The
Fluxus
Reader

EDITED BY KEN FRIEDMAN

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A book is always the product of a team. A book on Fluxus must certainly be so. Several individuals made this book possible. Thanks are due first to George Maciunas. Back in 1966, he proposed that I prepare a history of Fluxus. Thanks are due also to Nicola Kearton. She welcomed the book to Academy Press and shepherded it through development and preparation. Without her, this book would never have been possible. Thanks, finally, to Mariangela Palazzi-Williams, senior production editor at John Wiley & Sons. She made this book the physical reality you hold some thirty-odd years after George suggested it.

Much Fluxus research has been made possible by four individuals who have been responsible for publishing the three largest series of publications of Fluxus material: objects, scores, and multiples, books and catalogues. George Maciunas' Fluxus editions launched Fluxus publishing as an organized phenomenon. Dick Higgins' Something Else Press books brought Fluxus to the larger world. Gilbert Silverman and Jon Hendricks are responsible for the catalogues that have become the largest series of Fluxus research documents.

Several collections are central to the research on Fluxus. Three major collections are now readily accessible. Hanns Sohm's Archiv Sohm is now located at Stadtsgalerie Stuttgart and Jean Brown's collection has become The Jean Brown Archive at the Getty Center for the History of the Arts and Humanities. The collections and archives of Fluxus West and my own papers have been distributed among several museums and universities. The largest body of material is located at Alternative Traditions in Contemporary Art at University of Iowa, the Tate Gallery Archives in London and the Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth College. Substantial holdings that once belonged to Fluxus West are now part of the Museum of Modern Art's Franklin Furnace Archive Collection, the Museum of Modern Art's Performance Art Archives, the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art, the Ken Friedman Collection at the University of California at San Diego and the Henie Onstad Art Center in Oslo. All of these holdings are available for research, publication and exhibition under the normal conditions of research archives and museum collections. A number of important private collections are available under restricted access or by special appointment. Most notable among these are the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Foundation in New York and Detroit, Archivio Conz in Verona, and MuDiMa in Milan.

The documentation section was edited by Owen Smith. I developed the first versions of the documentation at Fluxus West in 1966 and supported improved versions over the years since. Project scholars and editors included Nancy McElroy, Kimberley Ruhe, Matthew Hogan, Judith Hoffberg, Giorgio Zanchetti, and James Lewes. Hoseon Cheon, Dick

THE CONTRIBUTORS

The scholarly content of *The Fluxus Reader* has been the product of a laboratory of ideas, a virtual colloquium. It has been my pleasure here to work with a number of the leading scholars now writing on Fluxus. The authors of the history chapters wrote doctoral dissertations on various aspects of Fluxus. **Owen Smith** is associate professor of art history at the University of Maine. He wrote on George Maciunas at University of Washington. Simon Anderson is head of art history, theory and criticism at the School of the Art Institute Chicago. He wrote on Fluxshoe and British Fluxus at the Royal College of Art. **Hannah Higgins** is assistant professor of art history at University of Illinois at Chicago. She wrote on the interpretation and reception of early Fluxus at University of Chicago.

The authors of the theory chapters have specialized in different aspects of intermedia. **Ina Blom** is doctoral research fellow in art history at the University of Oslo. She has written extensively on Fluxus and intermedia. Craig Saper is assistant professor of criticism at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. He has written on intermedia, multimedia, artist publishing and visual poetry. **David Doris** is a doctoral fellow in art history at Yale University. The chapter on Fluxus and Zen was adapted from his award-winning master's thesis at City University of New York.

The chapters on critical and historical perspectives have been written by three internationally renowned scholars in art history, art theory and literary theory. **Stephen Foster** is professor of art history at University of Iowa and director of the Fine Arts Dada Archive. **Estera Milman** is associate professor of art history at the University of Iowa and founding director of Alternative Traditions in Contemporary Art. **Nicholas Zurbrugg** is professor of English and head of the department of English, Media and Culture Studies at De Montfort University.

The section titled 'Three Fluxus Voices' is the result of two unique collaborations. The first is an extensive interview between Fluxus artist **Larry Miller** and Fluxus co-founder George Maciunas. Made just before Maciunas's death in 1978, it sheds important light on Maciunas' view of Fluxus. The second is the only known interview with Maciunas' wife, Billie. This interview was recorded by **Susan Jarosi**, doctoral candidate in art history at Duke University. The section ends with Larry Miller's own thoughts on what it is to think about Fluxus. Here, I beg the reader's indulgence. There could have been, perhaps there should have been any number of other views, other chapters. Time and space limit every book. I selected these three voices because they are unique and because they form a conceptually elegant triad. If there is a clear message in the sections on history, theory, critical and historical perspectives, it is that there no way to encapsulate Fluxus in any neat paradigm. On another occasion, and for other reasons, I will present other voices: here, time, a page limit and circumstance dictate a useful choice that makes available an interview with ideas that have never before been published.

The section titled 'Two Fluxus Theories' makes available the thoughts of two Fluxus artists who have attempted to theorize Fluxus and place it in a larger intellectual and cultural framework. The first is by **Dick Higgins**, Fluxus co-founder and legendary publisher of Something Else Press. The second is my own: as editor of this book, I feel obliged to put my thoughts on the table here, too.

FLUXUS READER WEB SITE

The World Wide Web is making a vital difference to many fields of human endeavor. The arts and scholarship have been particularly well served by this medium.

One of the most important developments for research and writing on Fluxus is a consortium of five major universities and museums with a key focus on Fluxus and intermedia. These five are developing a Web-based series of virtual resources for scholarship and reflection on contemporary art. University of Iowa's Alternative Traditions in Contemporary Art, the University of California Museum of Art at Berkeley, Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth, Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and Franklin Furnace in New York maintain the site. ATCA at University of Iowa will be hosting a wide variety of scholarly and pictorial materials that dovetail with the material in this book, and a portion of the site will be dedicated to expanding and reflecting on the specific chapters presented here.

The URL is: <http://www.lib.uiowa.edu/spec-coll/resources/atca.html>. Please visit the site.

INFORMATION AND IDEAS

I welcome queries and idea on any of the subjects covered in this book. If you have questions or thoughts you would like to pursue, please contact me at:

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KEN FRIEDMAN:
INTRODUCTION: A TRANSFORMATIVE VISION OF FLUXUS

A little more than thirty years ago, George Maciunas asked me to write a history of Fluxus. It was the autumn of 1966. I was sixteen then and living in New York after dropping out of college for a term. George had enrolled me in Fluxus that August. Perhaps he saw me as a scholar, perhaps simply as someone with enough energy to undertake and complete such a project.

Not long after, I grew tired of New York and I was ready to move back to California. That was when George appointed me director of Fluxus West. Originally intended to represent Fluxus activities in the western United States, Fluxus West became many things. It became a centre for spreading Fluxus ideas, a forum for Fluxus projects across North America – outside New York – as well as parts of Europe and the Pacific, a travelling exhibition centre, a studio in a Volkswagen bus, a publishing house and a research programme. These last two aspects of our work led George to ask me once again to take on a comprehensive, official history of Fluxus. I agreed to do it. I didn't know what I was getting into.

This history project was never completed. In part, I lacked the documentation, and despite gathering documents and material for years, I never did accumulate the material I should have done to carry out the job. Moreover, I found that it was the ideas in Fluxus that interested me most, far more than the specific deeds and doings of a specific group of artists. While I am a scholar in addition to being an artist, my interest in Fluxus does not focus on documentation or archival work.

The documents and works I did collect have not gone to waste. They found homes in museums, universities and archives, where they are available to scholars who do want to write the history of Fluxus, as well as to scholars, critics, curators and artists who want to examine Fluxus from other perspectives. The history that I never finished gave rise to several projects and publications that shed light on Fluxus in many ways. This book is one of them.

The key issue here is explaining a 'how' and 'why' of Fluxus. Emmett Williams once wrote a short poem on that how and why, writing 'Fluxus is what Fluxus does – but no one knows whodunit.' What is it that Fluxus does? Dick Higgins offered one answer when he wrote, 'Fluxus is not a moment in history, or an art movement. Fluxus is a way of doing things, a tradition, and a way of life and death.' For Dick, as for George, Fluxus is more important as an idea and a potential for social change than as a specific group of people or collection of objects.

As I see it, Fluxus has been a laboratory, a grand project summed up by George

Maciunas' notion of the 'learning machines'. The Fluxus research programme has been characterised by twelve ideas: globalism, the unity of art and life, intermedia, experimentalism, chance, playfulness, simplicity, implicativeness, exemplativism, specificity, presence in time and musicality. (These twelve ideas are elaborated in the chapter titled 'Fluxus and Company'.) These ideas are not a prescription for how to be a Fluxus artist. Rather they form a description of the qualities and issues that characterise the work of Fluxus. Each idea describes a 'way of doing things'. Taken together, these twelve ideas form a picture of what Fluxus is and does.

The implications of some ideas have been more interesting – and occasionally more startling – than they may at first have seemed. Fluxus has been a complex system of practices and relationships. The fact that the art world can sometimes be a forum for philosophical practice has made it possible for Fluxus to develop and demonstrate ideas that would later be seen in such frameworks as multimedia, telecommunications, hypertext, industrial design, urban planning, architecture, publishing, philosophy, and even management theory. That is what makes Fluxus so lively, so engaging and so difficult to describe.

We can grasp the phenomenon through the lens of several disciplines. One such discipline is history, and there is a history of Fluxus to be told. While the core issues in Fluxus are ideas, Fluxus ideas were first summarised and exemplified in the work of a specific group of people. This group pioneered these ideas at a time when their thoughts and practices were distinct and different from many of the thoughts and practices in the world around them, distinct from the art world and different from the world of other disciplines in which Fluxus would come to play a role. To understand the how and why of Fluxus, what it is and does, it is important to understand 'whodunit', to know what Fluxus was and did. History therefore offers a useful perspective.

Fluxus, however, is more than a matter of *art* history. Literature, music, dance, typography, social structure, architecture, mathematics, politics … they all play a role. Fluxus is, indeed, the name of a way of doing things. It is an active philosophy of experience that only sometimes takes the form of art. It stretches across the arts and even across the areas between them. Fluxus is a way of viewing society and life, a way of creating social action and life activity. In this book, historians and critics offer critical and historical perspectives. Other writers frame the central issues in other ways.

The ideal book would be three times as long as this one is and impossible to publish. I therefore chose to focus on issues to open a dialogue with the Fluxus idea. Rather than teaching the reader everything there is to know about Fluxus, this book lays out a map, a cognitive structure filled with tools, markers and links to ideas and history both.

Fluxus has now become a symbol for much more than itself. That companies in the knowledge industry and creative enterprise use the name Fluxus suggests that something is happening, both in terms of real influence and in terms of fame, the occasional shadow of true influence. Advertising agencies, record stores, performance groups, publishers and even young artists now apply the word Fluxus to what they do. It is difficult to know whether we should be pleased, annoyed, or merely puzzled.

Tim Porges once wrote that the value of writing and publishing on Fluxus rests not on what Fluxus has been but on 'what it may still do'. If one thread binds the chapters in this book, it is the idea of a transformative description that opens a new discourse. A new and

appropriately subtle understanding of Fluxus leaves open the question of what it may still do. That's good enough for me.

Owen Smith and I were discussing this book one afternoon. We reached the conclusion that it is as much a beginning as a summation. If, as George Brecht said in the 1980s, 'Fluxus has Fluxed', one can equally well say what someone – Dick? Emmett? – said a few years later: 'Fluxus has not yet begun.' There is an on-line discussion group called Fluxlist where the question of what lies between those two points has been the subject of much recent dialogue. One of the interesting aspects of the conversation has been the philosophical subtlety underlying the several positions. Those who believe there is a Fluxus of ideas and attitudes more than of objects feel that there is, indeed, a future Fluxus. This Fluxus intersects with and moves beyond the Fluxus of artefacts and objects. This vision of Fluxus distinguishes between a specific Fluxus of specific artists acting in time and space and what René Block termed 'Fluxism', an idea exemplified in the work and action of the historic Fluxus artists.

