

The

# FLUXUS

Reader

EDITED BY KEN FRIEDMAN

**AE** ACADEMY EDITIONS

# THE FLUXUS READER

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Edited by KEN FRIEDMAN

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Several collections are central to the research on Fluxus. Three major collections are now readily accessible. Hanns Sohm's Archiv Sohm is now located at Stadtsgalerie Stuttgart and Jean Brown's collection has become The Jean Brown Archive at the Getty Center for the History of the Arts and Humanities. The collections and archives of Fluxus West and my own papers have been distributed among several museums and universities. The largest body of material is located at Alternative Traditions in Contemporary Art at University of Iowa, the Tate Gallery Archives in London and the Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth College. Substantial holdings that once belonged to Fluxus West are now part of the Museum of Modern Art's Franklin Furnace Archive Collection, the Museum of Modern Art's Performance Art Archives, the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art, the Ken Friedman Collection at the University of California at San Diego and the Henie Onstad Art Center in Oslo. All of these holdings are available for research, publication and exhibition under the normal conditions of research archives and museum collections. A number of important private collections are available under restricted access or by special appointment. Most notable among these are the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Foundation in New York and Detroit, Archivio Conz in Verona, and MuDiMa in Milan.

The documentation section was edited by Owen Smith. I developed the first versions of the documentation at Fluxus West in 1966 and supported improved versions over the years since. Project scholars and editors included Nancy McElroy, Kimberley Ruhe, Matthew Hogan, Judith Hoffberg, Giorgio Zanchetti, and James Lewes. Hoseon Cheon, Dick

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Here, I thank also Ditte Mauritzon Friedman. Canon and deacon of Lund Cathedral, psychotherapist-in-training, and wife, Ditte has enriched my perspective on Fluxus and on life. And I thank Oliver Mauritzon, walking companion, philosopher and the first taster of whatever I happen to be cooking for Ditte.

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## THE CONTRIBUTORS

The scholarly content of *The Fluxus Reader* has been the product of a laboratory of ideas, a virtual colloquium. It has been my pleasure here to work with a number of the leading scholars now writing on Fluxus. The authors of the history chapters wrote doctoral dissertations on various aspects of Fluxus. **Owen Smith** is associate professor of art history at the University of Maine. He wrote on George Maciunas at University of Washington. Simon Anderson is head of art history, theory and criticism at the School of the Art Institute Chicago. He wrote on Fluxshoe and British Fluxus at the Royal College of Art. **Hannah Higgins** is assistant professor of art history at University of Illinois at Chicago. She wrote on the interpretation and reception of early Fluxus at University of Chicago.

The authors of the theory chapters have specialized in different aspects of intermedia. **Ina Blom** is doctoral research fellow in art history at the University of Oslo. She has written extensively on Fluxus and intermedia. Craig Saper is assistant professor of criticism at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. He has written on intermedia, multimedia, artist publishing and visual poetry. **David Doris** is a doctoral fellow in art history at Yale University. The chapter on Fluxus and Zen was adapted from his award-winning master's thesis at City University of New York.

The chapters on critical and historical perspectives have been written by three internationally renowned scholars in art history, art theory and literary theory. **Stephen Foster** is professor of art history at University of Iowa and director of the Fine Arts Dada Archive. **Estera Milman** is associate professor of art history at the University of Iowa and founding director of Alternative Traditions in Contemporary Art. **Nicholas Zurbrugg** is professor of English and head of the department of English, Media and Culture Studies at De Montfort University.

The section titled 'Three Fluxus Voices' is the result of two unique collaborations. The first is an extensive interview between Fluxus artist **Larry Miller** and Fluxus co-founder George Maciunas. Made just before Maciunas's death in 1978, it sheds important light on Maciunas' view of Fluxus. The second is the only known interview with Maciunas' wife, Billie. This interview was recorded by **Susan Jarosi**, doctoral candidate in art history at Duke University. The section ends with Larry Miller's own thoughts on what it is to think about Fluxus. Here, I beg the reader's indulgence. There could have been, perhaps there should have been any number of other views, other chapters. Time and space limit every book. I selected these three voices because they are unique and because they form a conceptually elegant triad. If there is a clear message in the sections on history, theory, critical and historical perspectives, it is that there no way to encapsulate Fluxus in any neat paradigm. On another occasion, and for other reasons, I will present other voices: here, time, a page limit and circumstance dictate a useful choice that makes available an interview with ideas that have never before been published.

The section titled 'Two Fluxus Theories' makes available the thoughts of two Fluxus artists who have attempted to theorize Fluxus and place it in a larger intellectual and cultural framework. The first is by **Dick Higgins**, Fluxus co-founder and legendary publisher of Something Else Press. The second is my own: as editor of this book, I feel obliged to put my thoughts on the table here, too.

## FLUXUS READER WEB SITE

The World Wide Web is making a vital difference to many fields of human endeavor. The arts and scholarship have been particularly well served by this medium.

One of the most important developments for research and writing on Fluxus is a consortium of five major universities and museums with a key focus on Fluxus and intermedia. These five are developing a Web-based series of virtual resources for scholarship and reflection on contemporary art. University of Iowa's Alternative Traditions in Contemporary Art, the University of California Museum of Art at Berkeley, Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth, Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and Franklin Furnace in New York maintain the site. ATCA at University of Iowa will be hosting a wide variety of scholarly and pictorial materials that dovetail with the material in this book, and a portion of the site will be dedicated to expanding and reflecting on the specific chapters presented here.

The URL is: <<http://www.lib.uiowa.edu/spec-coll/resources/atca.html>>. Please visit the site.

## INFORMATION AND IDEAS

I welcome queries and idea on any of the subjects covered in this book. If you have questions or thoughts you would like to pursue, please contact me at:

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 <<http://hdl.handle.net/1959.3/42234>>

## KEN FRIEDMAN: INTRODUCTION: A TRANSFORMATIVE VISION OF FLUXUS

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A little more than thirty years ago, George Maciunas asked me to write a history of Fluxus. It was the autumn of 1966. I was sixteen then and living in New York after dropping out of college for a term. George had enrolled me in Fluxus that August. Perhaps he saw me as a scholar, perhaps simply as someone with enough energy to undertake and complete such a project.

Not long after, I grew tired of New York and I was ready to move back to California. That was when George appointed me director of Fluxus West. Originally intended to represent Fluxus activities in the western United States, Fluxus West became many things. It became a centre for spreading Fluxus ideas, a forum for Fluxus projects across North America – outside New York – as well as parts of Europe and the Pacific, a travelling exhibition centre, a studio in a Volkswagen bus, a publishing house and a research programme. These last two aspects of our work led George to ask me once again to take on a comprehensive, official history of Fluxus. I agreed to do it. I didn't know what I was getting into.

This history project was never completed. In part, I lacked the documentation, and despite gathering documents and material for years, I never did accumulate the material I should have done to carry out the job. Moreover, I found that it was the ideas in Fluxus that interested me most, far more than the specific deeds and doings of a specific group of artists. While I am a scholar in addition to being an artist, my interest in Fluxus does not focus on documentation or archival work.

The documents and works I did collect have not gone to waste. They found homes in museums, universities and archives, where they are available to scholars who do want to write the history of Fluxus, as well as to scholars, critics, curators and artists who want to examine Fluxus from other perspectives. The history that I never finished gave rise to several projects and publications that shed light on Fluxus in many ways. This book is one of them.

The key issue here is explaining a 'how' and 'why' of Fluxus. Emmett Williams once wrote a short poem on that how and why, writing 'Fluxus is what Fluxus does – but no one knows whodunit.' What is it that Fluxus does? Dick Higgins offered one answer when he wrote, '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.' For Dick, as for George, Fluxus is more important as an idea and a potential for social change than as a specific group of people or collection of objects.

As I see it, Fluxus has been a laboratory, a grand project summed up by George

Maciunas' notion of the 'learning machines'. The Fluxus research programme has been characterised by twelve ideas: globalism, the unity of art and life, intermedia, experimentalism, chance, playfulness, simplicity, implicativeness, exemplativism, specificity, presence in time and musicality. (These twelve ideas are elaborated in the chapter titled 'Fluxus and Company'.) These ideas are not a prescription for how to be a Fluxus artist. Rather they form a description of the qualities and issues that characterise the work of Fluxus. Each idea describes a 'way of doing things'. Taken together, these twelve ideas form a picture of what Fluxus is and does.

The implications of some ideas have been more interesting – and occasionally more startling – than they may at first have seemed. Fluxus has been a complex system of practices and relationships. The fact that the art world can sometimes be a forum for philosophical practice has made it possible for Fluxus to develop and demonstrate ideas that would later be seen in such frameworks as multimedia, telecommunications, hypertext, industrial design, urban planning, architecture, publishing, philosophy, and even management theory. That is what makes Fluxus so lively, so engaging and so difficult to describe.

We can grasp the phenomenon through the lens of several disciplines. One such discipline is history, and there is a history of Fluxus to be told. While the core issues in Fluxus are ideas, Fluxus ideas were first summarised and exemplified in the work of a specific group of people. This group pioneered these ideas at a time when their thoughts and practices were distinct and different from many of the thoughts and practices in the world around them, distinct from the art world and different from the world of other disciplines in which Fluxus would come to play a role. To understand the how and why of Fluxus, what it is and does, it is important to understand 'whodunit', to know what Fluxus was and did. History therefore offers a useful perspective.

Fluxus, however, is more than a matter of *art* history. Literature, music, dance, typography, social structure, architecture, mathematics, politics ... they all play a role. Fluxus is, indeed, the name of a way of doing things. It is an active philosophy of experience that only sometimes takes the form of art. It stretches across the arts and even across the areas between them. Fluxus is a way of viewing society and life, a way of creating social action and life activity. In this book, historians and critics offer critical and historical perspectives. Other writers frame the central issues in other ways.

The ideal book would be three times as long as this one is and impossible to publish. I therefore chose to focus on issues to open a dialogue with the Fluxus idea. Rather than teaching the reader everything there is to know about Fluxus, this book lays out a map, a cognitive structure filled with tools, markers and links to ideas and history both.

Fluxus has now become a symbol for much more than itself. That companies in the knowledge industry and creative enterprise use the name Fluxus suggests that something is happening, both in terms of real influence and in terms of fame, the occasional shadow of true influence. Advertising agencies, record stores, performance groups, publishers and even young artists now apply the word Fluxus to what they do. It is difficult to know whether we should be pleased, annoyed, or merely puzzled.

Tim Porges once wrote that the value of writing and publishing on Fluxus rests not on what Fluxus has been but on 'what it may still do'. If one thread binds the chapters in this book, it is the idea of a transformative description that opens a new discourse. A new and

appropriately subtle understanding of Fluxus leaves open the question of what it may still do. That's good enough for me.

Owen Smith and I were discussing this book one afternoon. We reached the conclusion that it is as much a beginning as a summation. If, as George Brecht said in the 1980s, 'Fluxus has Fluxed', one can equally well say what someone – Dick? Emmett? – said a few years later: 'Fluxus has not yet begun.' There is an on-line discussion group called Fluxlist where the question of what lies between those two points has been the subject of much recent dialogue. One of the interesting aspects of the conversation has been the philosophical subtlety underlying the several positions. Those who believe there is a Fluxus of ideas and attitudes more than of objects feel that there is, indeed, a future Fluxus. This Fluxus intersects with and moves beyond the Fluxus of artefacts and objects. This vision of Fluxus distinguishes between a specific Fluxus of specific artists acting in time and space and what René Block termed 'Fluxism', an idea exemplified in the work and action of the historic Fluxus artists.

Beginning or summation, this book offers a broad view of Fluxus. It is a corrective to the hard-edged and ill-informed debates on Fluxus that diminish what we set out to do by locating us in a mythic moment of time that never really existed. Fluxus was created to transcend the boundaries of the art world, to shape a discourse of our own. A debate that ends Fluxus with the death of George Maciunas is a debate that diminishes George's idea of Fluxus as an ongoing social practice. It also diminishes the rest of us, leaving many of the original Fluxus artists disenfranchised and alienated from the body of work to which they gave birth. In the moments that people attempt to victimise us with false boundaries, I am drawn to two moments in history.

The first moment occurred in sixth-century Chinese Zen. It reflects the debates around Fluxus in an oddly apt way, and not merely because Fluxus is often compared with Zen. It involved the alleged split between the Northern and Southern schools of Zen. The real facts of the split seem not to have involved the two masters who succeeded the Sixth Patriarch, one in the North and one in the South, Shen-hsiu and Hui-neng. The long and tangled stories of schism seem rooted, rather, in the actions of Hui-neng's disciple Shen-hui and those who followed him. It has little to do with the main protagonists who respected and admired each other to the point that the supposedly jealous patriarch Shen-hsiu in fact recommended Hui-neng to the imperial court where he, himself, was already held in high renown. This is like much of the argument around Fluxus. It seems that the protagonists of one view or another, the adherents of one kind of work or another, those who need to establish a monetary value for one body of objects or another, seem to feel the need to do so by discounting, discrediting or disenfranchising everyone else. That makes no sense in a laboratory, let alone a laboratory of ideas and social practice.

The other moment I consider took place a few years ago, when Marcel Duchamp declared that the true artist of the future would go underground. To the degree that Fluxus is a body of ideas and practices, we are visible and we remain so. To the degree that Fluxus is or may be an art form, it may well have gone underground already. If this is true, who can possibly say that Fluxus is or isn't dead? We don't know 'whodunit', we don't know who does it and we certainly don't know who may do it in the future.

PART II  
THEORIES OF FLUXUS

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# DAVID T DORIS: ZEN VAUDEVILLE: A MEDI(T)ATION IN THE MARGINS OF FLUXUS<sup>1</sup>

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## PRE-FACE

In the history of the arts of the twentieth century Fluxus stands as a singularly strange phenomenon. It resembled an art movement and was inadvertently named as such in 1962.<sup>2</sup> Yet unlike other art movements, Fluxus produced no signed manifestos indicating the intentions of its participants, who, indeed, could rarely agree on just what it was that constituted the Fluxus programme. And, unlike other movements, Fluxus was not bound to a specific geographical location. On the contrary, Fluxus could well be seen as the first truly global avant-garde; the artists, composers, poets and others who contributed to the corpus of Fluxus work hailed from France, West Germany, Japan, Korea, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, and the United States. Quite a few lived their lives as expatriates or nomads.

Originally intended by George Maciunas (who is acknowledged as the principal organiser and disseminator of Fluxus) to be the title of a magazine for Lithuanians living in New York City,<sup>3</sup> 'Fluxus' soon became something quite radically different, coming to signify an astonishingly broad range of practices in virtually every field of human communicative endeavour. The work produced under, or in proximity of, the Fluxus flag includes films, newspapers, books, performances, symphonies, sculptures, sound poetry, dances, feasts, one-line jokes, insoluble puzzles, games – the list continues. However, it should be noted early on that these descriptive categories are more often than not inadequate to the task of containing Fluxus works, which, as I hope to demonstrate, operate in the margins *between* such categories. A single score, for example Ken Friedman's 1965 work, *Zen Is When*:

A placement.

A fragment of time identified.

Brief choreography.

might be realised as a painting, an assemblage, a poem, a private or public performance, a thought, or even a thesis for a master's degree – perhaps all at once. As such, Fluxus works were some of the most important manifestations in the development of intermedia; the term itself (also applicable in part to the concurrent phenomenon of Happenings) was coined by Fluxus participant Dick Higgins, denoting work whose structures determined the textures of the spaces *between* media. Indeed, it is this very *between-ness*, this marginality, that makes Fluxus, even thirty-odd years after its first European performances, so difficult to coax with words into stability.

The Fluxus phenomenon began at a unique moment in time, a period of relative artistic freedom and economic growth in the United States, Europe and Japan – only a decade and a half after the most destructive war in the history of humanity. The early 1960s saw the first humans in outer space, the inauguration and assassination of the youngest president in American history, the establishment of a US military presence in Vietnam, the assembly of the Berlin Wall, and the rapid proliferation of television and thermonuclear weapons. It was a strange and dangerous time.

In the midst of all the extraordinary institutional spending and material surplus that characterised the late 1950s and early 1960s, Fluxus created a space for itself outside the established gallery and theatre circuits. At a period marked by the production of massive, eminently saleable works, principally in the field of visual art, the artists of Fluxus produced works of little inherent economic value: pieces of printed paper, small plastic boxes filled with cheap, simple objects (sometimes they were filled with nothing at all) and, particularly in the first few years, performances. Fluxus produced virtually nothing to hang over the family piano, nothing that could reasonably be considered an ‘investment’ by a potential buyer. Indeed, the artists of Fluxus seem to have waged a battle against the economic and spiritual aggrandisement of both art and artist so rampant during the period. In place of the grandiose, Fluxus took the position of a sort of aesthetic Everyman, doing many small things in many small ways. In place of the supposed timelessness and permanence of the art object, Fluxus loosed a prolific flow of seemingly inconsequential amusements and ephemera, most of which, at the time, went largely unheeded. Fluxus challenged notions of representation, offering instead simple presentations that could provoke awe, laughter, disgust, dread – the entire range of human response. In the midst of an increasingly mediated world, the artists of Fluxus attempted to wake up to the experience of simply being human, a supremely strange enterprise indeed. This essay is an inquiry into just a few aspects of that strangeness.

