Anti-Art as the End of Cultural History

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I can imagine someone saying, since art is an important mode of knowing and communication, how can it ever become obsolete? This question is simply heedless toward the successive lessons of the avant-garde which prompted the brend theory. . . . For us, all high art, for example, was seen in the shadow of Stockhausen's "scientific music." Its message, so far from being uplifting or even neutral, was a message we were better off without.

—Henry Flynt, 1990

IN THE 1960S Fluxus offered a forum to performance artists coming from music similar to that provided by galleries to visual artists doing Happenings. Performers might read the numbers on adding machine tapes as a score and each accordingly raise and lower their bowler hats in the random order of the numbers. They might perform a "piano piece" by placing a vase of flowers on a piano. Such pieces opened up music to random and trivial events more characteristic of everyday life than what had been thought of as art. Was there a point in this process at which "art" would get so swamped or diluted by "life" that it would stop being art? Conversely, as in the Buddhist notion of an "art of everyday life," could one's means of dealing with life become so skilled or ennobled as to be considered an art? Some aesthetically-oriented societies had nonetheless no concept of art. Perhaps art would become obsolete and disappear from Western cultural life as well, and Fluxus, in helping to snuff out this beautiful sacrificial candle, would have illuminated the possibility of a more brilliant life for all humanity.

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Fluxus performances or “events” soon turned into the production of boxed multiples. The boxes usually contained either the printed notations or “scores” for the performances or assorted objects whose reference to events was more tenuous. Besides events and multiples, Fluxus (like many avant-garde groups, e.g. Symbolists, Futurists, Constructivists, Surrealists) also had a utopian political program, which in this case called for the abolition of art. The principle propagators of that program—with which some Fluxus members vehemently disagreed—were the Fluxus impresario George Maciunas and his sidekick Henry Flynt. It would be possible to describe Maciunas and Flynt as a pair of eccentric and amusing crackpots. On the other hand, it seems more interesting to take their politics seriously, to argue not only that their program was high-minded and deserving of support, but that their schemes for returning the Soviet Union to its revolutionary aesthetic of the 1920s might have been capable of realization. Their desire to restore to the individual some self-respect for his/her taste preferences, represented by Flynt’s picketing of the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum, and Lincoln Center, was in the highest traditions of participatory democracy, while their attempt to decolonize the international music scene by picketing the composer Stockhausen’s concerts was years in advance of its time.

The tensions generated by their attempt to impose this program on the rest of the group, far from disintegrating it, were a major factor holding it together. Such positions run contrary to what a number of Fluxus members and critics have written. Although the venom of the Fluxus campaign against Western high art may now have been recuperated by art history, that campaign is still worth scrutiny. If one draws a line through the axes of the paradoxes it generated, that line will not prove tangential (as some have claimed), but will lead to the conceptual center of Fluxus. Further, the utopian coloring of that center, the ideals of progress that animated its socialist metanarrative to try to break down its encircling boundaries or frames, which were really the same as those between art and life, show that the movement was not postmodern (as some have claimed) but a child of that modernism called Dada.3

Not only Dada notions, according to Maciunas, but others from Marcel Duchamp, John Cage, concept art (via Henry Flynt), Soviet Constructivism and Bauhaus rationalism (via Maciunas himself), games and puzzles (via George Brecht), haiku, Spike Jones, and vaudeville gags went to make up the compound that became Fluxus. The movement has also been described as a fusion of inputs from John Cage and the students who were attracted to his famous course at the New School in 1958–59 (Dick Higgins and
George Brecht, for example); the tendency known as “California Minimalism” that was brought to New York from Ann Halprin’s San Francisco dance workshop in 1960 by the composer La Monte Young (and which also included the sculptors Walter DeMaria and Robert Morris and the dancers Simone Forti and Yvonne Rainer); and the work of Japanese artists living in New York such as Ay-O, Yoko Ono and her then husband Ichiyanagi, some of whom brought with them experience of the Gutai and Ongaku groups in Japan.4 Since Cage had been influenced by Zen, and since Ichiyanagi was the principal propagator of Cage’s ideas in Japan, as Young was in California, a certain circularity characterizes this description. Fluxus was conceived by Maciunas, a Lithuanian refugee, in New York, gave its early concerts in Europe, then moved its center of operations with Maciunas back to New York. And although many artists were European or American (some of them expatriate) men, the presence of numerous women and Japanese as well as a Korean and an American black artist among the core performers complemented well the Bohemian marginality typical of avant-gardes.

It has proved difficult for chroniclers to specify without disagreement what Fluxus was, who belonged to it at different times, and what Fluxus work consisted of. Despite Maciunas’s entrepreneurship and his claim to be serving a collective, the members were widely scattered and contentious. Some did not know each other and others did not speak to each other, some claimed that they were “first generation” members and others that they never were members, some that Maciunas at one time or another kicked out all but two or three of them and others that he had no right to kick out anyone and never did. Thus George Brecht’s genial assertion that “In Fluxus there has never been any attempt to agree on aims or methods; individuals with something unnameable in common have simply naturally coalesced to publish and perform their work” takes on plausibility.5 This essay argues much more narrowly that Fluxus cultural politics, particularly its contested anti-art campaigns, were conceptually at the core of the movement and held it together organizationally.

Flynt met Maciunas in June 1961 at the latter’s A/G Gallery in New York in the company of the composer La Monte Young and the poet Jackson Mac Low. Young had been running a series of avant-garde concerts in Yoko Ono’s loft, in which Mac Low and Flynt participated. Now this group and Maciunas were planning for the gallery a parallel series of performances (in which Flynt would also take part) that would later come to be seen as a sort of antechamber to the Fluxus movement. At this point Maciunas already knew the history of the Soviet avant-garde scene of the 1920s and especially of the LEF.6 His father had been an engineer specializing in
power stations whose training and affiliations were German; according to one story he collaborated with the Nazis in Lithuania, although this has been disputed, and in 1944 he and his family fled with them from the advancing Russians. His mother was born in Tiflis (her first language was Russian) to an officer in the Tsar’s army who fled back to Lithuania during the Revolution; she has been anti-Soviet and in this country once worked as secretary to Kerensky. It is unclear how George Maciunas first im-

probably acquired his socialist ideals—perhaps as an expression of East European nationalism, or a rejection of his father’s affiliations. It is unclear too whether in the correspondence with Flynt that followed Maciunas’s departure for Europe in Fall 1961 it was Flynt “the ferocious Communist” who legitimated a certain militance in Maciunas by making the latter seem moderate vis-à-vis the rest of the group—much as Breton in the late 1920s had used the French Communist Party to establish for the Surrealist group some distance from the bourgeoisie—or whether Maciunas slowly drew Flynt over to his own Marxist position, with its special enthusiasm for the Soviet twenties, which the latter then typically took to extremes.

Flynt was a North Carolina-born and Harvard-educated mathematician, philosopher, and composer in the Cageian tradition and a member of La Monte Young’s circle in New York whose 1961 essay on “concept art” in the Maciunas-designed *An Anthology* is credited with having invented that type of work. In 1962 he dissociated himself from the art world to devote himself to writing essays on subjects such as the construction of non-

scientific empiricist cognitive modalities, the investigation of experiences of the logically impossible, and the preferability of an individual’s “ver-

musement” (later called “brend”) or “just-likings” to oppressive “serious culture.” Perhaps he should not even be considered a Fluxus member and indeed, several members have been eager to dissociate themselves from him. His importance to Fluxus was both through his influence on Maciunas and in the relentlessness with which he took to extremes positions implicit in Fluxus performance. In the 60s he tended to be isolated, and if this gave his thought independence, it also deprived him of experience that might in certain cases have given his judgment a broader base, as well as of earlier recognition and influence. Flynt’s arguments, couched in academic and sometimes technical language, proceed typically by a rigorous logic to undercut themselves until what remains is a Dada skepticism. This skepticism sits uncomfortably with the point of view militantly expressed while he was active from 1962 to 1967 in a radical Left political group. There was a Dada element in Maciunas’s temperament as well, although perhaps this merely recapitulated the well-known conjunction of Dada and Constructivism in 1920s Germany. Another paradox was that of two
reclusive and asocial artists trying to reorganize society to make it more cooperative.

