

Flipping through them, patterns of production, a gradual sliding into a documentary mode emerges that is about George Maciunas from 1964 to 1979, his life, his wedding to Billie Hutchins, his death and his afterlife. This anthology demonstrates how much Fluxus had shifted with time, and also how contemporary it remains as an experiment. By the last *ccV TRE*, memorial rites of passage had moved to the foreground, even for Maciunas. He was dying. Or, more accurately, he had died. As Fluxus artists have died, this last page/site has become more and more poignant even as the reader (in this case me) reflects on the mortality of everyone around me. To be clear, while this short reflection models reading using only one of the *ccV TRE* newsletters, I hope that this is only the first chapter, or model, for how the rest of the newsletters might be read. But there's more.

What does such a reading offer beyond the *ccV TRE* framework? What might this model bring to a broader context? What can it teach us now?

In the lengthy quotation that began this meditation, Reed laments that "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." He is correct. Information has become increasingly untethered from its material supports. When "the message" is no longer traceable to a printed page, it no longer has a meaningful author, beyond whatever algorithm (at that moment) defines the source. The fractured reading associated with the avant-garde texts here could be described as a harkening forward to this eventuality, but such a simple

formal association would have the blame game all wrong. The material emphasis, the long duration of reading, of returning to a text, of reflecting on how the reading operates and what its fragmented form may yet model—all these are missing from the ever-faster-scrolling, ever-less-attentive form of hopscotch brought to reading across layers upon layers of stacked windows.

When publishing is understood as conservation, the commitment has been made to keeping the materials out there so that new publics, future readerships, may learn from them about the past and (equally importantly) how to read them in ways that matter for the future. The goal, the hope, would be that a thorough reading in the Fluxus (and related) modalities would refresh and educate us all on how we encounter the texts we find on the internet, in social media and through ever-more-sophisticated artificial intelligence. In its progressive intentions, this is what conservation does. The point is not to simply preserve in order to stick ourselves in the past, but to keep the past vital in ways that allow us to mine it for paths not taken, meanings missed and aspirations for an ever-evolving future that we have the power to shape.

Notes

- 1 Edward S. Reed, *The Necessity of Experience* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 1.
- 2 Reed, *The Necessity of Experience*.
- 3 Natilee Harren, *Fluxus Forms: Scores, Multiples, and the Eternal Network* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020); Colby Chamberlain, *Fluxus Administration: George Maciunas and the Art of Paperwork* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2024).
- 4 Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962).
- 5 McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 31.
- 6 Marshall McLuhan and Victor J. Papanek, *Verbi-Voco-Visual Explorations* (New York: Something Else Press, 1967).
- 7 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994).
- 8 Alice Centamore and James Hoff, eds., *The Fluxus Newspaper* (New York: Primary Information, 2024).
- 9 Astrit Schmidt-Burkhardt, *Maciunas' Learning Machines: From Art History to a Chronology of Fluxus* (Berlin: Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection/Vice Versa, 2003).
- 10 Schmidt-Burkhardt, *Maciunas' Learning Machines*, x.
- 11 George Maciunas, "Fluxus Manifesto" (February 1963), in Jon Hendricks, *Fluxus Codex* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995), 24.
- 12 Maciunas, "Fluxus Manifesto."
- 13 Lori Waxman, *Keep Walking Intently: The Ambulatory Art of the Surrealists, the Situationist International, and Fluxus* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017).
- 14 Harren, *Fluxus Forms*, 125.
- 15 La Monte Young, *Compositions 1961* (New York: Fluxus, 1963).
- 16 Harren, *Fluxus Forms*, 143.
- 17 "Zen for Head 1962–2012," Fondazione Bonotto, <https://www.fondazionebonotto.org/en/collection/fluxus/paiknamjune/1334.html>.

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- Young, La Monte. *Compositions 1961*. New York: Fluxus, 1963.

17 Philip Corner: On creativity as discovery—a conversation with Hanna B. Hölling, Aga Wielocha and Josephine Ellis

Philip Corner (Figure 17.1), born in the Bronx, New York, in 1933, is a visual artist, composer, vocalist, trombonist, music theorist and educator. Following his return to New York from military service in Korea in 1961, Corner connected to Fluxus largely through his ties to artists such as Alison Knowles and Dick Higgins. Corner's notable score *Piano Activities* (1961) was famously performed at the Fluxus festival in Wiesbaden in 1962, in his absence. Corner's career has spanned numerous broad affiliations, including with the Judson Dance Theater from 1962 to 1964 and, later, the Experimental Intermedia Foundation. Corner also co-founded the Tone Roads Chamber Ensemble in 1963, a contemporary music group, and Sounds out of Silent Spaces in 1972, an ensemble for music and ritual. In this conversation, the *Activating Fluxus* team spoke with Corner about his rich personal history, his complex relationship with Fluxus, the potential for continuing his legacy and the nature of his scores, as both performance instructions and aesthetic objects in their own right.

Hanna B. Hölling: Philip, we are here today to speak about your work and its relation to Fluxus.

Philip Corner: You should know that I'm ambivalent about Fluxus. It's a trademark and a label that are used to market art. I've never been part of Fluxus. Fluxus doesn't exist. There are many of us who raised the problematic aspect of the name "Fluxus." Fluxus was just an organizational structure. George had an ideology that none of "his" artists ever accepted. The manifestos and the definition were George's idea of Fluxus. Other artists have said Fluxus only existed in George's mind. He organized events and then eventually left New York and was off the scene. Nothing happened for years, and then he died. After that it started: Fluxus was all over the place and it spread. I would say Fluxus was created by German collectors and museum organizers—René Block was one of them. Fluxus was based on vague connections or, sometimes, it was sufficient to create just one work. So, who is a Fluxus artist and who is not a Fluxus artist?



Figure 17.1 Phoebe Neville and Philip Corner. Festa dell'uva, Bassano del Grappa, 1996. Photo: Luigi Bonotto. Courtesy Fondazione Bonotto.

Fluxus includes concepts like, for instance, intermedia—an attempt to define a great variety of things by what they are, not trivial and superficial associations, accidents of history and all of that. There were artists including Robert Filliou, Daniel Spoerri or Wolf Vostell who were all part of the same world of intermedia, mixed media, events and Happenings. We're all part of the same thing; we've known and worked with each other. As Dick Higgins said, you can't lick it. Even if I end up with a vigorous polemic, the artists who make up Fluxus, whether they call them Fluxus or not, are great artists and doing good work. I'd like to think that I've done good work, and I'm continuing to do good work. The important thing is the artists, right?

And this goddamn Wiesbaden show in 1962. I'm the bad boy of Fluxus because I did this destruction of the piano. I have since put the record straight because *Piano Activities* is a concert piece. The score was conceived and written during the summer of 1961.¹ Its first performance took

place several months before Wiesbaden in New York. It was my first New York concert after coming back from Korea, in February 1962. It's been performed also in the Leipzig Gewandhaus. You can't get more consecrated than that. I'm a classical composer, and the score is a very precisely written verbal score with a lot of instructions and details about how you should prepare and be responsible for the work. It's a work that involves an action on the piano. This action is not necessarily intended to destroy the piano, but it doesn't put a limit. If you act on the piano with a certain degree of intensity, the piano will break. Let's say, there could be destruction as a consequence of an action, but it's not an intention of the score. So, since Wiesbaden, this particular interpretation of the work has been following me around, and it's probably my most famous piece. But the important thing is that it's music and an action in a concert hall, executed in a reasonable and responsible way. And it has nothing to do with negativity, attacking the bourgeoisie, protesting against the historical "blah blah."²

Hölling:

Thank you for illuminating the history of *Piano Activities* for us. Whether within or outside Fluxus, we are genuinely interested in the lives and afterlives of artworks and the activity of matter. *Piano Activities* offers so much food for thought here.

Corner:

Piano Activities has been performed quite a few times as, you might say, a "destruction event." But I prefer to use the term "transformation event." I even wrote a text, "The Morality of Transformation," that became a part of an installation in the museum of the Villa Croce in Genoa, which also includes a Fluxus object—the rear of what remains of the piano transformed into and treated as a sculpture. This object became a museum object; it exists now in several places. I could give you a list of where you could go and see *Piano Activities*' remains. That's part of the existence of the piece and part of what's happened to it—I've accepted that that's the possibility. [While performing the *Piano Activities*] you can even start off, let's say, not with the intention of destroying the piano, but knowing that your actions are going to destroy the piano, which is a slightly different attitude. The one in Wiesbaden, for instance, which was done [in 2012] at the fiftieth anniversary [of the 1962 concert] and is in the collection of the Nassauischer Kunstverein, is particularly beautiful. There's at least five or six remains of *Piano Activities* in museums and collections around the world.

The recording [of the 1962 Wiesbaden concert] resurfaced in Tokyo many years later and it came to the West. And it's a terrible recording of a terrible performance. On the internet,

you can find lots of other bad performances, but maybe this is the worst performance of *Piano Activities* that has ever been done. And that's made me famous.

Hölling: How do you conceive of your work? I'm specifically interested in the idea of how a musical work comes into being and how it begins to be interpreted.

Corner: I've been thinking about this recently myself: Who am I, what am I, what did I do? As a matter of fact, just this morning, I was out to a place called Albinea, where an indoor and outdoor permanent museum dedicated to my work is about to be opened. We have a friend here, an artist collector, who is helping me prepare and catalog all the stuff. We've already made a foundation and have pulled out works that were exhibited thirty years ago, which I'd forgotten about. Some of them are just in scratchy strips or practically destroyed and we've been reconstituting and preparing them. It's like a Philip Corner Museum and Archive, because I've done a lot of visual work. Of course, I started as a composer and am trained as a composer. I make sound events. And on a certain level, there's no real difference between something which becomes a sound event and something which becomes a visual object. In some cases, they intersect in such a way that the visual object is the score. Or a performance might give rise to an object with interesting visual aspects—it could be a drawing, a design or calligraphy, so even what I'm writing becomes important. There's a continuum between what's art, or what kind of art, whether it's to be heard or to be seen, or is a physical object, and there's no way that you can really separate that. I'm a composer, artist, sculptor and calligrapher. It's much more integrated into one kind of activity.

In a certain sense, I don't consider myself a creative artist. I think there's creativity, but I don't know if I am creative. I don't see what I do as creating anything. The common thread in my work—be it performance pieces, music, sound events, texts (poetic or philosophical) or visual things (calligraphic or abstract)—is that none of it is about self-expression. It's not about me and my inspiration. I see my work as a kind of research. Everything I've done in any field has been about exploring what is and what's possible.

You could say all my work consists of discoveries. This approach allows for extremes, like hyper-minimalism—more minimalist than minimalism itself. For instance, *One Note Once* or *Elementals*, which is about the indefinite prolongation of an unchanging constant. It's research into how much you can eliminate and still remain interesting. My answer,



Figure 17.2 Philip Corner, *Some Silences Wide*, 1989. Silkscreen on cloth, felt pen. 176 × 174 cm. Edition of 21 plus III AP. Photo: Giorgia Palmisano. Courtesy of Archivio Conz, Berlin, and the artist. © Philip Corner.

demonstrated by my work, is that there's no limit. Even silence is a form of exploration. One of my collections, *Some Silences* (Figure 17.2), has been performed several times and exists as a book.³ It invites the reader to define what silence means. Some silences are listening to sounds, while others are not.

In a certain sense, all of my pieces, no matter how complicated they get, are built on this extreme reduction. I even tried to conceive the opposite extreme, and I have a text, "Hearing the Whole World," that was published in one of the underground magazines in the 1960s. I thought, "What would be the opposite of hearing one note once?" Well, that would be hearing the whole world. I could imagine a multimedia electronic work that would just inundate you with thousands of images and sounds, going beyond even what Cage has done in some of his multimedia manifestations. I've never done it; that's the idea and in a certain sense it only exists as an idea. If you can go to one note once,

which is nothing, then you can also go to the other extreme, which is everything. Then everything I've ever done—performance, music, noise, poetry and literature—is simply between those two extremes: nothing or almost nothing and everything or almost everything. To an extent, my work shares in all those extremes.