## LONG LONG AGO . . .

In 1957 George Brecht, a chemist at the personal products division of Johnson & Johnson in East Brunswick, New Jersey, wrote an extraordinary essay entitled ‘Chance-Imagery.’ In it, he develops an outline of historical sources, methods and theories involved in the practical application of the forces of chance in the arts. Illustrating his text with examples drawn from the realms of physics and statistics, Brecht denotes ‘two aspects of chance, one where the origin of images is unknown because it lies in deeper-than-conscious levels of the mind, and the second where images derive from mechanical processes not under the artist’s control.’<sup>4</sup>

After a discussion of automatism in Surrealist production (certainly one of this century’s boldest adventures in the exploration of the unconscious), Brecht admits that he is ‘more interested . . . in the mechanically chance process.’<sup>5</sup> He cites Marcel Duchamp as the pioneer in this field, noting the techniques employed in the construction of his *3 stoppages étalon* (*3 Standard Stoppages*), in which the ‘standard’ measurement created by the fall of a piece of string was determined by ‘wind, gravity and aim’; and in his *La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même (le Grand Verre)* (*The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*), for which Duchamp employed a toy cannon to shoot paint-dipped matches at the glass to determine the positions of the nine malic molds.

Yet Brecht suggests that Duchamp's use of chance in his work was 'not exhaustive', and so acknowledges the importance of other modernist applications of chance: Jean Arp's chance collages, Max Ernst's 'decalcomania of chance' as well as his techniques of *frottage*, the Surrealist *cadavre exquis*, and Tristan Tzara's chance poetry. In each of these cases, the artist relinquishes, to a greater or lesser degree, the power to determine the form of a work, serving instead as a functionary, a facilitator of natural processes within a specific, limiting context (a poem, a drawing, a collage). In this strain of practice, in the denial of artistic choice and determinism in favour of the potency of apparently arbitrary natural processes, Brecht perceives profound spiritual implications. These implications, Brecht points out, were noted by the Dadaists themselves: 'The almost incredibly incisive mind of Tristan Tzara, as early as 1922, even recognised the relationship of all this to Oriental philosophy (in one of the most convincing of Dada documents, the "Lecture on Dada"): "Dada is not at all modern. It is more in the nature of a return to an almost Buddhist religion of indifference."'"<sup>6</sup>

Tzara aspired to indifference, of course, and so he perceived a kinship in Buddhism's evident coolness, its detachment from the world. I would suggest, however, that the Buddhist 'condition' is not one of indifference, but rather of a radical *involvement* with the world. This condition, according to Buddhist texts, demands first that one's own preconceptions be consciously cast aside – no easy task – in order that the things of this world be allowed to manifest themselves *as such*, as they present themselves in their fullness of being. Neither overwhelming nor unknowable, nature is thus revealed through simple, direct engagement in its processes. Further, the operations of the individual are themselves revealed through engagement in this unfolding; one becomes an actively perceiving, infinitely mutable organ of response, not differentiated from nature. Brecht quotes Daisetz Suzuki's discussion of the role of nature as a paradigm for human action in Zen Buddhism: 'Nature never deliberates; it acts directly out of its own heart, whatever this may mean. In this respect Nature is divine. Its "irrationality" transcends human doubts or ambiguities, and in our submitting to it, or rather accepting it, we transcend ourselves.'<sup>7</sup> This acceptance, notes Suzuki in his original text, is itself a matter of choice:

We accept nature's 'irrationality' or its 'musts' deliberately, quietly, and wholeheartedly. It is not a deed of blind and slavish submission to the inevitable. It is an active acceptance, a personal willingness with no thought of resistance. In this there is no force implied, no resignation, but rather participation, assimilation, and perhaps in some cases even identification.<sup>8</sup>

The artists of Fluxus were committed to the acceptance and the investigation of nature's 'musts', choosing in many cases to relinquish artistic control in favour of participation in, assimilation of, and identification with the processes of nature. Both Zen and Fluxus embody principles that entail a restructuring, and even ultimately an elimination, of the supposed boundaries between 'life' and 'art', between 'I' and 'other'. In this article I will examine certain aspects of Zen that *resonate* within some Fluxus performance, and which offer an alternative critical vocabulary, a provisional framework within which one can allow some aspects of Fluxus to be revealed.

This article came about, as many do, in an attempt to satisfy a curiosity. After establishing an initial connection with Fluxus material, I noticed that critics and even Fluxus artists would make the observation, now and again, that Fluxus was somehow *like* Zen, that Fluxus

works were *similar* in some respects to Zen works or Zen koans. Unfortunately, no one has ever chosen to examine this observation in any significant detail. How and why is it the case that Fluxus works so often bring Zen to mind? On the one hand, there is Fluxus: the name of a loosely organised group of contemporary artists (and non-artists) who were examining, in the most radical ways, the limits of what constitutes 'art'. On the other hand, there is Zen: the name of a centuries-old, non-theistic religion whose practitioners examine, in the most radical ways, the limits of what constitutes 'consciousness'. Two distinctly *different* explorations of the limits of what defines us as human, true, but why even mention them in the same breath? And supposing there is some connection between the two, why the attendant critical silence?

At the first pass, it seemed to me that both Zen and Fluxus were excruciatingly difficult to explain: somehow, no matter what words came to mind, they never appeared to be adequate to the task at hand; important details of the experience – including my experience – of both Zen and Fluxus invariably escaped exposition. Contradictions arose within each set of practices which systematically frustrated attempts to say anything *definitive* about either. After some time, and considerably more frustration, it became clear that my own difficulties in bringing about some sort of closure, some sort of totalising definition, were the result of the very pretensions which Fluxus and Zen perpetually mock. Words, to paraphrase a Zen adage, are so many fingers pointing to the Fluxmoon, and are not to be confused with the Fluxmoon itself. Or as Dick Higgins points out: 'We can talk about a thing, but we cannot talk a thing. It is always something else.'<sup>9</sup>

This 'something else' is what the artists of Fluxus, like the practitioners of Zen, have sought to interrogate. What the two hold in common is an insistent attitude of questioning: a revelation of the codes by which we come to frame the world, by which we come to receive the world as given and immutable. This questioning, unfolding through demonstration rather than discourse, indicates a cognitive shift away from the modernist understanding of the self as the inviolate centre of being. Both Fluxus and Zen investigate the nebulous realms between conceptual categories: between subject and object, between vision and hearing, between high and low. The Fluxus artist Eric Andersen has said:

The reason intermedia is called intermedia and not multimedia is that it falls between categories ... Every time it seems to take a direction or form a shape, something happens that just takes it out of it again. And Zen is doing the same number. It is falling between categories. This is one of the basic secrets of Zen.<sup>10</sup>

In this discussion of a relationship between Fluxus and Zen, it is not my concern to determine a linear, causal relationship between the two – to research how and why specific artists at specific times took specific 'inspiration' from Zen. Fluxus artists were, and remain, proudly omnivorous in their approaches to alternative modes of living and art-making; and so it would be an error to assert that any single artist found his or her philosophical base in the ways and means of Zen – and a graver error to imply that there was a universal interest in Eastern philosophies among the participants of Fluxus.<sup>11</sup> Fluxus is too slippery for that; too slippery, indeed, for one to assert anything that will not fall short of presenting an accurate, comprehensive picture. With this in mind, it should be noted that this paper – like any paper that claims to speak *about* Fluxus (or Zen, for that matter) – is tentative, provisional, and according to some, entirely off the mark. 'Fluxus encompasses opposites', says George

Brecht; no matter what one might think about it, 'there is someone associated with Fluxus who agrees with you.'<sup>12</sup> The contrary of this statement is also true: there is someone associated with Fluxus who disagrees with you.

## THE EVENT

Throughout this century there has been a strain of art that has sought to eliminate the perceived boundaries between art and life. Contemporary chroniclers of the art scene of the early 1960s, as well as the artists themselves, were well aware of their predecessors in similar pursuits. Unlike, say, the Futurists of an earlier era, who saw themselves as a new breed, determined to liberate themselves from the weight of history and inherited cultural baggage, intermedia artists of the early 1960s were only too happy to point out antecedents for their work, as if to stake out their own place within an alternative lineage of artistic production, a marginalised history that stood outside and against the mainstream.

Fluxus was a group of nominally kindred spirits who together and separately surveyed the peripheral territories of their respective disciplines, or rather the margins *between* those disciplines. The new structures that resulted from these explorations tested received notions of the limits of the arts, as well as the limits of our ability to perceive those structures *as* art.

George Maciunas staked out the historical parameters of these territorial researches with a zeal bordering on the maniacal. Trained in architecture, graphic design and art history, Maciunas had a considerable attraction to structure and order; he has been described as 'an obsessive/compulsive personality that accumulated, hoarded, classified, and dissected'.<sup>13</sup> He was also a fan of the film comedian Buster Keaton and of Spike Jones the bandleader whose parodies of popular and classical music – incorporating the sounds of pots and pans, car-horns, gunshots and kazoos – fused the boundaries between music and slapstick comedy. Maciunas' art-historical essays took the form of charts: painstakingly drawn evolutionary diagrams of the newest occurrences in the arts (those new occurrences, that is, that were of interest to Maciunas). Perhaps the largest of these charts is his *Diagram of Historical Development of Fluxus and Other 4 Dimensional, Aural, Optic, Olfactory, Epithelial and Tactile Art Forms (Incomplete)*, in which respects are paid to Futurist Theatre, Marcel Duchamp, Surrealism, Dada, Walt Disney spectacles, Byzantine iconoclasm, the Japanese Gutai Group, vaudeville, Joseph Cornell, and much else – in short, a fairly broad spectrum of historical traditions and isolated phenomena that have in common a re-evaluation of accepted notions of structure, both aesthetic and ontological.

Zen is not mentioned on this chart. Nor would one necessarily expect to find it there. John Cage, however, is. Indeed, the chart, says Maciunas, 'starts with what influenced Cage. Cage is definitely the central figure in the chart.' In fact, he continues, 'you could call the whole chart like "Travels of John Cage" like you could say "Travels of St. Paul"', you know? Wherever John Cage went he left a little John Cage group, which some admit, some not admit his influence. But the fact is there, that those groups formed after his visits. It shows up very clearly on the chart.<sup>14</sup>

'The argument goes like this', says the poet Emmett Williams, who is justifiably critical of the notion of a 'direct influence' of Zen on Fluxus:

John Cage was a student of Daisetsu T. Suzuki, the Japanese religious philosopher who helped to make the Western world aware of the nature and importance of Zen. In turn, many of the activists on the American Fluxus scene studied with Cage, who opened a few of the Doors of Perception for them. Ergo: Fluxus has a direct connection with Zen.

It would be more accurate to say: Ergo: Fluxus has a direct connection with John Cage. But Cage is an artist and a teacher, not a Zen missionary, who also 'studied' with Schönberg, Duchamp and Buckminster Fuller. Besides, there has been for many years a worldwide interest in Zen and other sects of Buddhism, and it would be surprising if Fluxus artists, generally a well-informed and well-travelled lot, were not aware of these disciplines, and of the value of meditation.<sup>15</sup>

John Cage, though certainly 'not a Zen missionary', was one of the most important conduits of Eastern thought to the Western world. As if directly addressing Williams' concerns about Cage's own role in the foundation of Fluxthought (but speaking of Dada rather than Fluxus), Cage notes: 'It is possible to make a connection between the two, but neither Dada nor Zen is a fixed tangible. They change; and in quite different ways in different places and times, they invigorate action.'<sup>16</sup>

It was in large part through the activities and pedagogy of John Cage that both Dada and Zen came to invigorate action during the late 1950s. As Williams points out, Cage studied chess with Duchamp for a time and was attracted in no small measure by the utopian thought of Fuller and the formal purity of Schönberg's music. And indeed, Cage attended lectures by Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki at Columbia University from 1949 to 1951. Suzuki's thought played a great role in the formation of Cage's own production; Suzuki's teachings, he felt, enabled him to regard music 'not as a communication from the artist to an audience, but rather as an activity of sounds in which the artist found a way to let sounds be themselves'.<sup>17</sup> As a vehicle of signification, this approach could 'open the minds of the people who made them or listened to them to other possibilities than they had previously considered ... To widen their experience; particularly to undermine the making of value-judgements.'<sup>18</sup>

In 1952 Cage had explored the opening of the mind to other possibilities in a piece entitled '4'33'', in which the pianist, David Tudor, sat at a piano and did nothing except indicate the beginning and end of each of the three movements by shutting and lifting the piano's lid. During the piece itself, no sound is intentionally produced by the pianist on the instrument. Four minutes and thirty-three seconds of distinctly *musical* silence: Cage, a composer of music, has imposed as a framework a measure of time and declared that whatever incidental sound occurs within this framework is a piece of music. With Cage came the notion that duration, sound and silence, rather than harmony, rhythm and melody, are the foundation blocks upon which musical experience is structured. With no melodic or harmonic passages to lead the listener through time, Cage's music ceases to function as narrative, but rather places the listener in the vertically structured space of synchrony – *this moment in time*. And time, as we have come to know it in this century, is interdependent with space.

It was the notion of opening to possibilities that Cage brought with him to the International Summer Course for New Music in Darmstadt (1958), and which he shared with his classes in 'Experimental Composition' at the New School for Social Research (1956 – 1960). Numbered among the participants at Darmstadt were La Monte Young and Nam June Paik (Emmett Williams was also living in Darmstadt at this time). Among those who attended the New School classes, with varying degrees of regularity, were Dick Higgins, Al

Hansen, Allan Kaprow, Toshi Ichyanagi, George Brecht and Jackson Mac Low (Brecht and Mac Low had been invited to sit in by Cage), all of whom were to play pivotal roles in the development of intermedia.

Cage's students were introduced to his understanding of music as time-space, and formulated their own methods for exploring these uncharted waters. On the one hand, students like Allan Kaprow and Al Hansen were impressed by the Cage/Dada notion of the 'simultaneous presentation of unrelated events' and went on to create happenings – complex, multi-sensory constructions – what Fluxus artist Tomas Schmit called 'the expressionistic, symbolic, voluminous opera-type-of-thing' – such as Kaprow's 1959 *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*.<sup>19</sup>

On the other hand, George Brecht – for whom the Cage class was in part 'a kind of confirmation' of 'the thought of Suzuki that I'd already discovered on my own'<sup>20</sup> – was not so inclined to construct as to *notice*: 'Composers, performers and auditors of music permit sound-experiences by arranging situations having sound as an aspect. But the theatre is well lit. I cough; the seat cracks, and I can feel the vibration. Since there is no distraction, why choose sound as a common aspect?'<sup>21</sup> Brecht claimed to be 'increasingly dissatisfied with an emphasis on the purely aural qualities of a situation', and so began to call his work, even his object-oriented work, 'Events'. This word, he claims, 'seemed closer to describing the total, multi-sensory experience I was interested in than any other . . .'<sup>22</sup> Rather than examining the extravagance and multi-sensory barrage that constituted many happenings, Brecht's work was 'very private, like little enlightenments I wanted to communicate to my friends who would know what to do with them.'<sup>23</sup>

#### *Three Telephone Events*

- When the telephone rings, it is allowed to continue ringing, until it stops.
  - When the telephone rings, the receiver is lifted, then replaced.
  - When the telephone rings, it is answered.
- Performance note: Each event comprises all occurrences within its duration.  
Spring, 1961

'I don't take any credit for having written a score like telephone events', said Brecht in a radio programme of May 1964. His role as 'writer', in this instance, is that of the scripting of possibilities implicit in one's engagement with a ringing telephone. Brecht's addendum, noting that 'Each event comprises all occurrences within its duration', informs the reader that the three performance possibilities listed may in fact be three individual *perceptions* of a single phenomenon. In contrast to the constructivist tendencies of the Happenings, in which the ringing of a telephone becomes an aspect of a larger composition, Brecht isolates and focuses on the single phenomenon, revealing the multiplicity within that singularity. For Brecht, the 'act of imagination or perception is in itself an arrangement, so there is no avoiding anyone making arrangements'. It is therefore also seen as unnecessary to develop complex, polymorphic structures for presentation: a single telephone ringing provides sufficiently fertile ground for performance possibilities. It is the *interaction* between the percipient/performer and the object perceived that provides richness and diversity. Brecht's

'little enlightenments' are acts of quotidian simplicity which are *presented* and *noticed*, or vice versa; indeed, Brecht declares, 'the occurrence that would be of most interest to me would be the little occurrences in the street ...'<sup>24</sup>

While Brecht may have coined the term 'Event' to refer to his 'private little enlightenments', he was by no means the only individual investigating the realm of monostructural presentation. In 1960 La Monte Young produced a series of 'Compositions' that built upon the ground of questioning opened up by John Cage's 4'33''.

*Composition #3 1960*

Announce to the audience when the piece will  
begin and end if there is a limit on duration.  
It may be of any duration.  
Then announce that everyone may do whatever  
he wishes for the duration of the composition.

Similar in some respects to Cage's piece, principally in the use of duration as its limiting aspect, Young's work, a musical 'composition', stretches the conception of performance by eliminating the need for a specifically *musical* instrument and performer, employing instead an 'announcer' to simply indicate the boundaries of the event. The audience thus become the performers and are given complete freedom to act within the established confines of the piece. While the work can still be understood as music, it is raw action and perception that themselves become the stuff of the performance, outside the limitations of our understanding of music as sound, silence and duration. In the following piece, Young questions the necessity of determining duration within a work, and examines the notion of synaesthesia, of a structured reversal or combination of perceptual acts, asking, 'Isn't it wonderful if someone listens to something he is ordinarily supposed to look at?'<sup>25</sup>

*Composition #5 1960*

Turn a butterfly (or any number of butterflies) loose in the performance area.  
When the composition is over, be sure to allow the butterfly to fly away outside.  
The composition may be any length, but if an unlimited amount of time is available, the doors and windows may be opened before the butterfly is turned loose and the composition may be considered finished when the butterfly flies away.

