

PRE-FLUXUS CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENTS AND GENERATIVE INFLUENCES

Chapter 1 of *Fluxus: The History Of An Attitude*

by Owen F. Smith

Historical considerations of the visual arts in Western Europe and the United States in the 1950s and 1960s tend to focus on the developments in late modernist extensions of painting and sculpture. This period has been seen as driven by an Existentialist world view or at least the rhetoric of mid-twentieth-century Existentialism with its focus on the individual as the main factor in determinations of artistic essence. This outlook is especially evident in the work by historians who have focused their studies on styles such as Abstract Expressionism and Post-Painterly Abstraction in the United States and Informal and Tachism in Europe. 1 A number of artistic explorations of the 1950s and 1960s were, however, antithetical to the idea of art as a form of personal expression. In this period, a number of issues about art and art-making began to be developed or, in some cases, re-developed, which would profoundly alter the direction of contemporary art. Numerous artists in all fields of creative expression became increasingly dissatisfied with the dominant forms of modernist expression, such as Abstract Expressionism in the visual arts, Beat poetry in the literary arts, and serial music in the musical arts. The underlying principles of most of these modernist art forms had become dominated by an aesthetic amplification of artistic autonomy. 2 These presumptions about the autonomy of art, coupled with an existentialist emphasis on the individual, resulted in a separation of art from social praxis. In the 1950s, many artists in the United States, Europe, and Japan began posing questions in their work that contributed to the deconstruction of modernist artistic practice: is an artist someone whose special talents make her or him better than other people? Is a work of art intrinsically valuable? For there to be a work of art, does an artist have to make something? Does a work of art have to be an object? The consideration of such questions was not fundamentally new, but a re-emergence, although in a somewhat altered form, of issues raised by the Futurists, Dadaists, and Surrealists in the first half of the century. 3 This period of questioning in the 1950s forms a significant theoretical background for the later developments associated with Fluxus. 4 As Fluxus developed in the 1960s, it in turn became the transmitter of such ideas to other artists and artistic groups.

Modernism has most often been considered as a very generalized set of unifying characteristics. In the visual arts, the modern period is most often determined by the use of a chronological frame, which begins in the mid-nineteenth century and ends, if it has at all, no earlier than the late 1960s or early 1970s. Secondly, the rubric modern art also refers to certain formal elements generally related to a Kantian conception of aesthetics and the nature of art. As several historians have recently emphasized, however, it is much more accurate to divide this monolithic term modern art into two oppositional directions. The first is the modernism of Impressionism, Post-impressionism, Cubism, Expressionism, and non-objective art, which is generally socially progressive, rationalistic, competitive, and utopian in nature. It is this form of modernism that is most often referred to when the term modern art is used. The second modernism, or avant-garde modernism, is that of Futurism, Dadaism, and Surrealism, self-critical movements formed to pose general critiques of the cultural status quo and thus predisposed to draw into question the considerations of the rational, progressive, and utopian bases of the first modernism. 5 It is the avant-garde modernism of Futurism, Dadaism, and, to a lesser degree, Surrealism that forms the conceptual progenitor of Fluxus and other so-called "alternative" arts developments of the post-World War II period. 6 These developments contributed in turn to what might be called a nascent stage of a postmodern sensibility. 7 Writing about the historical evolution of Fluxus, Dick Higgins stated that "Fluxus appears to be an iconoclastic art movement, somewhat in the lineage of the other such movements in our century-Futurism, Dada, Surrealism, etc. And, indeed, the relationship is a real one." 8

By far the most pervasive as well as the most general concern transmitted from Futurism, Dadaism, and Surrealism to Fluxus artists in the 1960s was the aspiration to break down the culturally determined artificial distinctions between art and life. The project of the Futurists, Dadaists, and Surrealists was not so much a critique of other modern-art forms as one of the institutional function of art as a mirror of bourgeois egoism, materialism, and passivity. Their goal was to utilize artistic structures to challenge the substructures of

bourgeois culture, the ultimate goal being to alter world history not art history.