Maciunas's tastes in music would seem to have evolved rapidly, since before becoming interested in performances of the sort pioneered by Young's circle, he had organized a group of 12 musicians to play Renaissance music on replicas of Renaissance instruments he had imported, and had also taken an interest in electronic music and the prepared pianos of John Cage. Flynt today believes that Maciunas overcame an initial distaste for the Young circle performances in order opportunistically and egotistically to promote himself as impresario for what he correctly perceived would be an important new movement. That would be ironic if true, since later years found Maciunas constantly railing against "prima donnas" in Fluxus who failed to subordinate their own egos to collective interests. But it is also possible to see in all Maciunas's musical tastes an undeviating quest for what, in a June 1962 talk, he referred to as musical "color" or material or "concrete" qualities.

In music, the concrete artist absorbs the sonic material with all its immanent richness of timbre and reproduces it this way without making distinctions of pitch or producing a denatured, abstract tone structure artificially purified of any sonic mix. A sound is thus to be regarded as material or concrete if it is closely related to the material from which it is produced.

Included would be the tradition of *musique concrète*—taped collages of birdsong, traffic noise, sounds of musical instruments—which Maciunas believed Cage had invented, and which had become absorbed into electronic music practice. Also included would be tones produced by someone bumping into a piano or hitting it with a hammer; also "human language or eating noises are more concrete phenomena than art song." The resistance of concrete sounds to systematization in a particular tonal order is just what makes them "so intensively polychromatic" and acoustically colorful. A visual equivalent would be a rotten tomato taken for what it is without resort to abstraction or illusionism. This early statement of Maciunas's anti-art stance is strongly moral in the direction of what one might call "authenticity of experience," but also faintly sadistic. Marxist notions may have directed the predilection for materiality, but there is also a desire to let the material speak, unmanipulated, with its own voice.

Throughout 1962 Maciunas, while apparently working as a designer for the U.S. Army in Germany, began by an extensive correspondence to gather the strands of what would become Fluxus. Originally conceived as a magazine, its East European issue, planned and replanned several times during
1962, was to have featured several articles on concrete art and music in Eastern countries, including Maciunas's own “Principles of Dialectic Materialism in concrete art” and “Potentialities of concrete prefabrication in USSR.”

Flynt was to contribute “The Fraud of ‘Western Artistic Freedom’” among other articles; Maciunas's Lithuanian crony in New York, the impresario of experimental film Jonas Mekas, was to write on film; while Andrei Volkonsky, a Soviet composer of twelve-tone music, and Marie Joudina in the Ministry of Culture, were to handle Soviet experimental music.

No sooner were the first Fluxus festivals—Wiesbaden in September, then Copenhagen and Paris—out of the way then Maciunas began to consolidate his grip, all in the name of the common good, on his little empire of contacts and itinerant performers, through a series of high-energy letters and circular newsletters. He offered (Newsletter #5, Jan. 1, 1963) to publish their complete works in boxes, with yearly supplements, in return for exclusive publication rights, much as Edition Peters did for Cage, but many members feared possible constraints on their activities and demurred. Then he proposed (Newsletter #6, Apr. 6, 1963) that they get together to clog up the New York City traffic, subway, and postal systems (especially where they affected museums, theatres, and galleries) by stalling trucks at busy intersections. Bricks would be mailed to newspapers and galleries without postage and with return addresses of museums, concert halls or other galleries; and museum or gallery entryways would be blocked with deliveries of “rented chairs, tables, palm trees, caskets, lumber,” gravel, sand, etc. Helium-filled balloons would explode high in the air, releasing fake dollar bills and Fluxus announcements. The enumeration of these activities in the newsletter was mixed in with certain pieces by Paik, Watts, La Monte Young, and Ben Vautier, to which they formed a logical extension, since they considered the city population as simply a large concert hall audience and turned the same aggressive tactics upon it.

A great furor arose when the various Fluxus artists had read their copy of #6. George Brecht “blew his top off because the proposals were getting too terroristic and aggressive” and threatened to go work with the Fluxus competitor Wolf Vostell, according to Maciunas, and Higgins thought he might be lost to Fluxus for good. Jackson Mac Low, known for his anarchist politics, wrote to Maciunas dismissing #6 as “old time middle-class (to shock the middle class is a favorite middle-class activity) sadistic Dada” and asked Maciunas to come up with “a whole different modern non-Dada approach” which could attract working people. “We won't be able to do this by making it harder for the ordinary worker to make his living
or to get about the city or to communicate.” He suggested expressions of support for striking and locked-out workers, to be distributed to them in leaflets together with notices of the latest Fluxus concerts and a few sample Fluxus pieces. Dick Higgins took a similar position. “It’s one thing to slug a Zen novice to knock the concepts out of his noggin, it’s another to isolate ourselves from our potential audience by alienating them in the subways and on the sidewalks,” he wrote to Williams; and to Maciunas he added, “I just don’t approve isolated acts of terrorism, cultural or otherwise. There’s no point in antagonizing the very people and classes that we are most interested in converting.”

Flynt found the activities in #6 too “artistic” and proposed that they culminate in a lecture by himself denouncing them all as “decadent serious culture” and expounding his theory of “brend.” Benjamin Patterson did not respond to #6. He had been working intensely assisting Maciunas for a year and had begun not to take him literally. Patterson expected that “some of these activities would happen and some of them wouldn’t. . . . George had a need to send out instructions.”

The next thing that did happen was that Maciunas sent out another newsletter (#7, May 1, 1963) admitting that #6 “seems to have caused considerable misunderstanding” and protesting that it “was not intended as a decision, settled plan or dictate” but simply as a means of starting a discussion, “which it did—partly.” Besides the reassuring news of Flynt’s and Mac Low’s dissents, #7 carried details of some new and even more spectacular “street events” by Tomas Schmit and Nam June Paik. And now some were actually planned—for Nice in July. Emmett Williams, Daniel Spoerri, and Robert Filliou, who had been invited to attend, were disquieted and Maciunas had to reassure them, “DON’T GET EXCITED ABOUT STREET COMPOSITIONS! You are not forced to participate in streets.” He explained that it had been especially difficult to draw New York audiences into a concert hall, and that street compositions offered an inexpensive way to excite their curiosity. The success of the street events in Nice confirmed Maciunas’s enthusiasm for them.

May 1963 was a time for reappraisal: “Total disagreement to do any political agitation, join Flynt, or do any art-terroristic activities, meant we have to arrive at an entirely different platform that we can all agree to,” Maciunas realized. At the same time he began quietly to measure his support among the various Fluxus artists, as shown in this letter to Williams.

Emmett! I must know how you feel about involving Fluxus politically with the party (you know which one). Our activities lose all significance if divorced from sociopolitical struggle going on
now. We must coordinate our activities or we shall become another “new wave,” another dada club, coming and going. There is resistance from Brecht, Watts, La Monte & Mac Low, who are either apolitical or naive anarchists, or becoming sort of indistinct pseudo-socialists. . . . Now, Flynt is politically oriented. Dick, Tomas [Schmit], I think [Ben] Vautier, also Joe Byrd, [Jonas] Mekas, Ben Patterson, also [Heinz-Klaus] Metzger & Sylvano Bussotti seem to be becoming politically oriented . . . The whole “editorial board” structure has been sort of “constructed” with decoys like La Monte & Mac Low, Ichiyanagi & Nam June Paik—all non-political—that’s good to draw support from non-political sources, but there just can’t be too many decoys, then whole fluxus becomes decoy & loses significance. Therefore it becomes more & more important to determine the political pattern of orientation of the “committee” before we start activities on grander, expanded scale.