The beating wings of a butterfly surely do produce sound – and can thus, by traditional standards, be appreciated as music – but this sound is certainly beyond the range of normal human perception. In such an extreme state, one becomes aware of the inability of a single mode of perception, in this case hearing, to reveal the totality of an object as it presents itself. The notion of a categorisation or isolation of the senses, and consequently of the specific arts that are addressed to those isolated senses, comes under question. In order to understand an object in its totality, the perceiver must herself be perceiving *as* a totality. In a commentary to the sixteenth case of the *Wumenguan* (in Japanese, *Mumonkan*), a thirteenth-century collection of koans, Wumen asks his reader:

Does sound come to the ear, or does the ear go to sound? Even if echoes and silence are both forgotten, when you reach this, how do you understand verbally? If you use your ears to listen, it will be hard to understand; only when you hear sound through your eyes will you be close.<sup>26</sup>

This is where matters begin to get interesting.

## THE BIG PROBLEM OF NAMING LITTLE THINGS

'There is, of course, one important thing that the masters of Zen and the masters of Fluxus have in common', notes Emmett Williams in his 1992 telling of the Fluxus story, 'the extreme difficulty of explaining, to the outside world, exactly what it is that they are masters of'.<sup>27</sup> While I disagree with Williams that this is the *one* important moment of commonality between Zen and Fluxus, Williams brings to light an important issue. Indeed, both Fluxus and Zen evade attempts to concretise them in language, attempts to effect their permanence, their stability.

Fluxus treads a strange terrain, a liminal space somewhere between words and silence. One of its key products are *Event scores*, taut little propositions, exercises, or word-objects, usually printed on small, often disposable, cards or sheets of paper. For example:

*Disappearing Music For Face*  
smile  
stop to smile  
C Shiommi Feb. 1964<sup>28</sup>

Hundreds of these event scores have been published over the past thirty years, and in many cases, they are all that remain of the events for which they served as the original impetus. The events themselves – elegant, ephemeral monostructural gestures which may be performed before an audience, alone or in a group, or in the mind – and the objects which are revealed within their structures, unfold in a space to which words have limited access: this space is not the space of language, nor of silence, but of being, or rather, becoming. Like Zen, Fluxus uses language to force a confrontation with the inadequacies of language, and posits instead a field of direct experience that eludes systematisation.

The earliest moment of Buddhist performance and its critical reception is the stuff of legend. Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha (c.560–480 BCE), after attaining enlightenment, stood on top of the Mount of the Vultures to offer a sermon to his disciples. Saying nothing, Shakyamuni held up a single golden lotus blossom before all those in attendance. His disciples were baffled by this gesture, save for one Mahakasyapa, who simply smiled in understanding. This circle of act and reception, the 'transmission of the lamp' of enlightenment outside the constructs of the language of scripture, direct action with 'no dependence on words and letters', came to constitute an essential paradigm of Zen's method and self-perception: Here it is – what is there to say?

The argument behind this method of disclosure, says Daisetz Suzuki, is simple, and quite beautiful:

The idea of direct method appealed to by the masters is to get hold of this fleeting life as it flees and not after it has flown. While it is fleeing, there is no time to recall memory or to build ideas. No reasoning avails here. Language may be used, but this has been associated too long with ideation, and has lost direction or being by itself. As soon as words are used, they express meaning, reasoning; they represent something not belonging to themselves; they have no direct connection with life, except being a faint echo or image of something that is no longer here.<sup>29</sup>

There is nothing mystical about this, really: a communication of what is true can certainly be expressed or contained in words – words themselves are *dharmas*, manifestations of reality –

but it also suggests that transmission of understanding is *independent* of language, indeed, that language is something of a hindrance to genuine understanding. Zen Buddhism ultimately attempts to foster a direct, unmediated relationship between the mind and reality, an immediate experience of the world *as such*. This is no easy goal to achieve, given the preponderance of language in the structuring of our day-to-day experience of the world and in the structuring of our own consciousness. It is language, after all, that comprises scripture and koan, as it is language which names the 'butter' and 'eggs' featured in Dick Higgins' May 1962 *Danger Music Number Fifteen (For the Dance)*:

Work with butter and eggs for a time.

Yet the words that constitute this language are not themselves the beliefs contained within scripture, nor are they the eggs that were tossed about during the performance, and which I am still rinsing out of my hair. A paradox thus presents itself. Language constitutes our subjective experience of the world, yet this very subjectivity simultaneously prevents us from experiencing the world in its *suchness*. Do we then discard language in order to gain access to an authentic experience of the world?

Yes and no. Chuang-tzu, one of the founders of philosophical Taoism, an important influence on the development of Zen in China, suggests that words be regarded as a net which is employed to catch fish; this net (known in Japanese as *senjyō*) is required to perform a task, but it is the fish themselves which are consumed: 'Words,' says Chuang-tzu, 'are there to convey a profound meaning; we should keep the meaning and forget the words.'<sup>30</sup> One must cast one's net if one is to catch any fish at all. One must also be wary of becoming entangled in the net. Language must by necessity be employed as a tool, but in such a way that it will create the conditions in which it is no longer useful, a void in which its own absence can be filled by unmediated perception and direct action. The principal tool used by Rinzai Zen (one of the two major schools of Zen) to accomplish this end is the technique of *kanna Zen* – literally 'Zen of the contemplation of words'. The form of this contemplation is embodied in the *koan*.

The term 'koan' is derived from the Chinese *kung-an*, which originally signified 'a legal case constituting a precedent'.<sup>31</sup> Koans have been used as a systematic medium of training since the eleventh century, when the students of Lin-Chi (Rinzai in Japanese) compiled the discourses and sayings of their master into a single volume, the *Rinzairoku*.<sup>32</sup> A koan may take the form of a portion of a *sutra*, an episode from the life of one of the great masters of the tradition, a *mondo* (a baffling dialogue between master and student), or a paradox; in short, any form that will, through the use of words, ultimately engage the student in a direct relationship with reality. Rather than being theoretical or discursive in nature, the constitutive form of a given koan (question or statement and response) is an example of its own teaching, codified in language. Ruth Fuller Sasaki points out:

The koan is not a conundrum to be solved by a nimble wit. It is not a verbal psychiatric device for shocking the disintegrated ego of a student into some kind of stability. Nor, in my opinion, is it ever a paradoxical statement except to those who view it from the outside. When the koan is resolved it is realised to be a simple and clear statement made from the state of consciousness which it has helped awaken.<sup>33</sup>

The beginning student, however, has no notion of this and struggles to seek an answer founded in the codes of language itself; after all, it is language which constitutes her very

subjectivity. But how does one respond in language to a problem such as the familiar, classic koan: 'What is the sound of one hand clapping?' Sitting on her solitary meditation cushion – legs locked in the lotus position, spine straight, hands folded in *mudra*, eyes half-open, breathing normally – the student begins to focus on the problem: one hand, the student may think, makes no noise at all; indeed, two hands are required for clapping. Tentatively, she will go to her *roshi*, or master, perhaps offering as a solution: 'The one hand makes no sound at all.' The *roshi* will deny the validity of this answer in some fashion (he might even strike the student, if this seems necessary, in order to bring the student into an immediate, incontestable appreciation of this moment), and the student will return to her problem. Time and again, she confronts the *roshi* with a solution, and time and again she is turned away. This state of affairs breeds a considerable and mounting tension. After some time, the problem becomes the single thought contained within the student's mind; there is room for nothing else. Finally, the tension has to break.

The traditionally 'correct' response to the problem of the one hand is this: the student thrusts her hand out toward the *roshi* and says nothing. Effectively, this is something akin to saying, 'Here is the sound Listen.' (In response to certain koans, the *roshi* may himself be slapped by the student, an appropriate gesture signifying, in part, the transcendence by the student of the master–student power relationship). Here then is a severing of the hand, if you would, and of the perceiving subject, from their linguistic correlatives. What is being presented is not 'one' hand clapping, and not 'two' (that is, not 'not-one'), but the sound itself as such, beyond such a dualistic notion as 'one'/'not-one': just this act presencing, a fact unfolding here before you. In short, an answer to a koan must be revealed experientially, as a demonstration or an example of the very principle it embodies.

What do koans have to do with Fluxus? Victor Musgrave, whose Gallery One hosted the 1962 Festival of Misfits, notes: 'some of the Fluxus artists have . . . produced significant equivalents' to 'the bandaged, all-seeing ambiguities of [Zen's] marvelous koan.' He asserts that this is 'the most formidable task that Fluxus artists have attempted.'<sup>34</sup> I agree. But how do the artists of Fluxus engage this 'formidable task'? How are Fluxus works the 'significant equivalents' of koans?

It is important to note that, according to Musgrave, an equivalence is seen not between Fluxus work and Zen painting or haiku verse, but between Fluxus work and koans. Rather than compare the work of Fluxus artists to the *expressions* of the specific sensibility that accompanies Zen practice, Musgrave likens Fluxus events to the principal *pedagogical* tool of Zen, the koan. The Fluxus work is not an index of the performer's relationship with his or her materials, as the exquisite brushwork of a Zen painting traces the path of the scribe's hand and presence of 'no-mind'. Rather, the Fluxus work, like the koan, is the exposition of the path itself, the restructuring and presentation of a process of meaning-production. The form a work takes is the demonstration of the unfolding processes of its own presentation and reception. Like the circular, stimulus/response form of the koan, Fluxus 'presentation', to quote Dick Higgins, 'would always have to do somehow with the general principle that ideas could be displayed or demonstrated rather than argued for or against.'<sup>35</sup>

## NO-HAND

In 1976 Higgins formulated his 'Exemplativist Manifesto', in which he outlines the mutable structures of what he terms *exemplative* work; that is, work in which 'the idea is developed through its embodiment in the actual work, and thus the work is an instrument for conveying a thought-and-feeling complex by implying a set of examples of it.'<sup>36</sup> George Brecht describes this notion as 'an expression of maximum meaning with a minimal image, that is, the achievement of an art of multiple implications, through simple, even austere, means.'<sup>37</sup> Exemplative work offers the audience/percipient/participant a construct of notation and performance, 'an image of the set of possibilities intended by the artist'.<sup>38</sup> The following snippet of conversation between George Brecht and Irmeline Lebeer gives an indication of how one might respond to a specific work, *Piano Piece*, for which the score reads simply 'centre':

- GB How would you realise this?  
 IL Me? Oh ... for example by pushing the piano into the centre of the room.  
 GB And how would you choose the centre of the room?  
 IL The centre of the room? You can feel where that is, can't you?  
 GB You mean intuitively?  
 IL You could also strike a note in the middle of a piano. Or drop something on the strings in the middle of the piano.  
 GB Yes. There are lots of possibilities, aren't there?  
 IL And you? What did you do? You've already realised it yourself, no?  
 GB Yes. With my two index fingers I began to play the notes of the piano starting from the two ends until I found the note in the centre.  
 IL Oh, of course. That's fantastic. In that case, that's the piece?  
 GB No, no – it's completely open. The realisations you've just made up are as good as any other.<sup>39</sup>

Event scores such as *Piano Piece* mark a culminating moment of what Umberto Eco described in 1959 as the 'open work'. Such works, notes Eco, 'tend to encourage "acts of conscious freedom" on the part of the performer and place him at the focal point of a network of limitless interrelations, among which he chooses to set up his own form without being influenced by any external *necessity* which definitively prescribes the organisation of the work in hand'.<sup>40</sup> Rather than presenting the conditions of an ideal performance – tempi, musical cues, specific notes to be played on specific instruments, colours, lighting, materials, and so on – the Fluxus event score *suggests* certain parameters in which the performer is free to determine his own form.

This *suggestiveness*, notes Eco, is the ability of the Event score text to stimulate in a performer/reader the capacity to adapt her own inner life to that of the work being performed, 'some deeper response that mirrors the subtler resonances underlying the text'.<sup>41</sup> But where does one look for the 'subtler resonances' in a text such as this one by Robert Watts, which simply reads:

winter event  
 snow

Indeed, the performer of this work is faced with an object that is nearly tautological in its apparent simplicity. Such a work cannot be regarded on its own merits – there is almost nothing here to be regarded. This is a work with virtually no *intrinsic* merit, no form of its own, no qualities of which to speak. Rather, as Eco says, it is 'the focal point of a network of limitless interrelations', and, as such, has an infinite potential number of possible realisations.

Now, rather than argue for or against this (we will return to this notion later), here is something the reader can do on his or her own that might help make the issue clearer. It is a piece by Fluxus artist Takehisa Kosugi called *Chironomy 1* (chironomy, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is 'the art or science of moving the hands according to rule, as in pantomime or oratory'). The text of the piece reads: 'Put out a hand from a window for a long time.' According to this text, the only tools needed to perform the piece are a hand, a window, and time (how much time constitutes 'long time' is up to the performer). So choose a window, choose a hand, decide on a length of time, and perform the piece. The discussion will continue afterwards.

Like Watts' *Winter Event*, the written text of Kosugi's piece says very little: it presents a simple image which offers nothing more than itself as proof, as baffling an injunction as it is apparently meaningless. What *does* it mean to 'put out a hand from a window for a long time?' To search for meaning in the written text as a closed, autonomous form is futile; there is simply nothing there to explain and no clue to understanding. One must look elsewhere for direction: Kosugi's text is a *musical score*; like any written musical score, one must *perform* the piece, follow its instruction in real-time, in order that it may reveal itself as meaningful.

The hand serves as the focusing element, a meditative stasis around which the world unfolds. During my own private performance of *Chironomy 1*,<sup>42</sup> I heard some yelling across the way, and the cry of a baby. Cars passed on the street below, there was a rich aroma of frying meat floating on the wind and the soft hum of my computer on the desk near by. After quite a few minutes of maintaining the gesture, I felt a slight pain in my forearm, a slow throb that worked its way up to my shoulder and the base of my neck. In the face of this pain, I became more determined to maintain the gesture, and soon it seemed clear that the piece, for me, was no longer one of formal duration – that is, was no longer concerned with the simple passing of time – but of *endurance*, of a body situated within a shifting, temporal network of physical and mental phenomena; this network in turn was brought to light by the body's situation within its structure, simultaneously inside and outside, revealed by the act of a single gesture *presencing*. In my performance of *Chironomy 1*, the gesturing hand – the distinct object named in Kosugi's text and thus initially the primary focus of my own consciousness – could not be located as an object independent of its context.

Kosugi described his own experience of *Chironomy 1* as follows:

I did one performance related to this piece in an outdoor space in Kyoto. There was an outdoor stage, and there was an auditorium, and at the rear of the stage was a backdrop, a wall and a door. I just slightly opened the door and put my hand out. The audience could only see my hand. The opening in the door was very narrow, so I couldn't see the audience. So the outside space was so different; the hand was exposed to the audience, and this part, my body, was behind the wall, so I was very isolated. Psychologically very strange.

Window, door, the same thing. It is the passage between in and out, so one can shut the door, and make an inside and outside. Putting one part of the body through the window, it becomes part of the outside – but the body is the inside – psychologically, it's very unusual, very affecting to the consciousness. So this is a part of mine, and I'm

exposing a part of the inside into a part of the outside. A kind of feedback. This part of my body, the hand, is very much a part of me. But if you expose it to the outside, and if there's a barrier between the hand and the body, then the hand could be independent – a little bit.

This side, my inside, and the outside, are so different, but still they are the same. So from the audience side, they can only see my hand. I cannot see my hand. But as a total reality, they are the same thing. I have my hand with me, but I cannot see it. The audience can see only my hand, but they cannot see my body. So, take this chair as an example. Maybe it has another part and it is exposed to another dimension, but we cannot see it. But everything is together. On the physical stage, it's just a chair.

A tactile experience, this piece. Eyes and ears are open; perhaps this makes the eyes and ears more sensitive. But most important is the hand: the hand is an antenna.<sup>43</sup>

What Kosugi has succeeded in creating is a wholly liminal state, a condition in which the notions of 'interior' and 'exterior' have been reversed, and finally revealed as inappropriate.

'In exemplative art', says Dick Higgins, 'the action is always between: it cannot take place at any one pole without the conception of another. It is therefore, as af Klintberg put it:

between the heart and the mind,  
between the personal and the objective,  
between the unitary and the general,  
between the warm and the cold,  
between the water and the stone.'<sup>44</sup>

If an open window serves as a frame, it also functions as a space of transit and becoming, neither solely inside nor outside. When a body part, such as a hand – Kosugi also experimented with other body parts during his career – is positioned within that marginal space, our ability to locate the space, or to name the 'isolated' body part within that space, is put into question. The body, as it enters the space of the margin, is *neither* inside *nor* outside – and it is *both* inside and outside. The apparent opposition of terms is unified – and nullified – through direct action. Both one and zero. Neither one nor zero. The sound of one hand clapping.

From a Buddhist perspective, there is no hand, no object, but for that act which enables the world to come to presence, and there is no world but for that *context* in which *this hand* reveals itself. Likewise, there can be no 'subject' and no 'object', but rather a relationship between the two that exists beyond one's ability to name them, or even perceive them, as isolated entities. Each is the cause of the other, each implies the existence of the other. It is thus conceptually inaccurate to distinguish between the two: they are one and the same thing.<sup>45</sup>

George Brecht examines the complexity of this mutual causation and the attendant problem of naming in this event score from 1961:

*Two Exercises*

Consider an object. Call what is not the object 'other.'

EXERCISE: Add to the object, from the 'other,' another object, to form a new object and a new 'other.'  
Repeat until there is no more 'other.'

EXERCISE: Take a part from the object and add it to the 'other,' to form a new object and a new 'other.'  
Repeat until there is no more object.