Beginning or summation, this book offers a broad view of Fluxus. It is a corrective to the hard-edged and ill-informed debates on Fluxus that diminish what we set out to do by locating us in a mythic moment of time that never really existed. Fluxus was created to transcend the boundaries of the art world, to shape a discourse of our own. A debate that ends Fluxus with the death of George Maciunas is a debate that diminishes George's idea of Fluxus as an ongoing social practice. It also diminishes the rest of us, leaving many of the original Fluxus artists disenfranchised and alienated from the body of work to which they gave birth. In the moments that people attempt to victimise us with false boundaries, I am drawn to two moments in history.

The first moment occurred in sixth-century Chinese Zen. It reflects the debates around Fluxus in an oddly apt way, and not merely because Fluxus is often compared with Zen. It involved the alleged split between the Northern and Southern schools of Zen. The real facts of the split seem not to have involved the two masters who succeeded the Sixth Patriarch, one in the North and one in the South, Shen-hsiu and Hui-neng. The long and tangled stories of schism seem rooted, rather, in the actions of Hui-neng's disciple Shen-hui and those who followed him. It has little to do with the main protagonists who respected and admired each other to the point that the supposedly jealous patriarch Shen-hsiu in fact recommended Hui-neng to the imperial court where he, himself, was already held in high renown. This is like much of the argument around Fluxus. It seems that the protagonists of one view or another, the adherents of one kind of work or another, those who need to establish a monetary value for one body of objects or another, seem to feel the need to do so by discounting, discrediting or disenfranchising everyone else. That makes no sense in a laboratory, let alone a laboratory of ideas and social practice.

The other moment I consider took place a few years ago, when Marcel Duchamp declared that the true artist of the future would go underground. To the degree that Fluxus is a body of ideas and practices, we are visible and we remain so. To the degree that Fluxus is or may be an art form, it may well have gone underground already. If this is true, who can possibly say that Fluxus is or isn't dead? We don't know 'whodunit', we don't know who does it and we certainly don't know who may do it in the future.

Ken Friedman

PART II
THEORIES OF FLUXUS

INA BLOM:
BOREDOM AND OBLIVION

INTRODUCTION: CHANGING CAGE

'Boredom was, until recently, one of the qualities an artist tried most to avoid. Yet today it appears that artists are deliberately trying to make their work boring.'[1] This is the opening statement of Dick Higgins' 1966 essay 'Boredom and Danger'. Boredom is a radical concept for a work of art: how can you claim attention for something that defies any attempt to focus for any long period of time, that breaks all the rules of communication? But, as it turns out, the question of focus and communication is the least of Higgins' worries. In 'Boredom and Danger' Higgins instead tries to present a theory of what might be interpreted as an *immersive* ideal of art.[2] Describing his own work as well as that of a number of artists in and around the Fluxus group, he attempts to formulate the terms according to which the cognitive boundaries dividing self and work or work and surroundings might, temporarily, fade out or be displaced. It is, in other words, an attempt to formulate the possibility of, in one sense or another, getting 'lost', since immersion renders the Cartesian divide between subject and object as uncertain or shifting, deframing the subject's 'outlook' on to the world. In the context of art, this ideal has often been cursorily described in terms of 'erasing the boundaries between life and art'; yet a closer look at the strategies and formulations of different Fluxus-related artists will reveal a more guarded, specific and problematising approach. The question is not one of boundaries between life and art in general, but of the conditions of possibility for immersion in particular.

It is from this perspective that many of the artists seem to reformulate, rework or reappropriate some of the most central but also most difficult and problematic assumptions underpinning the music of John Cage, whose work and thought could be said to be decisive for Fluxus. In his work, Cage clearly strives to achieve states of immersion: self-reflexive moments such as those produced by memory, knowledge, repetition, and so on, must be avoided at all costs. Only a system that will produce eternal change, eternal variation, will draw the listening subject out of the repetitive movement of the norm that frames a subjectivity reflecting back upon itself. To produce such change, an overarching element of oblivion or unknowing is in other words required. But even as Cage acknowledges the paradox inherent in this notion of oblivion – the fact that memory is, so to speak, an element that provides us with a 'something' *to be lost* in immersion (and so formulates the *possibility* of immersion) – he does not linger on this point.[3] He leaves it aside because he seems far more concerned with formulating the notion of a universal letting go of ego, a fundamental state of

'zero' that will allow all points of experience to enter into a free play of multiplicities.[4] And maybe it is precisely because Cage is so fundamentally devoted to the transcendental universality and maybe also formalism of a certain strain of modern art that his principle of free play 'automatically' extends from theory of art to a general social philosophy, without excess and without resistance. Beside the music and teaching of Schönberg, the paintings of Mondrian – which are nothing if not universalist in their aspiration – were, after all, one of his most important sources of inspiration. And while he felt close to the element of freedom in the compositions of Charles Ives, he disliked the touch of 'Americana' in this music; that is, the representational elements in the quotes from different popular musical sources. In Cage's world, the life–art question *is* the one fundamental question of immersion. And because subjectivity is, from the outset, the category that must be transcended in this notion of immersion, the life–art boundary must disappear universally, without regard for how or on what terms different kinds of 'memories' or subjectivities may even come to formulate such a division or its eventual upheaval. The musicalising of any sound can only happen through a mind that is – on principle and in universal terms – set to the measure of zero. A composition by John Cage, through emphasising an intention to extend the terms of *music* endlessly, is then also a theoretical/practical exercise towards a 'better world' – a world relinquished from the destructive forces of desire.

With many of the artists connected to Fluxus, the passage from art to social theory is not quite so automatic. In fact, it would seem that their main contribution would be to add friction to this passage. As they gain access to the field created by Cage – the principally open field of endless heterogeneity and multiplicity – they immediately start making their marks on this field. They honour the importance and value of this field by investing in it and working through it: in relation to Cage the teacher they are in many ways model students. But in this working through, they inevitably redraw it in different terms. For it is probably inevitable that they should submit this field to the kind of marks that it would – in principle – be immune to: the marks of ownership, of signatures, of different subjectivities, intentions and representations. The marks of *particularia*, in fact – of details and ephemera working their way out of all proportion, straying far behind the structured confines of Cage's multiplicity.

The field suddenly is not only marked, but slanted, out of joint. It seems at times to lack exactly that quality which Cage emphasised most of all – notably spiritual discipline or virtuosity, as expressed by the zero '*a priori*'. For instance, Cage emphasises the ethical possibilities of non-intentionality: 'If you're nonintentional, then everything is permitted. If you're intentional, for instance if you want to murder someone, then it's not permitted.'[5] Higgins, for one, seems prepared to take him at his word, but only through a redrafting of this statement that pushes its implications or limits of meaning. And the implication spelled out by Higgins is the word 'danger' – the second vector in his essay on immersion (boredom *and* danger), and also the title of an early series of works called 'Danger Music'. Higgins essentially follows Cage's focus on oblivion or unknowing as a prerequisite for immersion, but at the same time as he takes this step into the principle of indeterminacy, he immediately frames the unframeable. 'Danger' is a sign which frames – it points out the limits of immersion. On the one hand 'danger' seems to point, in an intensified and 'deep' way, right into that 'reality' in which art is supposed to be subsumed. And on the other hand it seems to highlight this reality as a place of consequences and implications, fear, trouble and desire; in

short to highlight it as a place that would fall outside or be the outside of Cage's all-inclusive field of indeterminacy. In this way, Higgins' spelling out 'danger' could be said to operate *at the limits* of indeterminacy.

It could be suggested, then, that by submitting Cage to the change he himself prescribed (he was after all the one to point out that his own name was an anagram of 'I Change'), many of the artists connected to Fluxus were working out practices of immersion precisely by realising the necessity of negotiating its terms. This 'it' is exactly the question here: what is the space, situation, context, possibility of immersion? 'Changing Cage' might have been a way of dealing with the fact that the space of immersion could not be formulated without an engagement with, and through, borders and limits – cages – of all sorts.

BOREDOM

In 1966 Dick Higgins published his influential 'Intermedia' essay, stating that the new and interesting forms of art did not limit their field of operation to a question of artistic media, but tended to operate between or outside particular media or categories.[6] A comparison between this essay and the actual artistic developments it described might lead to more precise definitions. As a term, 'intermedia' was designed to cover those instances where the artist did not simply combine different artistic media, but worked against the grain of any categorial organisations by means of strategies of displacement. In contrast to the term 'multimedia', 'intermedia' did not denote a formal identification but rather a strategic intent or a performative.[7] Then the medial aspect of the work could be described in terms of *transmedia*: that is, as an agent of change or transcoding. Intermedia's many attempts to formulate 'betweens' or 'outsides' did not express a dream about the idyllic state of the unmediated. It simply dealt with the principle of mediation as a passage from one state to another.

Around the same time, however, Higgins' lesser-known essay on boredom and danger somehow seems to strike closer to the core of the particular intermedial *strategies* that developed in the late 50s and early 60s. Higgins sets out as if he desperately needs to make sense of this puzzling concept, but it is immediately apparent that for him boredom is a positive term, a point of departure for a new orientation. The apparent lack of stimuli in boring art involves the surroundings in ways not apparent when stimuli appear as exciting along certain lines of expectation. When Higgins tries to explain the effect of boring art such as, for instance, Eric Satie's *Vexations,* in which an 'utterly serious 32-bar piece' is played very slowly 840 times (a performance takes twenty-five hours), he repeatedly returns to the way in which such works will fade into their environment, become an integral part of their surroundings.[8] Boredom destroys the boundaries that keep the surge of intensities within the fenced-off space of the work. Now the intensities move along different lines, as in a Cage-class experience referred to by Higgins, where the students were instructed to do two different things each, in total darkness, so that one could not visually determine the beginning and the end of the piece.[9] Higgins describes the way in which the intensities in this piece 'appeared in waves' as expectation of structure mingled with the experience of non-structure; how the sense of time was warped as work and non-work could not be distinguished as separate areas of perception.

In a set of notes dealing with the experience the spectator would have with his play *St Joan of Beaurevoir*, Higgins comments on a different aspect of boredom. Anticipating audience reactions, he describes different levels of involvement developing through the piece, such as boredom, irritation, understanding and new boredom. 'Then', he writes, 'the witness will ideally disappear into the piece. He will stop seeing himself and start seeing events as events ... The general stasis of the piece will be soothing. Quantities will become relative and not numerical.'[10] Boredom, in other words, has the capacity to cause disappearance on two different levels which must be experienced as reciprocal: the work will disappear into the surroundings, and the spectator will disappear into the work.

This situation describes the kind of symmetrical relationship where the two sides are different by being the reverse of one another, as in a mirror. The work sees 'itself' in the surroundings, as the surroundings sees 'itself' in the work. But in this throwing back and forth, the identity of each is cancelled – one no longer knows which side of the mirror one is on. Usually identity is established with a simple self-reflexivity: I know that I am. When Higgins describes the experience of the piece in the darkened room, he describes a situation where this simple reflexivity proliferates into a series of repetitive questions concerning the boundaries between work and perceiving subject. The intensities of the piece move along the lines of questions such as 'whether the piece was finished or not, what the next thing to happen would be, etc.'[11] And this repetition has the capacity to undo identity. It works to highlight the simulacral quality of a mirroring in which the two sides of the mirror are confused so that 'nothing' or 'everything' is finally mirrored. Boredom – or the level beyond the initial experience of boredom which Higgins calls 'super boring' – essentially has to do with indistinction, disappearance and oblivion.

Oblivion on the level of the work, oblivion on the level of the spectator who engages with the reality of the work. In 1959 Higgins worked with a series of works called 'Contributions' and which developed from this principle. One piece calls for the production of a sound 'that is neither opposed to nor directly derived from' the environment in which it will be produced.[12] The piece is in fact an instructive riddle. How can one determine that which is neither opposed to nor derived from a context? Obviously, there is no way to avoid either of these parameters as long as sound is reflected in terms of predetermined relationships and as long as one sees the context as a given, closed whole. The only way to arrive at the freedom of this neither/nor situation seems to be to accept a fundamental independence of sounds and an equally fundamental dispersion of context. Then anything will do, and this anything will simply contribute to the oblivion of the situation.

