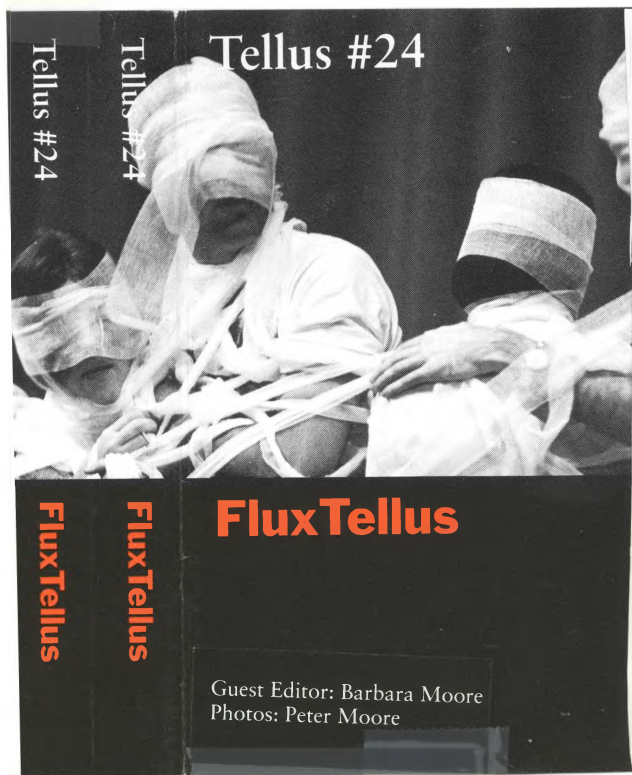




The Sound of Music?

The most famous Fluxus statement is George Maciunas' manifesto that Fluxus is "art-amusement", "a fusion of Spike Jones, gags, games, vaudeville, Cage and Duchamp." But before the hi-jinks, there was eclecticism. Fluxus grew out of a subculture of visual artists, poets, and musician/composers more united by what they were against—what Dick Higgins called "the going thing"—than what they were for. Flux-leader Maciunas, variously described as commandant, impresario, visionary, and dictator, was also an intellectual sponge, who sopped up all new ideas in the beginning, then squeezed out those that proved incompatible.

Some of that early diversity is evident in the first series of "official" Fluxus concerts, held at Wiesbaden in 1962. In addition to dozens of startling provocative works and fleeting gestural pieces—those that have come to be considered classically Fluxus—the 14 programs are peppered with relatively sedate modernist music by the likes of John Cage, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and Frederic Rzewski. La Monte Young had provided Maciunas with tapes and scores from the New York avant-garde including Terry Riley, Terry Jennings, Richard Maxfield, Alvin Lucier, Joseph Byrd, and Young himself. Whole evenings were devoted to works of the Japanese: Toshi Ichihyashi, Toru Takemitsu, Yuji Takahashi and others.

The Japanese composers specialized in noteless, visually intriguing notation, with complex instructions for interpreting the graphic compo-

nents. One example is Yasunao Tone's all-glissandi *Anagram for Strings*. His graphics are only a framework; the performer contributes by drawing oblique lines whose intersections with the numbers determine length and time.

Jackson Mac Low's *A Piece for Sari Dienes* also uses graphic notation, this time made by pencil rubbed through the holes of an old IBM punch card placed in different positions. Like Tone's piece, its interpretive options are based on this visual material, but whereas *Anagram* is specified for strings, Mac Low's sound sources—vocal, instrumental or other—are unrestricted.

Fluxus' main contribution to nontraditional notation is not graphic but word scores, which do away with all visual markings in favor of text. The early ones are lengthy, complex and precise. La Monte Young's 1960 instructions for *Poem for Chairs, Tables, Benches, etc.*, his first score using only words, run to 6 pages.*

Within a short time Young, George Brecht and Dick Higgins, the seminal figures in this style, had stripped away the superfluous. For Brecht's *Solo for Violin, Viola, Cello, or Contrabass* of 1962, the full score reads simply "polishing".

*the elaborate chance operations employed in the original score were not used to determine duration and number of events for the performance recorded here.



These pieces differ in the degree of skill required. Tone's *Anagram* implies a knowledge of the instruments; Mac Low's piece requires some practice. (For both, no one interpretation is inherently better than another.) On the other hand, Brecht's *Solo* reflects that "virtuosity of the spirit" (as opposed to "virtuosity of performance skill") that Dick Higgins remembers Brecht and Cage discussing in the latter's late-fifties class at the New School.