In attempting to create a 'new object' from an 'object' and an 'other', it becomes clear that

the 'object' constitutes the 'other', and vice versa. 'What is "it"', says Chuang-tzu, 'is also the "other"', what is the "other" is also "it" . . . Are there really It and Other? Or really no It and Other?' This question is ultimately unanswerable. 'Therefore', says Chuang-tzu, 'the glitter of glib debate is despised by the sage. The contrived "that's it" he does not use, but finds things in their places as usual. It is this I call "throwing things open to the light"'.<sup>46</sup>

This notion of 'finding things in their places as usual' proved attractive for many of the artists involved in Fluxus. For Brecht, it came as something of a 'surprise' when he 'learned that George Maciunas in Germany and France, Cornelius Cardew and Robin Page in England, Kosugi, Kubota, Shiomi in Japan, and others, had made public realisations of the pieces *I had always waited to notice occurring*' (my emphasis).<sup>47</sup> Brecht's Event scores – some of them, that is – can be seen as little exercises in concentrated attention, indices of phenomena *yet to occur*, virtual events waiting to be perceived or enacted. The participant in such exercises herself resides in a condition of relaxed awareness, attentive to shifting details in the poetic field – or perhaps not. Either way, Brecht's Event scores serve to describe the parameters in which this attention – or distraction – is practised.

## ATTENTION

From the beginning intermedia was concerned with matters of noticing phenomena as they occurred, requiring an act of attention by the participant in order for the work itself to be realised. This posed a dramatic shift of roles for both artist and receiver. As Dick Higgins points out, the artist becomes the creator of a matrix, rather than a completed work; the role of the receiver becomes that of a participant and collaborator.<sup>48</sup> In effect, the receiver does not merely finish a work, but *creates* it anew with each performance. This is a position of considerable responsibility – a work can never be performed precisely the same way twice, and so one must be attentive to the work's unique process of unfolding. Jackson Mac Low, a poet and co-editor of the seminal collection of the new arts, *An Anthology* (1961), has given some attention to the practice of attention:

From Zen I gathered the conviction that giving one's complete attention to any dharma (perception, form, feeling, etc.) may lead to a direct insight into reality, and that such insight can free us from suffering, which, as Buddhism teaches, pervades all sentient existence. (Briefly, through this insight the world of suffering, or *samsara*, is revealed to be basically the world of blissful awareness, or *nirvana*.) This way of perceiving is often characterised in Buddhist literature as 'choiceless awareness' or 'bare attention.'

Being 'choicelessly aware' is perceiving phenomena – as far as possible – without attachment and without bias. Artworks may facilitate this kind of perception by *presenting* phenomena that are not chosen according to the tastes and predilections of the artists who make them. One way of doing this – though not the only way – is to bring phenomena (including language) to the perceivers of the artworks by means of chance operations or other relatively "nonegoic" methods in which the artist's tastes, passions and predilections intervene much less than when artworks are made in other, more traditional, ways.<sup>49</sup>

In this passage, Mac Low is concerned with the means of presenting, rather than with the content of presentation. Choiceless awareness can be facilitated by processes in which the participant, by 'perceiving phenomena . . . without attachment and without bias,' structures a

psychic space in which each percept is as meaningful – or as meaningless – as any other.

One method of creating this space, according to Walter De Maria's contribution to *An Anthology*, is to engage oneself in 'Meaningless Work':

By meaningless work I simply mean work which does not make you money or accomplish a conventional purpose. For instance putting wooden blocks from one box to another, then putting the blocks back to the original box, back and forth, back and forth etc., is a fine example of meaningless work. Or digging a hole, then covering it is another example. Filing letters in a filing cabinet could be considered meaningless work, only if one were not a secretary, and if one scattered the file on the floor periodically so that one didn't get any feeling of accomplishment . . .

Meaningless work is potentially the most abstract, concrete, individual, foolish, indeterminate, exactly determined, varied, important art-action-experience one can undertake today. This concept is not a joke. Try some meaningless work in the privacy of your own room. In fact, to be fully understood, meaningless work should be done alone or else it becomes entertainment for others and the reaction or lack of reaction of the art lover to the meaningless work cannot be honestly felt.

Meaningless work can contain all of the best qualities of old art forms such as painting, writing etc. It can make you feel and think about yourself, the outside world, morality, reality, unconsciousness, nature, history, time, philosophy, nothing at all, politics, etc. without the limitations of the old art forms.<sup>50</sup>

De Maria's 'Meaningless Work' is concerned specifically with process for its own sake. While it opens up a space in which one can 'feel and think about yourself, the outside world', such a result is a secondary function of the work. De Maria's principal concern is that the participant experience a complete engagement in the work-process, devoid of purpose. Such engagement may be enacted in a condition of either directed attention or unfocused distraction; the texture of the experience is inscribed within the parameters of this reception. The work itself offers no reward – the receiver will draw from the work what meaning he will. Dick Higgins enjoys this sort of activity for just this reason: 'The nature of purposelessness interests me very much', he says. 'It is a great source of mental refreshment to do something for no particular reason, especially when it is not interesting or refreshing. One simply becomes conscious of nothing in particular. That phenomenon is implicit in a lot of my work.'<sup>51</sup>

The phenomenon is also present in much of the work of Ken Friedman, whose *Scrub Piece* – first performed in 1956, when Friedman was six years old – stands as something of a paradigmatic piece of meaningless work:

*Scrub Piece*

On the first day of Spring,  
go unannounced to a public monument.  
Clean it thoroughly.<sup>52</sup>

From one perspective, the notion of meaningless work, 'work which does not make you money or accomplish a conventional purpose', is an ironic commentary on the traditional role of the artist as a 'bohemian' producer of autonomous, transcendental, 'useless' objects. Indeed, George Maciunas believed Fluxus to be an intermediate step on the way to a total dissolution of art. In art's stead, he posited concretism and anti-art. The merit of the concrete artist, says Maciunas, 'consists in creating a concept or method by which form can be created independently of him.'<sup>53</sup> Maciunas' anti-art is concerned with dismantling the pretensions

that accompany the notion of the artist. It is 'directed against art as a profession, against the artificial separation of a performer from audience, or creator and spectator, or life and art: it is against the artificial forms or patterns or methods of art itself; it is against the purposefulness, formfulness and meaningfulness of art.' For Maciunas, 'Fluxus should become a way of life not a profession . . . Fluxus people must obtain their "art" experience from everyday experiences, eating, working, etc.'<sup>54</sup> And even further:

Anti-art is life, is nature, is true reality – it is one and all. Rainfall is anti-art, a babble of a crowd is anti-art, a flight of a butterfly, or movements of microbes is anti-art. They are as beautiful and as worth to be aware of as art itself. If man could experience the world, the concrete world surrounding him, (from mathematical ideas to physical matter) in the same way he experiences art, there would be no need for art, artists and similar 'nonproductive' elements.<sup>55</sup>

For Maciunas, 'anti-art', like nature, is ultimately the most complete sort of aesthetic experience, for it is presented without aesthetic *intention*; like rainfall, it just happens. Purposelessness – attentive engagement in a task simply in order to be engaged in engaging in a task – is thus a singularly radical conflation of the praxes of 'art' and 'life': anyone can do it. Yet as Jackson Mac Low points out, this purposelessness indeed becomes a purpose when it is employed to specifically political ends – that is, when 'works such as ours are considered merely tools with which to do away with art and artists. There may be, as some critics express it, "an anti-art moment" in such works, but this is subsumed in an immanently oppositional art with widened horizons.' As Mac Low sees it, 'the aesthetic of most artists associated with Fluxus is and always has been nearer to [John Cage's] "opening to the world" aesthetic than to Maciunas' anti-art position'.<sup>56</sup>

## MAKING A SALAD

Alison Knowles created situations of delicate, even mysterious, elegance in much of her early work. Her simplest and perhaps best-known work, *Proposition*, was first performed on 21 October 1962 at the Institute for Contemporary Arts in London.<sup>57</sup>

Make a salad.

Here is an act that is performed many times a day, in many different ways, by countless hungry individuals around the globe.<sup>58</sup> Knowles does not offer a recipe for a salad, does not elucidate the form that such a salad should take, but rather instructs the performer to act, simply to make a salad. Transplanted into the context of the concert hall, such an act becomes a specifically artistic or musical presentation – an unwritten contract between the performer and the audience that the work will be received within the horizon of art- or music-production. There is a mode of heightened perception that attends the making of a salad within the four walls of the concert hall; one is ostensibly there, after all, to listen to music or experience a theatrical presentation. Yet, with a work such as *Proposition*, a peculiar reversal takes place that draws the work outside the contract of theatrical presentation: one becomes explicitly aware of a quotidian object/action as having become something extraordinary (that is, 'art') by virtue of its context. One is immediately reminded of Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* of 1917, a common urinal signed by the artist and relocated into the space of the gallery, the

museum, and, ultimately, art-historical discourse. But Knowles' salad-production makes an additional leap: such an action need not be supported by the structures of artistic presentation in order to be extraordinary. While one might return from viewing *Fountain* with a renewed awareness of and respect for the form of common urinals, and with a sense of the power of institutions to frame and shape our perceptions of the world, one does not henceforth experience the *act of urination itself* as an act of producing art. In Knowles' work, by contrast, there is nothing but the performance of an action. Clearly, such a work need not be performed in an Art Institute for it to become meaningful. Nor does it have to be perceived as meaningful in order for it to be performed at all. 'Art' becomes 'life' and 'life' becomes 'art' and finally the distinction between the two becomes confused, superfluous. Knowles comments:

I think that many of the pieces are just simple refreshment pieces done for whatever day's work you have to do, supporting occurrences in life. It gives members of the audience the ball; they can make their own salad differently, even if they are doing it for their family ... Whatever it is you have to touch and work with, you can make a kind of performance of it, but it has to be stripped of the hangings and accoutrements of theatre. What happens is that a kind of revelation, no an emptiness, opens up.<sup>59</sup>

This quality of emptiness, says Knowles, is brought about through action performed 'exactly, precisely and modestly'. She notes: 'That's why Zen is mentioned in terms of Fluxus event performing. The action is directed and precise with nothing added.'<sup>60</sup>

By adhering to a strict procedure, by bracketing 'artistic' intention and simply making a salad, the performer allows that action to come to presence *as such*, unfolding in a space *between* states of being art or non-art. The making of Knowles' salad – or your salad, or mine – is a narration of the condition of liminality itself, the disruption of the frames of reference in which the act of making a salad occurs: making a salad is not art, yet it is not simply making a salad. And of course, it is both.

## JUST SITTING

The central practice of Zen is sitting meditation, or *zazen*. In Soto Zen, the second of the major schools, the use of koan has been virtually eliminated, and practical procedure has been minimised to this practice, 'just sitting' – a practice that one can apply when engaged in more complicated actions, such as making a salad, dripping, or playing baseball with a fruit. The act of sitting is perceived as a 'dynamic stillness' – one sits in a rigorously prescribed posture, unmoving, yet constituted by interior processes in constant motion: the heart beats, blood courses through its vessels, air enters and is expelled from the lungs, the stomach churns away at its food ...

In Robert Filliou's *Yes – an action poem*, performed on 8 February 1965 at New York's Cafe au Go-Go,<sup>61</sup> Alison Knowles described in encyclopaedic detail the physiological workings of the bodily functions of 'the poet'. The text of this portion of the performance is divided into sections entitled: 'Of the Necessity of Alimentation' (eg – 'Once his food is chewed, the poet swallows it, and it passes down the gullet [or "oesophagus"] into the stomach of the poet.'): 'The Blood of the Poet' ('As to quantity, blood constitutes five to seven per cent of the body weight of the poet.'): 'The Poet's Breathing', 'The Excretion of

the Poet' ('Under a microscope, one can see that the kidney contains many small tubules, which filter off waste material from his blood.');

'The Brain of the Poet' and 'Reproduction and Senses of the Adult Male Poet'. As Knowles read this rather elaborate treatise, Filliou 'sat cross-legged upstage, motionless and silent'. As Knowles finished her description, Filliou the poet rose to his feet and recited Part Two of the poem, which consisted of the following:

Yes.

As my name is Filliou, the title of the poem is:

LE FILLIOU IDEAL

It is an action poem and I am going to perform it.

Its score is:

not deciding

not choosing

not wanting

not owning

aware of self

wide awake

SITTING QUIETLY,

DOING NOTHING

Having actually already performed his score, sitting quietly and doing nothing during the preceding enumeration of his body's facticity, Filliou affirms his presence as body with a simple, resounding 'Yes'. He states his name, another fact. Filliou then proceeds to address *mind*, listing the qualities of a mind in an 'ideal' state (at least from Filliou's perspective), a mind 'aware of [it]self' as a unity, before, or rather with no regard for, the dualistic notions inherent in the acts of deciding (yes/no), choosing (between this/that), wanting and owning (that 'out there', as opposed to what is already 'in here'). The mind is 'wide awake', but utterly receptive.

The body of the poet is demonstrated as a realm of supremely complex dynamism, of manifold facts and disclosures. Its systems are engaged in day-to-day processes that are taken for granted but which, physiologically, constitute the poet's self as a living, breathing, bleeding, shitting entity. Even the skin of the poet is itself a process, home to 'sensitive nerve endings which tell him when, what and whom he is touching'. For Filliou, what unifies these disparate processes is not the enveloping sheath of skin, but the very act of 'sitting quietly, doing nothing'. This engagement with the world is a condition of concentrated, active dissociation from the human tendency to systematise and classify, to construct dualities. It forms the core and the strength of Filliou's work. It is 'better', he says, 'to accept all the possibilities in advance, and accepting them always, to remain beyond that region where everything is parcelled out, and everybody is owned by what he owns'. This is the Filliou ideal, 'the absolute secret I took from soto Zen tradition'.<sup>62</sup> It is this same condition, this same ideal, that in Buddhism is known as *samadhi*.

## MUSIC FOR A REVOLUTION

In 1961 a number of music students at the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music, including Takehisa Kosugi, Yasunao Tone and Mieko Shiomi – all of whom were

ultimately to be connected with Fluxus – formed an organisation called Group Ongaku ('Music Group'). This group, an offshoot of a musicology class, examined the nature and limits of the operations by which perceptible phenomena come to be received as music. Of considerable importance to the members of Group Ongaku was the concept of the *objet sonore* – 'sound as an object, rather than as an element in a musical piece'.<sup>63</sup> The transformation of the reception of music, from a specifically *listenable* object to a generally *perceptible* object, is described here by Mieko Shiomi:

One day in school, while I was performing our improvisational music, I got tired of loud and rich sounds. I started tossing a bunch of keys to the ceiling to make an ostinato, with its faint sound. And while I kept doing it, I began to look at my performance objectively as a whole, and I noticed that I was performing an action of tossing keys, not playing keys to make sound. This was the turning point, when I became concerned with action music or events.<sup>64</sup>

Takehisa Kosugi elaborates on this transformation, the expansion of the sphere of music:

The sound object is not always music, but action, action. Sometimes no sound, just action. Opening a window is a beautiful action, even if there's no sound. It's part of the performance. For me that was very important, opening my eyes and ears to combining the non-musical part and the musical part of action. In my concerts, music became this totality, so even if there was no sound I said it was music. Confusing. This is how I opened my eyes to chaos.<sup>65</sup>

Kosugi's 'confusion' about music as a totality was in fact a redefinition of the terms that limit music to perception by the ears alone – indeed, as Kosugi points out, his questioning of these terms as 'musical' is an *opening of the eyes* to chaos. Kosugi's explorations of this chaos resulted in works that examine the nature of breathing:

*Organic Music*

Breath by oneself or have something breathed  
for the number of times which you have decided  
at the performance.  
Each number must contain breath – in – hold – out.  
Instruments may be used incidentally.

walking:

*Theatre Music*

Keep walking intently.

close inspection of an object:

*Manodharma With Mr. Y*<sup>66</sup>

Watch over every part of Mr. Y's body about  
10 cm. apart when he brushes his teeth.  
If it is dark, a flashlight may be used.  
If it is bright, a magnifying glass may be used.

Like George Brecht's event scores, Kosugi's work can certainly be seen as a series of 'little enlightenments,' revelatory examinations of common minutiae. In *Music for a Revolution*, perhaps Kosugi's most memorable event score, the process of 'enlightenment', of throwing

things open to the light – opening the eyes to chaos – is simultaneously a descent into the gruesome darkness of not-knowing:

Scoop out one of your eyes 5 years from now and  
do the same with the other eye 5 years later.

This is music, says Kosugi: music for a revolution in *perception*, a revolution in *consciousness*:

Politically at that time there were many movements in Japan and the world. People wanted some kind of social revolution, but of course it was not realistic, changing society. And I thought changing, revolution, should be done by individual people, revolutions in consciousness. Dada and Surrealism – these offered imaginative, logical, practical, artistic approaches for seeing inside. Of course art activity in itself is a seeing-inside, a reflection from in and out, a feedback. So revolution should be done inside first. And yoga was a kind of training for me, like Zen, which is about self-revolution. This is one part of my thinking: self-revolution.

And then I met the awful, beautiful but awful, magical images of the Luis Buñuel film *Un chien andalou*. You know the image: cutting the eye with the razor. And it was so shocking, but the total film image was so gorgeous. It's a daytime dream. Cutting the eye, taking only the visual function. As an allegory it means we open our eyes to an unopened part of existence. So shocking, but such a strong message to our consciousness. This image is so cruel, it was hateful to me. But I took that message and brought that image into my own work. Scooping out eyes. Before opening eyes, there's a stage of consciousness of normal eyes. Beyond that, we have another consciousness. My idea was to open consciousness.

