

# Their Hearts Belong To Dada

## The Fluxus Movement

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**W**e can hold Marcel DuChamp responsible for every sort of irreverence in art today. He wouldn't mind. He painted a moustache on the Mona Lisa, presented a urinal as a drinking fountain and declared it to be "ready-made" art. For the 60 years since, artists have found inspiration in the after-shocks of such gestures. Fluxus is the unruly grandchild of Duchamp and dada. Loosely centered around the ideas of George Maciunas, from its inception in 1961 until the artist's death in 1978, fluxus extended the ideas of the ready-made to the sublimely absurd. Fluxus became an influence in its own right on the developments in the 1960s of pop art, concept art, mail art, process, and body art.

Much of the work was intentionally semi-permanent, so the current exhibition, *Fluxus, Etc.: The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection*, is installed as a jigsaw puzzle of documentation, posters, photographs, manifestos, as well as flux-objects. It will continue through the end of the month at the Baxter Art Gallery at the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena.

Maciunas was not only an artist; he was organizer and producer, the pivot of a circle of fluxus principals George Brecht, Ben Vautier, Robert Watts, Joe Jones, Alison Knowles, La Monte Young, Dick Higgins, Ay-O, and the list continues. Yoko Ono was an original member of fluxus, as was Claes Oldenburg, Robert Morris, Josef Beuys, Daniel Spoerri, Nam June Paik, even Kate Millet. Three voluminous catalogues accompany the show and chronicle more than 50 participants at least. Many of the artists involved were from Europe and Japan, where



Ben Vautier's Untitled Assemblage

Maciunas wrote, "Promote a revolutionary flood and tide in art. Promote living art, anti-art, promote non-art reality to be grasped by all peoples, not only critics, dilettantes and professionals."

This ambitious, if not wholly original, mission was to be achieved through humor,

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by presenting the absurdly obvious and absurdly improbable in art. It was intended to be a series of good, inventive gags, not high art, since only an artist can make "high art," while anybody could, and apparently did, participate in fluxus. The art of fluxus came from the everyday world, the source of fluxus' anti-art, egalitarian doctrines were accepted with greater interest than in the States.

Maciunas' manifesto, which is the poster for the exhibition, refers to the dictionary to define "fluxus": "a fluid discharge from the bowels," which is associated with purging "the world of bourgeois sickness, 'intellectual,' professional and commercialized culture. Purge the world of dead art.

imitation, artificial art, abstract art, illusionistic art, mathematical art."

The poster continues with more explanation. Fluxus is also an "act of flowing," and "ready-mades," but fluxus expanded that concept to include "ready-made" sound, and "ready-made" actions. Maciunas called this "concretism," after John Cage's music concrete. He said, "Concretism is a very simple term. It means the opposite of abstraction." A realistic painting, however, is not concrete because it's illusionistic. "The most concrete is the ready-made."

**W**henver you bring the everyday into the context of art, it becomes funny. Since fluxus is a gag, it makes sense that there are countless games and puzzles in the exhibition. Brecht created impossible games in boxes. One consisted of a glass ball in a box with the instructions, "Place ball on inclined surface. Observe the ball rolling uphill." Brecht is credited with extending the idea of the ready-made into the realm of action. He declared turning on and off a light as his event so that millions would unwittingly perform a George Brecht piece every day. His "Going to Rome" consisted of sending announcements that fellow fluxus force Al Hansen would auction off the contents of his apartment at a certain date and time.

Vautier made a ready-made out of everything with his signature. He signed the second World War, God, and the end of the world, and made them "Ben Vautier ready-mades." The assemblage shown above happily proclaims "I have bad taste."

Robert Watts created a flux atlas, a box of rocks selected from various parts of the world, and a series of numbered "flux rocks." He designed his own postage stamps, and built other false realities, such as a chromed toothbrush and pencil in

1964, and flux jewelry and placemats made from black-and-white photographs of the real items. Maciunas thought that Watts' pieces were a little too removed from being functional ready-mades but fluxus was a tolerant, amoebic association with few hard, fast rules. If anything, it was a way of looking at life with the ironic good humor of Zen.

The various objects of most fluxus artists were reproduced by Maciunas as multiples priced between 25 cents and \$25, but few were sold.

Fluxus also published newsletters and held fluxfests, flux food events and flux sports such as a stilt-walking event. These activities were also subsidized by Maciunas, who had a job as a graphic designer.

**F**luxfests were random performances that took place all over the world. They featured La Monte Young's short compositions, Nam June Paik destroying his violin on stage, or the use of natural activities and tasks in performance as furthered by Alan Kaprow and Dick Higgins in "Happenings." Ready-made sounds were used in compositions. In the exhibition there are musical instruments by Joe Jones to create "Music for the Tone Deaf." Little, spinning electric bobbles make noises on the strings of an open harpsichord, there's a violin in a bird cage, and a whole combo of drums and strings.

Fluxus died with Maciunas, but it hadn't been very active for a few years anyway. Such movements are short-lived by nature, and that may be part of their charm. There is something gratifying and intriguing about artists — be they dadaists, fluxus, or certain conceptual artists — who challenge the pretensions of fine art. The fluxus artists did not approach their subject with grave expectations, but with a sense of being involved in important frivolity. It was also a period of renewed experimentation. Fluxus does not seem trivial, because it has its roots in some of the formidable developments in contemporary art in the late '60s and '70s. It's when an idea is dragged beyond its own timeliness that it begins to appear absurd, for the wrong reasons.

Fluxus was a philosophy and since much of it involved written material, that is what fills the catalogues. At the beginning of the first volume, the fluxus artists were commissioned for \$100 each to submit a ten-word statement about fluxus. It is possibly the most revealing part of the show. Brecht wrote in vertical type, "All I have to say about fluxus in ten words." Christo said, "Fluxus artists have been my friends for 20 years." William de Ridder wrote in script, "Fluxus' goal was the journey but alas it became art." Larry Miller printed, "Fluxus has made an art out of nothing and vice versa." Vautier said, "Fluxus is a pain in art's ass." And touchingly, Yoko Ono's office assistant responded, "Due to Yoko's busy schedule, we are not at this time able to consider your business offer." ■

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