Maciunas’s conspiratorial tone (part of his love of intrigue) seems more ominous however if read together with a phrase he had written Paik around January of the same year.

I have always been striving for a common front & CENTRALIZATION, but such front must be constantly purged of saboteurs & “deviationists” just like the Communist Party. Communists would have long since split into 1000 parts if they did not carry out the strict purges. It was the purge or FLUX that kept them united or monolithic.

So the expulsions of members—which Maciunas was to deny he ever did—were inherent in the name and concept of the group? The ideals of rigidity and purity that are part of this concept are in direct contradiction to its suggestions of flowing and intermingling. It implied that purged members might be treated as filth. Still another document of this period is Maciunas’s 1963 manifesto (Fig. 1), copies of which he had thrown to the audience at the Düsseldorf Fluxfestival on February 2nd. Here too the revolutionary cadres fuse into a rigid front after the purges and flood tide have passed. Yet obviously some sort of preliminary “purge” had been necessary for the group to define itself and develop a common style. Even Vostell, whose style was eventually thought too violent and messy to be part of what became the Fluxus style of performance, could write of the 1962 Wiesbaden Fluxus concerts that “the entire list of composers was too broad. It could not possibly be a new aesthetics, and I remember mainly Paik, Higgins, and myself influenced George [Maciunas] to give up the idea of a concert agency and to concentrate only on ‘action music’
and ‘event’ type activities.” By what standards could it be considered mistaken then for the group to want to further strengthen itself by formulating theoretical principles (aesthetic, social, or political) that could guide its future development? Why should not an enterprising individual provoke this process? Yet the process of definition, of making manifest the politics that may already have been implicit in the work, risked resistance and fragmentation.

Meanwhile, in a series of essays and occasional private lectures in New York, Flynt had been developing his own anti-art philosophy. Unable to find an objective basis for evaluating works of art, he had decided that the basis in common use must be one of social agreement or convention, and that this could inhibit individuals from expressing or even experiencing themselves. “People have no idea of the extreme extent to which they are socialized even in what they do for recreation, self-expression.” Flynt’s remedy was for people to turn to valuing their own “just-likings,” for which he coined the term “brend.” He urged them to “concentrate on spontaneous self-amusement or play.” It would be a contradiction in terms to define brend impersonally, since everyone’s brend would be different, but in general it would exclude work, socially mandated or instrumental activities or those involving competition, and the impersonal (things not originated by the individual).

The conditioning which causes one to venerate “great art” is also a conditioning to dismiss one’s own brend. If one can become aware of one’s brend without the distortion produced by this conditioning one finds that one’s brend is superior to any art, because it has a level of personalization and originality which completely transcends art . . . If I succeed in getting the individual to recognize his own just-likings, then I will have given him infinitely more than any artist ever can.

With this goes an attack on “art itself [which] has become an institution which invests waste with legitimacy and even prestige; and it offers instant rewards to people who wish to play the game.” Each new art product should be scrutinized in light of the following questions: “If the product were not called art, would it immediately be seen to be worthless? Does the product rely on artistic institutions to ‘carry’ it?”

It may be unfair to try to summarize in a few lines the brend theory, which was part of a larger mathematico-philosophical corpus. Perhaps because both partly issued from the same milieu, brend shared with Maciuñas’s notions of this period an anti-authoritarian impulse, a prizing of authenticity of experience, and a certain purist scorn both of art as an
institution and for the Bohemian pretensions of artists' lives. From the point of view of poststructuralist (not necessarily postmodern) theory, brend is prescient in the extent to which it seems to view art as a social construction whose embedded ideologies may be imposed by a hegemonic authority, and in its desire to buttress the autonomy of the subject against the invasiveness and alienation of media imagery. On the other hand, brend may seem naive today in failing to interrogate the subject as a social construction as well.

On February 27, 1963, Flynt with Tony Conrad and Jack Smith picketed the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum, and Lincoln Center in New York with signs reading "DEMOLISH SERIOUS CULTURE! / DESTROY ART!"; "DEMOLISH ART MUSEUMS! / NO MORE ART!"; "DEMOLISH CONCERT HALLS! / DEMOLISH LINCOLN CENTER!" They handed out announcements of Flynt's lecture the next evening, which he delivered to about 20 people under a portrait of the poet Mayakovsky (Fig. 2, 3). According to the press release Flynt prepared, "the lecturer showed first the suffering caused by Serious-Cultural snobbery, by its attempts to force individuals in line with things supposed to have objective validity, but actually representing only alien subjective tastes sanctioned by tradition. He then showed that artistic categories have disintegrated, and that their retention has become obscurantist. (He showed that the purpose of didactic art is better served by documentaries.)" Flynt went on to propound the brend theory, and finished up by explaining "how his doctrine was anticipated by little known ideas of Mayakovsky, Dziga Vertov, and their group, as related in Ilya Ehrenburg's memoirs and elsewhere . . . He spoke of George Maciunas's FLUXUS, with which all this is connected." Donald Barthelme saw fit to parody this press release in the New Yorker.

Today Flynt explains that the connection with Fluxus noted in his 1963 press release was based on the role Maciunas had assigned him in Newsletters #6 and #7 (presumably that of an ally). However,
my maximum [anti-art] position. If you assume that my enthu-
siasms were legitimate and worthy . . . then Maciunas sold me
out.23

Without denying that the Flynt-Maciunas relationship had its ups and
downs, or that the ideas of both evolved rapidly, or that Maciunas early
became daunted in his utopianism, one might qualify Flynt’s assertion by
means of two observations. The first involves Maciunas’s defense of Flynt
against Higgins, who had written the former in late April or May 1963.

You’re quite mistaken about Flynt’s being at all sympathetic to
East Europe these days, he’s ostensibly a Maoist but really an
ultra, he counts the west as including the Urals and wants the
whole thing swamped . . . Keep a very hard eye on him, because
it is just not consistent with his point of view not to want to
sabotage your east european issue, since he so loves attacks,
fusses, and big cracks at cultural activity.

To which Maciunas responded,

About Flynt’s Maoism—that also he has made quite clear to me
several times, but I do not see him as an ultra. He highly respects
various aspects of Soviet Union, such as Mayakovsky & Vertov’s
anti-art campaigns. There is nothing of the sort in China yet to
attract his attention. (except for political strategy). East European
Fluxus will end up to be a sort of anti-art manifesto, heavily
leaning on Mayakovsky & Vertov. Art aspects relegated to a sort
of “Index”.

The second observation has to do with the endorsement implied in Ma-
ciunas’s announcement in about July 1963 of the Fluxus publication of
Flynt’s “successive writings.” Flynt would be constantly revising these
writings, it was announced, and Fluxus undertook to constantly swap
revised versions with purchasers in exchange for return of the old ones.
“It really would be detrimental to preserve everything; the extinction of
the superceded [sic] drafts produces a positive effect in the canon, a
superior canon—and the canon Henry Flynt intends.”24

January 1964 must have been a busy month as Maciunas prepared for
the first New York Fluxus festival. The militance of his letter to Tomas
Schmit that month may reflect the bustle of this heroic period, but its
rigidity may also reflect a position increasingly beleaguered. Maciunas's
tone is that used to address a novice monk.
Fluxus objectives are social (not aesthetic). They are connected
to the LEF group of 1929 in Soviet Union (ideologically) and
concern itself with: Gradual elimination of fine arts (music,
theatre, poetry, fiction, painting, sculpture etc. etc.) This is mo-
tivated by desire to stop the waste of material and human re-
sources . . . and divert it to socially constructive ends. Such as
applied arts would be (industrial design, journalism, architecture,
engineering, graphic-typographic arts, printing etc.).—these are
all most closely related fields to fine arts and offer best alternative
profesion to fine artists . . . Thus Fluxus is definitely against art-
object as non-functional commodity—to be sold & to make live-
lihood for an artist. It could temporarily have the pedagogical
[sic] function of teaching people the needlessness of art including
the eventual needlessness of itself. It should not be therefore
permanent . . .

