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

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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.

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.

Hanna B. Hölling: 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, *klintberger*, 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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