Kosugi points out that *Music for a Revolution* 'marked a sort of conceptual shift in my music. Seeing and hearing are the same thing. Opening a door became a part of music, as a function of performance. While you listen to the sound, you can see the sky ... it's a combination. So I thought, this combination is music. Normally music means for ears, sounds. But for my concerts, music became much bigger, not limited. This is a kind of confusion'.<sup>67</sup>

The confusion of this transformative shift in perception elicited by both *Music for a Revolution* and the eye-slashing scene of *Un chien andalou* is echoed in the work of other Fluxus associates. Daniel Spoerri created *Lunettes noires*, or *Fakir's Spectacles* (1964), a pair of eyeglasses with needles extending inward from each of the lenses. Clearly indebted to Man Ray's *Cadeau* (1921) – a clothes iron that has been studded with nails, rendering it not merely useless but counter-productive to its initial intention, Spoerri's spectacles create a terrifying paradox: this tool, originally intended to correct a dysfunction of vision, will now destroy the eyes. Other Fluxus work that explores the transformative power of sensory deprivation and deterritorialisation include Ay-O's *Black Hole* (1990), a permanent installation in the basement of the Emily Harvey Gallery in New York – bereft of vision, one must work one's way through a lightless passage, relying solely on a single handrail for guidance; and Ben Patterson's *Tour* (1963), in which a group of participants are blindfolded and led through the streets of a city (like much of Patterson's work, *Tour* is an inquiry into the realm of interpersonal communication, particularly the limits of trust). In these works, one is denied the naturalised primacy of (and the consequent dependence upon) the visual frame, and so one must restructure one's apparatus for positioning oneself in the world, reconstitute and reframe the world within the expanded field of the entire sensorium, or, as Patterson's *Tour* indicates, within the network of social relations.

This perceptual deterritorialisation is made particularly palpable in *Music for a Revolution*. Like the collapse of vision prompted by the slash of the Surrealist razor, Kosugi's scooping of the eyes is a clinical, mechanical process, an invasion of the body's integrity. Yet, in contrast to the terrifying suddenness of the Surrealist razor, Kosugi's revolution – equally terrifying – is a slow process, unfolding in three stages over the course of more than ten years:

- 1) Having determined to perform the piece, the performer has five years in which to anticipate the removal of the first eye.
- 2) Single-eyed after a period of five years, the performer necessarily undergoes a period of adjustment; having just lost the sense of visual depth, the performer's other senses – particularly that of hearing, the seat of balance – become more acute, compensating for the loss.
- 3) Blackness. After ten years, all that remain are the senses of hearing, touch, taste and smell, as well as the memory of sight. The adjustment continues, and becomes complete.

'Self-revolution must take a long time', says Kosugi. 'Time is a cushion for transformation.'<sup>68</sup> In Japan, perhaps the most well-known figure of transformation is Daruma. Throughout Japan, in bars, restaurants, store windows, temples and private homes, one finds small votive figures by this name, representations of Daruma, or Bodhidharma (d 532), the first patriarch of Zen, who brought the teachings of Shakyamuni from India to the East.<sup>69</sup> Esteemed as harbingers of good fortune, *daruma* figures are believed to assist in the achievement of goals and the attainment of wishes. They are short and squat, usually mustachioed, and they have no eyes. A *daruma* is acquired eyeless, and the purchaser paints in one of the eyes when he or she makes a wish, or determines to set out on a goal-achieving path. When the goal is finally achieved, the second eye is painted in, and the Daruma is complete.

This becomes meaningful, and perhaps even sheds light on *Music for a Revolution*, when seen with respect to the life of Bodhidharma. It is said that Daruma spent nine years facing a wall sitting in *zazen*, hell-bent on *satori*, or enlightenment. According to legend, he never moved from the spot, so earnest was he in his pursuit, and so over the course of time his legs atrophied. But he achieved his goal of enlightenment; he lost his legs, but gained *in-sight*. Like Bodhidharma himself, the little *daruma* figures, always legless, only fully 'see' when one has attained one's goal, a goal which ostensibly has been pursued earnestly and with great effort.

In *Music for a Revolution*, a reversal of this order takes place: in sacrificing one's sight, one regains one's legs, as well as ears, nose, tongue . . .; in short, one becomes *embodied* within a strange new sensorium, a beginner in one's own body, fully present. In Zen this shift is directed from the senses to the essence of mind. In an extraordinary passage by Nyojo (1163 – 1228), the teacher of Dogen (founder of the Soto school of Zen), we are given explicit instructions on how to affect this shift:

You should 'gouge out' your eyes and see nothing at all – after that there will be nothing you don't see; only then can it be called seeing . . . You should "block off" your ears and hear nothing at all – after that there will be nothing you don't hear; only then can it be called hearing . . . You should 'knock off' your nose and not distinguish smells – after that there will be none you cannot distinguish; only then can it be called smelling . . . You

should 'pull out' your tongue, so that the world is silent – after that your ebullience will be uninterrupted; only then can it be called speaking ... You should 'slough off' the physical elements and be completely independent – after that you manifest forms adapting to various types; only then can it be called person ... You should permanently stop clinging thought, so the incalculable ages are empty – after that arising and vanishing continue unceasing; only then can it be called consciousness.<sup>70</sup>

## RETURNING TO THE SOURCE

In much of her early work Yoko Ono was engaged in a patently mystical investigation in which she studied the nature of the 'unceasing arising and vanishing' called consciousness. Her work questions our construction of the real, a construction bound to the mediation of reason and the stabilising function of language. Often taking the form of paradoxes – insoluble by reason – Ono's meditative works demand an intuitive response from the participant. Other works engage the participant in intense, silent examinations or revelations of minutiae normally unheeded – and often unimaginable – within the course of daily life. In creating such works, Ono seeks to establish a psychic space beyond the intervention of dualistic discourse, a space of unthinkable thought. 'The mind is omnipresent, events in life never happen alone and the history is forever increasing its volume', says Ono. 'The natural state of life and mind is complexity. At this point, what art can offer (if it can at all – to me it seems) is an absence of complexity, a vacuum through which you are led to a state of complete relaxation of mind'<sup>71</sup>

At first glance, Ono's statement calling for an 'absence of complexity' recalls the oft-quoted words of Henri Matisse: 'What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity and serenity devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter, an art which might be for every mental worker, be he businessman or writer, something like a good armchair in which to rest from physical fatigue.'<sup>72</sup> Indeed, art, for Ono as for Matisse, is seen as an antidote to the 'complexities' of contemporary life. In her early works, Ono seeks temporarily to transcend the quotidian, to set a space apart for contemplation. Yet the serenity offered by Yoko Ono's work is not that of Matisse's 'good armchair', the weary bourgeois rises from an armchair refreshed and reassured, but Ono makes no such promises for her work. She adds: 'After that you may return to the complexity of life again, it may not be the same, or it may be, or you may never return, but that is your problem.' One is changed by the work only inasmuch as one allows or discovers in oneself the capacity to be transformed by, and to transform, the experience:

### *Sun Piece*

Watch the sun until  
it becomes square.<sup>73</sup>

– y.o. 1962 winter

In a 'To the Wesleyan People', Ono asks: 'Didn't Christ say that it was like a camel trying to pass through a needle hole, for John Cage to go to heaven?' Cage, according to Ono an epitome of 'mental richness', is ultimately as deluded and vainglorious as the materially rich man of Jesus Christ's original proverb. Ono's concerns during her early years of activity are primarily spiritual; in contrast to the 'mental richness' of Cage, as well as to the comparative

extravagance of Happenings, she assumes and prescribes the role of the ascetic: 'I think it is nice to abandon what you have as much as possible, as many mental possessions as the physical ones, as they clutter your mind. It is nice to maintain poverty of environment, sound, thinking and belief. It is nice to keep oneself small, like a grain of rice, instead of expanding. Make yourself dispensable, like paper. See little, hear little, and think little.'

*Lighting Piece*

Light a match and watch  
till it goes out.  
– y.o. 1965 autumn

Ono asks: 'After unblocking one's mind, by dispensing with visual, auditory, and kinetic perceptions, what will come out of us? Will there be anything? I wonder'. A key aspect of Ono's work is her desire to dispense with sensory stimuli altogether, creating works which seek to focus the participant's attention on a solitary idea or perception. Possessing little, dispensable as paper, concerned with ostensibly insignificant details of experience, the participant stands in direct confrontation with Western traditions of accumulation, reason and utility. Now there is only this match, burning for no practical purpose. It lights no cigarette, destroys no property, starts no cooking fire – yet potentially it may perform any of these functions. The match simply consumes itself, leaving only ash behind. The only object, says Ono, is the image of the match that has been constructed in the mind.

The spiritual intention of this sort of monostructural presentation is made explicit in Ono's work, and it is echoed to varying degree in the work of her Fluxus compatriots. Her outspoken asceticism reminds one that the role of the ascetic in history has traditionally been that of the revolutionary: one need only think of Siddhartha Gotama, Saint Francis of Assisi or Matatma Gandhi. Now, while it is not my intention to nominate Ono, or any other Fluxus artist, for sainthood, it should be recognised that the assumption of such an ascetic posture was in effect conceived as a powerful revolutionary tool during this period, a denial of the material surplus and icy logic that, in two brief flashes, had made possible the deaths of thousands upon thousands of Japanese during the summer of 1945. As Ben Patterson has pointed out:

Perhaps the one thing everyone forgets or represses is that I, and my generation of Fluxus artists, were all more or less twelve to fourteen years old when the first atomic bomb exploded and left its mark on civilisation. Perhaps only Zen or existentialism could begin to deal with such finality ...<sup>74</sup>

It is clear from reading Ono's 'To the Wesleyan People' – which seems to function as her manifesto – that she was quite compelled by Zen thought. 'If my music seems to require physical silence,' she says, 'that is because it requires concentration to yourself – and this requires inner silence which may lead to outer silence as well. I think of my music more as a practice (*gyo*) than a music.' *Gyo* is a technical term derived from Zen; expressed more fully, the term is *Gyo-ju-za-ga*. Translated literally, this means 'practice-walking-sitting-lying', suggesting that one should maintain Zen practice during all activities of daily life.<sup>75</sup> It is bare, undivided attention, the very sort of attention that Ono seems to require in her *Lighting Piece*, a work of music-as-practice – a practice of complete awareness of a single *dharma*, an object coming to presence in the fullness of its being, outside the frameworks imposed by utility.

Ono's metaphysics is clearly indebted to the more hermetic, intuitive aspects of Zen. In 'To the Wesleyan People', Ono quotes two Zen poems. One is by Shen-hsiu, who was a contender for the role of sixth patriarch of Zen, and who went on to establish the Northern school of Zen, noted for its gradual approach to enlightenment and its reliance upon intellectual understanding of the sutras:

The mind is like the Bodhi Tree<sup>76</sup>  
 The mind like a bright mirror standing  
 Take care to wipe it all the time  
 And allow no dust to cling.

The other poem, a response to that of Shen-hsiu, is by Hui-neng, who rose from the role of monastery cook to that of the sixth patriarch as a result of this response. Hui-neng's brand of Zen, the Southern school, stressed an intuitive leap into the immediacy of experience, apart from any intellectual understanding. This method is one in which a radical doubt is shed on the stability and isolability of the object:

There never was a Bodhi Tree  
 Nor bright mirror shining  
 Fundamentally, not one thing exists  
 So where is the dust to cling?

It is with Hui-neng that Ono has the greatest affinity. In an undated work, she seems to pay homage to the sixth patriarch:

*Wind Piece*

Make a way for the wind  
 This was first performed in 1962 at the Sogetsu Art Centre, Tokyo, with a huge electric fan on the stage. In 1966 at Wesleyan University, Connecticut, the audience was asked to move their chairs a little and make a narrow aisle for the wind to pass through. No wind was created with special means.

As part of the score itself, Ono describes two distinctly different performances; one in which the wind was created by a 'huge electric fan', and the other in which 'no wind was created with special means'. In the latter performance, was there a wind at all? Why does Ono need to mention specific examples of performances? In the following koan, the twenty-ninth case of the Wumenguan, Hui-neng addresses the problem of wind in a language that is – at least in translation – remarkable in its similarity to Ono's own rhetorical style:

Once when the wind was whipping the banner of a temple, the Sixth Patriarch of Zen witnessed two monks debating about it. One said the banner was moving, one said the wind was moving.

They argued back and forth without attaining the principle, so the Patriarch said, 'This is not the movement of the wind, nor the movement of the banner; it is the movement of your minds.'

The two monks were both awestruck.<sup>77</sup>

As a further critical illustration of what I believe to be the guiding structural principle of Ono's *Wind Piece*, here is a passage written in 1233 by Dogen, the founder of the Soto school of Zen:

Zen master Hotetsu was using a fan. A monk asked him about this: 'The nature of wind is eternal and all-pervasive – why then do you use a fan?' The master said, 'You only know the nature of wind is eternal, but do not yet know the principle of its omniscience.' The monk asked, 'What is the principle of its omniscience?' The master just fanned. The monk bowed.<sup>78</sup>

The 'principle of omniscience' of which Hotetsu speaks is simply wind itself; the act of fanning is the demonstration of that principle, rather than a theoretical, verbal explication of such. Meaning is conveyed by direct engagement, uncodified, manifesting itself in a space that pre-exists language. The content of the expression is the expression of the content. Fanning is an example or embodiment of wind, or rather of wind-ing, an action, a becoming that won't stand still long enough for one to apply the grid of language. The wind is what one does.

Yet, if this sheds any light on Ono's use of a fan to create wind for her performance at the Sogetsu Art Centre, how does it explain the performance at Wesleyan in which 'no wind was created with special means'? Clearly, at an indoor performance there will be no perceptible wind of which to speak. Where is the movement of the wind? As Hui-neng points out, it is no different than the movement of the mind. Ono seems to concur, declaring, 'my interest is mainly "painting to construct in your head"':

In your head, for instance, it is possible for a straight line to exist – not as a segment of a curve but as a straight line. Also, a line can be straight, curved and something else at the same time. A dot can exist as a 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, dimensional object all at the same time or at various times in different combinations as you wish to perceive. The movement of the molecule can be continuum and discontinuum at the same time. It can be with color and/or without. There is no visual object that does not exist in comparison to or simultaneously with other objects, but these characteristics can be eliminated if you wish. A sunset can go on for days. You can eat up all the clouds in the sky.

In short, the mind, as Ono perceives it, is able to simultaneously embrace contraries, can reconcile the poles of dualities – dualities that exist only as constructs of language. This is also the perception of Zen, as it is of many mystical traditions, both Eastern and Western ('Eastern'/'Western?'). And, as Ono suggests, it is the case in contemporary physics, where, for example, light is simultaneously conceived as wave ('continuum') and particle ('discontinuum'). This, at last, is the realm of non-sense, the bottom line of both physics and metaphysics. Here our notions of the stability of physical phenomena are overturned, as both the limits of logic and the bounds of certainty offered by faith are tested. Our efforts to frame the world invariably come off as provisional, subjective, and, ultimately, false.

## AN INFINITE NUMBER OF VARIABLES

In 1959 Alan Watts, then arguably the most important Western exponent and disseminator of Eastern philosophies, lodged his complaints against 'Western artists avowedly using Zen to justify the indiscriminate framing of simply anything – blank canvases, totally silent music, torn up bits of paper dropped on a board and stuck where they fall, or dense masses of mangled wire.'<sup>79</sup> While Watts admits that 'it is indeed the basic intuition of Zen that there is an ultimate standpoint from which "anything goes"', he also declares, 'this standpoint does not exclude and is not hostile towards the distinction between right and wrong at other levels and in more limited frames of reference.'<sup>80</sup>

Watts proceeds to point out that it is precisely the artist's ability to *frame* reality that sets his work apart from nature: 'every work of art involves a frame. A frame of some kind is precisely what distinguishes a painting, a poem, a musical composition, a play, a dance, or a piece of sculpture from the rest of the world.' Framing and lighting, he says, are the tools which create 'marvellous compositions' in the hands of a truly skilled photographer. An unskilled photographer will create 'only messes, for he does not know how to place the frame, the border of the picture, where it will be in relation to the contents. How eloquently this demonstrates that as soon as we introduce a frame anything does *not* go.'<sup>81</sup>

As we have seen, it is this notion of framing as a function of mastery and power that the artists of Fluxus questioned relentlessly. The emergence of intermedia – a range of structures that lay *between* media – was an extraordinary manifestation of this questioning. At a period in aesthetic thinking characterised by Clement Greenberg, Abstract Expressionism and serial music, all seeking to foster the self-reflectivity of media (that is, the fullest expression of the materiality, limits and language of each) – the notion of intermedia was, at the very least radical.<sup>82</sup> But the artists of Fluxus went a step further, questioning the enframing of the artist him- or herself as a site of privilege, as an individual whose mastery lends special weight to aesthetic choices.

George Brecht, two years before the publication of Watts' essay, appraised the role of chance in the work of Jackson Pollock, noting that the most remarkable aspects of Pollock's work happen beyond the artist's ability, conscious or unconscious as it may be, to assert total control over his materials. Unconscious production, or better, 'improvisation', is still a form of control, a framing, a function of the interiorisation and mastery of a set of learned skills and familiar materials. For the experienced artist such as Pollock, or Watts' master photographer, skills have been internalised to the point where production becomes naturalised, becomes 'second nature', as it were; as such, the works produced by the artist occur with the apparent effortlessness and certainty of natural force. In a sense, this is indeed the 'Zen' of the arts.

