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Visible Language Fluxus issues (*Fluxus and Legacy*, 39/3 (October 2005) and *After Fluxus* 40/1 (January 2006)).

Ken Friedman and Owen F. Smith, eds. Providence, Rhode Island: Rhode Island School of Design. [113 pp. (39/3) and 128 pp. (40/1). ISSN 0022-2224.]

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It may seem unusual to review two issues of a journal as if they formed a book, but in all but format, these issues of *Visible Language* comprise the same scope as a collection of essays on a single topic in book form, overseen by two editors. The journal itself is experienced in the research of Fluxus¹ as this is the second two-issue examination of the subject (the first being *Fluxus: A Conceptual Country* (*Visible Language* 26, nos. 1/2 (January/April 1992)). It is fitting that *Visible Language* should host two multi-issue specials on Fluxus, as its original title was *The Journal of Typographical Research*. George Maciunas gave form and meaning to Fluxus in part through his use of a distinctive typography, which has become the iconic image for Fluxus group activity. *Visible Language* gives prominence to and plays with typography in its titles—through changes in position, orientation, function, and so on.

For a devotee of British experimentalism, if for no one else, Fluxus always encourages comparisons with the other well-known text-based musical organisation that followed, the Scratch Orchestra. There are some major differences between Fluxus and the Scratch Orchestra, notably in terms of the cohesiveness of each movement. The Scratch Orchestra was a group that existed in a finite number of years and was based in central London. Fluxus was international, diffuse, with various centres in the United States and Europe and there is some disagreement about when it ended or even whether it has ended. However, there are several parallels between Fluxus and the Scratch Orchestra, notably in terms of the problem of documentation. Owen Smith wrote in *Fluxus: The History of an Attitude*:

The situation confronting anyone endeavouring to follow the history of Fluxus is further complicated by the transitory aspects of many of the works, especially the performances. After the actual performance of a work such as the Fluxus version of Philip Corner's 'Piano Activities', for example, one is left with the initial score for the piece, documentary materials such as photographs of the actual performance or performances, and possibly physical residue from the performance, such as the fragment of a piano. These *a posteriori* documents, however, are only evidence of an event having occurred, and in most cases they are only a partial or misleading reflection of the actual performance.²

The sheer amount of indeterminate content in a Fluxus event score or other material can make it impossible to find a 'definitive' performance. Smith noted that the events themselves were altered as to material, versions (given alternatives in the score), and the needs and abilities of individual performers.³ However, the main parallel between Fluxus and the

Scratch Orchestra lies in terms of the way both movements view, and play with, history. Owen F. Smith subtitled his book ‘The History of an Attitude’; for Dick Higgins,

Fluxus is: - a way of doing things.
 - a tradition, and
 - a way of life and death.⁴

Many writers have ignored this kind of statement as a central premise, as it does not fit in with the ‘scientific objectivity’ of Western historicism.⁵ However, Western arts historicism is neither ‘scientific’, dealing as it does with content that is often fantastic, nor in any way ‘objective’, in that the terms of its evaluations come from the structure of the historicism itself. Furthermore, that historicism is not applicable even within Western art. Smith delineates this problem in ‘Teaching and Learning about Fluxus: thoughts, observations and suggestions from the front lines’:⁶

The Fluxus worldview is a principal aspect of the conflict between Fluxus and most historical methods. This worldview is fundamentally connected to a rejection of the western tradition of the metaphysics of presence. This western tradition consists of two interconnected biases. The first bias privileges the object (presence) over the act (absence). The second bias involves a desire to explore and elaborate a pure, self-authenticating knowledge.⁷

The ‘presence’ that Smith finds in the Western tradition most obviously refers to the physical art work itself. An art historian usually works most traditionally with the ‘presence’ of a finished art work; even in much conceptual work (such as Duchamp’s readymades like *Fountain* (1917)), there is an end-product. However, in music and other time arts, the score is the ‘presence’ and more easily acts as the centre of any examination, usually in regards to the structure of the work itself. In Fluxus event scores (as with Scratch Compositions and other verbal/text-based music), the relationship between the structure of the score and the sonic/visual result is often unclear and changeable;⁸ moreover the ‘presence’ (structure) is often simpler than the ‘absence’ (act) or the idea that formed it. The compositional elements of the score are hierarchically less important in understanding a text piece than performance practice and even reception theory.⁹