Yet the way in which Higgins makes the question of context become central to the piece somehow spoils the innocence of this last solution. Sounds may be independent (Higgins preferred to use the word 'independence' rather than 'indeterminacy'), but the piece still forces a continual reflexion on the interplay between context and not-context: What is the 'right' context of a sound?[13] When this question is asked, sounds are suddenly no longer simply abstract 'musical' phenomena. If sounds appear to be 'independent', it is only because they have been recently 'liberated'. They come from somewhere, and they carry excesses of signification. It is as if Higgins is not willing to simply accept what is generally thought of as the immersive character of sound and the collapse of meaning with which it is associated. In this way the piece delves into a critical formulation of the borders of sound itself.

EVENT

What is crucial to this notion of boredom is that it engages with a term that was to become so central to early Fluxus as to be even identified as a 'form'. This term is the 'Event'. According to Higgins, at the level of super-boredom one is finally capable of 'seeing events as events'.[14] One is, in other words, exposed to the workings of the Event. And the event is in its turn associated with danger, for it seems implicit in Higgins' statement that the event essentially works to disrupt boundaries and promote oblivion.

But in order to grasp more precisely what the event comes to mean in this context, it is necessary to go back to some of its first formulations as they appeared in the writings of Jackson Mac Low and in the work and notes of George Brecht. 'In the "Five Biblical Poems" the metric unit is *the event* rather than the foot, the syllable, the caesura or the cadence', Jackson Mac Low wrote in a 1963 comment to his first chance poems from 1955.[15] To say that the event constitutes the metric unit of the poem has consequences first of all for the question of time in his work. The ordinary metric units of poetry set up a temporal structure that is integral to the work, organising the poem's elements in particular relationships. When the metric unit becomes the event, it crosses the threshold of this structure, opening the work to temporality *in general*. The work is no longer a rhythmically patterned expression of something non-temporal: it is inscribed in a larger, all-encompassing temporality that might be described as the temporality of sense itself.[16] Or one could simply say that it collapses the notion of art-time into real time.

This 'real time' is, of course, on one level a parallel to the resetting to zero of John Cage, in which all elements are levelled. But what is particular and interesting about the workings of Mac Low's event is how it makes large parts of his work reformulate what Benjamin Buchloh has described as the combinatory impasse of avant-garde art – that is, the strategy of reducing symbolic language to its lexical or phonetic units by swapping letters around in a sort of visual/verbal/vocal collage.[17] Despite the 'operations' of chance on symbolical language in his poetry, Mac Low seems to frame this Cage-like technique by the reverse possibility: that of retaining the highest possible degree of lexical, semantic or 'emotional' content. The score for a 1961 piece, *Thanks*, seems, for instance, to be a set-up for such a collaged word-salad or cacophony. But a closer reading reveals that quite ordinary speech or communication might be a perfectly valid interpretation of the piece.[18]

Huge portions of representational elements always remain in Mac Low's poetry. In an early work, such as the 'Five Biblical Poems', all of the words and word groups are derived from one sequence of the Bible and are clearly recognisable as such, establishing a field of meaning in a clear and consistent way. A number of later works make a more radical turn. Here, large sections of texts taken from different sources are left almost untouched. A series of poems named after cities ('London, Paris, Sydney') consists of almost entire passages from newspapers or gossip magazines. Yet other series use personal ads or long excerpts from the writings of Marquis de Sade or from scientific journals. What these pieces seem to have in common is an experience of operating on two simultaneous but incommensurable levels. On the one hand, there is a sense of calm semantic unity. On the other hand, this unity is subtly broken by minor ruptures, convulsive patterns that make certain unexpected marks in the graphic image or sudden minor folds or interruptions in the semiotic processing of the text.

In this the texts come to resemble the crystalline surfaces of the kind of postcard that will subtly change its image when the surface is flipped into different positions. The possibly immersive space of reading, of deep knowledge, passion or interest in one field of meaning or another is not unrelated to the indeterminate space of convulsions and disruptions – of oblivion. They are at an angle in relation to one another, connected and separated by a simple mental flip. And what is at stake is of course the control and movement of this flipping. In the texts of Mac Low it is slip-sliding – out of control. What Mac Low formulates with his event is this movement at the edge.

SPACE

Such a 'visualist' focus on surfaces reappears in the work of George Brecht, where it seems to proliferate into a whole topography of events, or what he chose to call 'an expanded universe of events'. In this way his work might be seen as an elaboration on the question of the space of immersion, since space is in fact a 'natural' metaphor for the experience of immersion. Yet for this very reason the notion of space is also a highly problematic one. It would seem to imply a generalised and neutral expanse that would seem to either lie outside of or marginalise the conflicts and desires that would provide the frame for the different points of view from which any notion of space is necessarily made up. But despite the essential silence and non-conceptuality of Brecht's work, the question of space actually goes through several transformations or renamings. It is, first, a 'field', then an 'expanding universe', and – finally – a 'book'. And each of these terms rework 'space' through the question of borders and their transgression.

For a central focus in the work of George Brecht could be said to be the question 'How are the things in the world connected?'. And this question is, fundamentally, a reworking or reversing of the lesson learnt from Cage about the autonomous behaviour of sounds or phenomena. As a way of exploring this question, Brecht starts to work with the notion of the event, exploring its meaning and its potential until it seems to become the point around which everything in his work turns. The crucial aspect of Brecht's event is, initially, the way in which it is used to map a landscape of boredom. Like so many others in the mid-50s, Brecht was obsessed with the idea of chance. Following the lead of Jackson Pollock, he made paintings by dropping ink on canvas and then crumbling the canvas into a ball so that the ink would dry in unforeseeable patterns. But somehow this activity did not quite do justice to Brecht's more particular fascination with certain aspects of chance expressed by modern science, and he soon found other approaches. As a point of departure, he starts out by reworking the traditional distinction between events and objects (or action and matter) – the reason behind the slightly puzzling fact that Brecht seems to make use of the term 'Event' only whenever anything is particularly object-like. This strategy was first demonstrated with his 'Towards Events' exhibition at the Reuben Gallery in 1959. The title is of interest because of its apparent incongruity with the most obvious aspect of the show's contents: a number of found objects, standing alone or in constellations. The ambiguity may seem to be solved by the fact that the objects in question are to 'be performed', but 'performance' in this case is completely unspecific, and has nothing to do with notions of musical or theatrical performance. With the piece called *Case* – a picnic suitcase filled with various objects – goes

the instruction that the objects can be used 'in ways appropriate to their nature'. The instruction for *Dome* – an arrangement of objects under a glass dome – barely indicates that the contents can be 'arrayed', then returned to their places. For the piece called *Cabinet* there is no instruction. It is simply a found cabinet with various rearrangeable objects.

This interchangeability of event/object gets a reverse treatment in Brecht's performance scores. While starting out as instructions for performance, later versions of the pieces seem to condense into a kind of objectification that makes their relationship to the category of performance or action uncertain. His 1959 version of *Time Table Music* indicates a railway station as a performance area, where a railway timetable works as a basic instrument for distributing the actions of the performers. But in a 1961 version called *Time Table Event*, the multiplicity of all these different elements has been erased, including the idea of performers. Now, all that remains is the railway station (any railway station) and a duration to be chosen from a timetable. Apparently the piece consists of anything happening within that duration. It is simply a found temporal object: the railway station is a place marked in its foundation by the 'when' of waiting.

An even more radical development takes place with *Drip Music (Drip Event)*, a 1959–62 piece developed from a notebook piece called *Burette Music*. While the initial composition was conceived for a number of small burettes set to drip on different sound sources, the final piece suggests only the concept of dripping in general, taking the piece out of the explicitly performative and into the realm of all dripping phenomena. What characterises the last versions of these two pieces is the way 'event' measures time just as much in terms of pre-existing phenomena or *objects*. And then we see that time, in these works, is conceived much like a sort of secret agent whose way of operating is either warp or continual metamorphosis.

The reasoning behind these pieces takes as its point of departure the questions of the premises of physical science, and particularly the question of which irreducible elements could constitute a scientific consideration of time. Field theory, theories of relativity and quantum physics provided what Brecht, in his 1958/59 notebook, called 'The Structure of a New Aesthetic', summarised by keywords such as 'space–time relativity', 'matter–energy equivalence', 'uncertainty principle', 'probability', 'observer–observed' and 'paradox as a reflection of our inability to imagine a simple model of the Universe'.[19] These general keywords served to express the difficulty of deciding the ontological status of object versus event, as exemplified for instance by the electrons in the atomic structure: they can only be described in terms of a probabilistic field of presence.[20]

In a 1959 essay on chance operations, however, Brecht introduced the event as part of a model of thought that would add a significant specification to the notion of the immersive space of boredom. In order to explain how notions of causality disintegrate into probability or indeterminacy, he invokes the principle of the second law of thermodynamics – a law originally designed to explain the theory of the gradual cooling or loss of energy in the universe. The principle of entropy explained by this law reflects the fact that heat always travels from a hotter body to a cooler one, as for instance in the case of an ice-cube placed in a glass of water at room temperature. This process obviously does not result in a cooler ice-cube and warmer water – instead the ice-cube melts, resulting in a levelling of the temperature extremes.

This is the example chosen by Brecht. What is important in his account of this process of

melting and mixing values is the stress he puts on the fact that this process cannot be attributed to one single cause. The ice-cube becoming cooler is not impossible. It is just improbable, and this improbability is statistical. As in Maxwell's statistical interpretation of what happens when there is a mixture of gases at different temperatures (Brecht refers to this as a good conceptual model of entropy), the molecules of the warmer gas collide with the molecules of the cooler, imparting some of their energy in the collision. The result is a mixture where the total amount of energy falls somewhere between the two extremes, but this is just a summation of a very large number of individual chance events. The loss of energy – or the process of entropy – must be attributed to a very large number of independent causes which in their individual intersections each represent an 'event'. This summation of a large number of independent causes, in other words, describes an entropic passage from one state to another – a linear, non-cyclical process in the sense that it cannot be undone or reversed, since this would entail compressing all the independent chains of effects into a single cause. An infinite information barrier separates the different stages in the passage from one another.[21]

Not the least part of the interest in such entropic processes is due to the way they seem to represent the passage of time itself, while at the same time wreaking havoc on boundaries and distinctions, including those that 'keep time'. Brecht's example of the melting ice-cube is an example of a move towards indistinction or uniformity, a fading out against the background and a loss of energy that essentially matches Higgins' description of boredom. But the metaphors used by Brecht when explaining the principle of entropy shows the tensions and ambivalences involved in this question: ambivalences concerning precisely the question of boundaries. In so many of his works there is a preoccupation with the mysteries and riddles of *sameness*, and yet in his explanation of the entropic principle he seems rather to focus on the fact that entropy promotes probability – an infinite universe of events and possible connections. He explains this point of view in a notebook entry:

> The unity of nature does not lie inherent in things, but is concomitant of nature's being what I find it to be. Hence, since humans have an infinite capacity to invent properties and to find similarities and differences in things, based on these properties, *relations can be found between even an infinity of things*. Hence all nature is unified by man's conception/conceiving of it.[22]

This realisation of an infinite number of possible relationships was to become the working principle behind all his subsequent work. At first, however, this possibility is expressed in generalising or universalising terms that would actually seem to give hints of a sort of topographic overview of an endless area of dispersion. As expressed in an unrealised project for a switchboard that would generate 'any light or sound events of any desired characteristics to occur at any points in space and time': 'The event, made actual, is one chosen from a universe of all possible lights/sounds from all possible space points.' As an answer to the question of how this infinite universe of pure possibility can be engendered, Brecht posits the following three parameters, which seems like a scientific rewriting of Cage's notion of zero: '1) Maximum generality. 2) Maximum flexibility. 3) Maximum economy.'

