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Around the world in a Minesweeper or  
A Few Observations on Fluxus

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## Around the World in a Minesweeper, or

### A Few Observations on Fluxus

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string quartets or small ensembles by Dick Higgins at the beginning, that class was oriented towards unconventional means of making art out of sound. Fluxus existed before it had its name, and it continues to exist today, many years later, as a form of and principle and kind of work. In this respect it is unlike an art "movement," which starts self-consciously and usually has a program of moving the arts from where they are found to some other point in their evolution. This is because its participants never thought of themselves as a group until they were described as such in connection with the "Festum Fluxorum" (Fluxus Festival) at Wiesbaden in 1962, by which time the participants had been doing "Fluxus works" for four or five years.

One part of the origin of Fluxus was the classes in "Experimental Composition" which John Cage taught at the New School for Social Research in New York City in the late 1950's. George Brecht, Jackson Mac Low, Al Hansen, myself and various others took these classes, and we were expected to bring in a new composition of some kind for more or less every class. The only instruments in the classroom area were a grand piano, a collection of oriental instruments used for Henry Cowell's class in "Music of the World's Peoples" (which met in the same classroom), and, as they accumulated, a large number of toys which we bought over a period of time to try our pieces out. Other than that, there was only whatever we happened to have in our pockets-- combs, coins, and such-like. In a situation like that, one couldn't very well write for

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string quartets or small orchestras. Thus, from the beginning, that class was oriented towards unconventional means of making art out of sounds.

One aspect of Cage's attitude was shown by one of his first questions: "Is there anyone here who has never before composed any music?" Several hands went up. "Is there anyone of you who cannot read music?" Al Hansen's hand went up. "Good," said Cage to Hansen, "You at least have nothing to un-learn."

The details of Cage's class are pretty well known, from Richard Kostelanetz's John Cage, available in Germany and the USA. I won't repeat that story. Basically, he emphasized the notation, the process of realizing the notation, the implications of the entire process, and he de-emphasized most craftsmanly elements of composition. It was largely stripped down to aesthetics.

After the series of classes got under way, many of us students found that the little pieces we were making for his classes were not just classroom exercises to us, but were fully satisfying. So we made a good relationship with some places in the neighborhood, such as the "E-pit-o-me Coffee Shop," and we tried out our pieces on the public there, often performing under the name of the New York Audiovisual Group.

Cage himself never made any pieces which resembled Fluxus pieces. For him our compositions were, I think, not very satisfying. Nor did we necessarily accept all his teachings, for example his mistrust of expression or of mimesis of all kinds. His role was more like an uncle and godfather to us than of a father.

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Happenings were in the air then, in New York, America and Europe; more or less independently, artists around the world were beginning to do open-form performances which had little, if anything, to do with traditional theater. But most Happenings artists worked out of art galleries and, later, museums. One of our problems was that our own performances, which tended to come out of music, dance or literature rather than from the visual arts, did not fit into gallery or museum programs. We performed, therefore, in theaters and cafés, for the most part. This meant that there was rather little unity in what we did. There would be a series of informal concerts at Yoko Ono's loft, a concert at a college or a theater, and there was no sense of continuity. We needed a rostrum.

One of us, the electronic composer Richard Maxfield, became friendly at this time (1960) with a young Lithuanian radical, George Maciunas, who had a gallery on Madison Avenue. He persuaded him to start a series of performances there of our work and of work by La Monte Young and his circle, who had recently arrived in New York from San Francisco. Young had been asked to guest edit a special issue of a magazine, Beatitude East, to consist of the new kind of work which we were doing. Young collected the material-- a vast amount of it-- but the magazine collapsed before it was published. So Young brought <sup>and Mac Low</sup> the material to Maciunas, and, in due course, it appeared as a book, an anthology, which was the first Fluxus-type publication (1961). However, Maciunas had to close his gallery, and went to Europe to avoid his creditors, taking many materials with him which had not found space in an anthology. His idea was to issue a magazine of such materials, to be called fluxus. In Europe he met others