There's no great creativity in my work. I see it as discoveries of what is already in the universe, just waiting to be revealed. That's what I'm doing, and that's the way I experience it. I don't sit down and try to express myself or even develop an idea. My mind is totally blank. And then something comes into my mind—I don't know where it comes from—and then I say, either, "Get out of my head, that's stupid," or, "That's genius, that's fantastic!" Then that's my piece, and I realize it. It can be a visual work, a performance work or a written work. It takes these different forms, but it's all the same thing: I have no idea, something comes into my mind, I like it, and then I do something with it. That sums up everything I've ever done.

Josephine Ellis:

I wanted to come back to your scores and the specific logic behind them, especially the relationship between a score and its performance. What kinds of possibilities or limitations are there to your scores when they are performed?

Corner:

I accept that any judgment of mine is completely subjective. I'm not really saying, "You can't do this." As a matter of fact, you can say it because all these scores have a certain amount of definition. Let's say *One Note Once*. Suppose you go dot, dot. Well, that's one note twice, right? Then it's not the same piece. That could be a criticism. I've said sometimes, "I like what you do, but it's got nothing to do with my score," and, "Why don't you rewrite it yourself and call it your piece? Define what you did, but don't call it my piece." Sometimes I've even liked it. So look at what's written, and don't call it my piece. That's the convention we have in our culture, that you define something and you say that you're the composer. Well, there's a definition [in my scores], even if the definition is open and free. It's not always *One Note Once*; sometimes it's pages and pages of details and commentary.

Some of my pieces are very specific. I mean, I've even done some quasi- or pseudo-Fluxus scores saying something like, "Do whatever you want." I've played around with indeterminacy and those extreme things which say, "You don't need me to tell you to do whatever you want." So there's this possibility of defining what you do and taking my work as an inspiration. One of my books translates all of my work. It's called

Lifework: A Unity.⁴ In this book, I've done a progressive presentation of my work where all of it has been translated into verbal form. I describe what the score is like, even if it's a big score. I also humorously presented a verbal score and wrote: "Take any idea you like from my book, and reformulate it, and call it your work." So that's the extreme.

Aga Wielocha: There's a well-known anecdote about Alison Knowles's *Identical Lunch* [1967], in which you've been identified as the individual who recognized it as a work. Also, you have published a book in response to this piece. I'm curious to hear your perspective on this story.

Corner: I have a book called *The Identical Lunch* [1973], which is different from Alison's [*Journal of the Identical Lunch*, 1971].⁵ I was working with a theater company in Boston, going back and forth between New York and Boston. I was staying in Dick Higgins's house. I've known Alison and Dick for a long, long time; we were close. I found out that Alison was going to this coffee shop, Riss, and having the same meal every day. In her mind, this was already a verbal score, and she was performing a piece. She had a little booklet with an appendix including people's comments. She invited me to join her in Riss. I said, "The tuna fish sandwich is okay, but I'm going to have something different every time I come. And I am not going to drink a glass of buttermilk." So already there was a difference; I wasn't performing her *Identical Lunch*. I like a lot of variety. As a matter of fact, even now, if I go to a restaurant, I'm tempted to say, "Oh, I'm not going to have the balsamic vinegar steak because I had that the last time." It should always be something different. So my identical lunch was the nonidentical lunch. My score would be to systematically go through the menu, eating whatever comes up, whether you like it or not. Usually, you find out that you do like it, so you're going through your own prejudices. Alison liked what I did, so she got the book published. So now both her book and mine are complementary aspects of the identical or the nonidentical lunch.

Hölling: You have expressed that people can pick up your works and interpret them in their own way. You then may appreciate or disapprove of their interpretation. Do you consider a new interpretation of your work as a potential future for it?

Corner: I'm not a fan of Philip Glass's music, but somebody asked him the same thing: "Will your music be played after you're gone"? And he said, "I don't know. I won't be here to listen to it." So that's basically my attitude: I won't be here to listen to it. That's your business.

Hölling: Nevertheless, isn't the concept of planning for a future inherent in the creation of a foundation or in supporting the existence of a museum, such as the "Philip Corner Museum" you've mentioned?

Corner: If this is happening, why should I prevent it? There's no doubt that some of my work is going to be performed after I'm dead, at least for a while. I know who my friends are, and I know that there are people who love my music. It's just that I won't experience it. So, from my personal point of view, one way or another, it doesn't matter. Being alive now, I like the idea that the park and the museum will happen. The important thing is the enthusiasm of my friend Gilberto Bortolotti, who is also an artist. He likes my work enough to offer his house, his land and his work. He is helping me dig out pieces from my archive, preserve them and present them in this context. He's doing it out of love. I know that this will survive for a while. But who knows what's going to happen in the future? The way the world is going, nothing may survive for long.

Hölling: It's a beautiful way to think about love as a driving force behind the preservation or continuation of art. Each of us from our individual perspective recognizes it. Writing a book or an article about an artist and transcribing an interview are good examples.

Corner: The only thing that's interesting to me about what we're doing is that you're a person who's interested in my work and who likes my work. Anything else about posterity, meaning or history, it's bullshit.

Hölling: I can understand why you see it that way. And yet I've been reading about your interests in durational sound and the deep materiality of sound. To me, these interests evoke a deeper preoccupation with duration, extending beyond the existentialist focus on the present moment—it's a longer perspective of and on life that thrives beyond it.

Corner: That's very nice. Thank you for saying that.

Hölling: I'm intrigued by the interchangeability of means and the more complex idea of intermedia existing in your work that have emerged from this conversation. For instance, the possibility of visual works becoming scores and scores assuming the role of visual works.

Often, your scores have an appealing aesthetics which arrives via your interest in calligraphy. They lend themselves to be treated as aesthetics objects in their own right.

Corner: There's an aesthetic quality to my scores. No matter what I do, I think about the way things look on the page, the way they're spaced. Even if it's not overtly artistic, it still should have an

aesthetic quality. I never just fill up a page, like a printed book, which is visually just a page full of words. I am always concerned with the spacing and something a little bit unorthodox about the way things go together.

Hölling: So, could we consider certain scores, with their particular materiality and uniqueness, as self-sufficient aesthetic entities that are works in their own right and separate them from the musical realization?

Corner: Any score is very graphic. It goes up and down, and it's measured. Part of the music's reality is already in the score, in the writing, and even if you can't read musical notation, you get some kind of sense of what the music is actually like. A Bach score is very different from a Mendelssohn score or a Beethoven score.

Hölling: It's intriguing because then the scores are not only means to an end but also ends in themselves.

Corner: I started studying music in a traditional way. And if you read a score, you know you're performing concept art because you're reading the score and translating the notes into the music in your head. And you're not necessarily following a recording, you're just studying a score. It's visual art and concept art.

Hölling: And could you say something about the language? You write your scores in English. And it's not exactly musical notation. We know it at least from [George] Brecht.

Corner: English is my language. Musical notation is specific, it tells you to do one thing. And of course there's interpretation, but that's already something projected on the notation. The notation itself is like one thing, but the nature of words is generic. I mean, a word, a single word, does not relate to one thing. It relates to a class of things. So, if you want to do something which has freedom—multiple interpretation, improvisation—you have to use words and notice that even traditional music has to use words, for instance in tempo indication. There are expressive indications that music notation has never dispensed with. And if you want any degree of variety and amplitude of possibility, you've got to use words.

Wielocha: Some of your works, including many recordings, have been collected by institutions. In one of the interviews, you also mentioned that some of them—for instance, the archive of Northwestern University—have collected scores but not artworks. I'm curious about how you differentiate between scores and artworks. What distinctions do you see between the two?

Corner: Northwestern University has a lot of my works. I've been trying to get stuff out of my house, including all of my cassette sound recordings. For instance, things that were never

produced, especially when there was a time when I was improvising every day. And so there's a lot of recordings of these improvisations. And I don't know whether anything else should ever happen to these recordings except that somebody listens to them. In some cases, I have improvisations that were not originally intended to be compositions, but they can be put on a record and exist as something permanent.

What's come out from this discussion is that there's not a clear distinction between an artwork and a score, and that, on a certain level, any artwork could be interpreted as a score. That's an extreme example. Obviously, if you're thinking along the lines of a conventional musical score, then you're really thinking linearly—a melody, a line that goes up and down, and there's a limitation to it. Let's take, for example, a visual image of a person. It is far from being a score. If you look at a Renaissance painting, sometimes the structure is very clear: there's an arm and the way the bodies go together, forming a triangle. You could follow that linearly, but to automatically translate a portrait of a person into a score becomes maximally difficult. But if what you can see is relatively distilled, irrational, goes up and down, has proportions, then that can easily be translated into sound.

Hölling: The interpretation of your scores often involves several interpreters. Is collaboration important to you?

Corner: It is. You touched on something that is essential. Partly it has to do with the aspect of freedom and improvisation, and in the realization that's almost a given. It exists in classical music, too, except everybody is doing the same thing, and one person [a conductor] has told everybody what to do. But if you're not doing that, then people are collaborating or interacting in a free interpersonal way and there is the indeterminate aspect of it. They're not all just doing what I told them to do. It is something that automatically generates freedom of combination, right? There's freedom in the realization of a single work, in how all that stuff fits together, and it depends on the people themselves who are doing the playing.

Hölling: Perhaps, at the end of the day, the Wiesbaden interpretation of your *Piano Activities* wasn't such a bad thing. Maybe if they stopped destroying the piano and instead focused solely on the creation of sounds.

Corner: The Wiesbaden thing. I've made four workshops with *Piano Activities* in Adelaide, Oldenburg, Marseille and Copenhagen. Part of the discipline and the rehearsal for the performance was learning what to do and what not to do, how to caress the piano and deal with it without destroying anything. For

instance, there are the dampers that you don't touch, because they're too fragile. So that was part of the discipline. The workshops have been put out on a record. These recordings are important because they captured the disciplined performances, not that destruction. I can assure you that when Steffen Schleiermacher performed *Piano Activities* in the Leipzig Gewandhaus, he did not damage or destroy the piano. You play it just as if it were a classical piece.

This is an edited excerpt from a conversation that took place on March 14, 2024.

Notes

- 1 See also the score for *Piano Activities (piece for many pianists)* in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/127342>.
- 2 Corner's score for *Piano Activities* was performed during the first Fluxus festival in Wiesbaden in 1962. The interpretation by George Maciunas, Dick Higgins, Ben Patterson, Alison Knowles, Wolf Vostell and Emmett Williams has entered the history of postwar avant-garde art as an attempt not only to explore the boundaries between classical music and noise but also to challenge bourgeois sensibilities by enacting a violent, destructive act of cutting apart its beloved instrument, a grand piano—the motifs that Corner contests. See also Philip Corner, Luciana Galliano and Toshie Kakinuma, "Oral History Interview with Philip Corner," Kyoto City University of Arts Archival Research Center, September 20, 2015, https://www.kcua.ac.jp/arc/ar/philipcorner_en/.
- 3 Philip Corner, *Some Silences* (Lugo: Exempla, Firenze & Exit, 1983).
- 4 Philip Corner, *Lifework: A Unity* (Lebanon, NH: Frog Peak Music, 1993).
- 5 Philip Corner, *The Identical Lunch* (San Francisco: Nova Broadcast Press, 1973); and Alison Knowles, *Journal of the Identical Lunch* (San Francisco: Nova Broadcast Press, 1971).

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18 Fluxus East and the dead letter

Maggie Hire

On errands of life, these letters speed to death.