It was along these lines that Brecht's planned his 1963 Yam Festival, a festival that was supposed to function as an 'ever-expanding universe of events'.[23] The festival could equally be described as a 'field', just as Brecht conceived of the totality of his own work as a field –

responding to the fact that field theory explores the multi-dimensional connections of any given element. The festival was conceived as a format that could contain the event at every level from 'everyday' phenomena to organised performance – an ambiguity that is perfectly captured by what is probably the most general of all of Brecht's work. His 1961 *Word Event* consists simply of the word 'exit' and is, of course, also 'realised' by any exit sign or exit action throughout the world. The point is, however, 'exit' will never provide a point of focus in itself – it will always be lost in the concrete, subjected to a chain reaction of images, ideas, memories, actions. It presents itself, in a radical way, as a singular centre or a nodal point, but by this very action centrality is somehow denied. It plays up 'connection', but also, by the same measure, sameness, a fading into the background, the continuity of unlike things that will 'get together like dust moves in the streets'.

And so Brecht elaborates on sameness: 'Consider an object. Call what is not the object the "other". Add to the object from the other another object to form a new object and a new "other". Repeat until there is no more "other"'.[24] The 'other' is a fiction whose limits are drawn in chalk on the living body of the *same*: small movements, small changes wipe the lines out just like entropy predicts it will. On the whole, Brecht becomes increasingly preoccupied with the fictional nature of the whole opposition of 'same' and 'other'. It is a residue of a manner of thinking which he would like to move beyond: all of his work explores a different and continuous dynamic between things that are distinct from one another. Descartes was wrong when he believed that the real distinction between parts entails their being absolutely separate, says Deleuze, turning instead to Leibniz for an alternative theory. Leibniz conceived of the world in terms of the figure of the fold – a figure that includes both continuity and separability, both sameness and boundary – and through this figure tried to show that two parts of really distinct matter can in fact be inseparable.[25]

And it is through Leibniz's vision that Deleuze is able to come up with a concept of the object that may in fact match what Brecht finally wanted to get at when he took such care to confuse object and event. 'This new object we can call *objectile*', Deleuze says, apparently adding 'object' to 'projectile' to give the image of an object that stretches and leaps across boundaries. It refers to 'our current state of things, where fluctuation of the norm replaces the permanence of the law, where the object assumes a place in a continuum by variation; where industrial automation or serial machineries replace stamped forms. The new status of the object no longer refers its condition to a spatial mold – in other words to a relation of form – matter – but to a temporal modulation that implies as much the beginnings of a continuous variation of matter as a continuous development of form [. . .] The object here is manneristic, not essentialising: it becomes an event.'[26] Along these lines of thought Brecht's event could be seen as a sort of *extension* – the extension that takes place when one element is stretched or folded around the following ones, so that they become parts of its whole.[27]

SCALE

The instruction piece about sameness pokes fun at a thinking that pits same against different: same and different may be in extension of one another. But another such piece places the weight somewhat differently and in fact sets out to redraw the concept of space in Brecht's 'universe' or 'field': 'Determine the centre of an object or event. Determine the centre more

accurately. Repeat until further accuracy is impossible.' Obviously, entropy is all about the loss of centre, the impossibility of retaining the notion of centre for any length of time. And so, on one level, Brecht's instruction is pure redundancy, a recipe for bouncing off the even surface of sameness. But on a different level of understanding, a centre – or even a proliferation of centres – can be found with absolute accuracy.

To get at this possibility one has to resort to the question of scale that is essential to a cartographic mode of representation. And Brecht's proposition is in fact an allegory of cartography. Imagine finding the centre of a map of a city. To 'determine the centre more accurately' all one would need is a map on a different scale, in which case the centre would be a part of the city, an area or a street. With each new scale, each new accuracy, the centre would be removed, change places – from street to building, from building to room, and so on, down to the specks of dust on the floor or the cracks in the wall. But the cracks in the wall might be a point of departure for new mappings, new proliferations. As Robert Smithson pointed out some years later, size might pertain to the object, but scale is what pertains to art. Scale not size makes it possible to perceive a crack in the wall as the Grand Canyon, or the organisation of a room as the solar system. 'Scale', he wrote, 'depends on one's capacity to be conscious of the actualities of perception.'[28]

Brecht's vision of infinite connections between things is in fact a vision about the operations of scale – a fact that is clearly demonstrated in a number of his works – and it is at this level his work might also be said to engage in a strategy of mapping. From this point of view his work is not so much about wiping out boundaries as about their continual redrafting, proliferation and transformation due to what one might call the 'ravages' of scale. For the strategy of mapping, in Brecht's work, is not one which would correspond wholly to the textbook definition of maps as scale models of reality (models in which visible marks portray relative positions, sizes, distances and locations of phenomena we believe are real). The question of scale that makes a crack in the wall turn into the Grand Canyon is not primarily a question of model to reality, but of passages, transformations and connections from one space or level of reality to another. The cartographic strategies in his work stem from the insight, elaborated by many writers and artists, that a map is an experimentation in contact with the real, and that its most interesting feature is that of being open and connectible in all of its dimensions. It is detachable, reversible and open to the constant modifications that are the hallmarks of performance – or, for that matter – Brecht's notion of the Event. Cartography may facilitate connections between disparate phenomena, but at the expense of a hyperintensive focus on borders and limits.

Such connections between the disparate are explored over and over again in Brecht's mute constellations of objects on chairs, in cabinets or in specimen boxes. As events, his objects *perform*: they stretch and leap along the lines of changing scales, into new areas – as described in the piece called *Delivery*: 'An area is set aside. Delivery of objects to the area is arranged.'[29] For the operations of scale imply sudden leaps – a sort of travel in which one does not trace a trajectory but simply accepts 'instant' displacements. But these sudden leaps are not always simply implied in the still, almost 'frozen' separateness of his objects. In a number of works it is actually highlighted on a purely visual level, as if providing a cue or a methodological recipe to the workings of scale. In the box called 'Page 52' from his *Book of the Tumbler on Fire*, scale creates connections between the dark horizon on a drawing of a small pond and a

series of 'dark horizons' on a grid structure. Rings in the water becoming eye-shaped because perspectival 'deformations' echo an eye-shaped object in the box. In a different boxed assembly, a twisted orange peel 'mimes' the position of a ballet dancer in a newspaper cut-out, just as the ashes at the tip of a cigarette in another box is a 'smaller' version of the rough-textured object close to it. In yet another box, the little piece of dark thread and the two-textured piece of fabric works as an extreme enlargement of the lines and textures in some black-and-white photographs of a stone building.[30]

The connections and continuities in these works are placed along purely optical lines; scale deals with the operations of visual perception. There is, however, a new kind of opticality or visualist tack to these works that makes up for the missing centre. Deleuze calls it 'point of view' or 'perspectivism', since perspective implies, at once, distance *and* continuity. Point of view on a variation replaces the centre of a figure or a configuration in a world that might now be described in terms of the variable curvature of a fold. Point of view relates to the way the new object or objectile 'exists only through its metamorphoses or the declension of its profiles'.[31] Point of view is then 'a power of arranging cases' – Brecht simply called his earliest exhibition 'an arrangement', while the objects it contained were to be 'arrayed'.[32]

The jumps and leaps of scale is what gives a point of view on the continuities between these objects, folding contexts and boundaries around each other. At the same time it seems to deal with phenomena that are somehow reduced to pure surfaces – surfaces that present themselves to vision. It is the surface connections that produce the awareness of scale and possible continuities between unlike things. Like crystals, the meaning of Brecht's objects does not develop from whatever inner depth they will convey, but from the way they will produce series of new surfaces and angles, in a development of movement and freezing. For even as Brecht produces leaps and connections, he always seems to show his objects as if in the same inert or frozen state.

This is probably why crystals seem to occupy such an important place in Brecht's thinking. His notion of the event seems to link up with the particular entropic quality of crystals.[33] For the entropy of crystals is quite paradoxical. Their clear surfaces, seemingly so structured, calm and orderly, are the result of a loss of tension and energy in their geological strata. In fact, they represent the strange situation where entropic dissolution is also an image of entropic order and symmetry: order and disorder fold around each other and become continuous. What Brecht maps, then, is not so much a world that is 'finally' entropic – he does not seem very concerned with the sublime sense of loss that a notion such as 'entropy' or 'lack of energy' might occasion. When he writes about the second law of thermodynamics, he does not touch upon this aspect at all. What he maps is a world of surfaces and continuities.

As an effect of this domain of surfaces, Brecht is actually able to formulate spatial difference within the map-surfaces that usually presents us with a model of the continuity of space. In map-pieces such as the *Wedding of Havana and Miami* or the *Three Translocations of the Isle of Wight*, the surface quality of the map has been doubly realised, so that it actually becomes a send-up of the homogeneous horizontality of this particular world model. As Brecht makes the territories move about, they are reduced to 'significant' visual spots on a flat picture-map, to be placed and replaced as a matter of form. The 'marrying' of Havana and Miami is as real but also as illegitimate as the constant stream of refugees which crosses

this particular territorial demarcation. On the other hand, mapping as an instrument of combination and continuity is doubly inscribed in a piece where an actual zipper both joins and divides two parts of a street map of Montmartre. There is an echo of the so-called zipper-effect in the paintings of Barnett Newman – with the important difference that the zipper-event that cuts across the flat surface of the map of Montmartre proliferates the axes of recombinations and lines of flight endlessly. In this way it breaks the rules of both 'horizontal' map-space and 'vertical' picture space.[34]

With this reformulation of space, it is significant that Brecht turns from seeing the totality of his work through the metaphor of a 'field' to seeing the totality of his work as a 'book', where objects or constellations of objects could constitute 'pages', 'chapters' or 'footnotes'. This was George Brecht's *Book of the Tumbler on Fire* – a concept and a project started in 1964, but that would extend to include works back to 1962 so as to express the interconnectedness of a series of work that could be seen as unfolding along an infinite line rather than clustering around one centre.[35]

For the notion of the book, with its dense layers of pages and folds, complicates any neutral or homogeneous concept of space and remains close to the core of Brecht's strategies of mapping. What counts now is the suddenness of the turning of the page – the new that connects in the blink of an instant with the previous, and the page or fold that guarantee continuity as well as separation. Both Leibniz and Mallarmé dreamed continually of the total book while working only in fragments, but, as Deleuze points out, we are mistaken if we believe that they did not succeed in their wishes: 'They made this unique Book perfectly, the book of monads, in letters and little circumstantial pieces that could sustain as many dispersions as combinations.'[36] And this description might be a description of Brecht's book as well – allowing for the fact that a book is both a 'material' and 'informational' object. Brecht, for his part, asserts that there is 'no theoretical reason' why his work should be a book – a defense, probably, against any totalising or centralising ideas that this concept might engender, such as the one that informs the notion of the 'failure' of Mallarmé to make the book of his dreams.[37] Seeing his work as a book essentially displaces the notion of a horizontal space of entropic dispersion that was Brecht's initial formulation of the immersive space of boredom. It complicates the notion of the space of immersion as an 'open' space.