The Italian Futurists saw the dependence on the past as suffocating. Although many modern-art movements challenged the visual or stylistic aspects of art, they still possessed a fundamental link to past aesthetics in their lack of any social or life praxis. The artists of the twentieth century, the Futurists declared, should look to life and its dynamic, non-static qualities as a model for their work and activities and simultaneously reject the primacy of rationality. The Futurist preoccupation with dynamism and change owed a considerable debt to the ideas of the French philosopher Henri Bergson. Bergson argued that what reason tells us about the ultimate nature of reality is wrong because the reasoning process is an analytical progression toward essences or conclusions about Being. The problem with rationalist methodology, according to Bergson, is that there are no basic, solid constituent units of reality. "Matter" is constantly changing and in a state of flux: everything is always in a state of becoming something else. Bergson argued that apprehension of flux requires exercise of the powers of intuition rather than the operations of logic; through intuition one could begin to experience nature as process.

Adopting these ideas about the ultimate nature of reality, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and the other Italian Futurists increasingly emphasized change, flux, and indeterminacy in their work. The role of the artist was to liberate himself/herself from rational conventions and the established social norms to become as active, aggressive, and dynamic as possible. Artists would become directly involved in the political and social concerns of the day. This recognition of dynamism necessitated the development of new art forms, a non-static art. The development of new, dynamic art forms, among them parole in liberté compositions and forms now generally referred to as "performance art," fulfilled two important objectives for the Futurists. The first was that these art forms could be utilized to confront aggressively the cultural values and sensibilities of the bourgeois, or passésists. Varieties of performance were thought to be more immediate, more reflective of the flux of reality than easel painting or traditional sculpture, and thus more likely to challenge the barriers that normally distanced artworks from the viewer and from life. The most significant element of performative work for the Futurists, however, involved the assumption that the dynamic shifting qualities of performance mirrored the energetic evolution of modern life. The Futurists sought not to create new art but new art forms, an art that went beyond older forms of art to create a new dynamic method of expression:

There is no reason why every activity must of necessity be confined to one or another of those ridiculous limitations that we call music, literature, painting, etc. . . . EVERY ARTIST WILL BE ABLE TO INVENT A NEW FORM OF ART . . . in which would be found mixed in accordance with a new measure and scale, the most diverse means of expression-words, colors, notes, implications of shape, of scent, of facts, noises, movements and physical sensations. . . . 9

It is this shift or alteration in emphasis from traditional, static, object-based art forms to the more open-ended forms of art, such as the parole in liberté and the performative arts, that established one of the primary strategies for the reintegration of life into art favored by Futurists, Dadaists, and Surrealists. Although the Dadaists and the Surrealists rejected the Futurists for their nationalism and pro-war stance, they adopted some of the performance forms that the Futurists had developed.

Like the Futurists, the Dadaists believed that it was not just cultural institutions and practices that needed to be altered, but the whole underlying structure of society. Philosophical discourses, science, and rationality, they decided, had artificially determined what was taken as the "true" nature of reality and all of its operations. In his "Dada Manifesto" from 1918, Tristan Tzara elaborated on the way in which such an "overestimation of reason" falsified any potential understanding:

There is no ultimate Truth. The dialectic is an amusing mechanism which guides us / in a banal kind of way / to the opinions we had in the first place. Does anyone think that, by a minute refinement of logic, he has demonstrated the truth and established the correctness of these opinions? Logic imprisoned by the senses is an organic disease. To this element philosophers always like to add: the power of observation. But this magnificent quality of the mind is the proof of its impotence. 10

For the Dadaists, Western culture had become an arena limited by the underlying philosophical constructs of rational thought. Art and culture, as elements of the Western intellectual network, were seen as unconcerned with the chaos of freedoms inherent in life and as a self-reflexive, institutionalized extension of the bourgeois mechanism of production and distribution. Like the Futurists, the Dadaists realized that the potential power of art existed in its potential for altering the practices of life. Life, however, was not defined

as the life of the comfortable bourgeoisie, the life of rationalized cause-and-effect relationships, but ordinary daily-life experiences which included irrationality, chance, and inherent contradictions.