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who were doing similar work,-- Emmett Williams, Wolf Vostell, Benjamin Patterson, and others. Through Ayo, a Japanese artist who lived in New York at that time, Maciunas also learned of and obtained similar materials from Japan, by people such as Takehisa Kosugi, Chieko (later "Mieko") Shiomi, etc. A concert of "Neo-dada in der Musik" was presented at Düsseldorf,-- it was us, but it was ill-named, because there was really little in common between what we were doing and Dada. By the summer of 1962, the fluxus magazine was well under way, and Maciunas wanted to present a large festival of fluxus pieces. The Düsseldorf critic, Jean-Pierre Wilhelm, arranged with the museum at Wiesbaden to work there, Alison Knowles and myself came to Europe from America to help him, the concerts created a great scandal and much serious interest, and so, in the autumn of 1962, fluxus became Fluxus, and the press decided to call us the "Fluxus-Leute," (Fluxus-people). It was an interesting time. One Fluxus concert was broadcast on television on the news, and Maciunas' poor old mother, who lived with us outside Wiesbaden and who had no idea what we were up to, stayed indoors for about two weeks afterwards because she was ashamed to meet the neighbors. As for us, we stayed up most nights arguing and discussing what Fluxus was, what we had in common and what we did not have in common. We never issued a manifesto, but we did work out a theoretical position for ourselves, which was basically a Hermeneutic one and which has been written about elsewhere, so I won't go into that in any detail.

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The Wiesbaden Festival was followed by festivals at Copenhagen, Paris, Düsseldorf and Stockholm (to March 1963), with other allied performances happening in between, such as one in connection with a show of Vostell's work at Amsterdam and another, the "Misfits Show" in London, both in October 1962.

At the Amsterdam performance, the Provos put in their first appearance, and built a bonfire outside the gallery out of the debris left over from Patterson's "Paper Piece." Among those provos was Willem de Ridder, who later organized a Dutch Fluxus festival, and who even ran a Fluxus shop in Amsterdam. A very young artist who was there was Tomas Schmit, who joined us and did some notable pieces.

The "Misfits Show" included Daniel Spoerri, Arthur Köpcke, Robert Filliou, Emmett Williams, Robin Page and Ben Vautier. Williams was already working with us, and the others joined in as well. We did a performance at the old Institute of Contemporary Arts on Dover Street, which thoroughly shocked the Londoners, gentle as it was, and turned off Britain to Fluxus for another ten years,-- terribly English, to react in that way.

At Düsseldorf we were joined by Joseph Beuys and by some Swedes, Stafan Olzon and Bengt af Klintberg, who invited us to Sweden but warned us that there would be very little money. Knowles and I were the only ones who went. Maciunas was furious, and insisted this could not be a Fluxus Festival without the whole group, and this offended the Swedes so

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much that they never worked with Maciunas afterwards, preferring to stay home in Sweden and Scandinavia in general for their Fluxus activities.

When Knowles and I returned to the USA, in March 1963, we found that George Brecht and Robert Watts were organizing a Fluxus type festival under the name of the "Yam Festival," named for "Yam," a collage by Watts which Brecht particularly liked. This festival included more than just Fluxus-type pieces. There were memorable dances by Trisha Brown and Yvonne Rainer, a Happening by Allan Kaprow, etc. Wolf Vostell visited America and did a memorable small piece, in which he gave a funeral for a television set (which was still playing as it was interred). Al Hansen did a very simple performance in which he threw rolls of toilet paper into the trees. There it hung until the next rain, looking for all the world like a landscape by Fragonard or Watteau. Also, George Brecht did a newspaper, V TRE, which was, in due course, taken over by Maciunas, when he arrived in the USA in the summer. He assigned letter codes to each Fluxus artist, and, since Brecht's code was CC, the newspaper became CC V TRE, which served as a Fluxus newspaper for many years.

Maciunas offered to publish my complete works. I told him that would not work, as I had written too much, but that we could make a book of a year's worth of works, April 13th 1962 to April 13th 1963, when I had written a piece I was particularly happy with. April 13th happens to be the birthday of Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the USA and the author of our "Declaration of Independence," a great radical. So that project became Jefferson's Birthday. He also wanted me to write an account of the background of Fluxus and some of its

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materials. Something Else Press published ninety seven ideas. This account was intended as a postface to the book, but it became long enough to be an independent work; so it was titled Postface, and eventually published, in one binding, with Jefferson's Birthday-- theory and practice in one binding. However, when the manuscript was complete, Maciunas kept postponing publishing it. Time passed. Maciunas rented a space downstairs from my studio. More time passed. One day I went to him and asked when my book would be ready. He said, "A year from next spring." I said that was too long to wait, but he argued that it couldn't be helped. I went downstairs to the bar on the street, thought and had a few drinks, then went back upstairs, removed my manuscript from Maciunas' desk and took it upstairs to my own. I went and had a few more drinks, then went home to Alison Knowles.

"Alison," I announced, "we've founded a press."

"Really?" she answered. "What's it called?"

"Shirtsleeves Press."