SOUND/VOICE

If Brecht reworks the space of immersion by reformulating the concept of space itself, other artists would rework the object that is generally seen as the model for immersion itself; notably sound Sound is believed to be unique in the sense that it has 'presence' – a presence that envelops the subject and erodes its bodily limits. As Frances Dyson has pointed out, the ears are orifices that are always open: the ears allow the subject to be continuously and uncontrollably surrounded by sonic disturbances. Sound ignores the boundary of the skin. It is present both externally in the environment and internally as a resonance or vibration. It evades the distinction between outside and inside, and so makes way for a loss of self.[38]

Cage made the most of this notion of the autonomy or immersive presence of sounds when he liberated them from the constrictions of harmony. Sounds, he claimed, were 'beings', and as beings, part of nature. Yet the being of sound is not for this reason free and

autonomous. In Cage's work sounds seem to be free only at the expense of being 'music': the tendency in Cage to musicalise any sound actually rules out whole dimensions of aurality. Douglas Kahn has pointed out that this collapse of sound into a problematic of musical sound betrays a contradiction at the core of Cage's musical philosophy. Cage was concerned with the possibility of moving away from the anthropomorphic perspective of music, but by retaining the idea of music as the benevolent and all-comprising framework of 'any' sound, contradicts this position and essentially reaffirms the modernist concern for the boundaries of art. What is at stake here is Cage's insistence on the naturalness of sounds, and the ecological, non-humanist perspective according to which sounds could be approached as beings. But this perspective is mired in an idealist and a priori opposition between culture and nature: an ecological perspective on sound should first of all depart from the historical determination of 'nature' and the social incursion into nature.[39] What falls outside this natural and non-humanist perspective is, in other words, all of those instances in which sound is not merely abstract vibrations 'in the air', but social phenomena that function in terms of memory and significance, context and shifting frameworks – that is, sounds capable of semiosis. From this perspective the boundary of music may be eroded by the overriding perspectives of aurality (or auralities) in general and in their various particularities.

But it was precisely these 'other' dimensions of sound that were explored as the students in John Cage's composition class at the New School of Social Research brought their class lessons outside the classroom context; and this was also precisely why Cage condemned this activity for lack of 'spiritual virtuosity', and on the whole maintained an ambivalent relationship to the activities associated with Fluxus. His 1958 and 1959 composition classes triggered some of the first collective 'pre-Fluxus' actions as students assembled under the name of the New York Audio Visual Group performed their exercises from Cage's class at Larry Poons' Epitome Coffee Shop.[40] Fearing a dispersal of his principles into an attitude of 'anything goes', Cage strongly emphasised the need for discipline, which generally meant emptying yourself from subjecthood, society and context in order to become an empty container for the nature of sound

A general lack of faith in the category of music was, however, often the productive drive for these experiments. 'Is it a fault of an event that it does not produce an apparent sound?', Dick Higgins wrote, 'I am tired of music [...] nothing is to be left but theatres, and maybe those will disappear for me too. Then I can begin again somewhere else.'[41] Nam June Paik, for his part, complained that for all his years of studying the aesthetics of music, he still had not found a satisfactory answer to the important question of what music is.[42] But Paik's question about the 'what' of music is entirely rhetorical: he poses it only at the moment when he is able to displace it, to demonstrate its relative position and its momentary insignificance. Cage's all-inclusiveness could not provide a real answer because it essentially responds to the question of the 'what' of music – an affirmation of boundaries despite all. And so he displaces Cage's all-inclusiveness as yet another form: 'I am tired of renewing the form of music – serial or aleatoric, graphic or five lines, instrumental or bellcanto [sic], screaming or action, tape or live. I must renew the ontological form of music.'[43]

But for Paik this ontological renewal was not about finding a new musical 'being'. On the contrary, the renewal was above all a question of creating a split in music's ideal unity, as implied in his term 'post music'. He is even aware of the pitfalls of the term, its potential

double bind: 'I never use therefore this holy word "happening" for my "concerts", which are equally snobbish as those of Franz Liszt. I am just more self-conscious or less hypocritical than my anti-artist friends.'[44] Following this statement, Paik sums up Western art music in terms of a series of blunt and rather funny sociological analyses, ending on a note which even includes the newest and most immersive strategies of boredom: 'New American style boring music is probably a reaction and resistance against the too thrilling Hollywood movies.' To move past or post music, Paik realises the need to leave the domain of the 'what'; but since he also realises the impossibility of 'just' leaving, his answer is a strategy of displacement that will replay music in terms of its possible excesses of signification. Music will be eroded by the semiotic remainder that is generally placed at music's margins.

And so he displaces 'what' by 'when' – the 'what' of music becoming subsequent to his own new question of the 'when' of music – in other words a leap to total contextualisation: 'This WHEN (time of day and day of year, a very interesting measure, which shall be intensely developed and exploited in my post music *The Monthly Review of the University of Avant Garde Hinduism*) ...'[45] And a part of this strategy of displacement is an initial disavowal of any sensual plenitude that might pull back to music's abstract domain: 'Post music is as calm, as cold, as dry, as non-expressionistic as my television experiments. You get something in a year. When you are about to forget the last one you received you get something again. This has a fixed form and this is like the large ocean ... calm sunny calm rainy calm windy calm sunny [...]'[46]

Paik even displaced the potential pathos of 'post' by literalising the concept and playing off the many levels of meaning produced by this action. For his post music is also a composition that is rhythmically structured by the huge social, national and international organisation known as the Postal Service. His post music is a composition that is formed as a *Monthly Review* ..., to be distributed by mail, of course. Paik conceived of this composition as a series of objects mailed to subscribers for a yearly fee of $8; among the objects proposed were 'genuine water from Dunkerque in organic glass bottle, the red earth from Auschwitz in an un-breakable polyethylene tube, or dirty nails of John Cage, cut in 1963, or cortizone bottle of George Maciunas, or arm-pit hair of a Chicagoan negro prostitute etc ...'[47]

It is as if, in direct response to the neutrality and emptiness propagated by John Cage, Paik expressly chooses objects laden with the memory of recent political atrocities, of illnesses, of sex and the body, including 'traces' or 'residue' from the body of Cage himself. These objects effectively serve in a strategy of 'changing Cage', for the use of the Postal Service and its expertise in distribution is obviously also a pun on the principle of distribution of disparate effects that was one of the main lessons derived from Cage. By the help of an insignificant structure – an empty framework waiting to be filled, precluding any actual relation between the structure and the 'filling material' – objects or sounds could be distributed throughout the compositions. Cage's comment on Jasper Johns' flag paintings explains this particular preoccupation with structure and distribution, since Johns' paintings are not paintings of a flag: 'The roles are reversed: beginning with the flag, a painting was made. Beginning, that is, with structure, the division of a whole into parts corresponding to the parts of a flag, a painting was made which both obscures and clarifies the underlying structure.'[48]

Paik, of course, undermines this notion of insignificant or empty structure. The rhythm

and function of a postal service can hardly be separated from the social reality of the goods it distributes, the rules and concerns governing this distribution, and, not least, the shifting and insecure temporal frameworks associated with this institution. Sarcastic expressions like 'the check is in the mail', say it all. The 'when' of post music is not the 'when' of a neutral temporal framework, but (like Brecht's railway station) the 'when' of waiting and frustration, of lost and found, of detours and delays. If anything, it invests indeterminacy with significance and emotion, trace and memory, all modified by possibilities of oblivion, failure and actual displacement.

The significance of this uncertain and unstable 'when' was at the core of Paik's work with electronics and media – his final move to displace and disperse musical insights and strategies through the huge processors of cultural meaning that are the mass media. Like Brecht, Paik was interested in the indeterminate nature of the electron, and repeatedly pointed out the fact that TV images, (electronic images) were indeterminate in their very foundation.[49] They were images one could neither hold on to nor control – images where the stability of the 'what' was always moderated by a radical 'when'. Despite the strong interest in electronics among composers, this aspect had largely gone unnoticed, Paik claimed: electronic composers were still caught in the deterministic forms of serialism and bound to the linear tracks of sound-tape.[50]

His TV experiments were in other words to be something entirely different from a merely optical version of musical indeterminacy or interest in electronics.[51] In fact they had the force to attack musical self-centredness at the core, since the new dominance of electronic media indicated (to Paik) a society increasingly 'infiltrated' by indeterminacy. His 1963 *Exposition of Music – Electronic Television* showed (violently) prepared pianos alongside TV-sets in which the transmission was being destroyed or transformed in various ways, all thanks to the 'when', or the unstability, of the electron. Cage had experimented with prepared pianos (placing objects on the strings to transform their sound at random), but Paik's preparations were more like mutilations. The piano, seen as the cult object of a musical culture, was submitted to the violence of transformation as the instrument now reappeared as a sort of matter capable of becoming 'anything'. And so, the transformed pianos, laden with all sorts of objects and debris, mirrored the violence of the electronic transformations and transmutations on the screens. Paik lost no time in pointing out the cultural significance of such transformations due to the proliferation of live TV and all kinds of radio transmitters (but also electronic equipment such as coffee machines and electronic drills). His preoccupation with electronic images was simply one way of dealing with a permeability of boundaries which would no longer – as in a Gesamtkunstwerk – concern just the 'arts'. There was more indeterminacy in culture-at-large than in indeterminate art, but this 'larger' indeterminacy could only present itself as excess or otherness. It could not, in other words, fit into the space of even an open work.

In the context of this excessive indeterminacy, Paik repeatedly returns to the question of boredom and oblivion. Boredom is in fact one of the main themes in many of Paik's statements about his new work. One of his comments resembles Higgins' anticipation of audience reactions: 'In the beginning it is (probably) interesting, then later on it is boring – don't give up! Then it is (probably) interesting again, then once more boring – don't give up! Then it is (probably) interesting again, then once more boring – don't give up!'[52] Then, Paik

claims, one will move to a level beyond beautiful and ugly, to a state of 'nothing' – an insight close to Higgins' description of the ability of the spectator to disappear into the work. Paik's way of linking the boundary-dissolving capacities of boredom with the transformative capacities of electronic culture shows to what degree his work and thought is concerned with a thinking that never pulls back to a final definition of music. On the contrary, his work seems concerned with how certain musical strategies and insights derived from Cage may return as mere effects within a different conception of both image-culture and sound-culture. If anything, Paik was hypersensitive to what Kahn calls the 'sociality of sound', and to the social consequences for sound and aurality at large due to technology-induced changes in social practices. Maybe the most marked change due to these technologies is the mobility of sounds or voices as *effects* 'cut-off' from the internal audition of the speaker. The recorded or amplified voice (to name just two basic transformations) now returns to its speaker as other or different, as it passes through any number of other spaces or contexts.

Paik, never content to let the technological apparatuses remain in any stable mechanical or reproductive form, would identify the technology itself with the notion of sound to the extent of transforming the apparatus endlessly. His apparatuses do not simply transmit or create sound, but constantly rewrite it, including a continual rewriting of the very technologies of recording and displacement. Record players were taken apart and reconstructed as towering 'record-schaschlik's' where the pick-up could be moved at will across the vertical and horizontal axes of the construction. Magnetic tape (with sound recordings) were glued on the wall in criss-crossing patterns. Listening by means of the loose soundhead of a tape recorder, one would trace a sound map of a wall terrain.

It is a cartography of sound, in fact, in which sound is submitted to the dimensionality of concrete space and distance, well removed from its non-dimensional location in the air/ear. Sound traces new dimensions and distances. Magnetic tape is no longer just a recording strip passing quickly over a soundhead in order to let sounds escape from it. It is itself a trajectory, a piece of concrete space and distance through which one has to make one's way at will and from all possible directions. At this point one can even see the contours of a close relationship between Paiks treatment of sound and Brecht's use of scale. The collapse of sound into space makes for the imaginary expansions or shifts equal to those that go from cracks in the wall to canyons. Paik's *Symphony for 20 Rooms*, in which sound events are defined in terms of twenty different rooms of a house, elaborates exactly these sonic/spatial measures.

This collapsing of sound into space may in fact be an indicator of Paik's critical engagement with the possibility of immersion. But at this point the sonic actions of Paik might be interpreted in terms of the concept of *voice*. The voice is a specification of sound in general, but simultaneously it complicates the notion of immersion in listening. Sound may erode the bodily limits, but the voice provides us with a more salient experience of a presence that is simultaneously coming from the inside and delivered from the outside. Regis Durand has written of the *mobility* of the voice, no doubt inspired by its new importance in the age of audio media where it produces instant intimacy and proximity, as well as reinforcing experiences of distance. As it cuts across the boundaries of reality and representation (a vocal sample has no less presence than 'the real thing'), the voice is an 'apparatus' in the sense that it produces and transforms of its own accord.[53] Just as the voice may be something produced by the body, the product of a source, it is also a piece of residue, something that falls outside,

that continues on its own. This fact of the voice as something that falls outside your own bodily space or 'life' was Antonin Artaud's supreme dilemma. Artaud's enemy was dead matter: the fear that your output is what you *put out*, that your voice moves to freeze the moment you let it escape into speech, sound, writing. He suspected that no turn of a phrase, no shape of an object, no track of a movement can constitute a life of its own, but is doomed to fall to the ground, limp as a discarded garment or excrement. The dead or residual character of the voice was dangerous for the reason that the separation from your own voice entails yourself as 'dead' or 'residual'. His only prescription against this sort of death was a vision of totality in which voice and body would be indivisible. And this vision of totality, where the symbolic language of 'society' must dissolve into a scream or 'noise' is parallel to many such totalising fantasies within the different avant-garde positions – from Yves Klein's *tout* to Cage's zero.