Tomas Schmit saw it as a "farewell to the occidental mania of perfection". Is it possible to imagine a "perfect" realization of Philip Corner's *Carrot Chew Performance* or Alison Knowles' *Nivea Cream Piece*? Here we have everyday occurrences—eating crunchy food and applying

cold cream—played with understated drama.

A "good" Fluxus performance discards role-playing and expressionistic posturing, no matter how intense the material. There's nothing extraneous in the Higgins' piece, *Danger Music Number Seventeen*; he just screams at the top of his lungs. Higgins wrote a whole series of "very simple, very concrete, very meaningful" *Danger Musics* because "a sense of risk is indispensable."

Much Fluxus music has this sense of risk. Just listen to Takehisa Kosugi's *Micro I*, in which the microphone is wrapped in paper (cellophane on this tape) and left to unfurl, or Young's *Poem* with its gorgeous cacophony of furniture scraped along the floor, or Emmett Williams' *Cellar Song for Five Voices* with its 120 syncopated permutations of 5 phrases that avoids boredom by the seat of its pants.

Not that boredom is undesirable, Williams also wrote a rousing performance script called *An Opera*, in which a brief narrative text is stretched to unbearable length by the addition of sequentially increasing numbers of beats between words. This excruciating rhythmic progression effectively comments on the more grandiose forms of music-theater enjoyed by many.

This irreverence is a Fluxus signature and Maciunas pounced on even the most innocuous traditions as fair game. Who else could have thought up the interpretation of Mieko (Chieko) Shiomi's *Wind*



Music, "Raise wind/Be blown by wind/Let anything be blown by wind...", in which the musicians watch stoically as their scores are whisked off the stands by the power of an offstage fan.

And his hilarious *Piano Piece No. 13 for Nam June Paik* (aka *Carpenter's Piano Piece*), in which the performer nails down the keys, usually on an already much mutilated, whitewashed piano, is a fitting climax to an evening of piano pieces, in its investigation of the piano-object not all that different from Brecht's careful polishing of the violin.

But for all his delirious invention, Maciunas was not flighty. Once in the repertoire, pieces stayed there, which is why *FluxusTelius* contains a large number of works from the early sixties, many of which have undergone endless variations. Maciunas himself composed one score in 1961, *Music for Everyman*, that because it contained a

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virtual catalogue of animate and inanimate sounds, he cannibalized for later works. One of his favorite versions, consisting only of mouth sounds, appears here as *Solo for Lips and Tongue* (ensemble). The amazing resonance is achieved by cardboard tubes.

Maciunas' distinctive personality was also an irresistible foil for other artists' pieces. Knowing how much the Flux-progenitor disliked children, Larry Miller couldn't resist providing an irritant, the wails of a baby on his *Lullaby for George Maciunas*.

Yoko Ono, although an obvious influence on the Fluxus movement, for the most part resolutely placed her work outside it. In a rare appearance she composed two pieces performed simultaneously at the 1965 concert at Carnegie Recital Hall. *Sky Piece to Jesus Christ* involved bandaging together members of the Fluxorchestra. *Piece for La Monte Young*, in three parts: "finding/dragging/waiting", had conductor Young pulling the wrapped orchestra behind him off the stage. These well exemplify her philosophy of *Imaginary Music*: "The only sound that exists to me is the sound of the mind."

That thinking underlies many of these Fluxus works. It's harder than one might think to discover pieces not dependent on the visual. Some purely sonic pieces were planned for a Flux-Radio show that never materialized, from which I have chosen Tomas Schmit's No. 13 from *Sanitas* and George Brecht and James Tenney's collaboration *Entrance-Exit*.

Schmit's audio sequence of telephone time being played for an hour is the kind of Fluxus piece that sets one's teeth on edge. But after awhile its very relentlessness is reassuring; one steels oneself and starts to listen.

The Brecht/Tenney tape, at its full six minutes or so, may also seem interminable to some. But its subtle change from white noise to sine wave, engineered by Tenney on the music synthesizer at Bell Labs in 1962, has a conceptual impact beyond its acoustic properties. Brecht conceived of a sound that "can be played from either end." Thus the title *Entrance* for the forward version, *Exit* for the reverse. (In Flux-chronicles, this work, and a movie version with the tape as soundtrack, has always been attributed to Brecht. However, Brecht correctly gives co-authorship to Tenney, with George Maciunas receiving credit for the title).