He goes on to say that art (the applied arts) should not be an expression
of the artist's ego but rather of objective problems to be solved. For this
reason Fluxus tends to the collective spirit, anonymity, anti-individualism,
and anti-Europanism (since Europe has most exalted the artist's ego
through art pour l'art ideology). "These FLUXUS concerts, publications
etc—are at best transitional (a few years) & temporary until such time
when fine art can be totally eliminated (or at least its institutional forms)
and artists find other employment." Schmit presumably knew this regimen
already since he had worked intensively with Maciunas as his assistant
after Patterson left. "Maciunas was a great idealist. Luckily, his Flux ide-
ology hardly influenced the Flux productions because he was the only Flux
person who stood right behind his theory," he wrote later.25 This ideology
in fact required Maciunas to defend the increasing production of Fluxus
boxes to Flynt as a terminal stage of art.26

On April 29, 1964, Maciunas and Flynt, calling themselves "Action
Against Cultural Imperialism," picketed a concert of music by Stockhausen
and other West German composers at New York's Town Hall.27 Their flyer,
"FIGHT MUSICAL DECORATION OF FASCISM," accused Stockhausen of an
ethnocentric bias which assumed the superiority of European serious mu-
sic and which had—in a lecture Flynt had heard at Harvard and in his
prestigious magazine Die Reihe—deprecated jazz and "every kind of work-
ners', farmers', or non-European music . . . In other words, the music of
Japan, India, Africa, or in the U.S., R & B or hillbilly music, does not exist!
. . . because it is not composed, or is not made up of pitches, etc, etc."
"STOCKHAUSEN'S DECREES SERVE NEO-NAZISM," the flyer proclaimed.
"Stockhausen is a lackey of the West German bosses and their government,
Fig. 1. Like a Vertov movie, this 1963 Maciunas manifesto is a montage of documentary (in this case a dictionary definition) with a revolutionary program.
Fig. 2. Henry Flynt (right) and Jack Smith picket the Museum of Modern Art in New York, February 27, 1963. Photo: Tony Conrad.

Fig. 3. Henry Flynt lecturing under a portrait of Mayakovsky.
Fig. 4. Title panel from 1965 Flynt-Maciunas pamphlet.

Fig. 5. Maciunas Prefabricated Building System: Isometric cross sections of components (from "Communists Must Give Revolutionary Leadership in Culture," 1965).
FLUXMANIFESTO ON FLUXAMUSEMENT - VAUDEVILLE - ART? TO ESTABLISH ARTIST'S NONPROFESSIONAL, NONPARASITIC, NONELITE STATUS IN SOCIETY, HE MUST DEMONSTRATE OWN DISPENSABILITY, HE MUST DEMONSTRATE SELFSUFFICIENCY OF THE AUDIENCE, HE MUST DEMONSTRATE THAT ANYTHING CAN SUBSTITUTE ART AND ANYONE CAN DO IT. THEREFORE THIS SUBSTITUTE ART-AMUSEMENT MUST BE SIMPLE, AMUSING, CONCERNED WITH INSIGNIFICANCES, HAVE NO COMMODITY OR INSTITUTIONAL VALUE. IT MUST BE UNLIMITED, OBTAINABLE BY ALL AND EVENTUALLY PRODUCED BY ALL. THE ARTIST DOING ART MEANWHILE, TO JUSTIFY HIS INCOME, MUST DEMONSTRATE THAT ONLY HE CAN DO ART. ART THEREFORE MUST APPEAR TO BE COMPLEX, INTELLECTUAL, EXCLUSIVE, INDISPENSABLE, INSPIRED. TO RAISE ITS COMMODITY VALUE IT IS MADE TO BE RARE, LIMITED IN QUANTITY AND THEREFORE ACCESSIBLE NOT TO THE MASSES BUT TO THE SOCIAL ELITE.

Fig. 6. Maciunas “Fluxamusement” manifesto, 1965 (detail).
just as Haydn was of the Esterhazys.” When AACI took up picketing again for their performance of Stockhausen’s *Originale* on September 8, this rhetoric had been toned down slightly and its resentments focused.

There is a Brussels European Music Competition to which musicians come from all over the world; why is there no Competition, to which European Musicians come, of Arab Music? (Or Indian, or Classical Chinese, or Yoruba, or Bembey, or Tibetan percussion, or Inca, or hillbilly music?)

The flyer for September 8 also suggested that these non-Western musics offered a vitality which would be lost to those who acquiesced in European musical domination, thus continuing the quest for authenticity of experience from Flynt’s brend theory and Maciunas’s preference for concrete art. However, a reporter picked up this difference between the two: Flynt preferred certain musical forms, but Maciunas wished to get rid of all art forms whatsoever.28 Flynt took aim at musicologists such as Alfred Einstein or Theodore M. Finney, who proclaimed the superiority of European music, but he particularly resented that Stockhausen scores of a certain period “look like differential equations,” which he saw as a pretentious attempt to put the prestige of science behind such music, and that in working for the state-supported Cologne radio Stockhausen received “direct patronage from the ruling classes.”

In fact Stockhausen dominated both centers for modernist music in postwar Germany—the international summer school at Darmstadt, set up to propagate the Second Viennese School (Schoenberg, Berg, Webern) that had been suppressed by the Nazis, and the new electronic music studios of the NWDR radio in Cologne. The composer had reportedly followed Adorno in decrying (in *Die Reihe*) the authoritarian nature of music and especially the dictatorship of conductor over orchestra players, but he also had a certain authority as the heir of Schoenberg, a position that had incidentally made him the darling of the Frankfurt Left. His selection as a target of picketing was thus paradoxical. LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), asked by Flynt to join the pickets, said, “But he’s a radical.” Flynt would have preferred to picket Leonard Bernstein, but the latter happened to be away on sabbatical.29 Patterson, a black Fluxus member who had come to give moral support to the museum picketings the previous year, now “picketed in my own way by not attending.” He found the picketers’ rhetoric dogmatic, but recognized later that of all Fluxus, Flynt “was the closest person to understanding what the Third World was going to become, that there would be a Third World.” The Civil Rights Movement, the appearance of both minimal music (in a band that included Tony Conrad and La Monte Young) and LeRoi Jones’s *Blues People* in 1963, and
the presence of Ben Vautier, with his early interest in "ethnicities," all form part of the context of the Stockhausen picketing which, coming before the days of ethnic studies departments or more general interest in classical Indian music, was however ahead of its time.30

There was this difference between the September picketing and the earlier one in April: In September, Fluxus people were also part of the performance. The composer had written a part especially for Paik when the work was first performed in Germany, and Paik played it in New York as well; this was his first collaboration with Charlotte Moorman, who directed the Avant-Garde Festival in which Originale took place. Several other Fluxus people, who played minor parts, would have had to pass through the picket line to enter. In that line, beside Maciunas and Flynt, were Conrad, Ben Vautier, and Takako Saito. Flynt and Vautier remember Ay-O there as well, perhaps because Maciunas is supposed to have pressured him by trying to withdraw his immigration papers, while Paik allegedly threatened to obstruct Maciunas's getting a U.S. passport if he did not stop the picketing. "Dick Higgins angered both pickets and scabs by joining the protest before going into the concert hall," reports Stewart Home. For a few days tempers were high. Higgins wrote Vostell about one of many such Fluxus denunciations.