In contrast, Paik is sceptical about totality and not afraid of residue. 'We should learn how to be satisfied with 75%, how to be satisfied with 50%, how to be satisfied with 38% ...', he writes in his preface to his *Exposition of Experimental Television*. And just a few lines below, he makes it very hard for anybody (including himself) to approach Zen Buddhism as just an interesting philosophical framework for a new and total artistic or musical vision: 'Zen is responsible of Asian poverty. How can I justify ZEN without justifying Asian poverty?? It is another problem to which I will refer again in the next essay' [*sic*] Then he asserts: 'The frustration remains as the frustration. There is NO catharsis.' From this point of view Paik may even take a special interest in the residual aspect of the voice. He picks up what Artaud leaves aside and interprets it as productive. It is this residual *and* productive aspect of the voice as apparatus that Paik explores when he continually rebuilds technology in terms of its own site or terrain. More particularly this means that he explores the capacity of the voice for creating not only presence, but also a split in presence. As in reverberation or feedback this split creates excesses and noise that will surround meaning, but not replace it.

Paik redefines sound in terms of loop or feedback in order to produce all the immersive characteristics of a voice. One work for instance demonstrates a record-player where the arm that supports the pick-up is replaced by a phallic object extended into the listener's mouth. The strongly erotic implications of this image of sonic/oral 'penetration' notwithstanding, the work also creates the image of an impossible 'listening through the mouth' where the sound returns by strange splits and warps to its source. The sound has become a voice. Now it can no longer be 'music' – something for the ear, something to which one simply listens. Cage praised the capacity to listen above all other faculties – he imagined an opening of the ear which would make one receptive to the 'excellence' of the world. For Cage, listening becomes a metaphor for receptiveness in general, not only the aural kind But by having listening *literally* make a detour through one of the orifices that (unlike the ear) not only receives but also discharges, it is as if Paik wants to 'dirty' the clean neutrality of Cage's receptiveness. Paik generally went to considerable lengths to displace this listening in terms of its silent 'other', notably sex. Not content to rest on the metaphorical plane of the sensual (this is, after all, Western music's way of sublimating the sexual experience), Paik used its rather more blunt backstreet forms of expression, such as striptease or penis-length contests.[54] When the 'arm' of the record-player becomes a sexual organ, he seems to point out that one is receptive only by risking exchange and interpenetration, which also means leaving one's own mark.

For whether the voice in question is mine or yours, or someone else's whose name remains unknown, these essentially social questions of ownership, propriety, recognition, territoriality and identity frame every moment of its being. As the composer Earle Brown notes with respect to one of Paik's early Cologne actions: 'A Paik is a Paik becoming a Paik (by any other name) [...] Yes Virgil, there *is* an avant-guard.'[55] An 'avant-guard' – keeping a watch on the borders that pop up as if out of nothing.

REPETITION

As Paik creates voices by returning sounds or sound-technologies on themselves, he moves into another minefield – notably that of repetition. It was a field that Cage himself had been threading with a certain care and many explanations and exceptions. Repetition must – in principle – not occur: to Cage repetition above all denotes repetition of the norm, and his work is, to the contrary, devoted to the possibility of change. Yet Cage is, of course, aware of the paradoxes and complications surrounding repetition, and of the way in which its concept inevitably surrounds his own concept of change. The rule of discontinuity in repetition – the fact that in order to be repeated an object must first have disappeared – actually gives a unique kind of singularity and momentary presence to the repeated object.[56] For this reason Cage claims that on one level 'repetition does not exist [...] and we cannot think either that things are being repeated, or that they are not being repeated.'[57] And about the experience of actually performing the 840 repetitive passages of Satie's *Vexations*, he asserts that the piece became interesting not at the point of the beat (which is the element that sticks to the most rigid form of repetition), but at the point of the phrase, where one could experience variation.[58] And so Cage is in one sense able to do away with the problem of repetition for the benefit of change. Beyond repetition, there is *always* change.

With this in mind, the way in which so many of the artists connected to Fluxus are unable to leave well alone but actually return to repetition over and over again is strange – even slightly uncanny. Because this return to repetition is often blunt, defiant, extremely determinate and unsophisticated. It seems to exist at the simple level of a beat or a single extended signal, as if they initially wanted to scar or mark the notion of change or indeterminacy itself. Paik had already pointed out that indeterminacy in composing and performing was still nothing but a stretch of linear time for the listener (attempts to 'solve' this problem by playing the same piece twice in one performance so that the listener could savour the difference, would not change anything in principle). With this insight they seem to return indeterminacy with a vengeance to the very linearity that it was supposed to escape, and with boredom as a main frame of reference. For the repetitive pieces form the very paradigm for what Dick Higgins called 'super boredom'.

One piece in particular seems to have produced a whole lot of 'frustration with NO catharsis', with a few legendary and contested performances.[59] In *Yes It Was Still There. An Opera* (1959), Emmett Williams – a central figure in the concrete-poetry movement – used a radical repetition of sounds and graphic marks as he subjected a simple little 'erotic mystery story' to infinite dispersal or attenuation.[60] *An Opera* is, like any opera, a story that illustrates itself in terms of both sound and vision. But in this case the illustration immediately

challenges or even destroys the story or 'libretto' – not by overturning its meaning, but by subjecting it to so many elements of temporal or graphic repetitions that the story gets 'lost' in the process. But then the libretto also deals with the question of loss: the story of a lost letter. Or, to be more precise – a lost *part* of a letter, notably the purely graphic dot over the *i*. The young man who has 'lost the dot over the *i*' gets help in searching from a young woman, but while the dot remains lost and absent (in the hero's mouth, incidentally), its graphic presence increases with every word uttered by the main character. For on the actual score his words are held apart with ever-increasing distances by a mad proliferation of graphic dots – one for each new word. In that way, the first word uttered by the man is followed by one dot, while word number 179 is followed by 179 dots ... and so on. Visually, the score develops as a spiralling structure of depletion as the distances between the words increase with every dot, since dots are also, among other things, the graphic sign used to indicate pauses.

In the performance of the score, however – that is, in its realisation as an 'opera', the depletion of the libretto is mediated by a different kind of 'presence'. The story stretches towards the infinite as the dots are 'represented' by even beats (on a drum, a cup, a table or whatever). The beats may be empty structural markers just like the graphic dot that signifies nothing more than simple pauses or the difference between capital and lower case *i*. But a performance of these beats takes around three hours, and of course the experience will be that of an eternal repetitive pounding, minimally interspersed by single words and sentences. Then, what might at first appear as a neat little paradox on absence and presence – the ever-increasing presence of the lost object – turns into a different kind of structure and a different kind of experience. The structure of absence/presence is displaced by repetition. The libretto may be lost in its own beat, but this repetitive drumming also evokes a different dynamic which has to do with *mutation* or transformation.

For repetition is the mark of the structure of *pattern* rather than the structure of absence or presence.[61] The logic of pattern may be explained by comparing computers to typewriters: A typewriter produces the presence of a single letter from a single key, while pressing one key on the keyboard of a computer produces chains of reactions and transformations, chains of codes where pattern and randomness interact. And so pattern indicates that information is never present in itself – it is dependent on the probability distribution of the coding elements rather than a presence. Pattern can be recognised through redundancy or repetition of elements, and one of its more crucial features is the tendency towards unexpected metamorphoses, attenuations and dispersals because of the long chains of reactions.

A specific type of single command works leading to endless processes of repetition and attentuation, as if initiated by a computer key, actually becomes a crucial feature in Fluxus. This was – at least partly – thanks to the influence of the composer La Monte Young, who edited what was to become the first Fluxus publication, notably the special issue of *Beatitude West* magazine, named *An Anthology*. Young seemed to reverse all of Cage's principles: No longer based on chance operations, his pieces appeared fiercely determinate. No longer pieced together as an assemblage of autonomous and heterogeneous multiplicities, they seemed to depart from a single sound, sentence, instruction or figure, many of them distinctly extra-musical. One significant piece even explored the extremes of linearity: *Composition #10 1960* simply instructs one to 'draw a straight line and follow it.' *Composition #7 1960* likewise explores the sound of a single interval (a fifth) to be held for a long – indeterminately long –

time. Yet, like someone pressing one key on the computer, Young seemed obsessed with the possibility of producing unforeseeable effects through a single command He professed an interest in newness:

> Often I hear somebody say that the most important thing – about a work of art is not that it be new but that it be – good. But if we define good as what we like, which is the only definition of good I find useful when discussing – art, and then say that we – are interested in what is   good, it seems to me that we will always be interested in the same things (that is, the same things that we already like).
> I am not interested in good; I am interested in new, even – if this includes the possibility of its being evil.[62]

For Young, as for Higgins, the new or the indeterminate is framed by the possibility of danger or *evil*. This concern with danger essentially deals with the potential for immersion. Unlike Cage, Young did not primarily conceive of a sound as a 'being' – an individual among individuals in a big network structure – but as a 'world': 'If one can give up part of himself to the sound and approach the sound as a sound and enter the world of the sound, then the experience need not stop there but may be continued much further and the only limits are the limits each individual sets for himself. When we go into the world of a sound, it is new.'[63] He had been searching out such worlds of sound since early age: wind, crickets, sounds of animals in a wood resonating off a lake, the humming of power stations, telephone poles and motors.[64] The repetition of endless identical moments in his single command compositions operate in terms of pattern: No element is present simply in and of itself, referring only to itself. Each repetition of a sound or a phrase carries within it the traces of its previous manifestations, but also announces its difference from these. It is essentially a generative movement instigated by the effect of differences when experienced in time: the spacing of the different elements in the play of traces and differences indicates an endless number of possible permutations. *Draw a straight line ...* was, on one occasion, issued as a booklet, with the composition instruction written along the middle of every page with new dates of execution/composition as the only changing elements: each day is a mutation of the previous one. The linear movement of the piece through the pages of the book told a story of repetition and transformation through one single figure.[65]

The recognition of the dynamics of pattern in these works may give a more precise idea of how the super-boring repetition of the pieces creates 'worlds' for immersion. N Katherine Hayles is concerned with pattern in the context of changing experiences of embodiment in a VR context, but her model of thought may throw some light on the implications of repetition and mutation in the single command works.[66] For a world of immersion to exist, the subject must step into it by simultaneously stepping out of itself. But while this idea may bring up notions of zen blankness, it actually indicates a specific kind of connectedness. The arm that presses the single command key on the computer belongs to a body and a subject that is then both part of the transformations taking place with the operations of pattern in the machine, while also being outside of it. In a text written for his *Symphony for 20 Rooms*, Paik develops a theory of immersion, which departs from a specific notion of individuality. Variability must be combined with intensity: the problem, as Paik sees it, consists in having variation without loosing intensity. The pure quantity of nature – Cage's endless variability – must, according to Paik, be undercut by 'quality'. By this he does not mean quality as in 'good, better, best'

which 'permits the possibility of comparison', but quality as 'Character, individuality, *Eigenschaft*', which 'excludes the possibility of comparison'. This individuality, which comprises not only the singularity of *moments*, but also their 'momentary' forgetting, is seen as the point of departure for intensity.[67]

It is symptomatic of Paik's perspective that he links this intensity both to the fixed-form linearity of sex (even if Stockhausen tries to dissuade him, saying that fixed form in music must be avoided because it is like sex) *and* to extatic religious practices which teach how to transcend the self. But even more significant is the way in which Paik crossbreeds the notion of intensity with the notion of boredom. Boredom appears when a fixed form – with its 'individuality' or '*Eigenschaft*' – is subjected to endless repetition. But this repetition, which necessarily entails oblivion, the forgetting from one moment to the next, also exposes the form to a process of wear and tear. The form gets dissolved in repetition. It gradually looses its contours while going on and on. This is the danger or evil of boredom. It demonstrates how *something* must be transformed or loose its boundaries in immersion. Paik's venture into film is an obvious example. *Zen for Film* (1964) is a loop of blank film leader, but as it is projected it gets gradually scratched-up and dusty. It's a perfect repetition in which the image always changes.