Joe Jones and Takako Saito make sound sculptures. Jones is best known for his battery-powered self-playing instruments, but the piece heard here is a boxed Fluxus edition, published by Maciunas in 1966, of hand wound music box mechanisms, discovered in the bins on Canal Street, and altered by clipping some of the playing prongs.

In 1964 Saito began making chess sets, which required phenomenal concentration from the players above and beyond the game. The pieces for one of these were all identical wood boxes, distinguishable only by the sounds within. She has turned this *FluxTellus* box into a similar sound box.

Illustrations

So here it is—a tantalizing selection of stirring visual and sonic renditions from the Fluxrepertoire, which is more definable than Fluxmembership. While it's impossible to cover the subject without including Young, one of the parents of word scores, his association with Fluxus was fleeting compared to his influence (an influence implicit in Emmett Williams' much performed *Voice Piece for La Monte Young*). Likewise Mac Low, Corner, Ono and others. Virtually all "Fluxus" artists led dual lives: their mainstream-one and their Flux-one. Many passed through Fluxus on their way elsewhere or had conflicts with Maciunas. Only Maciunas himself remained unequivocally Fluxus, and in Bob Watts and Larry Miller's *Laff Trace* his merry cackle remains to haunt us for years.

Barbara Moore © 1990

Cover: Yoko Ono, *Sky Piece to Jesus Christ* and *Piece for La Monte Young*, both 1965. Performed by the Fluxorchestra, Carnegie (now Weill) Recital Hall, NYC, Sept. 25, 1965.

1. George Brecht, *Solo for Violin...*, 1962. Performed by Brecht, Fluxhall NYC, April 25, 1964.
2. Mieko (Chieko) Shiomi, *Wind Music*, 1963. Performed by Joshua Rifkin, Philip Corner, George Brecht and others. Carnegie (now Weill) Recital Hall, NYC, June 27, 1964.
3. George Maciunas, *Piano Piece No. 13 for Nam June Paik* (aka *Carpenter's Piano Piece*), 1964. Performed by Maciunas at the Fluxhall, NYC, 1964.

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Supplementary Reading:
Ear Magazine, May 1990
131 Varick Street, Rm 905
NYC, 10013

Side One

1. Tomas Schmit, *No. 13* from *Sanitas—200 Theatre Pieces*, 1962. Recorded NYC, March 28-April 11, 1990. 0:03

2. George Brecht & James Tenney with George Maciunas, *Entrance...* (excerpt), 1962. Recorded Bell Labs, Murray Hill, NJ, 1962. © 1962 Sonic Art Editions, 2617 Gwynndale Ave., Baltimore, MD 21207. 1:38

3. Emmett Williams, *Voice Piece for La Monte Young*, 1963. Performers: Anne Tardos, Jackson Mac Low, Malcolm Goldstein, Yasunao Tone, Takehisa Kosugi, Philip Corner. Recorded Studio PASS, NYC, March 28, 29 and April 4, 1990. 0:05

4. Tomas Schmit, *No. 13* . . . 0:08

5. Joe Jones, *Flux Music Box*, 1966. Recorded Studio PASS, NYC, March 15, 1990. 2:31

6. Tomas Schmit, *No. 13* . . . 0:07

7. Jackson Mac Low, *A Piece for Sari Dienes*, 1960. Performers: Jackson Mac Low & Anne Tardos. Recorded Studio PASS, NYC, March 28, 1990. 10:03

8. Tomas Schmit, *No. 13* . . . 0:07

9. La Monte Young, "89 VI 8 c. 1:42-1:52 AM Paris Encore" from *Poem for Chairs, Tables, Benches, etc.*, 1960. Performance under the direction of La Monte Young. Performers: Rhys Chatham, Concert Master and First Chair, Alaleh Alamir, Claude Alvarez-Pereyre, Francis Falceto, Giuseppe Frigeni, Isabelle Marteau, Jean-Francois Pavuros, Noelle Simonet, Martin Wheeler, Duncan Youngerman. Presented by Galerie 1900/2000. Recorded by Jean-Marc Foussat, L'Ecole des Beaux Arts, Paris, June 8, 1989. 9:44

10. Tomas Schmit, *No. 13* . . . 0:08

11. Philip Corner, *Carrot Chew Performance*, 1964. Performer: Philip Corner. Recorded Studio PASS, NYC, April 4, 1990. 3:11

12. Tomas Schmit, *No. 13* . . . 0:11

13. Dick Higgins, *Danger Music Number Seventeen*, 1962. Performer: Dick Higgins. Recorded Kingston, NY, March 8, 1990. 0:29