Herman Melville, *Bartleby, the Scrivener* (1853)¹

In 1963, Fluxus chairman George Maciunas wrote the now-infamous “Fluxus Manifesto,” calling on artists to “PURGE the world of dead art, imitation, artificial art,” so as to forge an ephemeral and transitory “living art, anti-art, . . . NON ART REALITY to be fully grasped by all peoples, not only critics, dilettantes and professionals.”² Several Fluxus-associated artists were already probing new strategies to this end. For example, events, based on a loose set of instructions called “scores,” encouraged the continual remaking of art through arrangements of speech, sounds, objects and actions that varied from performance to performance.³ Further, mail art introduced an indeterminacy into the act of production that was attractive to many artists, who welcomed the possibility that their work might be altered during its journey through the postal system or upon its delivery to a recipient. Such manners of realizing artworks unburdened by convention—and even, at times, by the artist’s original intention—quickly became hallmarks of the Fluxus project. Against the traditional model of an autonomous artwork, created by a sole artist and exhibited to a passive viewer, these strategies incorporated others into the forging of a “living art”—whether calling on viewers to participate in events or folding another into an “act of ritual generosity” with the exchange of mail art.⁴

The egalitarian intentions of the latter strategy found a special fit with Maciunas’s ambition for a far-reaching and international Fluxus movement. Presented as expressions of freedom from the ordinary constraints of the art system, the exchange of mail art allowed artists to create a global network. As much as it introduced an element of chance into its production, mail art also promised connectivity, and even offered to extend a bridge across the Cold War chasm separating West from East—or, at least, so the story goes.⁵ For the ever-enterprising Maciunas, this connective quality of the post occasioned a special opportunity to expand the footprint of the Fluxus venture into the geographic terrain he considered particularly fertile: Eastern Europe.

“East . . . is more ready than West,” Maciunas mused to American artist Henry Flynt in January 1963.⁶ A “living art, anti-art” intervention was possible in the communist territory of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and its allied nations, he reasoned, because of their long history of anti-capitalist, collective avant-gardism:

We must all work towards eventual Fluxus in S.U. [the Soviet Union] OK? . . . Best to work through political agitators and present Fluxus as what they have been looking all along to have against the art-revolt brewing there. We can help them to impose a political supremacy over all art-activities. You agree??⁷

With these words, Maciunas solicited support from American poet and visual artist Emmett Williams in 1964: a letter sent by mail, a call to invigilate activities a continent away. Paradoxes abound within Maciunas’s curious attempt to fuse a Duchampian “anti-art” spirit with the radical legacies of the Soviet avant-garde, namely those of the Left Front of the Arts (LEF) Group and the Productivists, both important precedents for Maciunas, though far from well known in Western Europe or the United States at the time.⁸ But while we already know that the historical model of Productivist art and Maciunas’s leveraging of it were two very different things, little scholarship has attended to the object of his desire: the formation of a nebulous Fluxus East encompassing the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc nations, from the perspective of artists working in the region.⁹

Indeed, for some artists practicing in 1960s Eastern Europe, the idea of a Fluxus “living art” was limiting. Conversely, it was the symbolic idea of death that offered the promise of a failure that was, in fact, active and emancipatory. Such theoretical differences, this chapter proposes, are crystallized by artworks engaging with the post—a communicative medium that, against mail art’s claims to a universalizing neutrality, traffics in the unequal distribution of power, authority and control. Through an examination of Polish Fluxus affiliate Tadeusz Kantor’s 1967 Happening *The Letter*, this chapter formulates the concept of the “dead letter” as a method employed by some artists to escape the mapping of external powers onto their artworks—whether Maciunas’s expansionary aspirations, or the hegemony of the state. Ultimately, this chapter meditates upon the repercussions of keeping dead letter artworks alive—in archives, museums and other institutions—today. Polish contemporary artist Goshka Macuga’s *The Letter* tapestry, made in 2011 and based on Kantor’s work, provides a concluding example of how an artist might activate the conceptual tenets of a dead letter performance. Her work occasions a rethinking of the care of art objects to be better aligned with and responsive to their particular art histories.

A dead letter performance

On the evening of January 21, 1967, eight retired post officers donned their uniforms and began an onerous journey. Departing from Warsaw’s general post office, they toted a comically cumbersome parcel, stretched between them: an



Figure 18.1 Tadeusz Kantor, *The Letter*, 1967. Photo: Eustachy Kossakowski. Black-and-white negative, each 6 × 6 cm. © Anka Ptazkowska, Paulina Krasińska. Negatives are owned by the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. Tadeusz Kantor © Dorota Krakowska & Lech Stangret / Tadeusz Kantor Foundation.

almost forty-six-foot-long envelope, weighing nearly 200 pounds. Complete with outsized postmarks and three larger-than-life French bulldog stamps, a giant, hand-written scrawl on the envelope's face announced their destination: the Foksal Gallery, a haven for conceptual and avant-garde art that had been founded the year prior (Figure 18.1). During their two-and-a-half-hour expedition, the beleaguered postmen traveled along the city's main artery, Nowy Świat. Cutting through heavy darkness, they snaked their way past concrete housing blocks and navigated around barren trees. Accompanied by a police escort and at least one photographer documenting their progress, their activity shattered the stillness of the city's otherwise-desolate winter streets.¹⁰ To say that it would have been difficult to miss their postal performance would be an understatement.

This spectacle marked the beginning of Tadeusz Kantor's Happening titled *The Letter* (1967), which took a one-act play written by French poet Henry Galy-Carles as inspiration for its score.¹¹ (Though based on a loose score, Kantor preferred the designation of "Happening" over the Fluxus-favored "event," implying his commitment to a lengthier, irreproducible performance in which the lines between audience and performers become blurred.) Upon its arrival at the Konstanty Zamoyski Palace, once home to the Association of Polish Painters and Graphic Artists and to a café popular among artists and secret police alike, Kantor's mammoth letter eventually came into view of a small crowd, gathered at Foksal, which, to this day, occupies one of the palace's annexes. Huddled inside, the spectators listened to a recording of Galy-Carles reading his play, *L'enveloppe*, projected over speakers. The recipient of a mysterious letter without a return address, Galy-Carles's main character develops an intense paranoia,



Figure 18.2 Tadeusz Kantor, *The Letter*, 1967. Photo: Eustachy Kossakowski. Black-and-white negative, each $2\frac{1}{3} \times 2\frac{1}{3}$ in (6×6 cm). © Anka Ptaszkowska, Paulina Krasińska. Negatives are owned by the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. Tadeusz Kantor © Dorota Krakowska & Lech Stangret / Tadeusz Kantor Foundation.

only heightened as his mail somehow miraculously, terribly expands in size. Try as he might, the tormented addressee can't bring himself to open it. He eventually succumbs to his madness:

But then I am your prisoner . . . You hold me . . . you torment me and you hurt me . . . Ah! This anguish at my throat . . . I'm begging you . . . I want to know . . . I want to know . . . But already I can't move anymore . . .

Now I want to open you. But already I feel it's too late . . . stop growing . . .

I did not want to know the Happening . . . And the Happening wanted my death! Maybe I'm going to find at last the nothingness of my nothingness . . . and I will never know. . . never. . . never. . .¹²

The reading was interrupted by reports of the large letter's location, amplified by Polish conceptual artist Edward Krasiński over a megaphone. As the letter and its supporting crew grew nearer, a slew of artists and critics associated with the gallery—including Krasiński, Wiesław Borowski, Mariusz Tchorek, Maria Stangret and Anka Ptaszkowska—distributed real letters to spectators, described in the score as “intimate, full of details, . . . compromising, conventional . . . letters from friends . . . teachers, mothers to children, clerics, . . . lovers and scoundrels.”¹³ Upon its arrival, spectators were invited to participate in a cathartic act of destruction, violently tearing the fabric envelope and its stuffing to bits (Figure 18.2).

Recent scholarship has shown that the postal system did real work for Maciunas and other Fluxus artists.¹⁴ Even at its most benign, mail art's demands for reciprocity perversely “cast long shadows of unspoken obligations and power relations.”¹⁵

Aside from the exchange of mail art, Maciunas relied upon the post as a means of communication, producing a consistent and strategic stream of newsletters and handwritten memos meant to cohere an otherwise roving troupe of Fluxus artist-associates into a “United Front.”¹⁶ German media theorist Bernhard Siegert has argued that the twentieth-century post should itself be considered a technical apparatus capable of integrating subjects. Provided their position is predetermined by a postal grid, and that the demands of the system have been met by paying a postage fee, subjects are “delivered” from the task of being subjects since they are always already interpolated by the autonomous, closed system of the post.¹⁷ Following the work of Siegert and others, it is clear: postal-centric works on paper became *paperworks* for Maciunas, oftentimes meant to incorporate the receiver into a preestablished power structure and to cement their position as a Fluxus disciple.¹⁸

Such is certainly the case for artists like Kantor, who lived and worked in Eastern Europe. When Maciunas first foisted the title “Fluxus East” onto artists in the region—an action carried out largely in mail correspondence—several rejected the term right off the bat. Around 1965, Maciunas appointed Czech artist Milan Knížák as the “Director, Fluxus East,” and Knížák recalls that “it meant nothing”; “I knew my situation. I was a completely forgotten, young guy, living in Prague. . . . No power, no nothing, and then I became the director of Fluxus East.”¹⁹ More recently, in response to a 2005 exhibition of the same name at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin, art historian Klara Kemp-Welch wrote that, by bringing together a range of experimental artists under the banner of “Fluxus East,” irrespective of whether the artists self-identified with the project, the exhibition “amounted to a ‘potential retrospective colonization by Fluxus’ of a very diverse scene whose complex politics far exceeds . . . the relatively limited terms of the Fluxus idea.”²⁰ Yet, rather than dismissing Fluxus East outright, this chapter attends directly to the work of one would-be member of this group to propose the dead letter as one method of illuminating theoretical tensions haunting the Fluxus project to this day.

Although today associated with a piece of mail that lies unclaimed at a post office, or which cannot be delivered through a defect of address or other cause, the dead letter originally indicated a useless or ineffective piece of script: a writ, statute, or ordinance “which is or has become practically without force or inoperative, though not formally repealed or abolished.”²¹ By both meanings it’s tempting to excuse the dead letter as a repetition of the old conundrum of whether there is a sound when a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it.²² After all, the dead letter inheres a paradoxical presence: wherever it lands, it signals an absence—whether communicative or authoritative. While letters of life are always asynchronous, the dead letter is neither synchronic nor diachronic: its presence indicates a break, a space between two points in the postal system. For this, it suggests something of an ethic of incommensurability, a tactic by which academics Eve Tuck and K.W. Yang have challenged us to think the project of decolonization, a recognition that sometimes two parties “cannot speak to one another, cannot be aligned or allied.”²³ Utilizing these varied meanings, this chapter proposes that the dead letter invites the questioning of who defines, controls and benefits from communicative and artistic exchanges—or, here, breaks.

Though Kantor was never an official member of Maciunas's Fluxus group, his well-known *Panoramic Sea Happening* (1967) influenced many Fluxus artists; he is considered among the first artists to have embraced the Happening in Poland.²⁴ He is best known for his role in the experimental theater group Cricot 2; it was through this work that he developed an interest in pairing the ready-made elements of life with the absurd and surreal. While several aspects of *The Letter* betray such an impulse—an otherwise banal envelope deliriously increases in size, the commonplace reality of a police presence made to look ridiculous—for its destructive climax, the Happening welcomes spectators in a manner dissimilar to much of Kantor's earlier work. Art historian Claire Bishop has focused on the participatory Happenings of Milan Knížák in former Czechoslovakia—actions like his 1966 *An Event for the Post Office, the Police, and the Occupants of no. 26 Vaclavkova Street, Prague 6, and for all Their Neighbors, Relatives and Friends*, for example—to show how participatory art under state socialism was often employed as a strategy against the collectivist dogma of dominant ideology, and for the creation of a private sphere of individual expression instead.²⁵ Committed to ideas of freedom and individual imagination, Bishop understands artists like Knížák—whose action similarly involves community participation vis-à-vis subverting the usual function of the post—as creating the space for private experience, in a group setting. With gallery visitors allowed the individual experience of reading their own “delivered” letters, and a later call to destructive group action, Kantor's *The Letter* puts forth a similarly pitched participatory strategy.