"That's no good," she said. "Why don't you call it something else?" I thought that over, and decided she had an excellent name there-- I would call it "Something Else Press," and would publish only something else from whatever the fashionable publishers were doing. I also liked the implication that "something else" has as an exclamation in English, especially among black and young people, meaning "very good." So the next day I wrote a "Something Else Manifesto" (something which Maciunas, for very complex ideological reasons, opposed doing with Fluxus)-- and, in the next ten years, published many of the main texts of Happenings, Fluxus, Concrete Poetry, works of the avant garde of the past, and other related

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materials. Something Else Press published ninety seven books and pamphlets in all before it went bankrupt, in 1974, the year after I left it.

As for Maciunas, he was annoyed with me for starting my own operation. However, his own operation was towards designerly publications, fine small hand-crafted editions which could not reach a large public. I took it as my mission to do what I could to break out of the charmed circle of avant-garde specialists; with one book, Emmett Williams' Anthology of Concrete Poetry, we actually sold 18,000 copies-- not bad, for a press which never ever had more people working for it than one could fit into one taxi.

In 1963 Maciunas did the first New York Fluxus Concert at the annual meeting of the American trade association of perfume and flavorings chemists. We were substitute performers, but they loved us, (except for a noisy few), one of whom called out that John Cage was probably "rolling around in his grave" over us. Actually he wasn't. He was probably enjoying a very good dinner elsewhere in the city at that time.

The concert was followed up with an ongoing series of performances at Maciunas' studio, the "Fluxshop." These usually had small but loyal audiences. In spite of Maciunas' annoyance with me, we continued to work together. The series had great charm and ingenuity,-- necessarily since none of us had any money. A less official group of artists would be hard to imagine. Ben Vautier and Tomas Schmit visited from Europe and took part in the series; the contacts with Europe continued close.

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pass through a picket line of other Fluxus artists, who were  
 announcing One of the great Fluxus concerts took place in 1965  
 at Carnegie Recital Hall, a very official place where chamber  
 music is the normal fare. We sold it out. We had a Fluxus  
 orchestra for the occasion-- everyone who could play an instrument  
 brought one, and the collection of toys and non-traditional  
 instruments (for us)-- oriental instruments,-- was enormous.  
 The conductor was the distinguished Japanese art critic and  
 poet, Kuniharu Akiyama. One memorable moment was a performance  
 of a piece, I think by Mieko Shiomi, in which music paper  
 is placed on the stands, and the audience waits for the musicians  
 to arrive. Instead, however, a large fan is started backstage,  
 and the music papers are blown away off the stands. The audiences  
 cheered that one. is sort meant, of course, that he was more  
 involved in Maciunas now came under the influence of Henry  
 Flynt, an ultra-Trotskyist who denounced all forms of European  
 art music (including Fluxus) as degenerate and as cultural  
 imperialism. Allan Kaprow had arranged, as part of Charlotte  
 Moorman's <sup>1965</sup> series of Avant Garde Festivals, to do Karlheinz  
 Stockhausen's Originale. Many of us, as friends of Kaprow, were  
 invited to participate. Maciunas loathed Moorman, whom he  
 considered an opportunist, and Flynt loathed Stockhausen,  
 for strange ideological reasons which were unintelligible  
 to nobody but himself and perhaps Maciunas. Maciunas now  
 announced that any one of us who participated in that performance  
 could no longer be considered a part of Fluxus. He tried  
 to intimidate Ayo and others as well. We became quite angry  
 with him. Some of us, such as Al Hansen, had already cut off  
 from Maciunas, who was apt to be quite difficult to work with,  
 at best. The day of Originale arrived. The result was that  
 some of the Fluxus performers (myself, for instance) had to

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pass through a picket line of other Fluxus artists, who were denouncing the performance as cultural imperialism. This was grossly embarrassing, and it discouraged much of the camaraderie of the earlier times of Fluxus forever.

The result was that, after that, Maciunas became less performance-oriented. Performances did take place, but they happened less often, and they were more apt to be under the auspices of the Something Else Press or some other organization. Maciunas therefore concentrated on his publications-- especially the many "Fluxboxes," most of which date from this time. He also had a dream of doing architecture, and he started remodelling old industrial "loft buildings," in which many non-Fluxus people bought lofts and still live. Doing activities of this sort meant, of course, that he was more involved locally in New York, and less involved with Europe from then on. In Europe it seemed as if he (and therefore Fluxus) had stopped, but this was less the case than that his activities had changed, while the others of us were now working in Europe more as independents. We still thought of ourselves as Fluxus, however. Maciunas denounced some of us and read us out of Fluxus; but we knew who was (and who was not) Fluxus, and we continued to use the name independently of Maciunas, and to continue to perform works by people whom Maciunas had denounced (Hansen, the Swedes, etc.). This makes the later history of Fluxus a little complex. But there was never a breach among us,-- nothing like the split between the French and German Dadaists, for example.