Another point made by Smith that applies to all experimental music, at least, is the opposition to the unwritten assumptions in the structuring of history itself, the ‘self-authenticating knowledge’ of the second bias:

This logocentric bias means that art history at the present time is principally governed by an unwritten precept that requires historians to trace the art object back to its original context of production. The operational aspects of such a paradigm are principally structured around a view that positions the object in an evolutionary chain of events. The historian must trace this chain of events back to its source—an artist. The goal is to read the intentions and conditions of the artist as the total and originary source of meaning or signification.¹⁰

This kind of Spencerian ‘superorganic’ model for artistic evolution relies on a greater emphasis on the creator, articulated in music as ‘composer intention’. The creator of the artwork provides the sum of all meaning for the artwork and any meaning that can be divined will come from the creator. Such a clichéd view of Romantic ideals—the artist in his garret, the tortured compositional genius—does little service to works in which performance indeterminacy is a feature, as examination of the structure or the creator alone cannot reveal the totality of the art work. It is crucial that many of the New York Fluxus members learned from John Cage’s classes at the New School for Social Research at a time when Cage had moved from compositional indeterminacy to music with greater performance indeterminacy. In performance indeterminacy, a more balanced approach to creation, structure and performance possibilities (both realised and potential) is vital to its understanding, a situation that not only destroys the hierarchy of the Romantic notion of the creator but also the underlying association with evolution as a form of improvement and refinement, also a remnant of Romantic aesthetics.

Perhaps because common historical assumptions do not work, ‘[t]he artists, architects, composers, and designers active in Fluxus [have] always had an articulate awareness of history’, as Friedman and Smith state.¹¹ One reason they acknowledge is the sense that since nobody else is interested, somebody has to do it. Since ‘conceptual art’ has not been taken seriously (the situation in music was far worse, of course), the participants themselves have kept documentation of the movement. However, Smith and Friedman also see a necessary emphasis in Fluxus on a changing historical dialectic with events surrounding the movement. Part of this comes from the fluid nature of Fluxus intermedia: a great part of what constitutes a work changes radically with varied conceptions of performance and reception, but the interesting reason for this change is that the historian who understands this work can never stand apart from it.

For some, historiographic inquiry into Fluxus is part of understanding Fluxus itself. The kinds of questions that historiographers ask became a way to approach Fluxus as well as a tool for considering the history of Fluxus and Fluxus history.¹²

The article notes that Dick Higgins used Hans-Georg Gadamer's approach to hermeneutics in his analysis of intermedia. Moreover, Dick Higgins' criteria for Fluxus, as expanded by Ken Friedman ('globalism, the unity of art and life, intermedia, experimentalism, chance, playfulness, simplicity, implicativeness, exemplativism, specificity, presence in time, and musicality'),¹³ are seen by the authors to have a hermeneutic interaction.

Certainly all Friedman's criteria are acts or philosophical stances, the other part of Smith's duality of presence and absence. These considerations of the value of Fluxus in history bookend each of the two issues of *Visible Language*; these bookends hold articles that largely treat Fluxus as a history of actions. A third of the first issue, on the legacy of Fluxus, is devoted to delightful memoirs by children of Fluxus members, 'Fluxkids', compiled by historian Hannah Higgins, the Fluxkid of Alison Knowles and Dick Higgins. Both Ann Klefstad and Alan Bowman have collected the memories and opinions of subscribers to the Fluxlist email list and of contemporary Flux artists and Lisa Moren assembled scores and quotations about Fluxus. More traditional essays include Ina Blom's examination of the rather extraordinary signature works of Ben Vautier and Celia Pearce's examination of the game elements in art.

Since one might wish to obtain these two issues of *Visible Language* separately from a subscription to the journal itself, it is frustrating that the journal website lists back issues up to 2002 only. However, these issues are available by applying directly to Carrie Harris at the Rhode Island School of Design at charris@risd.edu. This collection reflects the proportion of Fluxus writing in general, between the archival, compositional and philosophical elements; between the relatively academic and the relatively jocular; between close academicism and nostalgic reminiscences.¹⁴ These approaches play to the balance of substance and feeling, of analysis and aesthetic, to give a good image of Fluxus art and thought.