For Kantor, however, participation was crucially tethered to the experience of a state of suspension, one conceptually bounded by Foksal Gallery's inaugural director Wiesław Borowski's influential theory of “an elimination of art from art” (1966) and symbolically evidenced by the liminal space of the post office. (Borowski was involved with Foksal for forty years, until 2006, and, as a remarkably perceptive critic, was an important interlocutor for avant-garde artists in Poland during this time.) In 1964, Kantor wrote a short piece of prose on the suspended state between postal sender and receiver:

THE POST-OFFICE

is a very special place
where the laws of
utilization
are suspended—
objects—letters, packages,
packets, bags, envelopes
and all their contents
exist, for some time,
independently,
without an addressee,
without a place of destination,
without a function,

almost as if in a vacuum,
 in-between a sender and a receiver,
 where both are powerless,
 with no meaning,
 bereft of their authority.
 It is a rare moment when
 an object escapes its destiny.²⁶

Death, for Kantor, might be understood as the standard state of the letter as it lands in the vacuum of the post office, where both sender and receiver are “bereft of their authority.”²⁷ Supportive of the production of similar “voids” and “deserted areas,” Borowski’s vision for the elimination of art is not meant as an artistic tendency; it is rather the active creation of nothingness that is “the most real and meaningful.” Neither escapism nor an expression of pessimism, “acts of renunciation, rejection, disapproval, elimination” grant new life to art because “they do not mean waiting for consequences,” since “they constitute results and consequences by themselves.”²⁸

Against Maciunas’s living art revolution, which sought to forge a collective out of individuals and create a socially active (at times contradictory) “anti-art,” Borowski theorized an elimination of art through the act of elimination itself—the creation of a void that is also a possibility. Kantor, in turn, staged this impulse by encouraging private experience within his preconceived action of collective destruction. The dead letter for Kantor, then, might be seen as offering both the promise of failure and the reinscription of agency: during a time of Fluxus connectivity and networking cybernetics, Kantor’s dead letter performance created a vacuum of authority and delivered to its subjects the ability to un-connect as individuals, together—a utopian, participatory model of art particularly attractive to those in the East, where the state often set parameters around public gatherings and censored private communications.²⁹ When Kantor’s letter “died,” it—as a dead letter—forged a suspended space free from the impositions of the government and Maciunas’s ambitions, as well as from the unwanted influence of any other outside force. Yet the questions remain: If Kantor intended for his letter to be dead, what are we meant to do with this work today? How might viewers—art historians, archivists, members of the public—engage with *The Letter*’s legacy, after its moment of performance, in a way that honors the artist’s aims?

An activation

Roughly two decades after Kantor’s dead letter performance, Borowski and Andrzej Turowski, an art critic and historian who co-ran Foksal for ten years alongside Borowski, theorized the creation of a “living archive.”³⁰ They imagined an archive in which art, its documentation, and other supportive files, could rest in a “neutrally present” space, divorced from the expectations of “artists themselves, display managers, the greedy audience,” past or future.³¹ Though Borowski and Turowski denote their speculative archive as “living,” their approach rings of

Kantor's desire to locate a dead zone "state of suspension" for his work. "WE . . . DENY ALL THE ARCHIVES, since any archive presents history," they write.³² Jacques Derrida has recognized the archive as aporetic, constantly working against itself, animated by a Freudian repetition-compulsion and propelled by a death drive.³³ Paradoxically, Borowski and Turowski's living archive might also be seen as animated by a destructive force. Wishing to dissolve the archive dedicated to the past by catching artworks in the act of "transmission," they disavow the moment of "broadcast" and the finality of the works' "reception." They are interested in locating the work of art as "a trace of a living thought recognized in its past condition."³⁴ Or, in their difficult-to-parse words: "The LIVING ARCHIVES marks the past condition of thought vis-à-vis its presentation."³⁵ Tellingly, Borowski and Turowski latch on to a postal metaphor to explain the living archive, describing it as being like a mailbox that prevents the delivery of mail, holding on to letters indeterminately.³⁶

Cricoteka, the Centre for the Documentation of the Art of Tadeusz Kantor in Cracow, builds upon Borowski and Turowski's work; it was founded in 1980 as a living archive of Kantor's Cricot 2 theater. As a cultural institution, it comprises a museum, archive, research center, contemporary art gallery and space for cultural events. Though living, as with Borowski and Turowski's model, the various objects, documents and videos of the Cricoteka are understood, in the present, to be of the past. Even still, it was Kantor's hope that the material of his archive would serve as "a living testimony / to our difficulties, perseverance, / our victories, / our journeys, and the battles fought. / Maybe one day, / the archives / will be of use to / those who wish / to continue the house, / or to rebuild it / using even different blueprints."³⁷ Cricoteka wishes that Kantor's artworks, objects and related ephemera will, in turn, teach the public about their historical moment, while also inspiring future artistic and scholarly activity.

One such example is Polish contemporary artist Goshka Macuga's *The Letter* (2011), a tapestry over thirty-seven feet in length, depicting a reformulation of Tadeusz Kantor's 1967 *Happening*, created for the first solo presentation of her work in a public Polish institution, held at the Zachęta National Gallery of Art in Warsaw in the winter of 2011–12 (Figure 18.3). To make the work, Macuga restaged Kantor's performance, photographed her version and commissioned artisans in Belgium to weave the resulting image into a monumental tapestry using a computer-controlled Jacquard loom. However, while Kantor's letter was sent to the Foksal Gallery, Macuga's is addressed to the Zachęta. While the former included oversized bulldog stamps, the latter features postage emblazoned with the former president Lech Wałęsa's likeness—a detail suggestive of the post-1989 history of political transformation and transition in Poland. Conjuring the viewer's living memory of more recent censorship in Polish art, Macuga's work gestures to the uptick in right-wing attacks directed against artists, artworks, curators and cultural institutions that the nation experienced in the early 2000s.

In those years, the vitriol directed against the Zachęta reached fever pitch. One of the better-known examples of an attack against the National Gallery occurred on December 21, 2000, a week after it opened an exhibition featuring Italian artist



Figure 18.3 Goshka Macuga, *The Letter*, 2011. Tapestry, 370 × 1132 cm. Collection of the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. © Goshka Macuga. Photo: Bartosz Stawiarski.

Maurizio Cattelan's *The Ninth Hour* (*La Nona Ora*) (1999), a life-like sculpture of Pope John Paul II that positions the religious figure on the ground, pinned down by a large meteor-like rock that has struck him.³⁸ On this date, Polish politicians Witold Tomczak and Halina Nowina-Konopka entered the gallery flashing their identification and proclaiming their immunity from Polish law by virtue of their status in parliament. They then attempted to remove the rock from the Pope and reposition the wax figure, standing it upright on its feet—an unsuccessful correction that resulted in damage to the sculpture's legs.³⁹ The pair also left a copy of a letter penned by Tomczak and addressed to the prime minister, the minister of culture and national heritage, and the minister of justice, "demanding the dismissal of the gallery's director, Anda Rottenberg, 'on grounds that a civil servant of Jewish origin' should not be spending the Roman Catholic majority's money on disgusting works of art."⁴⁰ Subsequently, ninety members of parliament joined Tomczak in signing another letter calling for Rottenberg's departure, to ensure "the restoration of a stately face to Polish national culture."⁴¹ These actions opened the floodgates, and the Zachęta received letter after letter from the public—many of which were antisemitic in nature—echoing the call for Rottenberg's ousting, which was eventually heeded when she resigned from her position in 2001.

Since the 1990s, Macuga has incorporated archival materials and other artists' works into her own; she has long been interested in clandestine knowledge systems and alternate modes of accumulating, sharing and disseminating knowledge.⁴² Of her process, she has explained, "I hope [to] create temporary changes

in how the viewer perceives certain concrete items, objects, works of art, pictures and stories. History changes over time . . . and our experience, in turn, influences our memories.”⁴³ Related to *The Letter* tapestry, Macuga plumbed the Zachęta’s archives to create an expansive work titled *Notice Board* (2011), an ersatz public message board over forty feet in length, consisting of press clippings documenting the attacks leveled against Rottenberg and other curators grouped alongside related envelopes, postcards and letters sent to the institution. The work, in the artist’s words, “gave voice to a public, but also placed a mirror to it—giving the public the opportunity to look at itself.”⁴⁴ For Macuga, *Notice Board* related explicitly to Kantor’s *Happening* through its coalescing themes of communication, artistic freedom and national identity.⁴⁵

While intergenerational exchanges between artists and lineages of influence frequently surface in art history, Macuga’s installation at the Zachęta is unique for its translation of Kantor’s *Happening* into an entirely different medium, socio-historical context and physical space, while still insisting upon shared thematic concerns. Though at times the term “activation” is used synonymously with “recreation” or “re-enactment,” Macuga’s work does neither of these things. Instead, her tapestry, which unites a methodology of archival research with a palimpsestic materiality of woven fabric in an installation encouraging public reflection, activates Kantor’s *Happening* by locating the potential for a shared solidarity within the public’s experience of learning—or at the very least confronting—a uniquely repetitious history, together. In so doing, and as this chapter contends, Macuga’s installation occasions a rethinking of how individuals and institutions alike might better care for artworks in a manner responsive to specific and alternative art histories.

Scholars, artists and conservation specialists alike have probed the imbricating territories of performance and conservation to suggest new, more expansive ways of conceiving the care of performance art outside the narrow framework of preserving its documentation and material traces.⁴⁶ Care, in this context, has emerged as one way to collaboratively act with the many involved in producing and maintaining a performance-based work.⁴⁷ While today, “caring” conjures relational and ethical connotations, in its original meaning, “to care” was laden with noetic meaning, related to “mental suffering,” “a burdened state of mind” and “serious or grave mental attention; the charging of the mind with . . . concern . . . attention . . . regard.”⁴⁸ Art critic Aruna D’Souza has built upon these varied meanings, and upon the work of earlier scholars of feminism and disability, to propose that a politics of care might open onto “imperfect solidarities” that are “based on temporary, context specific alliances . . . allow[ing] difference and even contradiction to remain intact, and . . . see[ing] such contradiction as a strength, not a weakness.”⁴⁹ Whether in thinking or in acting, caring generates reciprocity: to care is to develop a sensitivity and attentiveness to another person, being or thing that supersedes concern for the sole individual. And, when focus is shifted to appreciating the situational nature of caring, it becomes possible to locate a definition of care that is neither rigid nor dogmatic, but multiple and flexible—a care that is generous and that embraces differences, contradictions and all.

To return to Macuga's *Zachęta* installation, it is possible to extrapolate dead letters directly from the work: *Notice Board*'s aggregated correspondences, for example, might be considered "dead" since, by 2011, the missives no longer carried their initial force; and *The Letter*'s ossification of a notably active scene into a tapestry—a medium inextricably bound with a history of authority, ritual and power dating to the early modern period—freezes Kantor's parcel forever in a liminal moment of transmission, never to be delivered.⁵⁰ Yet, more important than these dead letter literalizations is Macuga's animating of the conceptual tenets of a dead letter performance—chief among them, a recognition of the contingent nature of communication and the power structures subtending the creation and afterlife of a work of art. For Kantor, the dead letter created an emancipatory void of authority where participants could un-connect as individuals within a group setting. Macuga's tapestry, meanwhile, activates the memory of Kantor's performance, while relating that history to her present moment of increased censorship of art by the state. In the context of the *Zachęta*, her work urged individuals to critically reflect upon their responsibility as and within a public—a move that, following D'Souza, opens onto the possibility of forging an imperfect solidarity with others, one grounded in care.