In fact the repetitive frames of film became a source for the continued exploration of the terms of immersion. In Jackson Mac Low's *Tree Movie* (1961), a still camera records a tree for an indeterminate length of time.[68] Dick Higgins explored the possibility of projecting a blank film which would be gradually burned by the projector during showing. Film is a medium that processes identical frames in time. The effects of speed on the processing of the frames make no single frame either absent or present; instead they partake in the play of pattern and transformation. This may actually seem like a processing of time itself, since it makes past, present and future converge in one extended, fluctuating moment. And so this exploitation of the repetitive implications of film gives a new take on the possibility of immersive presences or spaces. To quote Thierry de Duve on the subject of the performance of film in relation to the desire for a boundless 'real time': 'The *actualité* of real time/real space is dependent on being mediated through a system of reproduction.' To reach an immersive space or immersive presence, the simple heterogeneity of 'nature' is, in other words, not enough. What is needed is reproduction, that is, repetition. This is the seminal lesson of many Fluxus-related artists as they rework or reproduce the Cagean ground From this point of view they seem to have a knowledge of the nature of repetition and oblivion that is comparable to the insight of Deleuze: 'We do not repeat because we forget, we forget because we repeat.'[69] While Cage asserted that despite repetition there is always change, these artists would reverse the problematic: *because of* repetition, there is change.

SIGNATURES

One of the most blunt and insistent instances of repetition even seemed to recall the very space that Cage had gone to so much trouble to avoid: notably the space of the subject. It was a strange, even perverse, kind of invasion: the free-playing non-subjective space of Cagean multiplicity was interrupted by a series of work that seemed, above all, to scream *I,I,I* (in French, *moi, je*).

This was the repetitive strategy of Ben Vautier, whose most important statement from the late 50s onwards is *Moi, Ben, je signe* or *I, Ben, sign*. And right from the start these statements or instances of signature go to work, in paradoxical and often tormented ways, with the previous avant-garde formulations of totality or limitlessness, from Marcel Duchamp to John Cage and Yves Klein. The first moment in Ben's strategy comes when he discovers the fundamental duplicity of these notions of totality. If Duchamp's ready-mades, Cage's indeterminacy or Klein's notion of *tout* means that art opens up into anything, the reverse side of this possibility is the principle of appropriation: Duchamp, Cage and Klein appropriate *anything* for art, in the name of art or the personal signature. Appropriation is all about ownership, and yet in this instance ownership or signature is what must remain hidden: it is effectively dissolved into 'multiplicity' or carried off into the image of heavenly blue endlessness. The artist who appropriates is also the instance that is supposed to disappear. Because of this duplicity Ben sees no other choice but to go to work with the way in which this duplicity circumvents and interrupts the notion of the total.

For, on the one hand, there is no doubt that Ben follows both Cage and Klein in believing that new spaces can be found, must be found, and that a notion of limitlessness – of unlimited *possibility* – is fundamental to this search for the new. But to Ben this notion of totality remains narrowly 'artistic' and idealised so long as the appropriating and egoistic space of art itself is not taken into account, as long as the egotism of this space must be kept silent when everything else is supposed to sound And so Ben administers a return of the repressed. He starts to sign all over again, continually and maniacally. He signs the space of free play set up by John Cage, and it is in fact by signing it that he marks it off *as* a particular space, with particular limits. He is scribbling all over this territory like some kind of mad graffiti artist, taking it all for himself. Graffiti is basically about signature – about a forbidden signature: signing a space that is not yours, stealing a bit of the space for yourself. It has a tendency to take place in what is generally and idealistically known as 'public spaces', but by overwriting or signing these spaces the graffiti artist reopens the question of territorial ownership and boundaries: to whom do these spaces really belong? Ben's action is in many ways similar. The forbidden signature evokes a hidden or repressed signature in John Cage's free space. It also repeats, as if dumbstruck, the signature actions of Duchamp, but with a difference. Ben's signature no longer guarantees *anything* for art, as Duchamp's did, but (since it is so bluntly and obviously a repetition) turns back on itself in order to expose the limits and borders that were, by some strange occlusion, being kept out of the picture by Duchamp's followers.

These are, among other things, the limits and borders of the thing called 'ego', which plays such a central, if often misunderstood, role in the work of Ben. For, contrary to a widely held belief, Ben's work is not about a return to expressionism, not about a return to the communication of the inner depths of the soul or psyche. The ego in Ben's work is an exemplary space in that it is an object that seems to consist entirely of limits. From the outset his analysis of the art situation takes him right back to the limits of his own ego. His analysis starts out with an I – an I that is 'worried and in doubt' ('*Je reste inquiet et dans la doute*').[70] The limits of the ego are those of aggression and desire, of jealousy and ambition, and it is fundamentally formed through its relation to death: 'I am jealous, I want to do what has not been done. I'm afraid of not making it. I want it all. I'm the only one. I cry at night. I hate the others. I create it all. I sign it all. I am God Creator, Ben.'[71]

This anxiety and ambition, pointed out in an almost obsessive manner, is important because it disrupts the comfort of the standard avant-garde notions of totality. When Klein, for instance, conceives of his totality in terms of the infinite blue sky, Ben punctuates this idea by saying, very bluntly, that contrary to Klein his personal notion of totality has always been death. For Ben this means that since the notion of art and the desire to create cannot be separated from the anxieties of the ego, a proposition of totality that wants to *surpass* the workings of the ego and art can only do so by taking these factors into account, by working its way through them. Any other position is based on delusion, since such totalities (or notions of unlimited possibilities) are in fact limited by what they exclude. And so Ben drives a wedge into the earlier avant-garde acts of appropriation by working through the question of the signature itself. Ben had already assumed the principle of *intention* that informs Duchamp's artistic revolution (the fact that anything can be art if the artist intends it to). But by assuming and repeating it he also discloses its other side, so that intention is now rewritten in terms of the far more uncomfortable and egoistic notion of *prétention*: '*Je pourrais tout faire, car j'en ai la prétention*' ('I can do anything because of my ambition to do it').[72]

By working through the limits of the ego and its pretentions, Ben necessarily stumbles across a number of paradoxes and contradictions. But these contradictions turn out to be the very core of Ben's notion of creation. The most significant of these contradictions have to do with the question of the *new* – the possibility of creating new spaces – since the desire for the new is fundamentally linked to personal ambition, creating a space for one's own signature. Some of the funniest but also most heartbreaking moments in Ben's work are the instances where he seems to wonder what space is left for him when the concept of totality has already been claimed by so many other artists. Their (supposedly non-personal) concept of totality hurts or invades his (entirely personal) desire for a space of expression! Ben is perfectly aware that it is the egoistic desire for the new that lies behind his hurting, but on the other hand some notion of the new is absolutely fundamental to any attempts at surpassing a certain (artistic) culture, and its very particular grip on notions such as ego and intention.

And so Ben's way of dealing with this paradox is to introduce the new in terms of two notions that would initially seem to be antithetical to it. He defines the new in terms of repetition on the one hand, and absences on the other. He plays with and confuses the very slight differences which the French language sets up between *du nouveau* (the new) and *de nouveau* (once again).[73] Since Klein had already signed totality or 'all' (*le tout*), Ben can think of nothing else to do but to repeat this act of signature by signing totality all over again. Ben's most typical statement is notably 'I sign all' ('*Je signe tout*'). But in this repetition there is necessarily a displacement of the stakes involved in signing. Whereas Klein signs *all*, Ben *signs* all, which is an entirely different thing. Klein's act remains on the level of propositions or intentions, whereas with Ben the material physical presence of his signature or handwriting is all important.

And Ben's handwriting is virtually everywhere, spreading across every available surface with tremendous *prétention* and gusto. Klein's signature is a gesture of generalised appropriation, Ben's physical signature returns to the level of *particularia*, demonstrating, mark by mark, space by space, how one invests, particularly, in the possibility of the world. But the world or 'totality' will not be conquered: for every space covered by Ben's

handwriting one is reminded of all the millions of spaces into which his handwriting does *not* reach. Ben's point is precisely that the world will resist total appropriation of possibility – possibility or the new can only reside in contradictions or in multiplicities that will *not* cooperate 'peacefully'. These contradictions are fundamental. For instance, since the new is 'only' repetition, Ben claims to work precisely in the space of its contradictions or lack of positive characteristics.[74] His many elaborations on holes or hollows is one notable way in which he pays tribute to this vision of absences, as is the way in which he chooses to play with the contradictions or lacks in the given 'avant-garde' spaces.

But in fact the space of the signature itself is also a contradiction *par excellence*. On the one hand, it is the physical mark of a particular body, the guarantor of the ego, of personality and intention. On the other hand it undercuts all of these things. As Jacques Derrida insists, it is a written mark, designed to work precisely in the *absence* of the body or ego that has produced it. It is an original mark, an event produced by a singular person, and yet we recognise it as a signature only because it has been and may be repeated *ad infinitum*.[75] The effect of the signature is then an intertwining of singularity and repeatability: its repetition displaces the singular subject (or Ben's ego) as a mere effect of the signature. The signature then has to do with excess: it traces the material frame or 'body' of the subject, while producing the subject as an effect that exceeds this signing body. It is at once a guarantor of subjective limits while producing the subject as a something that is too much, something that has 'seeped out', demonstrating the hollowness of the inside and the permeability of limits. The signature is, in other words, a double-bind mechanism that also instigates the 'death' of this subject. Hence Ben's emphasis on the interconnectedness of death and totality. This is not a 'totalising' notion of death, but simply a way of expressing the most critical feature of the signature. For Ben, the necessity of working through the space of the signature comes from the way in which it plays with and at the limits of otherness. The signature is the space of Ben's ego, but it is also the space of its repetition in 'other' terms, the space of the ego's oblivion. In Ben's work the endless repetition of the signature works to deplete the limits of the ego and its intentions. It pushes the ego to its limits (passing through *prétention* and desire on its way) – and then beyond As the artists assembled under the name of Fluxus rework the terms of immersion, it is precisely through a thinking that takes into account the boundaries towards alterity and the critical and often painful contradictions that must remain within any concept of multiplicity. There is no *boredom*, no letting go of boundaries, without *danger* following suit.

POSTSCRIPT ON CONCEPT ART

A few words need to be added regarding Henry Flynt's invention of Concept Art in the 1961 essay of that name.[76] His text, published in *An Anthology*, sits uneasily in the general Fluxus context, but mainly because of a common misreading of its aims. It has often simply been interpreted as a positive appeal for the use of words or 'concepts' as works of art, and this appeal has then been identified with the fact that many Fluxus works seems to consist of 'words'. On the other hand, people like George Brecht, among others, have strongly denied that their work have anything to do with 'conceptuality'.[77] But a closer reading of Flynt's proposition along with the work that he sets up as an example reveals that this work, too, could be seen a strategy of entropic depletion. If Ben intends a depletion of the concept of the

ego by working with and through it, Flynt seems to suggest a similar depletion of the concept of art. Only he goes about it through a slight detour. By 1961 Flynt felt 'swindled' by both Cage and Stockhausen when he felt that their efforts led right back to the paradigm of Western art music, with no real room for the experiences of the black-, folk- and pop musics from his native American South.[78] And so, Henry Flynt's major preoccupation seems to have been various militant attempts to formulate ways of moving beyond the bourgeois institution of art. But his essay throws a different light on an attitude that might, at times, have seemed like a simple anti-art activism. For in *Implications – Concept Art Version of Coloured Sheet Music No.1* – a piece developed to accompany Flynt's essay as a sort of demonstration of its implications – revolutionary energy and meaning is in fact deflated by paratactic strategies of dispersal and emptying out. In a comment on the piece, Flynt claimed that 'its point was to proclaim the speciousness of syntactical categories of identifications' – much along the line of argument developed in 'Concept Art'.[79] In a seemingly paradoxical move Flynt propagated an art that would be based on both concepts and structure, but only after having emptied those terms of some usual assumptions: the notion of a logical connection between a name and its intension and the notion of structure as an organising factor that would be integral to some musical or artistic content. Structures and concepts could become artistic elements *on their own*, in their emptied-out, non-syntactical forms, Flynt claimed.