Naturally I feel a little sad, with Maciunas going to Russia so soon after the publication (three weeks from now) of my "Open Letter to Maria Joudina," in which I attack Maciunas and Flynt as the fascists they are, and point out the terrible damage they are doing both to the political left and to art by pretending to set them in opposition. Naturally Maciunas knows nothing about this, and in all innocence he is about to go to Russia to live, where, if they are wise, they will imprison him till he has a head on his shoulders, which may be never . . . Mme. Joudina is the lady in the ministry of culture who says your work is such a healthy tendency.

According to Peter Frank, "the dispute underscored a schism in the Fluxus circle that had begun with the presentation in April 1964 of Vostell's happening 'You.' " Whatever the case, Higgins feels that the incident generated so much bad feeling that "in a sense after that Fluxus was unable to regain regular access to the people most needed for performances" and that this hastened their decline.31 Maciunas at one time or another considered three artists and their organs or organizations as Fluxus rivals: Wolf Vostell (dé-coll/age magazine), Dick Higgins (Something Else Press), and Charlotte Moorman (the Annual New York Avant-Garde Festival). Something Else Press had brought Vostell to America as part of its program.
for getting his happening scenarios into print, and now Moorman had run off with several Fluxus performers, making Maciunas intensely jealous. So goes the saga of Fluxus co-options, which perhaps began when Maciunas co-opted the circle of La Monte Young, who had co-opted the John Cage scene.

On the one hand, it seems unreasonable to have tried to constrain artists who produced works as playful and ephemeral as those of Fluxus. On the other, the political utopianism of the group, accepted to varying degrees by its artists, needed power vis-à-vis an art world that was steadily draining away its original ideas and depended on the credit of its past achievements, some of which had been inspired by this same political utopianism. To some extent we may owe the survival of the group (in the form in which it was able to survive) and of a vision of coherence in a particularly disparate body of materials and activities, to Maciunas’s polemical impulses and strategies. The charge that he attempted to “Stalinize” Fluxus should be considered in regard to the exigencies of this situation.

There had been anti-art hints in Cage’s work, and members of the La Monte Young circle had spoken of their work as non-art or anti-art. It was touch-and-go, as Brecht had remarked, whether this work should be performed in concert halls or railway stations, and if the latter, why not streets and picket lines as well? The impulse to perform them in the latter venues came from the same motivation that had produced the scores. Suppose that Maciunas and Flynt had not set up their picket lines. How long could a group of fractious artists with greatly disparate materials have continued to perform smoothly? Picketing rocked the boat and kept the group alive. Members developed factions as well as common figures (Maciunas and Flynt) to unite against. Later the rifts were reconciled, and Fluxus became a sort of private club perpetuated by its own rituals of feuding and reconciliation.

Flynt and Maciunas did one more collaborative project, a theoretical pamphlet written late in 1964 and published in 1965 called “Communists Must Give Revolutionary Leadership in Culture” (Fig. 4). The Soviets had incongruously imposed illusionistic bourgeois cultural forms (e.g. the feature film, the realistic novel) on the people of a socialist state, and the pamphlet requested them to return their cultural policy in certain respects to where it had been in the avant-garde 1920s. The pamphlet was directed at the American New Left, the countries of Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, and China, all of whom were sent copies.

The pamphlet consists of two large colored sheets folded up and sandwiched between a piece of expanded polystyrene and another of translucent plastic—proposed materials for the “Maciunas Prefabricated Build-
ing System” which is advocated to replace the contemporary Soviet one (Fig. 5). One sheet contains the text and the other illustrates equipment deemed exemplary for socialism—Fuller’s geodesic dome and the Citroen 2CV car for efficiency, the electric guitar and organ for responsiveness—and also cites the efficient method by which the pamphlet was printed, Lenin’s directives on film, and a list of Vertov’s documentaries. The socialist goals guiding the pamphlet’s recommendations are 1) to foster efficiency, 2) to promote workers’ equality and discourage hierarchies or bureaucracies among them, 3) “to satisfy the workers’ desire, during a flood tide of class struggle, to come to grips with reality and to be done with escapism in culture”—this also continues the two authors’ search for authenticity of experience. Although Flynt is listed as writer and Maciunas as designer, Flynt has since said that the interest in efficiency was all Maciunas’s idea: Efficiency and frugality are not socialist but bourgeois virtues, he says, adding that he learned from the counter-culture that life is not about maximization of output.35

The pamphlet emphatically rejects “folk art,” which “means something antiquated, humble, and pathetic,” such as “those ‘Negro spirituals’ that were ‘purified’ of ‘ugly’ Africanisms, notated in choral fashion, and performed in the Concert Hall; or Villa-Lobos’ ‘Brazilian’ Symphonies; or the Kingston Trio; or Odetta . . . [or] the Russian Moiseyev’s Ballets of phony ‘folk dances’ performed on the Concert Stage . . . or the Cuban National ‘Folk Dance’ group.” No, “the most oppressed classes and nations have a crucial traditional culture of their own,” which is “usually a fusion of music, dancing, and lyrics—which is done or watched, but not ‘performed’ . . . In a phrase: ‘street-Negro music’.” There follows a discussion of what this means for each of several countries—for the U.S. in 1965 it is country blues, boogie woogie, R & B (and Gospel), and the hillbilly music they have influenced.36 This revolutionary culture has rightfully appropriated electric guitar and electric organ, electronic recording techniques, and radio dissemination. Some records are recommended, with a plea that Communists—whose attitude tends to be “white”-chauvinist and racist—listen to them.

“Folk handicrafts” such as hand-weaving, pottery, and metal-working must be replaced by mass production. Soviet prefabricated concrete architecture is “limited by the heaviness of concrete, structural redundancy, and stylist” and should be replaced by the lighter, more efficient Maciunas system. Clothes should follow more efficient sports models rather than copying Paris fashions.

Documentary film is another important instrument of revolutionary culture: Lenin ordered that socialist documentaries be shown in cinemas to
accompany feature films, and Vertov spliced together footage of actual events, organizing it differently than the fictional plot. Narrative film and the best-seller novel are dismissed as escapist, and theatre, with its small audiences, as inefficient.

“People can be educated to *like* the achievement of the most performance for the least cost, rather than the more primitive decoration,” the pamphlet urges. How can such a statement be reconciled with brend theory? Only by shifting “just-likings” to the collective level, since Flynt had pointed out that brend “is not necessarily solitary” and “that to counterpose the likes of the community to the likes of the individuals who make it up is an ideological deception.” However, in its willingness to coerce straggling individuals, the statement sounds closer to Maciunas’s organization of Fluxus than to Flynt. “My anti-art theory was a philosophical argument that if taste is subjective, then nobody is more able than me to create an experience to my taste,” Flynt has written recently, adding that “the artist is in the same false position as the fashion designer who says ‘Wear my clothes to be yourself.’” The pamphlet’s common thread with brend is the third of its three socialist goals, which eschews escape and illusionism. “I accepted the principle that the masses turn to fantasy and mysticism when their possibility to achieve satisfaction in actual life is blocked—and that in a period in which the masses are dynamic and are able (at least seemingly) to gain advantage for themselves, to gain a share of power, that they embrace a factographic aesthetic,” Flynt has written recently. “The reason I wanted to discourage so much recognizable art was not Spartan suppression of spontaneity, but an attempt to allow for spontaneity by curbing bureaucratically imposed kitsch.” This prizing of spontaneity is another feature the pamphlet shares with brend theory.37

