

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, Martcelline 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 at 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 into 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 from 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 Fluxemum 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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