Fluxus and
Legacy

In 1992, Visible Language published a double issue on Fluxus. This was the catalogue of Fluxus: A Conceptual Country, an exhibition organized by Estera Milman at the University of Iowa to mark the 30th anniversary of Fluxus as an international laboratory of artists, architects, composers and designers.1,2 The exhibition opened in New York at Emily Harvey Gallery, Franklin Furnace and Anthology Film Archives. It then traveled to the University of Iowa Art Museum, Madison Art Center, Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, Mary and Leigh Block Gallery at Northwestern University, along with other museums and galleries.

When we became interested in exploring the questions surrounding the Fluxus legacy, it seemed natural to turn to Visible Language. To our delight, editor Sharon Poggenpohl was inter-


2 Owen Smith is an art historian and artist who has worked with Fluxus for many years. Ken Friedman is a scholar, artist and designer active in Fluxus since the 1960s.
ested in the possibility. So we began. This issue of Visible Language is the result.

Any community of thought and practice that expands beyond the circle of its immediate founders is likely to face the problem of legacy and history. This problem becomes inevitable, once a community endures long enough to survive the founders. These problems are always vexed. When these problems enter the realm of history, the vexatious multiplies by the number of scholars and practitioners involved. In this case, the intermedia nature of Fluxus brings in questions and histories of art, literature, performance, music and other fields. Compounding this, the mixed feelings and motives of younger practitioners raise other questions: the desire to claim legacy, the wish to deny legacy, anxiety of influence and more. Finally, the partial location of Fluxus in the art world, together with the differing needs and demands of collectors, gallerists and museums compounds the problem. These issues have long puzzled us.

Today, Fluxus enjoys a problematic fame. Fluxus is well known—at least the name Fluxus is. At the same time, the central ideas and issues of Fluxus are overshadowed by a multiplicity of misleading or one-sided interpretations. As Bertrand Clavez notes, Fluxus itself is unknown to many of the younger artists, designers, composers and performers whose work demonstrates the clear trace of a Fluxus heritage. At the same time, many of the artists who want to claim the Fluxus legacy seek to control and use the Fluxus name as a trademark or brand name rather than understanding and entering into dialogue with a durable community of ideas and practices.

What is Fluxus? According to Fluxus co-founder Dick Higgins,

"Fluxus is not:  
- a moment in history, or  
- an art movement,

Fluxus is:  
- a way of doing things.  
- a tradition, and  
- a way of life and death."
This concise description suggests the range of the ways that Fluxus founders and participants see it—and the way that others see Fluxus, often to the dismay of those who created and developed it. For some, Fluxus is a laboratory. For others, it is a conceptual country, or a community. These descriptions work nicely. While some refer to Fluxus as a movement, few citizens of the conceptual country have ever agreed to enough common programmatic ideas to warrant the label of a movement. Instead, one might better examine the issues or themes that typify Fluxus experience. In the late 1970s, Dick Higgins developed nine criteria to describe Fluxus. Ken Friedman later expanded these to twelve criteria or ideas.

The twelve ideas are: globalism, the unity of art and life, intermedia, experimentalism, chance, playfulness, simplicity or concentration, implicativeness, exemplativism, specificity, presence in time and musicality.

As Higgins wrote, these twelve ideas are not a prescription, but rather a way to reflect on the degree to which any project or process engages the Fluxus idea. For Higgins, the degree to which a work, a process or a project represents “a way of doing things, a tradition, and a way of life” consistent with the criteria determine the degree to which it can said to be Fluxus or to represent a Fluxus ethos.

In addressing the question of a Fluxus legacy, we hope that this issue of Visible Language will introduce readers to the rich network of Fluxus ideas. For some, it will be a new introduction. For such readers, we hope that these articles and the references that support them will reveal a world that they may not hitherto have known. For those who already know Fluxus through the work or lives of specific artists, architects, composers, designers—or through the projects, publications and exhibitions of the group—we hope that the articles here will reveal the sometimes hidden dimensions in what may seem to be a well understood phenomenon.

We are deeply grateful to Visible Language editor Sharon Poggenpohl for opening these pages to us, and to designer Mark Nystrom for giving these pages the final look and feel that defines this issue.
We thank Ina Blom, Bertrand Clavez and Hannah Higgins for their contributions—along with Higgins's friends and fellow Fluxkids, Bibbi Hansen, Bracken and Tyche Hendricks, Jessica Higgins, Clarinda and Mordecai-Mark Mac Low and Rebecca Moore. Their research and reflection forms the core of this issue on Fluxus and legacy.

The Fluxus legacy—whatever it is, whatever it will be—is the product of Fluxus—whatever it was in the past, whatever it is today. Fluxus was a community or a laboratory of some kind. The Fluxus community was—and is—the product of many minds and hands. Our goal here is to frame the work of a large and significant group of contributors.

The achievements of any community survive in living memory because some members of the community endow it with a forum of narrative and demonstration. For the past quarter century, Emily Harvey built and maintained the central Fluxus forum. Her New York gallery began as George Maciunas's last loft space. Maciunas built it in a Fluxhouse located at what was once the site of P. T. Barnum's New York Museum. After Maciunas, Jean Dupuy transformed the loft into Grommet Gallery. Emily Harvey began her program of exhibitions and concerts in that space.

The site of P.T. Barnum's last theater was a well-chosen predecessor to the circus that George, Jean and Emily gathered around them over so many years. Barnum's theater and museum—unlike his circus—lasted only a few years. Despite his significance as a culture entrepreneur, George never made a durable go of his gallery and real estate ventures. Jean's memorable and influential Grommet Gallery lasted only a short time. In contrast, Emily Harvey Gallery had over two decades of life.

Emily expanded her activities to Vieux Pierrefeu in France, and later to the Emily Harvey Foundation in Venice. Under the guidance of Davidson Gigliotti, Henry Martin and Christian Xatrec, this foundation continues Emily's work in the community she loved and nurtured.
Emily was born in Connecticut. She exemplified the humility and virtue of New England at its best, with a spirit of kindness and generosity that embraced the Fluxus tradition. She had a keen intellect and a gentle way of speaking that revealed a personality as deep as her mind. Her work maintained and preserved the Fluxus community; her contribution is one reason that we are here today, reflecting on the question of Fluxus legacy.

We dedicate this issue of Visible Language to Emily Harvey, a lovely person and beloved friend. We miss her and we feel her presence still.

Ken Friedman and Owen Smith