Macuga's activation of Kantor's *Happening* appreciates and heeds the work's original theoretical framework and, by extension, Borowski and Turkowski's idea of a living archive, which sought to recognize the past in the actions of the living. Instead of simply re-enacting or providing documentation of Kantor's *Happening*, Macuga's tapestry symbolically ties together multiple episodes of artistic suppression in Poland, respecting the pastness of his dead letter performance while offering an avenue for the work to live on, transformed in the present. In so doing, her work exemplifies an expanded approach to conceiving the care of performance-based work. Through her activation, Macuga cares for the afterlife of Kantor's *Happening* outside of the traditional concerns of conservation for the material longevity of a work of art by, instead, treading in the realm of the conceptual. It is, after all, left to viewers of her work to think—with others, and with care—about the extended meaning of the work she is presenting. Macuga's retooling of Kantor's *Happening* makes one thing obvious: to keep an artwork alive, we must first develop a more nuanced understanding of what it means for it to die.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Hal Foster, whose seminar at Princeton first occasioned a version of this chapter, and to Hanna B. Hölling, Aga Wielocha and Josephine Ellis for their generative comments, especially the suggestion to look more closely at Goszka Macuga's work.

Notes

- 1 Herman Melville, *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street* (New York: Open Road Integrated Media, 2014), p. 29.
- 2 George Maciunas, "Fluxus Manifesto" (February 1963), The Museum of Modern Art, New York, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/127947>.

- 3 For art historian Natilee Harren, the foundation of Fluxus practice centers upon the event score and gives rise to “the artwork in flux”—artworks made in “diverse materials that have in common qualities of transitivity, variability, and a transformed relationship to authorship, labor, and distribution owed to their foundation in notational devices.” Natilee Harren, *Fluxus Forms: Scores, Multiples, and the Eternal Network* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 7.
- 4 Ina Blom, “How to (Not) Answer a Letter: Ray Johnson’s Postal Performance,” *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 29, no. 2 (2007): 1–19. The second phrase is Blom’s.
- 5 Blom argues against mail art’s purported “generosity” in “How to (Not) Answer a Letter: Ray Johnson’s Postal Performance.” For Klara Kemp-Welch, however, a counter-public sphere (or a “parallel culture,” in Czech author Václav Havel’s words) developed in the Eastern Bloc to facilitate the exchange of ideas and art-related ephemera. Using Bruno Latour’s Actor Network Theory, Kemp-Welch argues that the networking of artists in Eastern Europe—namely, through the mail—counters the conventional narrative of Eastern isolation. Klara Kemp-Welch, *Networking the Bloc: Experimental Art in Eastern Europe 1965–1981* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019).
- 6 George Maciunas, card file on Henry Flynt, early January 1963, Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, cited in Cuauhtémoc Medina, “The ‘Kulturbolschewiken’ II: Fluxus, Khrushchev, and the ‘Concretist Society,’” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, nos. 49–50 (2006): 237.
- 7 George Maciunas, letter to Emmett Williams, Spring 1964, copy in Archiv Sohm, in Eric Andersen, ed., *Fluxus East: Fluxus-Netzwerke in Mitteleuropa: Ausstellungskatalog* (Berlin: Künstlerhaus Bethanien, 2007), 16.
- 8 For more on the relationship between Maciunas’s Productivist agenda and the economic challenges the Soviet Union was facing in the late 1950s and early 1960s, see Medina, “The ‘Kulturbolschewiken’ II,” 231–43.
- 9 For Maciunas’s interest in the historical model of Productivist art, see Julia Robinson, “Maciunas as Producer: Performative Design in the Art of the 1960s,” *Grey Room* 33 (2008): 56–83.
- 10 Wiesław Borowski recalls that when the local police heard that this was an “important art action,” an escort was granted “to prevent unwanted interferences.” Klara Kemp-Welch, *Antipolitics in Central European Art: Reticence as Dissidence under Post-Totalitarian Rule 1956–1989* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), 32.
- 11 Kantor had spent time in Paris the year prior and, while there, he and Galy-Carles discovered a mutual interest in the liminality of the postal service.
- 12 “Mais alors je suis prisonnier de toi . . . Tu me tiens . . . tu me tourmentes et tu me fais mal . . . Ah! Cette angoisse a ma gorge . . . Je t’en supplie . . . Je veux savoir . . . je veux savoir . . . Mais déjà je ne peux plus bouger . . . / Maintenant je veux t’ouvrir. Mais déjà je sens que c’est trop tard . . . cesse de grossir . . . / Je n’ai pas voulu connaître l’événement . . . Et l’événement a voulu ma mort! Je vais peut-être enfin trouver le néant de mon néant . . . et je ne saurai jamais. . . jamais. . . jamais. . .” Leaflet accompanying Tadeusz Kantor’s Happening *The Letter*, Foksal Gallery, Warsaw, 1967, photos by Eustachy Kossakowski and Zygmunt Targowski; text by Henry Galy-Carles, Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw, <http://digitizing-ideas.org/en/entry/20524>. My thanks to Drew Weitman for her thoughtful translation of this passage.
- 13 Leaflet accompanying Tadeusz Kantor’s Happening *The Letter*, 2.
- 14 Among other sources, see Ina Blom, “How to (Not) Answer a Letter,” in *Houses to Die In and Other Essays on Art* (London: Sternberg Press, 2022), 201; Colby Chamberlain, “International Indeterminacy: George Maciunas and the Mail,” *ARTMargins* 7, no. 3 (2018): 57–85; and Magdalena Holdar, *Fluxus as a Network of Friends, Strangers, and Things: The Agency of Chance Collaborations* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2023).
- 15 Blom, “How to (Not) Answer a Letter,” 201.
- 16 Throughout the 1960s, newsletters and handwritten memos were deployed in the service of facilitating collectivity, as well as to insinuate Fluxus’s methods of experimental

- composition into larger power structures. See Chamberlain, "International Indeterminacy." Also see Chamberlain's fabulously detailed *Fluxus Administration: George Maciunas and the Art of Paperwork* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2024).
- 17 See Bernhard Siegert, *Relays: Literature as an Epoch of the Postal System* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999). For more on the Foucauldian in Siegert, see Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, "Going Postal to Deliver Subjects: Remarks on a German Postal A Priori," *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 7 (December 1, 2002): 143–58.
 - 18 "Paperwork" is Chamberlain's term for the works on paper that make up the postal practices of many Fluxus artists—not just as a medium (that is, not just as works on paper bearing an "aesthetic" of administration) but as media (a specific juncture of material and technique). See Chamberlain, "International Indeterminacy."
 - 19 Petra Stegmann, "Fluxus in Prague: The *Koncert Fluxu* of 1966," in *Art Beyond Borders: Artistic Exchange in Communist Europe (1945–1989)*, eds. Jérôme Bazin, Pascal Dubourg Glatigny and Piotr Piotrowski (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2016), 244. Claire Bishop reports that it was through the critic Jindřich Chaloupecký that Knížák first made contact with Allan Kaprow and Jean-Jacques Lebel, and that, in 1965, Knížák was nominated as "Director of Fluxus East" by George Brecht—though, of course, the appointment was Maciunas's to make. Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London and New York: Verso, 2012), 132.
 - 20 Kemp-Welch, *Networking the Bloc*, 412.
 - 21 Oxford English Dictionary, "dead letter; *n.*," <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/47651>.
 - 22 John Durham Peters posits this conundrum in *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 2000), 151. Peters has a particularly interesting take on the dead letter, not as the failure of minds to "share the meaning of signs" but as that of mortal beings failing to get "in touch." Reading the haptic into the dead letter's (mis)communication, Peters proposes that, "The problem of communication is not rupture between spirits but letters that never arrive. It is not a noetic problem (relations between minds); it is an erotic one (relations between bodies)."
 - 23 Eve Tuck and K. Wang Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 28.
 - 24 Notably, *The Letter* was included in Harald Szeemann's controversial exhibition *Happening & Fluxus*, held at the Kölnischer Kunstverein in 1970–71. The first attempt at bringing Fluxus into an institutional art world context, the show was dubiously received by artists and the public alike. Kantor's *Happening* is featured in the exhibition catalog as a photograph from the event, though archival material suggests that Szeemann may have also wished for Kantor to organize a live enactment. See Magdalena Holdar, "Doing Things Together: Objectives and Effects of Harald Szeemann's *Happening & Fluxus*, 1970," *Journal of Curatorial Studies* 6, no. 1 (April 2017): 90–114.
 - 25 Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 4. Bishop's fifth chapter, "The Social Under Socialism," covers Knížák's performance. See also Milan Knížák and Jan Maria Mach, "An Event for the Post Office, the Police, and the Occupants of No. 26 Václavkova Street, Prague 6, and for all Their Neighbors, Relatives, and Friends," in *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s*, eds. Laura J. Hoptman and Tomáš Pospiszyl (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2002), 120–23. This action is another great example of Eastern European artists exerting their own force over the postal system. Knížák's *An Event for the Post Office* involved three interventions. First, the residents of 26 Václavkova Street were mailed packages containing a range of strange and unexpected items—one included, for example, a leaflet telling the recipient to go "get a cat." Second, "things were left illegally in halls," including books and calendars strewn about and "goldfish flopping around on the floor." Finally,

- the neighbors were mailed free tickets to see a movie, so they could all sit next to one another in “reserved seats.” While the building residents were first subjected to a postal interpolation to which they could not consent, the movie ticket presented the opportunity to voluntarily reconvene alongside their neighbors in a different space. What actually happened—a police investigation lasting two months—makes plain the connection between postal performances and power regimes, and artists’ aims at disrupting these systems.
- 26 Tadeusz Kantor, “The Post-Office,” in Michal Kobiak, *Further on, Nothing: Tadeusz Kantor’s Theatre* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009 [1964]), 158–59. Courtesy of Tadeusz Kantor © Dorota Krakowska & Lech Stangret / Tadeusz Kantor Foundation.
 - 27 Kantor would come to write his “Theatre of Death” manifesto in 1975, in which he articulates a desire to constellate the themes of history, memory, death and the role of the artist within his later theater performances.
 - 28 Wiesław Borowski, “Elimination of Art from Art,” in *Program Galerii Foksal PSP* (Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art, June 16, 2025 [1966]), <http://digitizing-ideas.org/en/entry/20541/1>.
 - 29 I see this impulse to un-connect as providing the building blocks of an “unconnected network.” My proposition for an “unconnected network” is in part inspired by the recent work of Marisa Duarte, whose book *Network Sovereignty* (2017) reveals how technology initiatives led by Indigenous people can play a transformative role in the reassertion and exercise of their sovereign rights. Duarte’s work questions the development of local network infrastructure in Indigenous and rural, low-income communities in different parts of the world. Similar to the dead letter, which—significant even in death—speaks of lapses in communication and authorization, the unconnected network—significant even when isolated—speaks of the unconnected, who are, by definition, not within the network.
 - 30 Wiesław Borowski and Andrzej Turowski, “The Living Archives,” in Wiesław Borowski, Hanna Ptaszkowska, Mariusz Tchorek and Andrzej Turowski, “Foksal Gallery Documents,” *October* 38 (1986): 52–62.
 - 31 Borowski and Turowski, “The Living Archives,” 61.
 - 32 Borowski and Turowski, “The Living Archives.”
 - 33 See Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
 - 34 Paweł Polit, “Foksal Gallery and the Notion of Archive: Between Inventory and Place,” *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 21 (2009): 108–20.
 - 35 Borowski and Turowski, “The Living Archives,” 61.
 - 36 Borowski and Turowski, “The Living Archives.”
 - 37 Tadeusz Kantor, “Texts, Essays, and Intimate Commentaries,” trans. Michal Kobiak, *Performing Arts Journal* 16, no. 2 (1994): 21.
 - 38 The exhibition, *Beware of Exiting Your Dreams: You May Find Yourself in Somebody Else’s*, was curated by Harald Szeemann.
 - 39 The exhibition at the Zachęta also included Macuga’s *Triptych* (2011), a work comprising three near-abstract photographs pulled from the institution’s conservation files, detailing the damage done to Cattelan’s sculpture.
 - 40 Apollinaire Scherr, “A Fallen Pope Provokes a Sensation in Poland,” *The New York Times*, May 13, 2001.
 - 41 Scherr, “A Fallen Pope Provokes a Sensation in Poland.”
 - 42 Macuga’s work finds overlap with a strategy of retrieving gestures of alternative knowledge or counter-memory utilized by other artists working in the early 2000s—a strategy dubbed an “archival impulse” by Hal Foster in “An Archival Impulse,” *October* 110 (2004): 3–22.
 - 43 Lydia Mullin, “Goshka Macuga,” The Museum of Modern Art, New York, <https://www.moma.org/artists/131293>.