14. Tomas Schmit, *No. 13* . . . 0:07

15. George Brecht & James Tenney with George Maciunas, *Exit* (excerpt), 1962. Recorded Bell Labs, Murray Hill, NJ, 1962. © 1962 Sonic Art Editions. 1:35

Side Two

1. Tomas Schmit, *No. 13* . . . 0:0

2. George Maciunas, *Solo for Lips and Tongue* (ensemble), 1961-1977. Performers: Larry Miller, Philip Corner, Peter Van Riper, Yasunao Tone, Geoff Hendricks, Peter Frank, Yoshi Wada. From videotape recorded by Larry Miller at The Kitchie NYC, March 24, 1979. 1:30

3. Tomas Schmit, *No. 13* . . . 0:10

4. Yasunao Tone, *Anagram for Strings*, 1961 (published 1963). Performers: Malcolm Goldstein, Takehisa Kosugi. Recorded Studio PASS, NYC, March 29 and April 4, 1990. 6:30

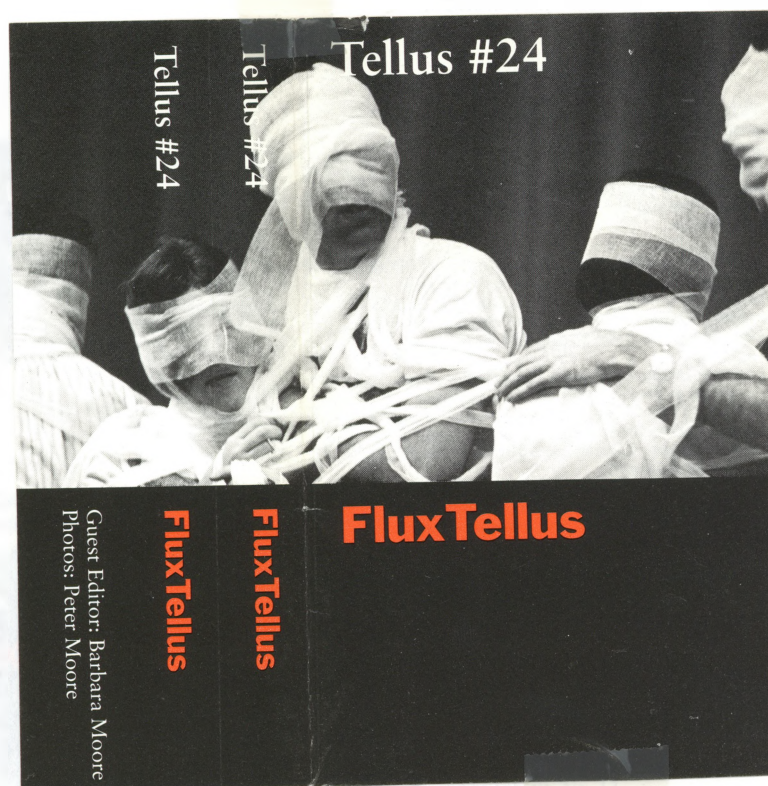
5. Tomas Schmit, *No. 13* . . . 0:10

6. Alison Knowles, *Nivea Cream Piece—for Osca [Emmett] Williams*, 1962. Performers: Alison Knowles, Ingrid Dinter. Recorded Studio PASS, NYC, March 29, 1990. 2:30

7. Tomas Schmit, *No. 13* . . . 0:08

8. Takehisa Kosugi, *Micro 1*, 1962. Performer: Yasunao Tone. Recorded Studio PASS, NYC, April 4, 1990. 2:32

9. Tomas Schmit, *No. 13* . . . 0:08



10. Emmett Williams, *Cellar Song for Five Voices*, circa 1960. Performers: Dick Higgins, Jackson Mac Low, Petr Kotik, Joseph Kubera, Chris Nappi. Presented by the S.E.M. Ensemble. Recorded by Mikhail Liberman at Paula Cooper Gallery, NYC, Feb. 6, 1990. 12:22

11. Tomas Schmit, *No. 13* . . . 0:07

12. Larry Miller, *Lullaby for George Maciunas* (excerpt), 1971. Performer: Stephanie Miller. Recorded Orlando, FL, Nov. 1971. 2:43

13. Tomas Schmit, *No. 13* . . . 0:08

14. Robert Watts and Larry Miller, *Laff Trace* (excerpt), 1983. Performer: George Maciunas. Tape collage by Miller from original tape recorded by Watts, Mountainville, NJ, 1968. 0:49

In cassette box, Takako Saito, *Sound Box*, 1990.