But for Brecht, who was trained as a scientist, the value of Pollock's work is strictly a technical matter. He sees the intervention of an 'infinite number of variables', such as 'paint viscosity, density, rate of flow at any instant; and direction, speed and configuration of the applicator, to say nothing of non-uniformity in the paint', as mitigating the artist's power of absolute expression. Brecht cites Pollock's *One, 1950* as an example of an exercise in which 'differently-coloured streams of paint have flowed into each other after application, resulting in a commingling completely out of the artist's hands.'<sup>83</sup>

What is of greatest concern to Brecht are the microscopic, natural processes that occur beyond the artist's capacity to assert his will over them, as the paint settles into itself, drip melting into drip. At this level of occurrence, the notion of 'paint' on 'canvas' no longer makes any sense; in the realm of the molecular, paint might just as well be molten lava, hurricane winds or tomato sauce. If this is the case, according to Brecht, then it is no longer valuable to regard the artist as the producer of extraordinary objects, as these objects are no longer perceived as set apart from any other object in nature. The physical laws of a painting are no different than the physical laws that govern nature itself. To subject this continuum to an arbitrary fragmentation – the function of a choosing subjectivity – is seen by Brecht as a pretension in direct conflict with natural law.

Alan Watts contends:

Some artists may argue that they do not want their works to be distinguishable from the total universe, but if this be so they should not frame them in galleries and concert halls. Above all they should not sign them or sell them. This is as immoral as selling the moon or signing one's name to a mountain.<sup>84</sup>

Here Watts makes an important point. The artist, if she has no wish for her work to be considered 'art' – as here opposed to 'the total universe' – should avoid framing devices of every sort, should not commodify, or even *present*, the work in any way. But can such a task be accomplished? Can an artist create an art work that transports none of the signs of being 'art'? For George Brecht, the artist, and the images produced by the artist, are simply manifestations of nature:

Here I would like to introduce the general term 'chance-imagery' to apply to our formation of images resulting from chance, wherever these occur in nature. (The word 'imagery' is intentionally ambiguous enough, I think, to apply either to the physical act of creating an image out of real materials, or to the formation of an image in the mind, say by abstraction from a more complex system.) One reason for doing this is to place the painter's, musician's, poet's, dancer's chance images in the same conceptual category as natural chance-images (the configuration of meadow grasses, the arrangement of stones on a brook bottom), and to get away from the idea that an artist makes something 'special' and beyond the world of ordinary things. An Alpine peak or an iris petal can move us at times with all the subtle power of a 'Night Watch' or one of the profound themes of Opus 131. There is no a priori reason why moving images should originate only with artists.<sup>85</sup>

With no clear distinction between 'art' and 'nature', or between 'artist' and 'nature', there opens up a democratised field of production in which anyone can fulfil the role of an artist, in which anything – anything fully an example of itself – can be appreciated as a 'unique' work, that is, as nothing particularly special or extraordinary. 'Act of imagination or perception is in itself an arrangement,' says Brecht, 'so there is no avoiding anyone making arrangements.' How then can one create a work that is not art? One response is simply to call *everything* art, as in this 1967 work by Ben Vautier:

TOTAL ART SCULPTURE

Pick  
up  
anything  
at your  
feet.

Or in this 1973 score by Ken Friedman:

DANCE REPORT

Choreography considered as the motion between  
your present position and your next position.

In these works, however, a question arises. If everything is 'art', if every object is 'sculpture', if every movement is 'dance,' then what becomes of 'art', 'dance', 'sculpture'? How can these terms continue to maintain any power of signification? Vautier and Friedman have made efforts to collapse entirely the traditional oppositions of sculpture/

non-sculpture and dance/non-dance, and in doing so, have created specifically anti-art works. Yet there remains an attachment to the notions of 'sculpture', of 'dance', and so, of 'art'. The terms 'anti-art' and 'non-art' acquire meaning only inasmuch as they are the oppositional and complementary terms for 'art'. 'Art' – its parameters indeed broadened by such works – remains as an enframing.

As George Brecht points out, the distinctions between 'art' and 'non-art', between what is 'inside' the frame and 'outside' the frame, are inappropriate, arbitrary and without real meaning.<sup>86</sup> Brecht addresses this arduous, paradoxical problem in a 1972 interview with Robin Page, presenting a challenge to 'anybody who thinks they're making art, or non-art: to make a work which cannot possibly be considered art. There's the problem. Send your letters to George Brecht ... and I'll send you something in return ... unless I'm too busy.'<sup>87</sup> The artist presents the problem, then sits back to read his collection of 'thrillers', leading a perfectly inartistic life as others fumble through the semantic labyrinth.<sup>88</sup> The artist himself has become an exemplative work, the embodiment of his own idea.

## OBJECTS MAKING MISCHIEF

For George Maciunas, the decentring of the artist's position of mastery and privilege, and the attendant reconstitution of the art object within the expanded field of natural processes, had inherently revolutionary applications. In his chart entitled 'Fluxus Art-Amusement', which was clearly a manifesto (although like all Fluxus 'manifestos' it is unsigned and was no doubt widely disputed), Maciunas outlined his view of the difference between the functions of traditional art as practiced in contemporary capitalist society and his own vision of 'art-amusement'.<sup>89</sup> In regarding the Fluxus phenomena as 'art-amusement', George Maciunas pinpointed an essential ingredient for an art of genuinely subversive power, an interruptive art that questions the power and pretensions of both frame and framer: *laughter*. As Dick Higgins points out, the art world into which Fluxus was born was dominated by Abstract Expressionism in visual art and post-Webernite serialism in music, both of which 'were apt to be extremely solemn and tendentious affairs indeed'. Seriousness, he notes, 'tended often to be equated with solemnity. Fluxus tended often to react against this by moving in the direction of humour and gags, introducing a much-needed *spirit of play* into the arts.'<sup>90</sup> By introducing thigh-slapping laughter into the horizon of art, Fluxus confounded art's claims to sublimity and ritual power.

Fluxus performance, more often than not, is very funny. Maciunas declared that he 'wouldn't put it in any higher class than a gag, maybe a good gag.' He ties this aspect of Fluxus performance to what he calls the 'monomorphism' of the work; a Fluxus work must be direct and simple, like a good joke, in order to be effective, in order to be *Fluxus*. Indeed, as previously noted, it is this monomorphism that sets Fluxus performance apart from the 'polymorphism' of happenings. After all, says Maciunas, 'you cannot have six jokers standing and telling you jokes simultaneously. It just wouldn't work. Has to be one joke at a time'.<sup>91</sup>

*f/h Trace*

Fill French horn with rice  
bow to audience.

Watts' piece *f/h Trace* is effective – will be read as 'funny' – only to the degree that it subverts the audience's expectations. As is standard practice in classical Western musical performance, one expects the musician or performer to acknowledge the audience with a polite bow before he commences the work at hand. In this piece – frequently performed in formal concert attire, as were many Fluxus works – Robert Watts turns the expectation of the audience upside-down, as the performer's requisite bow is accompanied by a sudden splashing of rice upon the stage. Here the bow is the performance, and . . . well, I suppose you had to be there really. The simplest gesture at once overturns the pretence and pomp of traditional performance etiquette, by jamming the received codes that constitute the viewer's frame of reference.

Another example by Mieko Shiomi:

*Event for the Late Afternoon* (1963)

Violin is suspended with rope or ribbon inserted through pulley at top and secured to floor. Performer in samurai armor positions himself under suspended violin, draws his sword and cuts the rope in front of him.

One by George Brecht:

*Saxophone Solo* (1962)

- Trumpet.

Yoko Ono:

*Wall Piece for Orchestra* (Winter 1962)

Hit a wall with your head.

Ben Vautier:

*Tango* (1964)

The audience is invited to dance a tango.

and Ken Friedman:

*Zen Vaudeville* (1966)<sup>92</sup>

The sound of one shoe tapping.

What these simple events have in common is a particular mode of fiddling with the culturally conditioned constructs by which one comes to receive – and so expect – the experience of performance as social ritual. A theatrically garbed performer is whacked on the head with her own violin, an unlikely trumpet is pulled from a saxophone case, the members of an orchestra line up and bang their heads against a wall on cue from the conductor, the audience – and not the 'performers' – dance the tango, a single shoe taps. During Fluxus performance, received notions of performance are mocked inverted, and shown the door.

*Word Event* (1961)

- Exit.

– George Brecht

Ken Friedman calls this aspect of Fluxus 'Zen Vaudeville'.<sup>93</sup> Maciunas calls it 'Neo-Haiku theatre'.<sup>94</sup> Indeed, like Fluxus, Zen regards laughter as an important index of understanding: as we have seen, the transmission of Zen began with a monomorphic gesture

– the presentation of a single flower – and a smile of reception. The smile is the signifier of sudden realisation, of ‘getting the point’ and approving its significance. In Zen, says Christmas Humphries, laughter is ‘a sign of sanity; and the comic is deliberately used to break up concepts, to release tensions, and to teach what cannot be taught in words. Nonsense is used to point to the beyond of rational sense.’<sup>95</sup>

In Nam June Paik’s *Zen for Head*, the grand Abstract Expressionist gesture is turned quite literally on its head. The performer simply dips his head into a bucket of ink and paints a line down a sheet of cheap kraft paper that has extended along the floor. Using his head as a brush, the performer paints a line (indeed, Paik’s work is an interpretation of La Monte Young’s *Composition #10 1960*: ‘Draw a straight line and follow it.’). In contrast to the monumental status of, say, a large-scale calligraphic work by Franz Kline, Paik’s gesture does not, cannot, function as an index of the master’s hand – no hand was used, for one thing, but is rather the index of *any* body, *any* performer to chooses who enact the work. The painting is thus no masterpiece, at least not by traditional standards, and so points an accusatory finger at the very notion of mastery. Paik’s ‘crazy Zen’, as it is called by Ken Friedman, provides a welcome, unexpected relief from the high seriousness of Abstract Expressionism.<sup>96</sup>

Paik’s work is not without its precedent. Conrad Hyers notes a certain eighth-century Zen painter-priest by the name Wang-hsia, nicknamed Wang-mo (Ink Wang):

When he was drunk, he would splatter ink on the surface, laughing and singing the while. He might kick it, or rub it on with his hands, wave (his brush) about or scrub with it ... [Then] he would follow its configurations to make mountains, or rocks, or clouds, or water.’ According to another authority he would even dip his head in the container of ink, and paint with his hair as a brush.<sup>97</sup>

The resulting laughter, says Conrad Hyers (speaking of the laughter that seems so prevalent in Zen, and which often accompanies the solution of a koan), is an expression of cognitive shock in the face of a rupture of the expected, the dissolution of the frame’s authority – an explosive decentring of the self. According to Hyers, this sort of laughter

leads toward the debunking of pride and the deflating of ego. It mocks grasping and clinging, and cools desire. It cuts through ignorance and precipitates insight. It turns hierarchies upside down as a prelude to collapsing them, and overcomes dualities and conflicts by embracing and uniting opposites. The whole intellectual and valuational structure of the discriminating mind is challenged, with a result that is enlightening and liberating.<sup>98</sup>

The space of the comic is thus a forum for the investigation of boundaries, a site of transgression in which received, unspoken codes are simultaneously revealed and overturned. Like the blasphemies of the Zen koan, the irreverent wackiness of many Fluxus works condemns self-serving notions of the sacred in art. For the artists of Fluxus, no act was absolute, no art work was transcendent, and no artist was above receiving a pie in the face. In Zen and in Fluxus, humour throws a monkey-wrench into the smooth operation of the given and the known, posing instead a fragmented world of questions, of absolute instability, a stream of flux in which the integrity of both the object and the subject are perpetually up for grabs.

## NO-SELF

The very name of Fluxus points to an appreciation of the world as a field of transformation, as flux. Like Zen, Fluxus posits a reconfiguration of the subject as an inextricable component within this field. Rather than presenting the subject as *acting upon* the world, there is a sense of reciprocal determination, an *inter-action*. George Brecht notes: 'I conceive of the individual as part of an infinite space and time; in constant interaction with that continuum (nature), and giving order (physically or conceptually) to a part of the continuum with which he interacts.'<sup>99</sup> In Zen thought, this continuum is known as *sunyata*, the primordial emptiness.

'Form is emptiness, emptiness is form', reads the *Hannya Shingyo*, the 'Heart Sutra', one of the essential texts of Zen. Indeed, the essence of Zen thought is found in the notion of emptiness, *sunyata*, the very ground of being. All *dharmas*, that is manifest forms, are seen as having no independent self-nature, no individual essence that separates them from the fabric of being, from any other *dharma*. These forms are themselves impermanent, provisional, continually becoming but never arriving at a moment of being. Norman Bryson examines the notion of *sunyata* in the work of the Japanese philosopher Keiji Nishitani, pointing out that the notion of an entity as a fixed body, clearly delineated from the world, does not hold up when regarded in the light of *sunyata*. 'Subject' and 'object' become inappropriate terms, as they are both revealed to be aspects of the other, each part of 'the universal field of transformations':

Moved on to the field of *sunyata*, or radical impermanence, the entity comes apart. It cannot be said to occupy a *single* location, since its locus is always the universal field of transformations: it cannot achieve separation from that field or acquire any kind of bounded outline. Because of its inseparability from the field of impermanence it cannot be said to enjoy independent self-existence, since the ground of being is everything else. And it cannot present itself in the guise of enduring form.<sup>100</sup>

Nishitani's project, as outlined by Bryson, is a radical critique of the Cartesian *cogito* – the notion of the subject as a permanent stable centre around which objects arrange themselves, shifting in and out of the subject's experiential horizon. Rather than regarding the subject as isolable entity, Nishitani – whose terms are clearly structured after Buddhist progenitors – asserts that what *appears* to be a given object is only the *difference* between that object and the surrounding field. The inverse is also true: the surrounding field is constituted of the *difference* between it and the given object. As discussed earlier, object and field, 'it' and 'other', are interdependent, and thus the object cannot be examined in isolation from that field, cannot be framed. Nor, for that matter, can the subject be isolated or framed.

In Zen the individual, not bound by the notion of self as fixity, is rather understood as an integral part of an ever-shifting field of becoming. With no selfhood to preserve, the individual – whom Rinzai calls 'the one who has neither shape nor form, neither root nor trunk, and who, having no abiding place, is full of activities'<sup>101</sup> – is perpetually *responding* to the newest developments within the field of *sunyata*.

If a man comes to me and says, 'I am seeking the Buddha,' I come out in conformity with the situation of purity. If a man comes to me and asks about the bodhisattva, I come out in accordance with the situation of compassion (*maitri* or *karuna*). If a man comes to me and asks about bodhi [or enlightenment], I come out in accordance with the situation of incomparable beauty. If a man comes to me and asks about nirvana, I come out in

accordance with the situation of serene quietude. The situations may vary infinitely, but the Man varies not. So, [it is said], '[It] takes forms in accordance with conditions, like the moon reflecting itself [variously] in water.'<sup>102</sup>

It is thus inaccurate to conceive the self as a static entity, sitting solitary on a meditation cushion. On the contrary, the individual continually manifests both stasis and mobility, and produces these experiences as new occasions arise. 'He responds to all kinds of situations and manifests his activities, and yet comes out of nowhere.'<sup>103</sup> Suzuki points out that the self, a manifestation of the formless field of *sunyata*, is thus difficult to locate as a centre of experience:

The Self is ever moving or becoming. It is a zero which is a staticity, and at the same time an infinity, indicating that it is all the time moving. The Self is dynamic. The Self is comparable to a circle which has no circumference, it is thus *sunyata*, emptiness. But it is also the centre of such a circle. The Self is the point of absolute subjectivity which may convey the sense of immobility or tranquility. But as this point can be moved anywhere we like, to infinitely varied spots, it is really no point. The point is the circle and the circle is the point.<sup>104</sup>

Meditation, the principal practice of Zen, is thus not a recentring of the subject, a cultivation of 'inner' tranquility or stability. Rather, meditation is a continuous process of responsiveness in accordance with 'exterior' forces, a decentring of the subject's illusory selfhood. As Dick Higgins explains, the 'point' of which Suzuki speaks can indeed be moved anywhere:

We have no fear of becoming: our thought processes are meditations (for our parents, the purpose of meditation was medicinal – it was to clear the mind and restore perspective. It had to be slow, for fear of losing control. But we begin where they left off – we need not control in order to experience, so we can meditate at any speed and virtually in any situation) – 'meditations' they are, in the sense that they are liberated processes of thought and feeling, as opposed to directed ones. We are quite readily capable of experiencing these as emptiness and beyond concrete conceivability. All this adds up to a new mentality, at least for the Western world.<sup>105</sup>

As Higgins points out, thought is not 'directed' outward, but is 'liberated', able to respond and conform to any given situation. The thinking self is reflexive of its surround, reconstituted in the margin between the subject and object. Here is a mutual interdependence of subject and object, two centres that re-establish themselves – through interaction – as a unity. In a 1978 interview John Cage examines the notion of the 'new mentality' of the decentred self, the dismantling of the *cogito*:

John Cage I like to think that each thing has not only its own life but its own centre and that that centre is, each time, the exact centre of the Universe. That is one of the principal themes I've retained from my studies of Zen.

Daniel Charles Must we dissociate the idea of life and the idea of the centre?