Did this polemic printed on bright red paper have any chance of reaching receptive authoritative ears in the Soviet Union? The years 1962–63 had seen several vicissitudes of arts liberalization in the course of Khrushchev’s stop-and-go de-Stalinization campaign, and these vicissitudes may have introduced some spontaneity within the rigid Soviet bureaucracy. The mass-production of prefabricated urban buildings and furniture after 1958 had willy-nilly reawakened the Soviet people to Constructivist forms, and certainly Maciunas had been encouraged by his contacts with Marie Joudina in the Culture Ministry. Although Flynt considers Khrushchev a philistine and a boor, a passage in the latter’s speech of March 8, 1963 comes close to Maciunas’s hymn to anti-art (“Anti-art is life, nature; true reality is the one and all. The bird song is anti-art.”) in his Düsseldorf talk of June 1962. Said Khrushchev:
It is inconceivable why, and for what purpose sensible, educated people play the fool, give themselves airs, and present the most absurd products as works of art, while life around them is full of natural and thrilling beauty... The winter forest on New Year's Eve was so beautiful that it impressed me strongly. Perhaps the shadows were not silvery, but words fail to express the deep impression the forest made on me.

In the same speech Khrushchev seemed to recommend following one's own "just-likings," as he himself did.

Anything alien to the people does not get their support, and certainly cannot be progressive... When I listen to Glinka's music, tears of joy always come to my eyes. Perhaps I'm old-fashioned, getting on in years, but I like to listen to David Oistrakh playing the violin; I also like to listen to the violinists' group of the Bolshoi Theatre...38

As it happened, Khrushchev fell from power in 1964. The pamphlet was late in getting printed and distributed. Otherwise Maciunas might have been able to "return" to the U.S.S.R. to become its master designer. He might have hitched a caboose to a Trans-Siberian train and given Fluxus performances to workers in railyards all the way to Vladivostock. Maciunas's interest in the Soviet Union was art historical as well as political. He was intensely interested in the old Russian walled cities and also in the art of the Siberian migrations. Paik believes that he convinced the U.S. Air Force in Libya, where he had helped design an air base, that he had security clearance and slipped aboard a Russia-bound plane. Perhaps he went to Russia twice. Higgins thinks he stayed with Maria Joudina there. Paik says that he wrote Khrushchev a letter on how to conduct cultural politics, around 1961, and received an answer. In a letter of May 1963 Maciunas laments that

We must postpone East Europe Fluxus for 1965, maybe. Chrushchov is not hot on Fluxus at this very moment, although he agrees with us in being against abstract art!!! So he is closer to Fluxus then say New York "Abstract expressionists" or the French "Tachistes," yes? So I believe Fluxus has best breeding ground in Soviet Union... Best to work through political agitators and present Fluxus as what they have been looking all along to have against the art-revolt brewing there. We can help them to impose a political supremacy over all art activities. You agree?
Here “George is doing what is supposedly the most unprincipled thing a leftist can do, which is to side with a rightist against the center,” Flynt complains today. Maciunas evidently also had contacts with Lithuanians in the Soviet U.N. delegation. He felt that the Soviet Union was still the leading edge of revolution and, as Flynt says, “managed to shrug off the embarrassing things.” In a March 1963 letter, he writes that he has postponed the two-month East European tour to Summer 1964 “because of delay in visa process etc., besides USSR is VERY SLOW in accepting fluxus & I want to flood them with FLUXUS-fests in every town maybe right across Siberia.” In Fall 1963, he reports that “I have talked with a few officials recently & have interested them with a proposal: we get one freight car attached to freight trains, give free concerts in freight yards whenever & wherever train stops. We travel thus right to Vladivostok & then hop to Japan.” July 21, 1964 finds him reflecting that “I thought it wise to follow Chrusheev’s advise and Decentralize Fluxus—at least to 3 centers Tokyo – New York – Amsterdam.”

A Danish Fluxist, Eric Andersen, had postcards mailed from all over the Soviet Union tracing an imaginary tour by four male Fluxus members in which the four had interpreted a Maciunas composition by urinating on stage. The fastidious Maciunas replied,

Knowing of our plans to go to USSR in advance . . . I would have the chance of forbidding you to play any of my pieces since I am going to USSR in the Spring 1965 in regards to some important (non-fluxus) affairs, and performance of my pieces, especially in such a vulgar manner could jeopardize not only my affairs there, but my whole future life . . . To protect fluxus and salvage some of the past promotional efforts I put in there, I regret I must publicly denounce you to the Soviet Press along the lines of criticism voiced in their press and accuse you of apostasy.

Andersen was highly pleased. Maciunas had risen to the bait. Evidently such denunciations were a ritual of the Fluxus circle.

Previously when Flynt had written an article attacking Soviet cultural policy, Maciunas had indicated that he had “shown it to the Russians” and that they had sternly repudiated it (“as if they had whipped him into line,” Flynt recalls), and the two had become estranged until Maciunas sent a postcard suggesting the Stockhausen picket. Flynt pointed out that the 1965 pamphlet made the same criticism of the Soviets as had the article, but Maciunas “was now willing to sign and take the consequences.” Then Maciunas’s prefabrication system proposal was turned down, together with Flynt’s musical and cinematic ones, although the former was apparently offered a one-way ticket to go live in the Soviet Union—“they weren’t
interested in turning him loose” to do Fluxus either. “The Soviet Union was as bad as the U.S. in not being able to utilize talent,” Flynt reflects bitterly. “The new luxury apartment buildings in NYC are looking more and more like Maciunas’s minimal shelter systems—except that Maciunas somehow injected a Japanese sensibility which made his systems richer than the non-prefabricated knock-offs.”

Maciunas may have been quite torn up by this rejection, Flynt thinks. “He never intended to spend the rest of his life in the U.S.,” and that he did so amounts to “a confession that he was wrong politically about the Soviet Union. He had gone as far as he could on the basis of his original assumptions and was incapable of rethinking them.” After that point, this line of Fluxus politics had nowhere to go. “History had whacked us over the head,” Flynt says. “Without ever examining his miscalculations, [he] slowly abandoned his political-cultural posture.” He did produce two more manifestos in 1965 and a third in 1966 that suggest a program of reduced ambitions. The title of the first of these, “FLUXMANIFESTO ON FLUXAMUSEMENT - VAUDEVILLE - ART?” seems to refer to Flynt’s “ver-amusement,” an early name for brend (Fig. 6). It describes an entropic situation which however is not brend and in which the artist merges into the audience and “anything” substitutes for art. One may question the extent to which such a program is realizable, since it seems to depend on some sliver of art to survive in order to be transgressed against in the process of being eliminated. The revolutionary flood tide in art of the 1963 manifesto as well as the earlier insistence on concrete qualities have here quite receded. After 1966, Maciunas redirected his utopian political energies into the Fluxhouse Artists’ Cooperatives in SoHo, which ironically generated a real estate boom in that area of decrepit cast-iron buildings. Before his death in 1978, Maciunas had become more and more an artworld prankster, resigning himself to producing expensively handcrafted Fluxus boxes for an artworld elite.