Dada; elegant and unprejudiced leap from a harmony to the other sphere; trajectory of a word tossed like a screeching phonograph record; to respect all individuals in their folly of the moment: whether it be serious, fearful, timid, ardent, vigorous, determined, enthusiastic; to divest one's church of every useless cumbersome accessory. . . Freedom: Dada Dada Dada, a roaring of tense colorst and interlacing of opposites and of all contradictions, grotesques, inconsistencies: LIFE. 11

The Dadaists not only wanted freedom from bourgeois culture, but from logic, order, and anything familiar, accepted, or an attribute of the status quo. To this end, Dadaists employed irony and humor in their performances and in the objects they created. Turning to the absurd, naive, primitive, and effects created by chance, the Dadaists attempted to mystify the seemingly complacent bourgeoisie by focusing on the paradoxes of life. Art objects were not important in themselves for most of the Dadaists but were used as a means of communication: painting and sculpture, such as the work of Francis Picabia, for example, were vehicles for commentary, parody, or blasphemy, not treasures as they had been thought of before. The concept of art as a kind of "cerebral revolver shot," as Tristan Tzara called Dada acts, the repudiation of rationalism and "Truth," the rejection of the mechanisms of bourgeois artistic culture, and the desire to make art more directly correspondent to life form a strong conceptual link between Futurism, Dada, Surrealism, and Fluxus.

French Surrealism of the 1920s and 1930s can be seen to have evolved in part out of Dada. Although the specific developmental relationships between Dadaism and Surrealism are still debated, Surrealism carried on and expanded several key ideas of Dadaism, especially the attack on the division in bourgeois culture between what is called art and life; this division was held to prevent the achievement of art's full potential. 12 Surrealism, too, saw bourgeois culture as dominated by the supremacy of rationalist thought. The irrational and non-rational responses of the Dadaist artists to these kinds of bourgeois sensibilities, however, were replaced in French Surrealism by an interest in a systematized consideration of the non-rational structures of the Freudian unconscious. For the Surrealists, the creative act resulted in the unification of images from the unconscious mind with the realm of ordinary occurrences and objects into a super-reality, or Sur-realism. Within this framework, artistic production was a vital means for exploring the unconscious, rather than a means of producing aesthetic objects for sale. Surrealism is most accurately described as a way of thinking, a philosophy and a way of life, as opposed to a style of art or literature. It is this idea of artistic production as a way of life that was to be one of the Surrealists' greatest legacies for the artists of the 1960s and 1970s. This significance of Surrealism for the post-World War II American artists was commented on by Fluxus artist Dick Higgins:

The Surrealists constituted the nucleus of the then avant-garde. Some of us who later did fluxus works were very conscious of this . . . from time to time there would be Surrealist "manifestations," and some of these both in Europe and the United States, rather resembled the Environments out of which happenings developed. These were, in any case, locked into our sensibility, as points of reference in considering our earlier art experiences. 13

In addition to the Futurism-Dadaism-Surrealism network of the early twentieth century, the ideas of two individual artists and thinkers - Marcel Duchamp and John Cage - must be added to the historical backdrop of Fluxus. Ben Vautier commented on the significance of these two individuals for Fluxus:

Officially nothing ties them [the artists associated with Fluxus] together, if not a certain way to conceive art and the similar influences by which they have been affected. These influences are: John Cage, Dada and Marcel Duchamp. Without Cage, Marcel Duchamp, and Dada, Fluxus would not exist . . . Fluxus exists and creates from the knowledge of this post-Duchamp (the readymade) and post-Cage the depersonalization of the artist situation. 14

Although Marcel Duchamp was associated with both Dadaism and Surrealism, he should be considered individually because of the significance that his ideas had for artists after World War II. 15 The work and ideas of Marcel Duchamp incorporate a number of the ideas that became central to the development of "non-gallery" art in the late 1950s and 1960s, such as the work of Robert Morris and Ben Vautier. A central element of Duchamp's thinking was his campaign against what he called "retinal art." A work of art has at least two general aspects, the first of which corresponds to the sign-that is, the visual elements-and the second to the signifier, what might be loosely described as the conceptual elements. Duchamp felt that in the

arts too much importance had come to be placed on the physical attributes of the sign. Through this emphasis on the purely visual, art had become intellectually limited and over-valued as an object endowed with special physical properties. 16 By rejecting retinal art, Duchamp wanted to put art back into the intellectual realm. This did not mean for him that art should be logical or rational, but that it should be "in the service of the mind."