John Cage Suzuki taught me that in fact we never stop establishing, outside the life of things, a means of measure and that we then continually try to re-place each thing into the grid of our measure. Thus, we lose the things; we forget them, or we disfigure them. Zen teaches us that we are really in a situation of decentring, relative to the grid. In this situation, everything is at the centre. There is then a plurality and a multiplicity of centres. And they are all interpenetrating. And Zen adds: in non-obstruction. To live, for all things, is to be at the centre. That entails interpenetration and non-obstruction.<sup>106</sup>

This non-obstructive interpenetration, or rather, interaction, is a principal function of Fluxus event scores, themselves meaningless if taken as isolated structures. As discussed above, it is precisely the engagement of a participant in the interpretation and realisation of a score which enables the work – and the participant – to come to presence. There can be no one correct interpretation, only provisional examples of realisation. In this respect, Fluxus event scores are similar to koans, and they are also similar to Nietzschean *aphorisms*. Gilles Deleuze describes the generation of meaning in the aphorism as wholly contingent upon the intervention of external forces:

An aphorism is a play of forces, a state of forces each of which is always outside the others. An aphorism means nothing, signifies nothing, and has no more a signifier than a signified element . . . An aphorism is a state of forces, the last of which is at the same time the most recent; the most present and ultimate/temporary one is always the *most external force*. Nietzsche poses it very clearly: if you want to know what I mean, find the force which gives a meaning, a new meaning if need be, to what I say. Connect the text with that force. There are no problems of interpretation of Nietzsche, there are only problems of machination: machinating Nietzsche's text, trying to find out with what external, current force he succeeds in *getting something through*, a flow of energy.<sup>107</sup>

Like the aphorism, the Fluxus event score is forever unfinished, continually calling to external forces to provide completion, to resonate with and overlap the text as set forth by the author. In the field of transformations, there is only a perpetual coming into being of the text – a becoming that includes as part of its constitution the very subjectivity that is engaged in its realisation. There is thus only 'legitimate misinterpretation', notes Deleuze, 'treat the aphorism as a phenomenon awaiting new forces that come and "subjugate" it, make it work, or else make it explode.'<sup>108</sup>

*Exercise*

Determine the centre of an object or event.

Determine the centre more accurately.

Repeat, until further inaccuracy is impossible.

– George Brecht

It is the provisional nature of the Fluxus event score, its ability to be legitimately misinterpreted by any external force, that releases it from the grid of subjectivity, the notion of a permanent fixative power, which Deleuze calls the despotic machine. Like Nietzsche's aphorisms, Fluxus scores maintain an immediate relationship with the outside; indeed, they cannot be said to have independent being apart from this externalising relationship. Another blow to the *cogito*. Says Deleuze, 'opening a text by Nietzsche at random dispenses us for one of the first times from interiority, the interiority of the soul or of consciousness, the interiority of essence or of concept, in other words, from what has always been the principle of philosophy.'<sup>109</sup> The same is true of Fluxus event scores. To quote Rinzai, the work – like the participant who is engaged in the work's realisation – 'takes forms in accordance with conditions, like the moon reflecting itself [variously] in water.'

*Shadow Piece II*

1

Project a shadow over the other side of this page.

2

Observe the boundary line between  
the shadow and the lighted part.

3

Become the boundary line.  
– Chieko Shiomi, 1964

As sites of potential transformations, with no autonomous formal or material interiority, such texts stand outside the mechanisms which serve to implement social codes: laws, contracts and institutions. Such works, notes Deleuze, ‘can be understood neither through the establishment or the application of a law, nor through the offer of a contractual relationship, nor through the setting up of institutions. The only conceivable equivalent might be “to be embarked with” ... Rowing together is sharing, sharing something irrespective of law, contracts, institutions. A drift, the movement of drifting, of “deterritorialisation.”<sup>110</sup> This is the movement of flux.

*Opus 50*

Place the palms of your hands side by side on this piece of paper – After a short time: Raise the hands and place your eyes in the same level as the palms – Notice the coincident unus pultorum retardation in the situations etc!

or something else  
– Eric Andersen

In place of interiority, both of the text and of the subject, Fluxus events establish a shifting zone of impermanence, a *nomadism* in which the self is continually redefined in accord with the external force (for example, an event score, a performer, the weather) that is now asserting its momentary demands, and with which it now interacts. In Fluxus, as in Zen thought, the self is whatever one happens to be doing at any given moment. In the field of sunyata, a third entity reveals itself, an entity neither subject nor object, and yet constituted by both – subject and object are, as we have seen, the same thing. Identity becomes multiplicity.

One must take special care not to influence oneself. Tomorrow one will write Schubert’s Fifth Symphony, cook some kohlrabi, develop a non-toxic epoxy, and invent still another kind of theatre; or perhaps one will just sit and scream; or perhaps ...

– Dick Higgins<sup>111</sup>

You don’t try to make a style, or to achieve some identity – I mean your artwork doesn’t try to achieve identity. You try to be out there in the waste open land and fool around

– Eric Andersen

Here is the notion of self as a passage, a nomad, a flow of intensities as one shifts from one plateau of experience to the next.<sup>112</sup> On the periphery, out in the ‘waste open land’, the nomad is a marginal entity (if he can be called an entity at all), a circle without circumference, without a centre. The nomad stands in direct confrontation with the prevailing understanding of the artist as mythic subjectivity, the Producer of Great Works, organic, whole, fixed, comprehensible. The nomad escapes the over-coding of the State, of stasis, functioning instead within a smooth, open-ended, decoded space, a space in which one can freely move from any one point to any other. This perpetual play of difference and joyful anarchy in the

face of the determinate is the space of a counterculture. 'Its mode of distribution', says Brian Massumi, 'is the *nomos*: arraying oneself in an open space (hold the street), as opposed to the *logos* of entrenching oneself in a closed space (hold the fort).'

<sup>113</sup>

America was, you know, patting itself on the back. It already had its new art form [Abstract Expressionism], but we could have the street.

– Alison Knowles<sup>114</sup>

We are not nonparticipants, like the beats were: We are arming to take the barricades.

– Dick Higgins<sup>115</sup>

As Higgins notes, the beatniks were a generation of self-perceived rebels who played the role of 'nonparticipants', and whose pursuit of a romantic individualism ultimately led them back into the fold of a tradition, back into the mythos of the American frontier. (Indeed, the beatniks' attraction to Eastern philosophies rang of transcendence, of the ecstatic self subsumed into the oneness of nature.) This same mythos was concurrently being lionised and reified in the visual arts as 'American-Type' painting: big, fast and unshaven, the abstract Expressionist gesture became the loaded signifier of American selfhood – the automatic writing of the American unconscious, vast and spontaneous, but always bound to its territory.

Nam June Paik points out that it is not only the destiny of American arts to be the vehicles of such territorialities, but that of Zen as well. In the June 1964 edition of *cc fiVe ThReE*, Paik had a great deal to say about Zen:

Now let me talk about Zen, although I avoid it usually, not to become the salesman of 'OUR' culture like Daisetsu Suzuki, because the cultural patriotism is more harmful than the political patriotism, because the former is the disguised one, and especially the self-propaganda of Zen (the doctrine of self-abandonment) must be the stupid suicide of Zen.

Anyway, Zen consists of two negations.

the first negation:

The absolute IS the relative.

the second negation:

The relative IS the absolute.

The first negation is a simple fact, which every mortal meets every day: everything passes away ... mother, lover, hero, youth, fame ... etc.

The second negation is the KEY-point of Zen.

That means ...

The NOW is utopia, what it may be.

The NOW in 10 minutes is also utopia, what it may be.

The NOW in 20 hours is also utopia, what it may be.

The NOW in 30 months is also utopia, what it may be.

The NOW in 40 million years is also utopia, what it may be.

Therefore

We should learn,

how to be satisfied with 75%

how to be satisfied with 50%

how to be satisfied with 38%

how to be satisfied with 9%

how to be satisfied with 0%  
 how to be satisfied with -1000% ...  
 Zen is anti-avant-garde, anti-frontier spirit, anti-Kennedy.  
 Zen is responsible of Asian poverty.  
 How can I justify ZEN, without justifying Asian poverty??  
 It is another problem, to which I will refer again in the next  
 essay.  
 ...  
 The frustration remains as the frustration.  
 There is NO catharsis.

Paik, in this passage, in part an invective against Zen, strikes an important note. Zen, he asserts, is 'responsible of Asian poverty', and if Zen is to be justified, it must be seen in that light. In feudal Japan, for example, Zen was revived in the fourteenth century, transmitted within a monastic system overseen and subsidised by the imperial court, as well as by the many military governors, or *shogun*, who ruled the provinces. The monks, trained in cloistered mountain monasteries and respected by the masses as highly educated spiritual leaders, were regarded by the rulers as 'effective means for quelling unruly elements among the populace'.<sup>116</sup> Zen promotes an essential quietism amongst its practitioners, a 'doctrine of self-abandonment' that demands that one reins in desires. As Paik points out, Zen teaches 'how to be satisfied with 75%, how to be satisfied with 38%'; in short, it teaches one to accept and be satisfied with one's lot in life, even if that lot is economic poverty. Clearly, such a teaching would have been immensely useful to a military ruler (who himself would certainly *not* be satisfied with these percentages), and Zen quickly became official culture in Japan.

In the United States of the 1950s and 1960s, the incorporation of a methodology of Zen in the arts meant something quite different from that of its use in feudal Japan. For the beatniks, and for artists such as Franz Kline, Zen's appeal was that of a pure, exotic, certainly mystifying other. Zen offered an ancient, solemn set of artistic traditions far removed from reason and naturalistic representation. A sanction and inspiration for a self-perceived '*advance guard*', Zen was employed by artists and poets as a tool to explore the frontiers of the unconscious, the unmitigated, spontaneous source of selfhood.

Like the beatniks, and certainly like the counterculture(s) that flourished throughout the 1960s, the artists of Fluxus were concerned with establishing an unmediated relationship with the world. But the artists of Fluxus, as we have seen, did not regard the self – particularly the unconscious – as the absolute, generative centre of this world. Rather, there was a concern with decentering the self, positioning the self as one *provisional* centre in perpetual interaction with the infinite multiplicity of centres that constitute the world. In contrast to the Zen of the beatniks – a means to consummate the 'manifest destiny' of modernism, the revelation of the frontiers of selfhood – the Zen appreciated by the artists of Fluxus was, as Paik says, 'anti-avant-garde, anti-frontier spirit, anti-Kennedy'. Indeed, Zen, as received by some of the artists of Fluxus, posits a self that is no self at all. George Maciunas understood this, and employed it to advance his own notions of 'selflessness'. In a letter dated 16 March 1964, Maciunas offered some advice to Ben Vautier:

I notice with disappointment your GROWING MEGALOMANIA. Why not try Zen method. Curb and eliminate your ego entirely. (If you can) don't sign anything – don't

attribute anything to yourself – depersonalize yourself! that’s in true Fluxus collective spirit. De-europeanize yourself!<sup>117</sup>

As Jackson Mac Low points out, Maciunas’ notions of ‘depersonalisation’ and ‘true Fluxus collective spirit’ ‘were based on half-baked Leninist ideas and have little if any relation to Buddhism.’<sup>118</sup> Yet the understanding of Zen as a method of decentring the self is consonant with Maciunas’ desire to eliminate ‘the idea of the professional artist, art-for-art ideology, expression of artists’ ego through art, etc.’<sup>119</sup> Such a radical revision of the conceit of authorship goes hand-in-hand with the critique of the autonomy of the object posited by Fluxus artists. This stance stood in marked contrast to that of the thriving art market of the period – a market that flourished by promulgating the mythic individuality of the artist as well as the monolithic authority of the artist’s product. Fluxus downplayed – indeed, it sought to eliminate – the artist’s traditional role as unique producer of unique objects, instead creating *situations* in which objects, often objects of daily use, would be allowed a space in which to reveal themselves.

Know honor  
 But keep to the role of the disgraced  
 And be a valley to the empire.  
 If you are a valley to the empire,  
 Then the constant virtue [power] will be sufficient ...  
 – Tao Te Ching, Chapter 27

The artists of Fluxus walked an alternative, ultimately revolutionary passage through, or rather *as*, a valley to the empire of representation. In contrast to the *logos* of the beatniks and Abstract Expressionists – the narrative of the frontier, the production of a myth of formal wholeness validated by a logic of transcendental affirmation – the artists of Fluxus posited no absolutes, no methods, no tools, no fixed structures for their works. Rather, their mode of production was based on the notion of a plenitude of possible meanings and interpretations – detached from an understanding of the work as an extension of the artist’s identity. Dick Higgins calls such work ‘*post-selfcognitive*’, or ‘*post-cognitive*’ for short. The post-cognitive work, says Higgins, is concerned with

the object qua object, the poem within the poem, the word within the word – the process as process, accepting reality as a found object, enfolding it by the edges, so to speak, without trying to distort it (artistically or otherwise) in its depiction. The work becomes the matrix – any kind of matrix will do for the particular needs of the particular work. The artist gives you the structure: you may fill it in yourself. This is not formalism (though it includes structuralism as an aspect) – the emphasis is still on the subject. But the subject is accepted – the artist will have to look elsewhere, if he wants to *prove* his identity.<sup>120</sup>

The works of which Higgins speaks are no longer grounded in the subjectivity of the artist, but in the horizons of a particular work’s inception, its many possible centres and contexts. The form of a work is entirely contingent upon the exigencies of its moment(s) of realisation, beyond the control of the artist. In another essay Higgins notes:

One thing above all was foreign to Fluxus works: personal intrusion on the part of the artist. In fact there was almost a cult among Fluxus people – or, more properly, a fetish, carried far beyond any rational or explainable level – which idealised the most direct relationship with ‘reality,’ specifically objective reality. The lives of objects, their

histories and events were considered somehow more realistic than any conceivable personal intrusion on them.<sup>121</sup>

Higgins' statement might be fruitfully related to this passage by RH Blyth, in which he discusses the place of the object within the poetic form of *haiku*:

Each thing is preaching the law [Dharma] incessantly, but this law is not something different from the thing itself. *Haiku* is the revealing of this preaching by presenting us with the thing devoid of all our mental twisting and emotional discoloration; or rather, it shows the thing as it exists at one and the same time outside and inside the mind, perfectly subjective, ourselves undivided from the object in its original unity with ourselves . . . It is a way of returning to nature, in short, to our Buddha nature. It is a way in which a cold winter rain, the swallows of evening, even the very day in its hotness and the length of the night become truly alive, share in our humanity, speak their own silent and expressive language.<sup>122</sup>

Adopting this viewpoint, it would be incorrect to say that Fluxworks (many of which were known as 'neo-haiku events') are *inexpressive* as a result of the artist's self-limiting role in their production. Rather, the site of expression in Fluxworks has been radically shifted from the artist to the object (no longer necessarily an *art* object), which in turn must be engaged by a receiving subjectivity, an arbitrarily imposed force, if it is to come to presence at all. In Zen thought, object and subject are interdependent, and this is clearly the case in Fluxus as well. Fluxus works are singularities, each moment of performance identical only with itself, subject to the intervention of an infinite number of potential, temporary forces. Lines of force and transformation can be drawn between any number of works, realisations, participants, available materials, points of view. There is thus no repetition, no re-presentation, in the space of the Fluxus nomad, only the production of possibilities, permutations and new intensities. Nothing lasts long enough, or speaks with enough authority, for it to be re-presented. Jean-François Lyotard declares that, in the place of representation,

one should insist on the *forgetting*. Representation and opposition imply memory: in passing from one singularity to the other, the one and the other are maintained together (through channels of circulation, set-ups, fantasies or libidinal configurations of cathexes). An identity (the same) is implied in this memory. In the eternal return as a desire for potentiality, there is precisely no memory. The travel is a passage without a trace, a forgetting, instantaneous which are multiple only for the discourse, not in themselves. Such is the reason for the absence of representation in this voyage, this nomadism of intensities.<sup>123</sup>

We find this same idea in Zen – the notion of forgetting as a way of maintaining an immediate awareness of the shifting present, beyond representation. In the Hsin Hsin Ming, one of the earliest Zen texts, Seng Ts'an (d. 606?), the third patriarch of Zen, points out that in forgetting, one moves beyond the realm where comparisons can be made, and where even the notion of identity ('oneness') is transcended:

Forget the wherefore of things,  
And we attain a state beyond analogy:  
Movement stopped is no movement,  
And rest set in motion is no rest.  
When dualism does no more obtain,  
Even oneness itself remains not as such.

In this idealised space of transcendence, says Seng Ts'an,

Nothing is retained now,  
 Nothing is to be memorised,  
 All is void, lucid, and self-illuminating,  
 There is no strain, no exertion, no wasting of energy –  
 This is where thinking never attains,  
 This is where the imagination fails to measure.<sup>124</sup>

This idealised space of transcendence and forgetting is *sunyata* – emptiness – the source of everything that is the case.<sup>125</sup> In the *Hsin Hsin Ming*, itself quite imbued with a Taoist sensibility, we are given instructions as to how one might fully experience this: 'no strain, no exertion, no wasting of energy.' In Zen and Fluxus, one simply does what one is doing now, even if that something is not very much at all. This can be art, if one wishes to call it such, or it can be Zen or meditation, sport, music, work, relaxation, education – whatever one might wish to call it. In a 1967 letter to John Cage, George Brecht strikes to the heart of the matter: 'I continue to do as little as possible and to be closer perhaps to Chuang-Tzu than to Hui-Neng though they're both great guys. The refrigerator door works better now that I've oiled it.'<sup>126</sup>

In Zen, many of the artists involved in Fluxus found a paradigm for destabilising the individual's relationship to the object and to the world. This paradigm necessitated a rethinking of the forms of presentation that would seek not do violence to the object or the individual by submitting them to closure. Instead, the new forms would recognise the relationship between object and self within a condition of constant *change*, each presencing for a moment and then receding back into the horizon whence it came, leaving behind scarcely a trace of itself. In this recognition, Fluxus, like Zen, shed doubt on the notion of ownership and so circumvented the mechanisms of the system of official 'avant-garde' culture, the business of art as business – at least temporarily. Commerce, after all, has a way of catching up with even the most fleeting of ephemera.