What Flynt is essentially promoting, then, is a sort of radical unrelatedness or dispersion. Following this strategy, his *Implication* creates 'axioms', 'statements' and the like, but he immediately subjects these axioms and statements to a process of folding and dispersing. In fact what he creates is a series of surfaces which reproduce one another in crystalline processes of movement and freezing. The 'axiom' that starts the process is a sheet of cheap white typewriter paper which will be soaked in inflammable liquid, then burned on a rectangular fireproof surface so as to create a rectangle of ashes the same size as the sheet. The rectangle of ashes will next be photographed in white light, and in a way that makes it coincide exactly with the frame of the film. The negative of this film will then be melted and cooled in a mould to form a doubly convex lens with small curvature; with this lens one will take a colour photograph of the ashes rectangle in different yellow light. A new lens will be made of this new negative, in order to take new photographs with this lens in red and blue light. These newest negatives will be melted in a mould with the ashes which have been photographed to create a new lens, with this lens a black-and-white photograph of the white ashless surface is made. Yet another lens is made from this last negative, while a negative is made from the lens used in the last photograph. From this new negative and new lens two prints will be made in an enlarger – an enlargement and a reduction.

The piece, in other words, deals with surfaces and sameness: against the identifying distinctions of concepts and structures, the piece creates one continuum of disappearance and oblivion from the assumed difference between reality and recording. This is highlighted by his use of photography. As a medium of documentation photography is particularly devoted to the question of memory, but here its memory recording is gradually depleted. First of all, the ashes that are to be photographed could be seen as 'already' photographic, since both ashes and photographs are indexes or traces, memory objects of a specific kind Reality and recording are parts of the same. In the process that follows, the memory contained in each single recording is immediately caught by oblivion, as each new photograph or memory

record 'selflessly' serves as the recording apparatus for yet another memory. In this process, the boundary that separates memory from oblivion can no longer be kept distinct.

The strategy implied in this and other works somehow implements Flynt's ambivalence and vagueness of formulation when he tries to move around the art/anti-art dilemma. He invents alternative formulations, such as 'veramusement' and, later on, 'brend' (a contraction of the former), but he still depends on the word 'art' both for definitions and for marking his resistance. Flynt clearly sees this dilemma. And so it seems increasingly apparent that his work to deplete the meaning of 'concepts' and 'structures' in general has implications for the particular concept of art through a sort of metonymical affiliation. By emptying concept and structure of meaningful, value-bound affiliations while keeping the terms intact, he seems to have been able to do with them what he could not do to the word 'art' because of the enormous institutional weight that would make any counter-formulation too squarely 'dialectical'. One of his many attempts at alternative terms was 'act' – acognitive culture. As a positive term it might not work, but his *Implication* shows the significance of the 'acognitive' as a practical strategy in relation to the concept of art: the choice to simply empty it out, to subject it to processes of oblivion – circumventing the issue by dispersing and displacing it.

NOTES

1   Dick Higgins, 'Boredom and Danger', *Something Else Newsletter* (Dec 1968). The essay was originally written in the summer of 1966.
2   On the subject of art and immersion, I am indebted to interesting exchanges with the artist and writer Joseph Nechvatal.
3   '... it's memory that one has to become free of, at the same time that you have to take advantage of it. It's very paradoxical.' John Cage quoted in Richard Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage*, New York, 1988, p 209.
4   'Everything is permitted if zero is taken as the basis. That's the part that isn't often understood. If you're nonintentional, then everything is permitted. If you're intentional, for instance if you want to murder someone, then it's not permitted. The same thing can be true musically.' Ibid, p 208.
5   See n 4.
6   Dick Higgins, 'Intermedia', *The Something Else Newsletter*, (Feb 1966).
7   Ina Blom, 'The Intermedia Dynamic: An Aspect of Fluxus', Dissertation, University of Oslo, 1993.
8   Higgins, 'Boredom and Danger'.
9   Ibid. The piece was originally by George Brecht; John Cage, however, suggested that it should be done in darkness.
10   Higgins, notes to *St Joan of Beaurevoir*, 'What Part Does a Witness to St Joan of Beaurevoir Play?'. In the Silverman Collection, Detroit and New York.
11   Higgins, 'Boredom and Danger'.
12   Dick Higgins, *Contribution 1*, November 1959.
13   Higgins, 'Boredom and Danger'.
14   Ibid.
15   Mac Low quoted in Emmett Williams, ed, *Poésie Etcetera Américaine*, Paris, Centre Americain 1963. Translation mine.
16   'What constitutes the originality of speech, what distinguishes it from every other element of signification is that its substance seems to be purely temporal. And this

temporality does not unfold a sense that would itself be nontemporal, even before expressed, sense is through and through temporal.' Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, trans David B Allison, Evanston, 1973, p 83.

17 Benjamin HD Buchloh, *Broodthaers: Writings, Interviews, Photographs*, Cambridge, 1988, p 77.

18 La Monte Young, ed, *An Anthology*, New York, Jackson Mac Low and La Monte Young, 1963. I take it as an indication of the centrality of the piece that Mac Low chose to publish it in this groundbreaking collection of works.

19 Brecht, *Notebooks II*, p 65.

20 Brecht quoted in Henry Martin, *Introduction to George Brecht's Book of the Tumbler on Fire*, Milan Multhipla Edizioni, 1978, p 106.

21 N Katherine Hayles gives a very clear account of the principle of independent but intersecting causal chains in her essay on chance operations in John Cage's music. In Perloff and Junkerman, *John Cage: Composed in America*, Chicago, 1994, p 232.

22 Brecht, *Notebooks III*, p 52.

23 George Brecht and Robert Watts, 'Yam Lecture – Oakland Version', 1962. Hand-written document. In the Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart.

24 Brecht, *Exercise*. From 'Water Yam', 1963.

25 Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, London, 1993, pp 5–7.

26 Ibid., p 19.

27 Ibid., p 77.

28 Robert Smithson, *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed Nancy Holt, New York, 1979, p 112.

29 Brecht, 'Water Yam', 1963.

30 The three last works referred to are *Untitled* (1973), *Untitled* (1965) and *Untitled* (1971), reproduced in Martin, *Introduction*, pp 243, 248 and 240 respectively.

31 Deleuze, *The Fold*, pp 20–22.

32 George Brecht, 'Towards Events', leaflet, 1959.

33 A series of work from 1976/77 are based on crystals in connection with small objects and mirrors. Crystals are also mentioned in a number of other contexts.

34 The three map-pieces are reproduced in Martin, *Introduction*, pp 220, 219 and 184 respectively.

35 This is the point of view expressed by Martin in *Introduction*, p 34.

36 Deleuze, *The Fold*, p 31.

37 Brecht, as quoted in Martin, *Introduction*, p 32.

38 Frances Dyson, 'When Is the Ear Pierced,' in Moser and MacLeod, eds, *Immersed in Technology*, London, 1996.

39 Douglas Kahn, 'Track Organology', in *October 55*, Boston, MIT Press, 1990, pp 67–78.

40 The Cage classes are described at length in Al Hansen, *A Primer of happenings and Time/Space Art*, New York, Something Else Press, 1965.

41 Dick Higgins to George Brecht, 26 January 1960. In the Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart.

42 From a 1963 interview with Gottfried Michael Koenig, in Wulf Herzogenrath, ed, *Nam June Paik: Werke, 1946–1976*, Cologne, 1977, p 51.

43 Nam June Paik, *Post Music: The Monthly Review of the University for Avant-garde Hinduism*. Printed leaflet, Fluxus edition, 1963.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

48 John Cage, *A Year from Monday*, London, 1985, p 74.

49 Nam June Paik, *Exposition of Music-Electronic Television*, leaflet, 1963. Paik attributes

this last insight to KO Götz, who had pointed out to him that electronic images were productive, that is, indeterminate, not reproductive.

50   Ibid.

51   Ibid.

52   Paik, *Exposition of Music-Electronic Television*.Translation from the German mine.

53   Régis Durand, 'The Disposition of the Voice' in Benamou and Caramello, eds, *Performance in Postmodern Culture*, Wisconsin, 1977, pp 99–110.

54   Paik's sexual works include *Serenade for Alison* (a striptease work), *Young Penis Symphony*, *TV Bra for Living Sculpture* and *Chroma-Key Bra*, *TV Penis* and *Opera Sextronique* (another striptease piece, which led to the arrest of cellist Charlotte Moorman in New York in 1967).

55   La Monte Young, ed, *An Anthology*.

56   Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans Paul Patton, London, 1994, p 70.

57   Cage quoted in Kostelanetz, p 222.

58   Ibid., p 47.

59   'There have been, to my knowledge, only five performances, three of which led to acts of violence.' Emmett Williams, *My Life in Flux and Vice Versa*, Stuttgart 1991, p 101.

60   Ibid.

61   For this interpretation of pattern as opposed to presence/absence, I rely on N Katherine Hayles' essay 'Virtual Bodies and Flickering Signifiers', in *October 66*, Cambridge, 1993, pp 69–92.

62   La Monte Young, *Lecture 1960*; reprinted in *Tulane Drama Review*, vol 10, no. 2 (Winter, 1965).

63   Ibid., pp 81–2.

64   Interview with La Monte Young, New York, 1988.

65   It is important to emphasise the continuity between the conception of a world or worlds for immersion in Fluxus and the creation of such world(s) in recent club culture (techno, ambient, jungle, etc) Whereas, with Fluxus, it was pigeonholed in terms of the 'avant-garde' or the 'experimental', it is now a broad social phenomenon.

66   Hayles, p. 91.

67   'One forgets as quickly as children do. Stockhausen's new term "Moment" seems to me to be of strong importance in this connection.' Paik, 'To the *Symphony for 20 Rooms*', in Young, ed, *An Anthology*.

68   Jackson Mac Low, *Tree Movie*, Score, 1961. Published in *ccV TRE* Fluxus Newspaper 1, New York, 1964.

69   Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p 18.

70   Ben Vautier, 'Manifeste 1960', in *En Rouge: Textes theoriques. Tracts*, Milan, 1975, p 11.

71   Ben Vautier, statement after his participation at the Misfits Fair in London, 1962, where he lived exposed in a shop window for two weeks. Published in Hanns Sohm and Harald Szeeman, eds, *Happenings and Fluxus*, Cologne Kunstverein, 1970.

72   Ben Vautier, *Le Happening*, 1966; reprinted in Charles Dreyfus, ed, *Happening and Fluxus*, Paris, 1989, p 178.

73   For instance, Vautier, *En Rouge*, pp 41 and 34.

74   Ibid., p 35.

75   Derrida, 'Signature, Event, Context, in *Margins of Philosophy*, Chicago, 1982, pp 307–30.

76   Printed in La Monte Young, ed, *An Anthology*, second edition, New York 1970. In the 1963 edition, the same piece carried the title 'Transformations'. The last version (*Implications*) then underscores the connection between the 'Concept Art' essay and the work.

77   Brecht, quoted in Martin, *Introduction*, p 117.

78   See n 61.

79   Henry Flynt, *Fragments and Reconstructions from a Destroyed Oeuvre, 1959–1963*, New York, Backworks, 1982, p 8.