Duchamp also argued that the idea that art possessed some special enduring quality was an ingenious cultural construct. "I doubt its [art's] value deep down," he wrote. "Man invented art. It wouldn't exist without him. All of man's creations aren't valuable. Art has no biological source. It's addressed to a taste." 17 He drew attention to the influence of taste in the act of creation itself. Artists can become a kind of machine, copying themselves to produce works that possessed the individual qualities recognized by cultural institutions and art buyers.

Duchamp maintained that "fine" artists were no different from any other classes of people who make things.

Fundamentally, I don't believe in the creative function of the artist. He's a man like any other. It's his job to do certain things, but the businessman does certain things also. . . . Now everyone makes something, and those who make things on canvas, with a frame, they're called artists. Formerly, they were called craftsmen, a term I prefer. We're all craftsmen, in civilian or military or artistic life. 18

In his work, Duchamp attempted to de-mythologize the role of the artist, to undermine the perception of the artist as a "genius," and to counter the effects of taste in creation. He used chance techniques, for example, to remove the interference of the ego and limitations of personal taste. 19 He also made use of impersonal methods of production associated with industry. Probably the most historically significant of these was the utilization of readymades. 20 With his readymades, Duchamp raised a number of questions that would become central to the thinking of many artists in the 1960s and 1970s: what are the necessary and sufficient conditions for art or art-making? Does an artwork have to be "made" by an artist? Is something a work of art if an artist says it is? If something is not a work of art, why not? 21 The significance of Duchamp's ideas as an alternative to mainstream modernism for the development of post-World-War-II "alternative" arts, and Fluxus in particular, was indicated by George Brecht, who described what he felt was a paradigm shift associated with these ideas of Duchamp. In an interview with Henry Martin, Brecht discussed this shift:

We've been talking about a change in paradigm or about the way a new paradigm began to emerge around 1915 and we've been calling it the Duchampian paradigm, just for want of something better, right? . . . [it's] important to notice the way the Duchampian paradigm seems to show up the kind of development that's typical of an artist's work. Take Monet, for example, or any artist between Monet and Duchamp, including Picasso, and there's a straight line quality in the development of his work when it's considered as a whole. With Duchamp . . . The works are like points scattered off into many different directions . . . like a spiral. Duchamp's work no longer develops along a straight line but distributes itself through a series of points that lie on a spiral and you can intuit the center but you can't see any straight line development at all 22

The relationship between Fluxus and John Cage, who met Duchamp in the late 1940s and was profoundly impressed by his work, was much more direct than between Duchamp and Fluxus. Ben Vautier stressed the central role of Cage's ideas for the development of Fluxus, stating that Fluxus would not exist "especially without Cage who, I would like to say, has done two brainwashings. The first, at the level of contemporary music by the notion of indeterminateness, the other, by his teaching through the spirit of Zen and his will to depersonalize art." 23

The study of Zen in the mid 1940s had taught Cage that rationality gives a false impression of the world as static, for Zen holds that the world is a united web of interrelationships that are in a state of constant flux and change. As Bergson noted, the idea that everything is related through process and change and that everything interpenetrates ultimately transcends the limits of reason. Zen metaphysics also extend to notions of the self and led Cage to a critique of the notion of the artist as genius. Zen looks at the individual not as an isolated entity, but as parts of an essentially integrated whole. According to Cage

. . . turning [away from intentionality] is psychological and seems at first to be a giving up of everything that belongs to humanity . . . This psychological turning leads to the world of nature, where, gradually or suddenly, one sees that humanity and nature, not separate, are in this world together; that nothing was lost when everything was given away. In fact everything is gained. 24

The unifying force of process and change, in Cage's view, integrates all life activities within the concept of nature. Thus, Cage came to believe that art should harmonize with nature and its processes. Art should utilize the operations of the natural world; thus, chance and change should be a part of the artistic process. 25 The use of chance for Cage is a way to liberate the artist from taste, habit, and ego. Cage also believes that to be consistent with nature art must be concerned with equivalences. In Zen metaphysics there are no natural hierarchies; thus, Cage concluded that art should mirror an equivalency of values instead of suggesting that "artistic" experiences are more elevated than "ordinary" experiences. In this way, art becomes important as a means to make one aware of one's actual environment.