- 44 Nicolaus Schafhausen, "Taxonomies of Knowledge: Goshka Macuga in Conversation with Nicolaus Schafhausen," *Mousse Magazine*, April 1, 2016, <https://www.mousse-magazine.it/magazine/goshka-macuga-nicolaus-schafhausen-2016/>.
- 45 In Macuga's words, "The physical presence of these letters, as opposed to the *Letter* that Kantor offered, leaves little space for poetic interpretation, providing instead an illustration of the harsh reality and conditions that the transformation brought about for the Polish contemporary art scene. *Notice Board* marks these significant changes in Polish culture post-1989, highlighting the dialogues that ensued around the subject of artistic freedom and national identity by presenting evidence of this moment in the form of the actual letters." Schafhausen, "Taxonomies of Knowledge."
- 46 For more on the complexities involved in caring for and conserving performance and performance-based artworks, see Hanna B. Hölling, Jules Pelta Feldman and Emilie Magnin, eds., *Performance: The Ethics and the Politics of Conservation and Care*, Vol. I (London and New York: Routledge, 2024).
- 47 Several feminist practices have offered ways to rethink and rewire power through collaborative and intersectional practices. See, for example, Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi, "Writing with: Togethering, Difference, and Feminist Architectural Histories of Migration," *e-flux*, July 2018, <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/structural-instability/208707/writingwith/>.
- 48 Oxford English Dictionary, *care*, *n.*, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/care_n1.
- 49 Aruna D'Souza, *Imperfect Solidarities* (Berlin: Floating Opera, 2024), 24.
- 50 See Barty Phillips, *Tapestry* (London: Phaidon Press, 1994). In the early modern period, tapestry weaving was a time-intensive and physically demanding process, done by hand. Tapestries were oftentimes commissioned by the church and members of the noble class to depict noteworthy scenes related to religion and to conquest, hence winning the medium its dual status as luxury good and propagandistic material.

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19 FLUXUS.GRAM

Johannes M. Hedinger and Marcus Gossolt

Can the historical network of Fluxus, its participants and their artistic-subversive strategies of making be revived within a contemporary context, and, if so, how? How can we make this heritage—much of which has receded into the obscurity of archival vaults and dusty museum vitrines—available and accessible to a wider audience? How can we reframe preservation as a dynamic force capable of activating and bringing to light artistic practices, attitudes and worldviews that seem to have faded into the past? And how can this activation also take place outside the field of art in other life contexts?

These are questions that have accompanied us—the Swiss art collective Com&Com—since the beginning of our collaboration with the research project *Activating Fluxus* in 2022, which has focused on examining diverse methods of bringing historical Fluxus to life. Within the research team, we have introduced new perspectives into art-historical debates through artistic experiments and workshops (Figure 19.1). These have included experimental score writing, the creation of an art multiple, a visit to a Swiss folklore museum (Museum Appenzell) and a study day in a private collector's *Wunderkammer* that explored the intimate ways in which the collector's life interweaves with the intricate objects he has amassed, capitalizing on their inseparability. Other formats involved interventions and performances in a Berlin warehouse housing a Fluxus collection (Archivio Conz) and the exploration of social media channels—always with the aim of expanding perspectives on existing theories and methods at the intersection of art and life.

For the final part of the four-year research project *Activating Fluxus*, we developed *FLUXUS.GRAM*, a curatorial networking and activation program that integrates artistic practice, digital publication and participation, art education and mediation with artistic research. This initiative seeks to merge art and life, offering a contemporary interpretation of Fluxus while exploring the historical significance of certain intrinsic Fluxus forms (Figure 19.2).

A brief contextual excursus

The project draws inspiration from the experimental, participatory ethos of Fluxus, centering on three key concepts: the Fluxkit, the instruction/score and the



Figure 19.1 Fluxus workshop by Com&Com, May 11, 2023, HKB Bern Academy of the Arts. Photo: Aga Wielocha.

networked system of distribution. Historically, Fluxkits functioned as portable anthologies that circulated art through international networks, while instructions and scores provided open-ended frameworks for audience engagement. Both formats prioritized collaboration and active participation—principles that remain central to our project’s design.

Fluxus has been recognized as an international network of artists, performers, musicians, composers and designers, led in the 1960s and 1970s by George Maciunas. While some regard Fluxus as having ended with Maciunas’s death, others argue that it remains alive—perhaps even more so—continuing its legacy of interdisciplinary experimentation aimed at dissolving the boundaries between art and life through accessible, do-it-yourself aesthetics.

Fluxus’s participatory principles were shaped by various influences, including Dadaism and the experimental music concepts of John Cage. Though each artist pursued their own individual agenda, they contributed to a dynamic network that embraced a remarkably diverse range of mediums, from performance, film and poetry to electronic media, scores and objects. This approach fostered one of the most innovative and influential artistic phenomena of the twentieth century.

With interaction and collaboration at its core, and postal services as a means of communication, Fluxus became one of the first truly global and diverse artistic networks—influential across Europe, North America and Japan while including artists of various racial and ethnic backgrounds, social classes, gender identities and orientations.



fluxus.gram ...

FLUXUS.GRAM

10 Beiträge 25 Follower 12 Gefolgt

Fluxus Score Collection. Join by activating or creating a new score. All shown at

Cabaret Voltaire, 28.2.2026

Part of "Activating Fluxus" (HKB/SNSF)

linktr.ee/fluxus.gram



deevamaria, artnowglobal + 1 weitere Personen sind Follower

Gefolgt ▾

Nachricht senden



Communica...



Contempora...



Historical



Activation



Figure 19.2 FLUXUS.GRAM, Instagram screengrab, November 2, 2025.

Scores, kits and mailings

Fluxus works often took the form of an event emerging from or accompanied by a brief prompt or a series of instructions known as an “event score.” These verbal or written scores blend the methodologies of music composition and visual art. Scores can be understood as a set of guidelines, however abstract or narrative, for the audience or recipient to perform actions. Similarly, Fluxkits—the historical Fluxus boxes—were designed to prompt the viewer to perform an action and thus make Fluxus art widely accessible. With their origins in George Brecht’s *The Case* (1959), Fluxkits were conceived as a continuation of his *Yearbox* concept—an encyclopedic, anthological Fluxus *Sammelsurium*—to be distributed through Fluxus’s international networks. Encased in repurposed attaché cases, these kits featured an array of artistic materials, including games, riddles, films, functional objects such as hand-crank film viewers, tactile surprises and event scores. Maciunas envisioned Fluxkits as pedagogical tools that demonstrated the *needlessness of art*.

At times interpreted as three-dimensional scores, in Fluxkits, the affordances of the objects dictate the mode of their activation. Whereas scores or instructions were meant to be realized, Fluxkits were meant to be handled. But their intricate materiality and experiential, interactive nature stand in opposition to contemporary ethics of preservation and musealization, which attempt to keep historical work away from touch and use. By shifting the Fluxkit to the digital realm, our project, *FLUXUS.GRAM*, offers an alternative to these tendencies by generating a work that can be digitally handled, activated and “used.” It reimagines the Fluxkit as a digital box and the Fluxus score as a digital object (and a representation of a historical score) in the context of contemporary art and popular social media, with further inspirations drawn from artists such as Miranda July and curator Hans Ulrich Obrist.

The core principles of Fluxus—privileging process over product, blurring the boundaries between art and life and embracing ephemeral and affordable materials—are evident in Fluxus instructions and scores for actions, which often use very simple materials and the postal distribution network. This characteristic is shared with other historical Fluxus works conceived for circulation, capitalizing on the Fluxus network’s focus on communication and exchange. Correspondence between artists, the stamps and markings they applied, and even the postal system itself became integral components of Fluxus artistic production. Over time, this *art of correspondence* evolved into a movement of its own—*mail art*. It enabled the dissemination of unconventional ideas across vast distances, often bypassing institutional and ideological constraints. Whether through letters, postcards, photocopies or small-press magazines, mail art functioned as a form of artistic exchange that deliberately circumvented commercial markets and institutional gatekeeping. Operating largely outside conventional systems of distribution and regulation, it fostered an open, often subversive network that challenged dominant art world structures.

In light of the growing obsolescence of traditional postal communication, it is particularly striking that more and more artists have turned to social media to reimagine how their work circulates. These platforms offer new possibilities for

visibility and connection, while also raising questions about surveillance, data ownership and algorithmic control. For instance, H.R. Fricker (Hans Ruedi Fricker, 1947–2023), a renowned mail artist, used Facebook in a diaristic manner to map his daily activities, adapting the ethos of mail art to the logics of digital sharing. Unlike earlier forms such as mail art, social media leverages simultaneity and immediacy in publishing and communication. It also offers integrated forms of commentary and interaction—for example, through likes, comments under posts, reposts (featuring others), or by tagging people—thereby expanding the network and creating new connections. It functions as a digital (social) network.

Audience participation and activation

As sketched earlier, audience participation was one of the hallmarks of historical Fluxus, and both Fluxkits and instructions/scores were inherently participatory, with their realization depending on the involvement of others. Fluxus events were chance performances that turned the audience from passive observers to active participants. In other words, Fluxus works were incomplete without the audience's actions, whatever form they might have taken.

The concept of activation was central to Fluxus multiples, starting with George Brecht's *The Case* (1959) and including the iconic Fluxkits assembled by Maciunas. Designed to be owned and engaged with by anyone, these objects invited recipients to respond to open-ended prompts and instructions. Their deliberately ambiguous nature ensured that each interaction yielded unpredictable outcomes. This approach extended to other Fluxus-related works, such as Yoko Ono's *Grapefruit* (1964), an artist's book composed of instructional pieces that range from acts of self-reflection to imperatives for silence, creation and destruction. Readers were prompted to perform simple yet evocative actions—watching snow-fall, making a sandwich or even burning the book itself upon completion.

By prioritizing indeterminacy and chance, Fluxus multiples and instructions functioned as catalysts for ongoing live art actions. Each activation reinforced the movement's core philosophy: dissolving boundaries between art and life through direct engagement and participation.

Fluxus today and tomorrow

Fluxus has never been homogeneous, bringing together many hands and minds in the aesthetic exploration of various media. Just as historical Fluxus resisted a uniform style, its influence has extended into diverse forms, including new and social media, digital art and net art—sometimes without explicit reference to Fluxus itself. Contemporary artists continue to embrace humor, absurdity, ephemeral materials, instructions, networks and audience participation, embodying a Fluxus-like attitude.