Notes

¹ Fluxus, the interdisciplinary art movement founded by George Maciunas in 1962, formed a fusion of poetry, music, visual arts, and other art forms in what member Dick Higgins called 'intermedia'. The output of Fluxus was prodigious, through publications, Fluxboxes, Fluxfilms, touching all media. The Fluxus activity with the closest ties to other experimental music was perhaps the Action Score, a category of Fluxus activity that saw the development of music in 'verbal' or text notations.

² Owen Smith, *Fluxus: History of an Attitude* (San Diego: San Diego State University Press, 1998): 6.

³ *Ibid.* There is a further parallel between indeterminate scores of the type used in Fluxus and the Scratch Orchestra (and other maximally indeterminate scores) and the problems of early music scholarship. Peter Wright, in 'Early 15th-Century Pairings of the Sanctus and Agnus Dei, and the case of the Composer "Bloym"' (*The Journal of Musicology*, 22/4 (Fall 2005): 604-643), found a mass pairing in which the anonymous scribe who collected them wrote: 'Agnus non pertinet ad Sanctus' ('The Agnus doesn't go with the Sanctus', note at the end of Sanctus, Trent 87, fol. 21V). Wright gives a good case for likely pairs, slightly shifting the inscribed order, through painstaking study and inductive reasoning. Even with the most careful stewardship (for instance, Richard Ascough's collection of Scratch artefacts), the disparate nature of Fluxus and Scratch membership often creates similar loose ends.

⁴ *Visible Language*, 39/3 (October 2005): 214.

⁵ Much of the misunderstandings about Cage, Fluxus, the Scratch Orchestra and other experimental composers and movements in the 1950s and 1960s come from dismissing their application of non-Western philosophy as a kind of fashion, when it actually lies at the base of the artistic activity, informs it, and provides a counterpoint to Western thinking of the establishment culture of the time.

⁶ *Ibid.*: 218-235.

⁷ *Ibid.*: 223.

⁸ Carl Dahlhaus, in 'Was Heisst Improvisation?' (in *Improvisation und neue Musik: Acht Kongreßrefeate*, ed. Reinhold Brinkmann (Mainz: Scott, 1979): 9-10), indicated that a composition, by definition, must be intrinsically linked between what is written and what is heard. As George Lewis summarised him, 'what is worked out [as a structure] and notated must constitute the essential part of the aesthetic object that is constituted in the consciousness of the listener' (George Lewis, 'Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives', *Black Music Research Journal* 16/1 (1996): 96). This definition applies to verbal, graphic, and other performance-indeterminate works so randomly as to have no meaning for experimental music. As I wrote elsewhere ("Well, it's a vertebrate. . .": Performer Choice in Cardew's 'Treatise', *Journal of Musicological Research* 25/3-4 (July-December 2006): 291-317), La Monte Young's *Piano Piece for David Tudor #1* (1960) ('Bring a bale of hay and a bucket of water onto the stage for the piano to eat and drink') is a composition and Cardew's graphic work *Treatise* is not. In fact, what strikes one most about Dahlhaus's definition (as summarised by Lewis) is that structure is central and that sound is only implied in the definition in that there is a listener to apprehend the aesthetic object.

⁹ The incomprehension of music theorists when confronted with graphic and verbal/text scores was the main reason that I chose to study musicology at university, despite the pleas of musicologists that music analysis had the entirety of the twentieth century as its purview and post-war topics 'had not stood the test of time'.

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*: 223.

¹¹ Friedman and Smith, 'History, Historiography and Legacy', *Visible Language* 39/3 (October 2005): 311.

¹² *Ibid.*: 312.

¹³ Ken Friedman, 'Forty Years of Fluxus', *Fluxus Debris at Art/Not Art* (accessed 7 December 2006).

¹⁴ *Fluxus Reader*, ed. Ken Friedman (Chichester, Great Britain: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1998) is another valuable compilation; it is, perhaps, more thoroughly academic in tone and scope.