Flynt’s trajectory has been somewhat different. After leaving the sectarian left in 1967, his political writings became as skeptical as his other work. In the same year the brend theory went into “final form,” cleansed of its earlier Marxist language; now he “cast the move to brend as a private devotion, so to speak, or as the practice of an ideal society.” Whoever can grasp “the experience beyond art” may do so, but the replacement on a social level of art and entertainment (pseudo-brend) by brend is relegated to that utopian plane where the distinction between work and leisure will be abolished. In 1978, when Maciunas sent me on an errand to Flynt, the latter was extremely reticent in providing information about Fluxus politics. He was then still keeping a considerable distance from art, insisting
that he became associated with artists “by default because art is the field
with the least formal standards” and that he “never had any connection
with Fluxus as an art movement. The connection was rather that Maciunas
published important documents of mine in Fluxus publications at a time
when nobody else would touch them.” In 1987 he “resumed making art
in order to revive the original concept art,” and then “broadened his artistic
production . . . to classic modernism, as he calls it,” according to his
gallery. I have never seen these exhibits, but when a reviewer reports
that one “painting is based on composer Karlheinz Stockhausen’s theories
of pluralism and randomness,” the context of that painting is bound to be
paradoxical.

In 1990 Flynt published a highly informative account of his anti-art
campaigns, both during the time of the La Monte Young circle and during
Fluxus. Flynt contends that he alone took the anti-art argument to its
logical conclusion, destroying his early work and, until recently, desisting
from producing more. His colleagues—with the possible exception of
Maciunas, who anyway failed to understand the brend theory properly—
drew back from enacting these conclusions to the anti-art argument be-
because they wanted careers in art, a field where, because objectivity is
impossible, one-upmanship either wins or loses. Therefore, because Flynt
desisted and lost, he wins, as the purist and most minimal artist of them
all. From this 1990 account, it is clear that he not only still gives credence
to the brend theory but wants its continuing cogency respected and
understood. Although it is not certain whether or not his current output
should be considered oppressive serious culture, it cannot belong to the
avant-garde, which he says ended in 1968. That part of it which derives
from concept art belongs to the aesthetics of mathematics and is not really
covered by brend theory. Flynt’s essays may not be part of a system but
a series of successive forays which “exploit non-true material for rational
purposes.” One of these forays, into non-Western and specifically Asian
musics, seems to have expanded into an envelope of mystical understand-
ing that permitted him to resume art production. At the same time, the
repressive socialization which Flynt had tried to circumvent through brend
had made it difficult for him to find an audience for his unconventional
theories except as they could be presented through art works.

A curious feature of Flynt’s account of Fluxus is the alliance he claims
with Ben Vautier, “a career artist who has used ‘anti-art’ slogans in a quasi-
Dadaist way, as a source of content for the artworks from which he earns
a living. Ben’s position, if I understand it, is that he is an ‘honest hypocrite’.”

A bloc was formed in the Originale demonstration—Flynt, Ma-
ciunas, Ben—which held together in that the three of us passed
through the political critique of culture to anti-art as the end of cultural history. . . . At this juncture, the avant-garde process which I am surveying culminates and ends. The generation in question began with Cage’s purely formalist radicalism—which seemed to have anti-art hints. It passed into a Leftist, programmatic perspective of culture. And it arrived at an unconditioned proposal of brend . . . as the end of art history . . . Given that the anti-art discussion culminated in 1968, and was sidelined thereafter, one may consider 1968 to have been an end to the entire avant-garde.44

In that case, he believes, the current spasm of interest in Fluxus can only be commercialization spiced with nostalgia. The Fluxus anti-art campaigns of the 1960s have long ago burnt themselves out, but the issues they raised have yet to be extinguished.

NOTES

1. “Mutations of the Vanguard. Pre-Fluxus, During Fluxus, Late Fluxus.” Ubi Fluxus Ibi Motus, 1990–1962 (Milan: Mazzotta, 1990), 121. The title of this essay is taken from the same page (see n. 44 below). I would like to thank Henry Flynt for his cooperation in the preparation of this essay. Copies of most letters cited therein, unless otherwise noted, are in the Jean Brown Collection of The Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, Santa Monica, CA.

2. Hegel thought that art was merely a stage in the self-realization of the spirit through self-knowledge, and that art had already become dialectically superseded. For a contemporary presentation of this viewpoint, see Arthur Danto’s essay in Berel Lang, ed., The Death of Art (New York: Haven, 1984). In Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux), Danto argues that the supersession point occurred in the mid-1960s.

3. However, some readings of Fluxus behind the many 1992–93 exhibitions related to that movement are postmodern.


7. Nam June Paik says the father was a collaborator and his son was ashamed of that (personal interview with Paik, 26 May 1979). Jonas Mekas argues that it would have been impossible for him to have worked for American forces in Germany and be entrusted with responsible work if he had been a collaborator (personal interview with Mekas, 19 Sept. 1979). The details on his mother’s life are from a personal interview with Nijole Valaitis (sister), 27 Aug. 1979.

8. As for the correspondence that might decide this point, Flynt destroyed that in his possession and Maciunas’s half is unaccountably missing from the Sohm Archive in Stuttgart.
9. This was the Workers World Party, a Trotskyist, Maoist group splintered from the Socialist Workers Party.


13. Undated Maciunas letter to Dick Higgins and Alison Knowles.

14. Tony Conrad thinks that at the time mailing a brick could easily have been seen as a musical piece, and that its humor and inventiveness links it to a lot of contemporary Fluxus art activity. (Telephone conversation of 11 Apr. 1992). According to Stewart Home, “there is no doubt that the plan could have caused a good deal of disruption. Since any given postal worker can only carry a limited weight when delivering mail, if enough packages had been sent simultaneously to a single district this could have caused considerable delay in the distribution of mail. If the district selected was a business district the tactic would have been particularly effective with virtually no adverse effect on ordinary workers.” *The Assault on Culture: utopian currents from Lettrisme to Class War* (London: Aporia Press & Unpopular Books, 1988), 54.

15. Maciunas letters to Emmett Williams, Daniel Spoerri and Robert Filliou, and to Dick Higgins and Alison Knowles, May 1963 (undated); Dick Higgins letter to Emmett Williams, early May 1963 (undated).

16. Letter dated 25 Apr. 1963 and circularized to those who had received #6. The original is entirely in capitals, with underlining for words that appear here in italics, “due to my typewriter’s disrepair,” according to Mac Low, who suggested the present typographical format. A German translation of this letter appeared in *Happenings. Fluxus. Pop Art. Nouveau Réalisme.*


20. Maciunas, who later had difficulties with the tenants of his SoHo Fluxhouses, insisted that seven out of ten artists had tried to cheat him but that no businessmen or engineers ever tried to do so.


22. *The New Yorker*, Oct. 12, 1963, 49–51. The press release was reprinted in ccV *TRE* (Fluxus newspaper) no. 3. Conrad had been a fellow mathematics major at
Harvard, and was a composer (later film-maker and video artist) who had introduced Flynt to La Monte Young; he was at this period a collaborator of Flynt's whose ideas ran parallel. “... most of my writings are really collaborations with Tony Conrad. I often find that I do not understand my own position until I know how it appears to him.” Flynt, Blueprint for a Higher Civilization (Milan: Mutilpla Edizioni, 1975), 179. Smith, Conrad's roommate at the time, was a filmmaker of anarchistic and untheoretical bent. See the interview with Smith by Sylvère Lotringer, “Uncle Fishook and the Sacred Baby Poo-Poo of Art,” Semiotext(e), III, no. 2 (1978), 192–203. My thanks to Tony Conrad for calling attention to this interview. Flynt has suggested recently that the reference to Ehrenburg is to People and Life (New York: Knopf, 1962), 274.

23. Personal letter from Flynt, 2 May 1992. Brecht's text included the statement that “Whether you think that concert halls, theaters, and art galleries are the natural places to present music, performances, and objects, or find these places mummifying, preferring streets, homes, and railway stations, or do not find it useful to distinguish between these two aspects of the world theater, there is someone associated with Fluxus who agrees with you. Artists, anti-artists, non-artists, anartists, the politically committed and the apolitical, poets of non-poetry, non-dancers dancing, doers, undoers, and non-doers, Fluxus encompasses opposites.” The first sentence is mischievous because what was at issue was not venue but type of performance. The last sentence seems equivalent to Hans Richter's “realization that reason and anti-reason, sense and nonsense, design and chance, consciousness and unconsciousness, belong together as necessary parts of a whole—this was the central message of Dada.” (Dada, art and anti-art [New York: Oxford, 1965], 64).