He (and we) continued active. By now Performance Art had become popular, with its great, usually unacknowledged, debt to Fluxus. In New York the most interesting series of such works was organized by Jean Dupuy, a French artist

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who settled there in the late 1960's. Dupuy's performances were a little like the Fluxus Festivals, in that they included many different people on the program, working in as many Fluxus continued to evolve, as Fluxus' very name said it should (a "flux" is either diarrhoeia, change, or a catalytic moment), all of which pleased Maciunas when he selected the name). Maciunas had a dream of, one day, all the Fluxus people boarding a minesweeper, a kind of boat which someone had told him could be bought cheaply as surplus from the American navy, and spending two years or so touring the world performing. He also became interested in buying an island in the Carribean, and hoped to gather a group of Fluxus artists together to settle there. He actually went there with a few Fluxus people; however, there turned out to be no water, and there were many many poisonous plants, one of which gave off some kind of fumes which made everyone quite ill. So that plan was abandoned.

Instead he bought an enormous estate in New Marlboro, Massachusetts, about 200 Kilometers northeast of New York. It had belonged to some wealthy people who bred horses there and only used it in the summers; therefore, in the winter it was incredibly expensive to heat, and some rooms could not be heated at all. However, he moved there, and the program of tradition of Fluxus feasts and private celebrations (usually concerts for ourselves), which had become his pattern in the late 1960's in New York, followed him to New Marlboro in the mid 1970's.

He (and we) continued active. By now Performance Art had become popular, with its great, usually unacknowledged, debt to Fluxus. In New York the most interesting series of such works was organized by Jean Dupuy, a French artist

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who settled there in the late 1960's. Dupuy's performances were a little like the Fluxus Festivals, in that they included many different people on the program, working in as many divergent new styles as possible. One did one especially fine series, the "Grommet Theater" evenings. A grommet is a small metal ring which is inserted into such materials as canvas when one makes tents, so that <sup>rope</sup> ~~cloth~~ can be passed through it without tearing it. Dupuy hung canvas all around his loft, put grommets into it, and behind each grommet there was a Fluxus or Performance Art performance, which only one spectator at a time could see. Maciunas did his last public performance on this occasion; but where the other performances were "looked at," Maciunas did the looking himself, and when anyone came near to his grommet, he would squirt out perfume at them. Dupuy's relation with Fluxus was problematic-- we certainly considered him one of us, but was it too late to join, in the late 1970's? Perhaps he was The Last Fluxus Artist (at least the last to join during Maciunas' lifetime).

The feasts continued, on New Year's or at Halloween, especially. We gave one memorable feast in honor of Maciunas, and it was held in the printing plant of Zaccar Offset, a printer for whom I had worked in the early 1960's and which had become Maciunas' principle printer. For the occasion, we made up an enormous Festschrift for Maciunas, with pages by as many Fluxus artists as possible. He was very pleased by this event, and we felt good about it. It was well that we did, because--

By the Fall of 1978 it was quite clear that something was seriously wrong. Maciunas' health, never the best, had taken a dramatic turn for the worse. It developed

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that a cancer had spread through his body, and that he was doomed. He made the best of it, gave one more spectacular Halloween Feast at New Marlboro, and did his best to get his health back. At New Marlboro he had taken, as a tenant, a young novelist, Billie Hutchins, who seemed to have no idea what Fluxus was, but who loved Georgeas and was willing to go along with whatever he wanted.

They were married in January, 1979. The Fluxus artists who were in New York at the time did performances at the wedding. Hendricks was the priest, and the bride and groom cross-dressed, as did many of those present. The wedding was followed by an erotic feast, at which Young made an aphrodisiac tonic, I contributed an absolutely tasteless gelatine confection (the texture was interesting), someone else baked a huge loaf of bread in the form of genitals, and so on. In other words, Maciunas' iconoclasm continued to the end.

The last time I saw him, I visited him at New Marlboro a few weeks before he died. He was lying on a bed downstairs in the largest room of the mansion-- a ballroom-- and Fluxus people were scurrying around, working on his projects-- his own pieces, Fluxboxes by others, and so on. It was something rather close to what would have happened if he had ever succeeded in organizing his world tour on a minesweeper.

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When he went into the hospital for the last time, the doctors told his wife that they had no idea why this man was still alive-- according to medical science, he should have been dead weeks ago. So, at the end of April, 1979, he died. But there is some question as to whether Fluxus died with him; the Fluxus people are still a group, and while nobody of us does only recognizably Fluxus work, almost all of us occasionally still do it. It seems important to continue to do so,-- it is still needed, in a world of pretensions and falseness, grandiosity and humorlessness. We are still as much of a group as we ever were.

Berlin

18. March, 19