

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

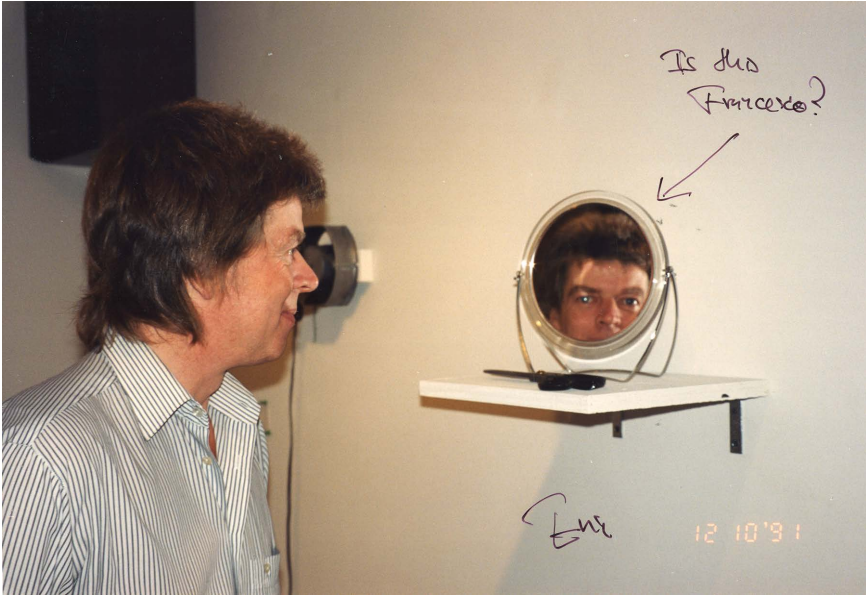


Figure 13.1 Eric Andersen in 1991. Photo: Francesco Conz. Courtesy of Archivio Conz, Berlin, and the artist.

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 "intermedia" 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>.

Bibliography

- Andersen, Eric. "Errata." In *"The Lunatics are on the Loose . . .": European Fluxus Festivals 1962–1977*, edited by Petra Stegmann. Potsdam: Down With Art, 2012.
- Andersen, Eric. "What Is . . .?" In *The Fluxus Constellation*, edited by Sandra Solimano and Eric Andersen, 25–33. Turin: Neos Edizioni, 2002.
- Ellis, Josephine. "Loss as Creation's Companion, with Eric Andersen." *Activating Fluxus*, February 24, 2023. <https://activatingfluxus.com/2023/02/24/loss-as-creativitys-companion-with-eric-andersen/>.
- Holdar, Magdalena. *Fluxus as a Network of Friends, Strangers, and Things: The Agency of Chance Collaborations*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2023.
- Kakinuma, Toshie, and Eric Andersen. "Oral History Interview with Eric Andersen." Kyoto City University of Arts Archival Research Center, April 21, 2014. https://www.kcua.ac.jp/arc/ar/ericandersen_en/.