

1962-2002, Forty Years of Fluxus

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Charles, Daniel. *Gloses sur John Cage* suivies d'une *Glose sur Meister Duchamp*, Paris : Desclée de Brouwer, 2002, (Arts & esthétique)

Fluxus dixit : une anthologie vol. 1, Paris : Les Presses du réel, 2002

Jonas Mekas présente Fluxfriends, George Maciunas, Yoko Ono, John Lennon, Paris : Ed. du Centre Pompidou, 2002

- 1 Ten-year Fluxus commemorations and anniversaries have been the rule since 1972, but this is the first time that they have been so geographically widespread, for France, Italy, Germany, Spain, Great Britain and the United States have all paid tribute to Fluxus. From the exhibition in the Genoa Museum, focused essentially on the works, to the show in Madrid, focused on live art and film, by way of Wiesbaden, where the exhibition was dispersed throughout the city, and bent on being forward-looking, each one tried to define the phenomenon by one of its aspects. In France, staggered events taking place throughout the year (concerts, conferences, and so on) lent a new topicality to this "movement", which has been neglected in this country, to say the least. And if the Wiesbaden catalogue as well as the minutes of the French conference, have not yet been published, the Italian and Spanish catalogues are now available.
- 2 Faced with this upsurge, the timeliness of publishing and re-publishing works on the subject has been quite apparent, all the more so because the bibliography available in France is particularly meagre. Will the traditional rejection of Fluxus in France, which is almost as age-old as the birth of the group¹, finally dwindle and die out as a result of these publications, which an educational concern for direct source access seems to have informed, first and foremost? It is true that this is a largely unexplored continent which still needs opening up for French researchers.

- 3 So Les Presses du réel, the Pompidou Centre and Desclée de Brouwer propose three books which each deal with this moment in the history of contemporary art from a different angle, while sticking to that exploded, dispersed structure which was the hallmark of Fluxus publications.
- 4 It is probably their appraisal of the bibliographic desert afore-mentioned which prompted Les Presses du réel, based on a proposition made by Michel Giroud, to publish a three-volume Fluxus anthology. This first volume, compiled and translated by Nicolas Feuillie, gives direct access to the main theoretical writings of Fluxus artists. The first editions of these works, often associated with small alternative presses, were extremely difficult to come by, both because of their rarity in France, and because of their price on the international market. So there is good cause to extol this considerable effort to provide access to the texts, and we have no doubt that this will help us to get beyond the caricature to which Fluxus is often reduced.
- 5 The division and organization of the texts are clear and user-friendly, the translation reads very smoothly, while a choice of scripts of Fluxus events, plus a selective bibliography and biographies of the authors of the texts all offer a useful complement to this compilation. In all, this is an excellent handbook, a working tool for students and researchers alike. It is also a unique opportunity to venture into the Fluxus universe through the main door, the door opening onto positions and postures, manifestos and discussions, works and writings.
- 6 Nevertheless, this utilitarian think-tank-like aspect of Fluxus, and the quality and selection of texts, underpin the regret one might feel over the various gaps in the scientific apparatus: apart from a brief though relevant introduction to each text, the notes are still too few and far between, and it is a pity that there is neither an index, nor a list of authors. These tools, no matter how minimal they may be, would have offered a useful complement to this recollection, but without infringing upon its appearance of a somewhat rough-and-ready document, a style that is often de rigueur in this type of work.
- 7 With *Fluxfriends*², introduced by Jean-Michel Bouhours for the Georges Pompidou Centre, we enter a more intimate sphere, the sphere of the friendship that binds Jonas Mekas, the famous pioneer of experimental cinema, his Lithuanian compatriot George Maciunas, founder of Fluxus, Yoko Ono, one of the leading figures in experimental art circles and an early supporter of Fluxus, and, needless to add, John Lennon, Yoko's husband and a star who is not dwelt upon here. This book offers us a plunge to the heart of the creative activity of these artists, not only in its most utopian and ethereal aspects, but also in its most practical and material forms. It also offers outstanding access to a large number of hitherto unseen documents and interviews, not to mention the exchanges of correspondence between the artists and excerpts from Jonas Mekas' private diary, which are, it goes without saying, being published for the first time. Here again, however, the task of introducing the text is not quite complete, and if there is an index of the most frequently mentioned proper names, the list of contents has its shortcomings, whereas the by definition fragmentary nature of the text calls for an exhaustive reading if the volume's whole wealth is to be tapped. However, the book constitutes an irreplaceable account of artistic life in New York in the 1960s and 1970s, and a mine of first-hand information for the researcher.

- 8 The republication of Daniel Charles's *Gloses sur John Cage*, for its part, is being offered to mark the tenth anniversary of the death of the famous American composer, master of musical indeterminacy and acoustic collage, whose influence on the Fluxus artists was a major one, whether they were his students at the New School for Social Research or whether they attended his seminar at the Darmstadt Ferien Kurse. Daniel Charles's book, published in 1978, which is here fleshed out by an essay and given a new feel by three other texts following the first edition, has lost none of its original strength, outlining with small touches a portrait of the master, but offering above all an analysis of his music which has no equivalent. So it is the ensemble of the forms of the relationship to time, to work, to chance and to zen which are broached as dictated by texts written over a 30-year period. Whether it is a matter of the nature of Cage's written work or of its interpretation, Cage's musical topicality, criticism of his poems (mesostics) or his study of zen, D. Charles offers us the keys to an in-depth understanding of Cage's œuvre, in the twofold light of musicology and philosophy. This depth of vision was incidentally nurtured by a complicity spanning more than 30 years between the two men, and lends the author's analyses a delicacy and sensibility for Cage's work which are unmatched.
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NOTES

1. For the record, let us remember that one of the very first Fluxus concerts, at the Paris American Center in December 1962, was knowingly sabotaged by those very same people who were meant to be promoting it, and offered the striking contrast of an empty auditorium for Fluxus, and a full one for the Domaine Poétique.
2. Also worth noting is a special edition of this book produced by Editions Re:voir, consisting of a box containing *Fluxfriends* and a video tape (Pal or Secam) of films made by Jonas Mekas dedicated to George Maciunas, Yoko Ono and John Lennon.