The year 1997 marked the thirty-fifth anniversary of the first Fluxus festivals. During these thirty-five years, the artists of Fluxus have dodged and flitted between categories, surfacing now and again to tweak the collective nose of the art world. Fluxus brought the very act of perception up for accounting by attempting to clear the slate, eliminating everything that was held to be nonessential to the acts of perceiving, of doing, of simply being in the world and acting as if it mattered. If the sporadic outbursts of performances and publishing offer any indication, Fluxus still has the power to do so. In Fluxus, said George Brecht in 1964, 'individuals with something unnameable in common have simply naturally coalesced to publish and perform their work.'<sup>127</sup> Today, after so many exhibitions and articles, that 'something' *remains* unnamable, those 'individuals' *remain* individuals. Perhaps this is what has kept Fluxus vital over the course of these thirty-odd years: try as one might to name it, Fluxus still cannot be pinned down, cannot be explained away. The passage of time has demonstrated that the ultimate fact of Fluxus may be that which is inscribed within its very name.

The myriad creatures rise from it yet it claims no authority;  
 It gives them life yet claims no possession;  
 It benefits them yet exacts no gratitude;

It accomplishes its task yet lays claim to no merit.  
 It is because it lays claim to no merit  
 That its merit never deserts it.  
 – Tao Te Ching, Chapter 2

## NOTES

- 1 Portions of this essay first appeared in the catalogue that accompanied the 'Fluxus Virus' exhibition at the Galerie Schüppenhauer, Cologne, in 1992, under the title 'Fluxus and Zen? Shut My Mouth, Quick!' The current essay constituted, by and large, my Master's thesis for Hunter College, New York from which I graduated in 1993.
- 2 See, for example, Dick Higgins, 'In einem Minensuchboot um die Welt', in René Block, *1962 Wiesbaden FLUXUS 1982*, Wiesbaden, Harlekin Art, and Berlin, Berliner Künstlerprogramm des DAAD, 1982, p 127, where he wrote, '... in the autumn of 1962, *fluxus* became *FLUXUS*, and the press decided to call us the "Fluxus-Leute" (Fluxus-people).'
- 3 B Mats, 'Birth of Fluxus: The Ultimate Version', *Kalejdoskop* [Åhus] (1979), no. 3; cited in Clive Phillpot and Jon Hendricks, eds, *Fluxus: Selections from the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection*, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1988, p 9.
- 4 George Brecht, *Chance Imagery*, A Great Bear Pamphlet, New York, Something Else Press, 1964, p 3.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p 4.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p 5.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p 7.
- 8 DT Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of DT Suzuki*, New York, Doubleday & Co, 1956, p 234.
- 9 Dick Higgins, 'A Something Else Manifesto', in D Higgins, *A Dialectic of Centuries: Notes towards a Theory of the New Arts*, 2nd edn, Printed Editions, New York, 1976, pp 102–3.
- 10 Author's interview with Eric Andersen, New York, 3 October 1992.
- 11 Robert Filliou, however, remarks in a letter to the editor of the *Berlingske Tidende* dated 21 December 1963 that, 'many of us have been influenced by Zen Buddhism'. In Harald Szeeman and Hans Sohm, *Happening & Fluxus*, Cologne, Kunstverein, 1970.
- 12 George Brecht, 'Something about Fluxus', in *FLuxus cc fiVe ThReE* (June 1964).
- 13 Barbara Moore, 'George Maciunas: A Finger in Fluxus', *Artforum* (October 1982) no. 21, p 40.
- 14 Larry Miller, Videotaped interview with George Maciunas, 24 March 1978; text transcribed in this volume.
- 15 Emmett Williams, *My Life in Flux and Vice Versa*, London and New York, Thames & Hudson, 1992, p 163.
- 16 John Cage, *Silence*, Middletown, CT, Wesleyan University Press, 1961, p xi.
- 17 Cage: 'This testing of art against life was the result of my attending the lectures of [DT] Suzuki for three years. I think it was from 1949 to 1951.' In Richard Kostelanetz, *The Theater of Mixed Means*, New York, The Dial Press, 1968.
- 18 Quoted in Rick Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, p 196.
- 19 Tomas Schmit, 'If I Remember Rightly', *Art and Artists* (1972), vol 7, no. 7, p 39.
- 20 'An Interview with George Brecht by Irmeline Lebeer', in Henry Martin, *An Introduction to George Brecht's Book of the Tumbler on Fire*, Milan, Multhipla Edizioni, 1978 p 83.
- 21 In *cc V TRE* (January 1964).

- 22 George Brecht, 'The Origin of Events', in Sohm and Szeeman, eds, *Happening & Fluxus*.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 'Excerpts from a Discussion between George Brecht and Allan Kaprow . . .', in *Fluxus ce jiVe ThReE* (June 1964).
- 25 La Monte Young, 'Lecture 1960', in Achille Bonito Oliva et al, eds, *Ubi Fluxus ibi motus*, Venice, Biennale and Milan, Mazeotta Editore 1990, p 203.
- 26 Thomas Cleary, *No Barrier: Unlocking of the Zen Koan*, New York, Bantam Books (1993), p 80.
- 27 Emmett Williams, *My Life in Flux and Vice Versa*, p 163.
- 28 'Stop to smile' might be better – or differently – translated as 'stop smiling'. *Disappearing Music For Face* was realised as a film in 1966. Shot at 2000 frames per second, the image is an extreme close-up of a smiling mouth (that of Yoko Ono): imperceptibly over the course of the ten-minute film, the smile fades. The score has also been realised as a live performance.
- 29 DT Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of DT Suzuki*, New York, Doubleday & Co, 1956, p 130.
- 30 *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Philosophy and Religion*, Boston, Shambhala, 1989, p 311.
- 31 Ibid., p 182. An alternate translation might be 'a controversial or mysterious case' (thanks to Matthew Miller for translation from Chinese).
- 32 Heinrich Dumoulin. *Zen Buddhism: A History*, vol 1, New York, Macmillan, 1988, pp 201–2.
- 33 Ruth Fuller Sasaki and Isshu Miura, *The Zen Koan*, New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, 1965, pp xi – xii.
- 34 Victor Musgrave, 'The Unknown Art Movement', *Art and Artists* (1972), vol 7, no. 7 pp 12–14.
- 35 Dick Higgins, 'Something Else about Fluxus', in *ibid.*, pp 16–21.
- 36 Dick Higgins, *A Dialectic of Centuries*, p 157.
- 37 George Brecht, 'Project in Multiple Dimensions', (1957/58), in Henry Martin, *Introduction to the Book of the Tumbler on Fire*, pp 126–7.
- 38 Dick Higgins, *A Dialectic of Centuries*, p 156.
- 39 'An Interview with George Brecht by Irmeline Lebeer', in Martin, *Introduction to George Brecht's Book of the Tumbler on Fire*, p 85.
- 40 Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1979, p 51.
- 41 Ibid., p 53.
- 42 The following brief description is written in the first person, with the understanding that the phenomena described are personal, referring to a specific performance at a specific time by a specific person (the author).
- 43 Personal interview with Takehisa Kosugi, 10 November 1993.
- 44 Dick Higgins, *A Dialectic of Centuries*, p 157. Reference to Bengt af Klintberg, Swedish folklorist affiliated with Fluxus.
- 45 This paradigm of mutual engagement, known in Mahayana ('Great Vehicle') Buddhism as the doctrine of Interdependent Origination, is also an important precept in both Zen and Taoism.
- 46 This translation is from Ben-Ami Scharfstein's Introduction to Yoel Hoffmann, *The Sound of the One Hand*, New York, Basic Books, 1975, p 18.
- 47 George Brecht, 'The Origin of Events' (dated August 1970), in Sohm and Szeeman, eds, *Happening & Fluxus*.
- 48 Dick Higgins, 'The Post-Cognitive Era: Looking for the Sense in IT All', in Higgins, *A Dialectic of Centuries*, p 6.
- 49 Jackson Mac Low. 'Buddhism, Art, Practice, Polity', in Kent Johnson and Craig Paulenich, *Beneath a Single Moon*, Boston, Shambhala, 1991, p 177.
- 50 Walter De Maria, 'Meaningless Work', (1960), in Jackson Mac Low and La Monte

- Young, eds, *An Anthology*, New York, 1961, unpaginated.
- 51 Higgins, *Postface*, p 92.
- 52 Ken Friedman, *The Events*, New York, Jaap Rietman, 1985, unpaginated. *Scrub Piece* was first performed at the Nathan Hale Monument in New London, Connecticut.
- 53 George Maciunas, 'Neo-Dada in Music, Theater, Poetry, Art', in Phillpot and Hendricks, eds, *Fluxus: Selections from the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection*, p 27. This essay/manifesto was read at the Fluxus concert 'Après John Cage' in Wuppertal, West Germany, on 9 June 1962.
- 54 George Maciunas to Tomas Schmit, 8 November 1963; cited in Jon Hendricks, ed, *Fluxus etc./Addenda II: The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection*, Pasadena, CA, Baxter Art Gallery, California Institute of Technology, 1983, pp 165–6.
- 55 Maciunas, 'Neo-Dada in Music . . .', p 27.
- 56 Jackson Mac Low, 'Fluxus and Poetry', unpublished manuscript [June 1992], p 7.
- 57 Alison Knowles, *by Alison Knowles*, New York, Something Else Press, 1965, p 2.
- 58 One can imagine, however, that there are at any given moment situations in which making a salad is difficult, if not impossible, for any number of reasons – political, economic, social. One can further imagine that the very difficulties brought to bear on salad-making by these forces might also be revealed by a performance of Knowles' *Proposition*.
- 59 Estera Milman, 'Road Shows, Street Events, and Fluxus People: A Conversation with Alison Knowles', *Visible Language* (1992), vol 26, no. 1/2, p 103.
- 60 *Ibid.*, p 104.
- 61 In Robert Filliou, *A Filliou Sampler*, New York, Something Else Press, 1967, pp 5–10.
- 62 Robert Filliou, 'The Propositions and Principles of Robert Filliou (Part One)', *Humanistic Perspectives in Contemporary Art* (1978), no. 9, p 7.
- 63 Mieko Shiomi to the author, dated 16 October 1992.
- 64 *Ibid.*
- 65 Interview with Takehisa Kosugi, New York, 10 November 1992.
- 66 *Ibid.*
- 67 *Ibid.*
- 68 *Ibid.*
- 69 Many thanks to Ken Friedman for bringing these *daruma*s to my attention.
- 70 Thomas Cleary, trans, *Shobogenzo: Zen Essays by Dogen*, Honolulu, HI, University of Hawaii Press, 1986, p 9.
- 71 Yoko Ono, 'To the Wesleyan People (who attended the meeting); A Footnote to My Lecture of January 13th, 1966', reprinted in Yoko Ono, *To See the Skies*, Milan, Fondazione Mudima, 1990, pp 14–15. All quotations of Yoko Ono in this portion of the paper have been drawn from this essay.
- 72 Henri Matisse, 'Notes of a Painter', in Herschel B Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art*, Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1968, p 135.
- 73 It seems reasonably safe to assume that this proposition, like many of Ono's works, is intended to be performed 'in the mind'.
- 74 Interview with Ben Patterson, New York, 3 April 1992.
- 75 *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Philosophy and Religion*, Boston, Shambhala, 1989, p 122.
- 76 The tree beneath which Shakyamuni Buddha attained complete enlightenment.
- 77 Thomas Cleary, trans, *No Barrier: Unlocking the Zen Koan*, New York, Bantam, 1993, p 141.
- 78 Thomas Cleary, trans, *Shobogenzo*, p 35.
- 79 Alan Watts, 'Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen', in Nancy Wilson Ross, ed, *The World of Zen*, New York, Vintage, 1960, p 336. Originally published in Alan Watts, *Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen*, San Francisco, City Lights Books, 1959.
- 80 Watts, 'Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen', p 335.

- 81 Ibid.
- 82 See, for example, Clement Greenberg, 'Towards a Newer Laocoon', in Francis Frascina, ed, *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, New York, Harper & Row, 1985, pp 41–2. Originally published in *Partisan Review* (July – August 1940), vol 7, no. 4, pp 296–310.
- 83 Brecht, *Chance Imagery*, p 6.
- 84 Watts, 'Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen', p 335.
- 85 Brecht, *Chance Imagery*, p 7.
- 86 For an interesting comparison of Brecht's and Vautier's views on these matters, the reader is referred to 'A Conversation about Something Else: An Interview with George Brecht by Ben Vautier and Marcel Alocço', in Martin, *An Introduction to George Brecht's Book of the Tumbler on Fire*, pp 67–73.
- 87 George Brecht, 'An Interview with Robin Page for Carla Liss (Who Fell Asleep)', *Art and Artists* (1972), vol 7, no. 7, p 33.
- 88 This 'gesture' would seem to have a precursor in Marcel Duchamp's mythic decision to 'quit' his practice of art and pursue his love of chess. However, for Brecht, as we have seen, there can be no 'quitting' or 'starting': he simply has some novels he'd like to read. No big deal.
- 89 Chart reprinted in Szeeman and Sohm, eds, *Happening & Fluxus*, unpaginated.
- 90 Dick Higgins, 'Fluxus: Theory and Reception', in *Fluxus Research*, special issue of *Lund Art Press* (1991), vol 2, no. 2, pp 34–5; reprinted and re-edited in this volume.
- 91 Miller, 'Transcript of the Videotaped Interview with George Maciunas', p 26.
- 92 Friedman corrected the spelling of the title in his 1990 *Correction Event: Zen Vaudeville*.
- 93 Ken Friedman, 'Fluxus Performance', in Gregory Battcock and Robert Nickas, eds, *The Art of Performance: A Critical Anthology*, New York, EP Dutton, Inc, 1984, p 59.
- 94 George Maciunas, 'Expanded Arts Diagram', in Szeeman and Sohm, eds, *Happening & Fluxus*.
- 95 Cited in Conrad Hyers, *The Laughing Buddha: Zen and the Comic Spirit*, Wakefield, NH, Longwood Academic, 1991, p 34.
- 96 Friedman, 'Fluxus Performance', p 63.
- 97 Hyers, *The Laughing Buddha*, pp 49–50.
- 98 Hyers, *The Laughing Buddha*, p 17. For a more thorough analysis of the radical power of laughter to overturn categories, the reader is referred to Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans Hélène Iswolsky, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1984.
- 99 George Brecht, 'From Project in Multiple Dimensions', in Martin, *An Introduction to George Brecht's Book of the Tumbler on Fire*, p 126.
- 100 Norman Bryson, 'The Gaze in the Expanded Field', in Hal Foster, ed, *Vision and Visuality*, Seattle, WA, Bay Press, 1988, pp 97–8.
- 101 Cited in DT Suzuki, Erich Fromm and Richard De Martino, *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis*, New York, Grove Press, 1960, p 35.
- 102 Ibid., pp 36–7.
- 103 Ibid., p 35.
- 104 Suzuki, 'Lectures on Zen Buddhism', in *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis*, pp 25–6.
- 105 Higgins, 'An Exemplativist Manifesto' (1963), in Higgins, ed, *A Dialectic of Centuries*, p 162.
- 106 John Cage and Daniel Charles, 'For the Birds', in *semiotexte* (1978), vol 3, no. 1, pp 32–3.
- 107 Gilles Deleuze, 'Nomad Thought', in *ibid.*, p 17.
- 108 Ibid., p 18.
- 109 Ibid., p 16.
- 110 Ibid.
- 111 Higgins, 'A Something Else Manifesto', p 103.
- 112 An evening of Fluxus performance is often constituted by a chain of seemingly

- disconnected Events. Presented one after the other, there is no sense of a narrative flow, but rather of an *accumulation* of singularities. This recalls the disjunctive structure of aphoristic books such as Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*, as it recalls that of the great koan collections, the *Rinzairoku* and the *Wumenguan*, as well as the *Tao Te Ching* and Paul Reps' contemporary collection of Zen texts, *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*.
- 113 Brian Massumi, *A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1992, p 6.
- 114 Milman, 'Road Shows ...' p 100.
- 115 Higgins, *Postface*, p 18.
- 116 Dumoulin, *Zen Buddhism: A History*, vol 2, p 153.
- 117 Cited in Jon Hendricks, *Fluxus Codex*, New York, Abrams, 1988, p133.
- 118 Jackson Mac Low to the author, 3 August 1992.
- 119 *Fluxus etc./Addenda II: The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection*, Pasadena, CA, Baxter Art Gallery, California Institute of Technology, 1983; cited in Phillpot and Hendricks, *Fluxus: Selections from the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection*, p 12.
- 120 Higgins, 'The Post-Cognitive Era', p 6.
- 121 Higgins, 'Something Else about Fluxus', p 18.
- 122 In Daisetz T Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1970, p 228.
- 123 Jean-François Lyotard, 'Notes on the Return and Kapital', in *semiotexte* (1978), vol 3, no. 1, p 52.
- 124 DT Suzuki, 'History of Zen Buddhism from Bodhidharma to Hui-Neng', in *Essays in Zen Buddhism* (First Series), New York, Grove Press, 1949, p 200.
- 125 Actually, the idealised space of transcendence is called '*nirvana*', but as seen by Zen, there is really no idealised space of transcendence – or it is at most very unimportant – and the concept of nirvana, like all concepts and names, is just more emptiness.
- 126 George Brecht to John Cage, 30 June 1967; cited in Martin, *The Book of the Tumbler on Fire*.
- 127 Brecht, 'Something about Fluxus'.

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