For instance, the late German artist Christoph Schlingensiefel created several Fluxus-inspired works, including the Fluxus-oratorio *Eine Kirche der Angst vor dem Fremden in mir* (2008). Influenced by Fluxus, Schlingensiefel's Happenings

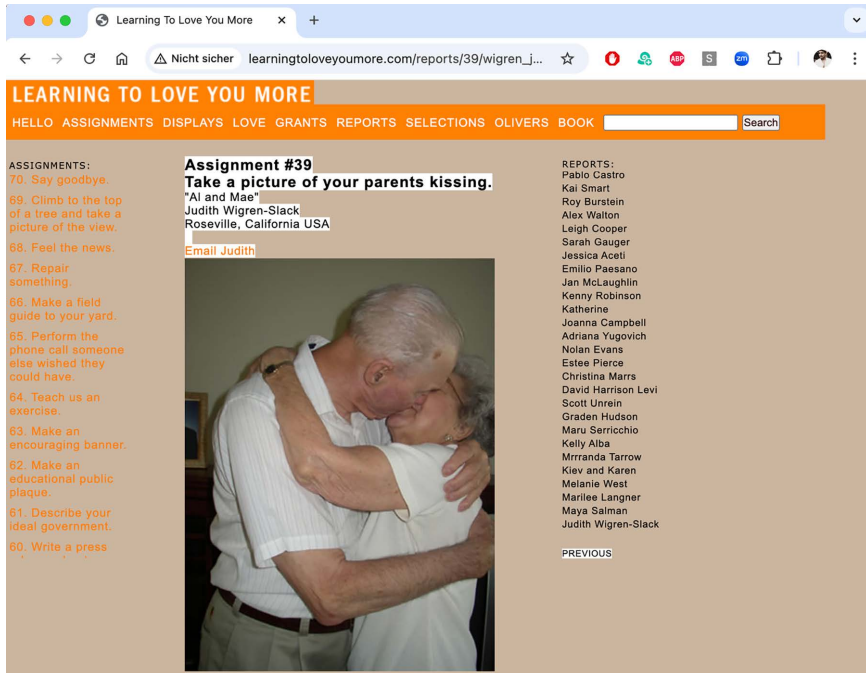


Figure 19.3 Miranda July and Harrell Fletcher, *Learning to Love You More*, 2002. <http://learningtoloveyoumore.com/>. Reactions to Assignment #39: “Take a picture of your parents kissing.” Al & Mae, by Judith Wigren-Slack. Screenshot, July 9, 2025.

sought to heighten audience awareness and offer a new experience of reality. In this oratorio, he transforms his cancer diagnosis into both the subject and catalyst for his theatrical action. The requiem also serves as a homage to Fluxus artists, who viewed life and death as integral to their artistic practice.

Transdisciplinary artists such as Miranda July have developed several participatory and instruction-based works, including *Eleven Heavy Things* (2009) and *Learning to Love You More* (2002). In *Learning to Love You More*, July and her fellow artist Harrell Fletcher created a website inviting strangers to submit their responses to a series of creative, simple prompts, such as “Take a picture of your parents kissing” (Figure 19.3). Like many other Fluxus artists, July is interested in testing the limits of authorship, creating a space for anyone—not just artists and cultural workers—to engage in radical intimacy and self-expression. Meanwhile, curator Hans Ulrich Obrist has organized *Do It*—a series of instruction-based exhibitions—since 1993, with over sixty iterations worldwide, featuring more than 300 artists, numerous publications and an online version hosted by e-flux (Figure 19.4).

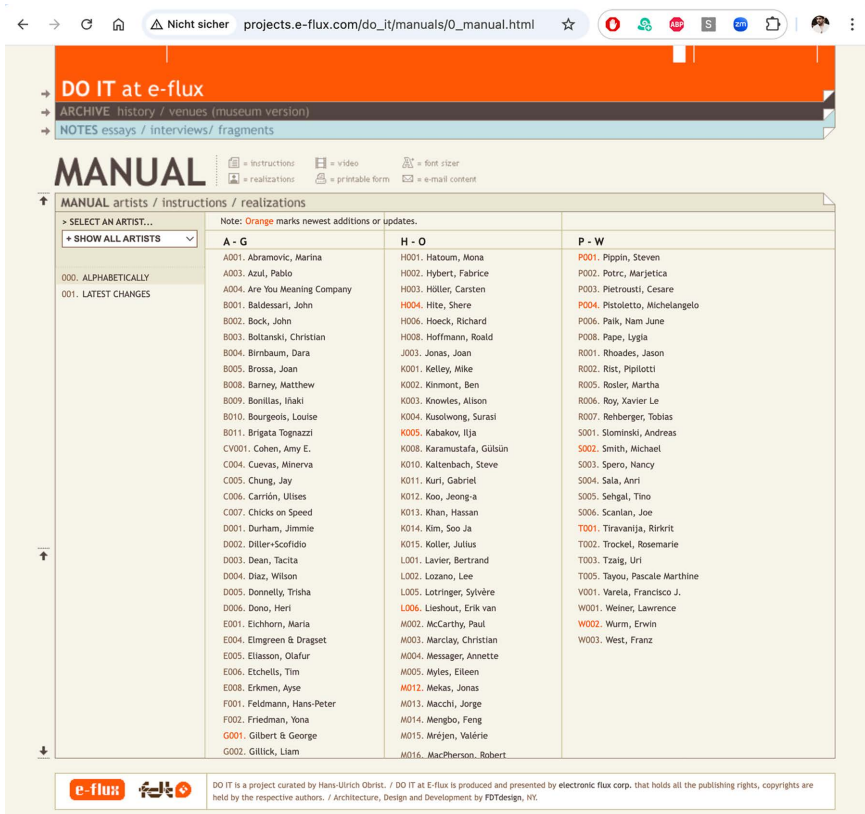


Figure 19.4 *Do It*, founded by Hans Ulrich Obrist, 1993, online archive at e-flux since 2002, http://projects.e-flux.com/do_it/homepage/do_it_home.html. Screenshot, 2025.

Revisiting the Fluxkit

Offering an artistic response to some of the research questions raised by the project *Activating Fluxus*, *FLUXUS.GRAM* has been conceived as a contemporary digital Fluxkit—an online collection of contemporary and historical Fluxus scores, mainly brief instructions (for performances, objects and/or installations), accumulated and curated by Com&Com. It is housed on Instagram, a social media channel widely used by individuals, artists, brands and organizations to visually share their work, ideas and lives.

FLUXUS.GRAM utilizes Instagram's capacity as a digital exhibition space and an archive, allowing broad public engagement through visual and interactive content. As a growing collection, the Instagram channel *FLUXUS.GRAM* contained approximately three dozen artistic scores—half of them historical,

Embrace an important friend in a full-length hug for 31 minutes

Contact should be frontal, body to body, full length, with legs, chests, pelvises and heads touching.

Speak a maximum of twenty words each to each other. Do not proceed to other activities or to „sex.“ The room should be silent, without music.

Alternately, videotape your embrace. There should not be a third party present videotaping; the camera should be set on a tripod with no operator.

After, write your sensations on a large paper or blackboard. Read them out loud.

Name the activity you have just engaged in, using just one word. Mail this word to me.

Figure 19.5 Shere Hite, *Untitled*, 1996, from *Do It (TV Version)*, produced by Museum in Progress. Designed by Com&Com.

Look for a photo of a person who seems likeable or attractive. It's important that you can assume this person is dead. You don't need proof, your assumption is enough.

The photograph might be found in a variety of places: magazines, flea-markets, a family photo album. In any case, you must take great care in the search, which will continue until your intuition tells you that you've found the right photo. However, it is important that the person you choose is a complete stranger.

You take this photo and choose a frame according to your taste, as with any home decoration. This can be a wall frame or a standing frame, or possibly a case that you carry around.

Having brought this photo into your daily life, and now looking at it frequently, you should, as often as you like, think about who this person might have been, about what his or her life may have been like, about the cause of his or her death. You should find out how close you can get to this person, and at what point you would give him or her a name.

Figure 19.6 Hans-Peter Feldmann, *Homework*, 1996, from *Do It*. Designed by Com&Com.

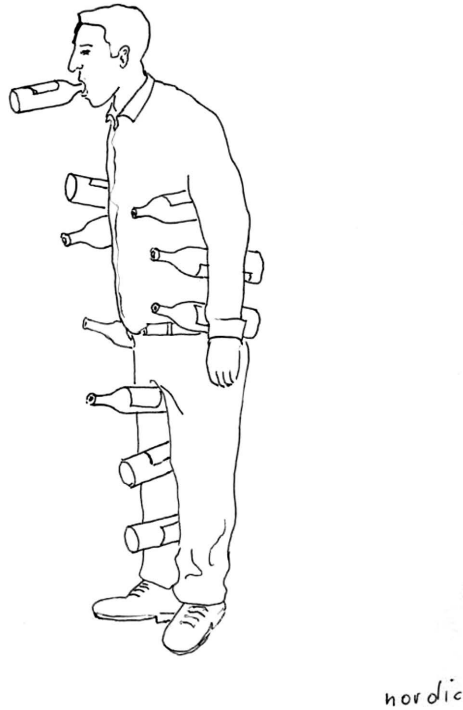


Figure 19.7 Erwin Wurm, *One Minute Sculpture (Nordic)*, 2002. Courtesy Erwin Wurm.

half contemporary—at its launch (see, for example, Figures 19.5–19.10). As this chapter goes to print, it is predicted that *FLUXUS.GRAM* will expand through an open call, commissions, individual invitations and spontaneous responses from the public.

Most of these primarily text-based scores featured on *FLUXUS.GRAM* are meant to be performed—activated—by the viewer. Those willing to engage with the scores might be invited to record the activation and/or its outcomes through photos, text, audio or video and share them via the *FLUXUS.GRAM* channel. A forum/comment section (Instagram Stories) facilitates creative dialogue and is designed to remain active beyond the runtime of the research project. It is planned—again, as this chapter goes to print—that all scores and activations generated throughout the project are to be presented in an exhibition and animated through a curated program of artistic interventions at Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich on 28 February 2026.

1 WE ARE LIVING IN A POST-IRONIC AGE.
 IRONIC DOUBT IS JUST DISSATISFACTION
 ELEVATED INTO A LIFESTYLE. 2 WE HAVE
 BEGUN TO HAVE DOUBTS ABOUT THE
 PROCESS OF DOUBTING. 3 TRUTH IS NO
 LONGER UNCONDITIONAL, BUT RATHER
 CHANGES TO FIT THE DEMANDS OF THE
 MOMENT. 4 THE WORLD IS MORE THAN
 WHAT IT IS. 5 EVERYDAY LIFE PROVIDES
 A PROVING GROUND FOR THE HUMAN
 SPIRIT. 6 EVERYTHING IS FILLED WITH
 MAGIC & BEAUTY. 7 BEAUTY CAN INSPIRE
 US TO BECOME BETTER PEOPLE. 8 BEAUTY
 CAN GROW INTO LOVE. 9 OUT OF LOVE,
 TRUTH CAN EMERGE. 10 WE ARE STANDING
 AT THE VERGE OF SOMETHING WONDROUS:
 THE REBIRTH OF OUR SELF-CREATION.
 POST-IRONY MEANS TOTAL IMAGINATIVE
 AND CREATIVE FREEDOM.

*«first post-ironic manifesto»
 by Com&Com (Marcus Gossolt / Johannes M. Hedinger) 2008*

www.postirony.com

Figure 19.8 Com&Com, *First Postironic Manifesto*, 2008. Courtesy Com&Com.

BOPAPE, Dineo Seshee
(2020)



This exorcism should be practiced in the morning ☀️
What you will need: a bowl or a cup that you like

If you are able to be outside go outside
If not stand by a window where you can feel the warmth of the sun on your skin

Turn in a circle so that the sun can warm all sides of your body directly
Hold the bowl or cup with all the hands you have
Turn your body towards the sun
Allow the sun's rays to pour into your bowl
Once filled to the brim, bring the bowl to your lips
And allow the rainbow to flow into your body,
Continue to pour and drink until yes.
Once at yes, allow the bowl to be filled again to overflowing w the sun's rays...
Then lift the bowl to the top of your head and tilt the bowl... allowing the rainbow to
flow on your body
Take a slow deep breath in and then out and smile
Lower the bowl to the ground in front of you,
Bow and thank the bowl....
And bow and once up again
Close your eyes
Feel the warmth of the sun on your lips
Pour them ...and kiss the sun deeply
Take a deep breath in through pursed lips
Then sigh out the exhale
Thank the sun ☀️

Figure 19.9 Dineo Seshee Bopape, *Morning Exorcism*, 2020, from *Do It*. Screengrab, July 9, 2025.