Apart from the fact that Brecht's statement partly contradicts his “Ten Rules: No Rules (Editorial)” in ccV TRE No. 2, it has a certain legitimacy at the level of impulse (not at a practical level as advocate for “a new school of marginal art”) as an inheritor of the Cage/Zen tradition. Taken together with Flynt's position, it presents an important paradox within Fluxus theory that is not clarified by the latter's “either/or” formulation. See n. 5 above.


27. Flynt notes that this picketing took place between two Fluxus concerts of the Spring series, although, since he did not perform in them, he was unaware of this at the time. “Mutations,” 21.

28. The April 29, 1964 flyer has been reproduced in Fluxus Codex, 250, while the upper part of the Sept. 8, 1964 flyer can be found in Ubi Fluxus . . . , 122. The Village Voice covered the latter demonstration in its issue of Sept. 10, 1964 (“Anti-Art Pickets Pick on Stockhausen”), while Flynt says (“Mutations,” 114) that Harold Schoenberg's review of Originale in The New York Times of Sept. 9 asserted that the demonstration was part of the performance. Flynt commented recently that by “Bembey . . . evidently I meant bembe, the ceremony in Santería” (personal letter of 3 June 1992).

Stockhausen had at first been included in the program of the Wiesbaden Fluxus Festival in 1962, although Maciunas was suspicious: “Could I see the score??? It is not I hope some reactionary piece or neo-Wagnerian piece like the other things of his.” Paik had offered to get tapes from the studio in Cologne, but Maciunas refused to pay for them. The composer himself had submitted nothing, and it was thought he might not want to be included; finally he was dropped. (Citation from a letter of Maciunas to Paik, probably June 1962).


30. Ben Vautier, L'ethnisme de A à Z (pour un nouvel ordre mondial) (Nice: Z'éditions, 1991) explains that the artist's interest in ‘l’ethnisme’ began with a 1961 work of that title by François Fontan. For Jones (Baraka), see n. 36 below.


32. In regard to Fluxus-originated ideas, conceptual art was pre-dated by Flynt's 1961 essay (in An Anthology) “concept art” and by individual works by Fluxus artists listed (with later parallels in conceptual art) in Maciunas's monster chart, “Diagram of Historical Development of Fluxus and Other 4-Dimensional, Aural, Optic, Olfactory, Epithelial and Tactile Art Forms”; a similar list of uncredited Fluxus innovations in “structural” film can be found in Maciunas’s chart in P. Adams Sitney, ed., Film Culture Reader (New York: Praeger, 1970), 349. Vostell remarks, “Everyone took from the Fluxus-source: Warhol, Oldenburg, Rauschenberg, but they never said thank you.” Flash Art 84-5 (Oct.-Nov. 1978), 54. Michael Cooper considers Phyllis Johnson’s “Aspen Boxes” to be a direct imitation of Fluxboxes, and that 1960s underground newspapers, in the style first popularized by the East Village Other, were a direct offshoot of V TRE, the Fluxus newspaper.

33. Perhaps the most famous of these, which ritualized the rivalry between Maciunas and Charlotte Moorman, was Maciunas’s “Composition 1971 . . . dedicated to all avant-garde artists such as [here follows a huge alphabetical list ending with the ZAJ group] who refused or did not participate in the so-called annual avant-garde festival. George Maciunas shall avoid all visual and oral contact with any of the participants in this festival until the next one comes along.” Maciunas then found ritual ways around this prohibition. See Geoff Hendricks, Ring Piece (Barton, Vt.: Something Else Press, 1973). 7–8, 13.

34. The Workers World Party chairman, Sam Marcy, who had directed Flynt to turn down the offer of a WBAI radio interview at the time of the second Stockhausen picket because he was not “politically mature enough,” now urged him to write this pamphlet, although WWP then “pointedly refused to display, review or otherwise promote” it. Personal letter from Flynt, 7 Sept. 1990. The pamphlet was published by World View Publishers, New York, and has been reprinted in FLUXUS, Etc./ Addenda I, 38–41, and in 1962 Wiesbaden Fluxus 1982 (Berlin: Harlekin Art, 1982), 105–108.

35. Efficient design is, however, among the goals listed in the program of the Soviet Productivist Group (Rodchenko, Stepanova, and probably Tatlin), together with “ruthless war against art in general.” Seth R. Feldman, Evolution of Style in the Early Work of Dziga Vertov (New York: Arno, 1977), 63.

36. “Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), Blues People, had just come out in 1963. This contraposition of European and southern-hemisphere culture—and the rise of a plebian music which was a new national language—was a phenomenon of the U.S. . . . In taking the African-American music of that time as a model, I was convinced that it was a new language of the utmost profundity.”

“‘African-American music was wry, astringent, spiritually profound. . . . It was exemplary in another way: being an ethnic music, its most vital exponents, I believed, were sometimes amateurs. So perhaps there could be a deep culture which did not
depend on professionals and stars. This was very different from Maciunas’ notion of democratic culture . . . which wanted to make culture so prosaic that ‘anybody’ could do it.” Personal letters from Flynt, 15 Aug. and 7 Sept. 1990, respectively.

37. “Mutations,” 27; personal letters from Flynt, 15 Aug. and 7 Sept. 1990. The term “factographic” has been used to refer to Vertov’s film theories.


39. Personal interview with Paik, 26 May 1979; Maciunas letters to Williams, Spoerri and Fililou, May 1963 (undated), to Robert Watts, Mar. 1963 (undated), to Williams and Spoerri, Fall 1963 (undated), to Williams, 21 July 1964; telephone interviews with Flynt, 23 Aug. 1979 and 3 April 1992. In an undated letter to Higgins (c. May 1963) Maciunas remarks, “I will not be able to be reached via Maria Joudina. But should I stay there (permanently) I will let you know how I can be reached.”

40. The Maciunas composition, known as “In Memoriam to Adriano Olivetti,” is described in the second sentence of this essay as played with bowler hats. The citation is from a Maciunas letter to Andersen, Williams, Schmit, and Addi Koepcke, of probably 25 Oct. 1964 (postmark smudged). Andersen sent typewritten copies of this letter to the other three, remarking, “after that George Maciunas had received choking, surprising and unmeasurable [sic] letters and articles from me on my russian-trip reporting constructed and unbelievable performances made by the Eastern Fluxus Quartet on the Eastern Fluxus Tourne [sic] he sent the following letter to my address.”


42. “Mutations,” 121; Blueprint, 65; Harry Ruhe, Fluxus, the most radical experimental movement of the sixties (Amsterdam: ‘A’ [Leidsekrusstraat 10], 1979), n.pag.; Flash Art 84-5 (Oct.-Nov. 1978), 49.

43. Richard Cándida Smith has proposed a different formulation of this episode: There was never an abyss (that Flynt alone jumped into), and the art careers of his colleagues were predicated on using anti-art to reconceptualize what art was about. Flynt (and perhaps Maciunas) happened to take anti-art literally.

44. The reviewer is Catherine Liu, in Artforum, Summer 1989, 139–40. She comments, “Flynt’s work expresses the hope that the limits of art itself may be changed or even destroyed. This utopianism reflects a certain kind of refusal or denial of the contemporary situation.” The “highly informative account” is “Mutations,” and the last citation is from that account, 121. La Monte Young has commented that “Mutations” is “the most accurate recollection of that period I’ve ever seen in writing.” (telephone conversation of 16 Apr. 1992).

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