And what is the purpose of writing Music? . . . the answer must take the form of a paradox: a purposeful purposelessness or a purposeless play. This play, however, is an affirmation of life-not an attempt to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in nature, but simply a way of waking up to the very life we're living . . . 26

The primary function of art, Cage believes, is not only to be a means of increasing one's awareness of actuality, but also a way of celebrating these new awarenesses. 27 These celebrations, though, are not an end in themselves for Cage: they are instruments for making people more aware of the significance of life around them.

The attitude that I take is that everyday life is more interesting than forms of celebration [art], when we become aware of it. That when is when our intentions go down to zero. Then suddenly you notice that the world is magical. 28

The thinking of John Cage overlaps with that of Marcel Duchamp in several important ways although they came to related conclusions for very different reasons. In referring to this link, between his outlook and that of John Cage, Duchamp said, "If people choose to associate us, it's because we have a spiritual empathy and a similar way of looking at things." 29 For the purpose of this study, their ideas come together most markedly on two important points. First, artists are not "advocates of high truth." Second, the effect of personality and taste should be removed from art-making processes. These two ideas form the crucial core of what would develop in the late 1950s and 1960s into a situational view of aesthetics that is central to Fluxus. 30

The significance of John Cage as a role model for many of the artists who would become associated with Fluxus cannot be understated. His importance is evident on a number of different levels that include, but are not limited, to his activities as a teacher, writer, performer, and composer. One of the most significant aspects of Cage's work and ideas in the 1950s was the development of new theatrical qualities in musical performance. By the early 1950s, Cage had come to believe that musical performance was a kind of theater, analogous to the theater of life, and as such it should engage both the "eye and the ear." 31 One of Cage's first performative explorations of these ideas is the now-famous Black Mountain multi-media performance in the summer of 1952. 32

In the late 1950s, Cage's influence on artists, musicians, and composers was beginning to be evident throughout the United States, Western Europe, and Japan. In this period, Cage came into direct contact with several of the artists who would later become central in the development of early Fluxus and had an important impact on their thinking. Cage first performed in Europe in 1954 with David Tudor. 33 This performance and the ideas on which it was based at first outraged critics, but by the late 1950s, these ideas had become respected within European avant-garde music circles. Like Cage, many of the leading European composers began to make use of indeterminacy in their own works in the 1950s. Some composers, such as Karlheinz Stockhausen in his classes in Darmstadt, in turn introduced younger composers to these ideas. 34 When Cage and Tudor returned to perform in Germany in 1958 and 1959, they found a very receptive audience that included, among others, La Monte Young and Nam June Paik, both of whom would later become central in the development of Fluxus in the early 1960s. 35 In the United States, Cage's contact with other younger artists who would become active in Fluxus was primarily through his class on "Composition of Experimental Music," taught at the New School for Social Research in New York in the late 1950s. 36 Dick Higgins described the significance of the ideas presented in this class:

Cage used to talk about a lot of things going on at once and having nothing to do with each other. He called it autonomous behavior of simultaneous events: I called it independence. In fact, the beauty about studying with Cage was that he brought out what you already knew and helped you become conscious of the essence of what you were doing . . . 37

Through this class, a number of artists not only came into direct contact with Cage and his ideas but also one another. ³⁸ In 1958, the students and participants in Cage's class included, among others, George Brecht, Dick Higgins, and Jackson Mac Low, all of whom would become central in the development of new performative art forms and Fluxus in the early 1960s. Through the ever-increasing network of interaction among people like Higgins, Brecht, Mac Low, Toshi Ichiyangi, Henry Flynt, and La Monte Young, a number of works were developed and produced in New York that would directly lead to the idea for the Fluxus group and its eventual formation.

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