Objectives and impact

At the heart of this project lies a commitment to communication and engagement, structured around several key objectives. First, *FLUXUS.GRAM* seeks to bring Fluxus to life by inviting contemporary artists and creators to contribute new scores and, by doing so, connect with each other as a network. Second, *FLUXUS.GRAM* invites broad public participation, ensuring that both historical and contemporary Fluxus works remain active and relevant. *FLUXUS.GRAM* approaches Fluxus scores as more than mere instructions—they become pedagogical tools that invite interaction and dialogue. Finally, and perhaps most relevant for the broader pursuit of the research project *Activating Fluxus*, *FLUXUS*.

ELIASSON, Olafur
(2020)

To create a new world view...

- 1) Stare at the dot on the Earth about ten seconds.
- 2) Then train your focus onto a black surface.
- 3) An afterimage appears in the complementary colours of Eliasson's visual.
- 4) You have projected a new world view.

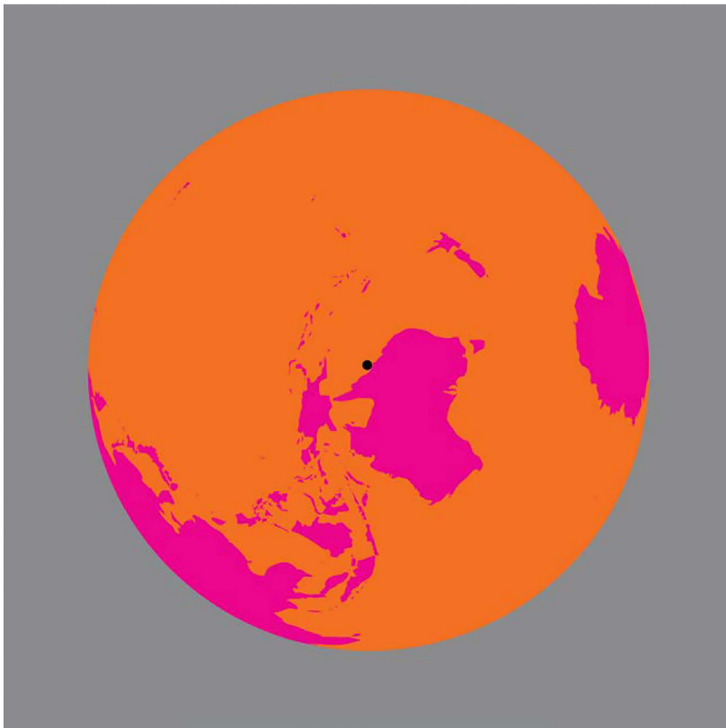


Figure 19.10 Olafur Eliasson, *Earth Perspectives*, 2020, from *Do It*. Screengrab, July 9, 2025.

GRAM tests the capacity of the artistic and curatorial interpretation of historical Fluxus as a potential form of conservation, one that not only preserves but also reinvents Fluxus through lived artistic experiences across different audiences. Rather than treating Fluxus as a static historical phenomenon, this initiative—and the research project more generally—aims to sustain its legacy as a living, participatory form that continues to generate new meaning through activation and exchange, ensuring Fluxus remains relevant across generations and various social groups. In this way, the project functions as an ongoing rewriting of Fluxus itself, ensuring its continued resonance in contemporary artistic practice.

Join us

Available since November 2025, *FLUXUS.GRAM* has been distributed widely through participating artists, as well as selected activators and the project-associated members within and beyond the art world, engaging diverse audiences and social groups.

We invite you to engage with *FLUXUS.GRAM* by exploring the various scores and interacting with the platform. Whether by contributing to the growing collection of scores or by activating one of the scores already present on the channel (accessible via [instagram.com/FLUXUS.GRAM](https://www.instagram.com/FLUXUS.GRAM)), you can become part of a growing network of participants and co-creators.

20 Musée d'art naïf and culture

Ben Vautier

These two fragments by Ben Vautier—the French artist also known as Ben—have been excerpted from Vautier's newsletters, which were distributed to the artist's network, including the editors of this volume, over a period of several years prior to the artist's passing. The excerpts preserve the original formulation in French. A translation follows, rendered by the editors to facilitate comprehension for non-French speakers.

MUSÉE D'ART NAÏF

MUSÉE D'ART NAÏF

Nouvel accrochage
avec une pièce,
Ben est sous le lit,
et une autre où un âne
peint avec sa queue.

MUSÉE D'ART NAÏF

Nouvel accrochage
de 15 nouvelles pièces dont
une sculpture de
Michel Batlle.
J'adore sa sculpture,
L'homme traversé par
l'angoisse, la jalousie, le sexe, les ondes etc.
Il vient d'exposer
une centaine d'œuvres, peintures et sculptures
monumentales,
à l'Abbaye de Valmagne près de Sète.

MUSÉE D'ART NAÏF

Pourquoi pas un toboggan
qui partirait du balcon et arrive
sur le ring?
Ce serait fou.

MUSÉE D'ART NAÏF

pourquoi pas
un défilé de mes robes,
vos robes, sacs et chapeaux?
(Je cherche pour cela
des mannequins femmes, hommes
et travestis
pour les porter.
J'ai plein d'idées
de robes nouvelles,
au moins 10 nouvelles:
une robe trouée,
une robe pinces à linges,
une robe cravate,
une robe avec des lunettes,
une robe pinceaux de peinture.
Je voulais aussi faire un défilé.

MUSÉE D'ART NAÏF

Pourquoi pas
une ou deux soirées
cinéma avec films des autres?
Si on fait un programme sur le ring,
je demanderais à Bataillard
de monter
pour chanter un chant corse.

MUSÉE D'ART NAÏF

pourquoi pas un blues
chanté sur scène
par moi et Stéphane
à la guitare
et Combas au micro.

MUSÉE D'ART NAÏF

pourquoi pas
un espace film
avec les films de Amiel
et la projection
de 123 photos de
Bruno le casting man.

MUSÉE D'ART NAÏF

pourquoi pas
une soirée poésie etc.
avec une lecture de poèmes
d'Erebo par Agnès Laurenti.

MUSÉE D'ART NAÏF

pourquoi pas un mur
Guy Debord,
Isou,
Ben,
David Duchamp.

MUSÉE D'ART NAÏF

pourquoi pas
recevoir et exposer
les extraterrestres. Incroyable!
Oui, mais comment les contacter?

Voilà, j'attends vos projets
sur mon mail.

From Ben Vautier, JE N'AI PEUR DE RIEN, February 19, 2024.

CULTURE

CULTURE

Pourquoi pas créer un groupe,
les incompréhensibles invraisemblables,
avec
Bruno Duval,
Daligand,
François Guynochet.

CULTURE MUSÉE

Pourquoi pas créer un musée "débaras"
où tout le monde pourrait venir
se débarrasser de son stock
d'objets inutiles
transformés en Art contemporain?

CULTURE

je propose pour le festival de Cannes
un film (scénario) vérité:
un bateau rempli de boat people
qui s'échoue à Cannes
pour l'inauguration
du festival du film.

CULTURE

(redite)
je propose
aux artistes d'art contemporain

de se faire empailler
pour finir dans un grand musée
d'artistes humains empaillés
signés "Ben 2023".

CULTURE

Question monde,
nous assistons à une guerre des langues,
anglais contre russe et chinois.

CULTURE IA

Drôle de monde
Quand l'art
part en eau de boudin
ou jus de cerveau
en I.A.

CULTURE

où est passée
l'art qui devait changer le monde?
Tout n'est que décoration,
comédie, mensonge,
argent et hypocrisie.
Comment croire à l'art
dans le cadre
de ce marché de l'art
qui vous dit
que mardi
Cézanne a fait tant,
Bonnard tant,
Sisley tant,
Trois cent mille le mardi,
puis plus rien vendredi,
et trois mois après
il dépasse le million,
que Combas vaut tant,
Dolla vaut tant,
que Ben ça monte,
qu'il faut acheter?

CULTURE

que devient Titus Carmel?
Bernard Venet
et ces artistes

d'art contemporain
au quatrième étage
des Galeries Lafayette,
du rayon art et artistes?

CULTURE

l'incroyable marbre d'Arman
qui est depuis 30 ans
devant l'entrée de la porte de l'Élysée,
et il y a eu plus de 10 présidents.
Arman est mort,
mais le marbre est toujours là.

From Ben Vautier, JE N'AI PEUR DE RIEN, February 19, 2024.

The following text is the English translation by the editors:

MUSEUM OF NAIVE ART

MUSEUM OF NAIVE ART

New exhibition
with a piece,
Ben is under the bed,
and another where a donkey
painted with his tail.

MUSEUM OF NAIVE ART

New exhibition
of 15 new pieces, including
a sculpture by
Michel Batlle.
I love his sculpture,
The man pierced by
anguish, jealousy, sex, waves and so on.
He has just exhibited
a hundred works, monumental paintings and sculptures
monumental sculptures,
at the Abbaye de Valmagne near Sète.

MUSEUM OF NAIVE ART

Why not a slide
from the balcony to the ring
the ring?
That would be crazy.

MUSEUM OF NAIVE ART

why not
a parade of my dresses,
your dresses, bags and hats?
(I'm looking for
male, female and transvestite models
and transvestites
to wear them.
I have lots of ideas
for new dresses,
at least 10 new ones:
a dress with holes,
a pinafore dress,
a tie dress,
a dress with glasses,
a paintbrush dress.
I also wanted to do a fashion show.

MUSEUM OF NAIVE ART

Why not
one or two evenings
with other people's films?
If we do a program on the ring,
I'd ask Bataillard
to come up
to sing a Corsican song.

MUSEUM OF NAIVE ART

why not a blues
sung on stage
by me and Stéphane
on guitar
and Combas on microphone.

MUSEUM OF NAIVE ART

why not
a film area
with films by Amiel
and the projection
of 123 photos of
Bruno the casting man.

MUSEUM OF NAIVE ART

why not
an evening of poetry etc.
with a reading of poems
by Agnès Laurenti.

MUSEUM OF NAIVE ART

why not a wall
Guy Debord,
Isou,
Ben,
David Duchamp.

MUSEUM OF NAIVE ART

why not
receive and exhibit
extraterrestrials. Incredible!
Yes, but how to contact them?
I look forward to hearing from you
on my e-mail.

From Ben Vautier, JE N'AI PEUR DE RIEN, February 19, 2024.

CULTURE

CULTURE

Why not create a group,
the incomprehensible implausible,
with
Bruno Duval,
Daligand,
François Guynochet.

CULTURE MUSEUM

Why not create a museum
where anyone can come
to get rid of their stock
of useless objects
transformed into contemporary art?

CULTURE

I propose for the Cannes Film Festival
a film (scenario) vérité:
a boat full of boat people
that runs aground in Cannes
for the inauguration
of the film festival.

CULTURE

(repeated)
I propose
contemporary art artists
to be stuffed

to end up in a large museum
of stuffed human artists
signed “Ben 2023”.

CULTURE

The world,
we’re witnessing a war of languages,
English versus Russian and Chinese.

CULTURE AI

Funny world
When art
goes to pot
or brain juice
in AI.

CULTURE

what happened to
art that was supposed to change the world?
It’s all decoration,
comedy, lies,
money and hypocrisy.
How can you believe in art
in the context
of this art market
that tells you
that on Tuesday
Cézanne did so much,
Bonnard so much,
Sisley so much,
Three hundred thousand on Tuesday,
then nothing on Friday,
and three months later
he passes the million mark,
Combas is worth so much,
Dolla is worth so much,
that Ben is on the rise,
that you have to buy?

CULTURE

what’s become of Titus Carmel?
Bernard Venet
and these artists
contemporary art

on the fourth floor
of Galeries Lafayette,
in the art and artists department?

CULTURE

Arman's incredible marble
which has stood for 30 years
at the entrance to the Élysée Palace,
and there have been more than 10 presidents.
Arman is dead,
but the marble is still there.

From Ben Vautier, JE N'AI PEUR DE RIEN, February 19, 2024.

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