Publication: Chicago Tribune
Date: 11/14/93 Sunday
Page: Section 13, p. 14

Making something from nothing

Freewheeling Fluxus movement illuminated the art of the everyday

By Alan G. Artner
TRIBUNE ART CRITIC

Every radical movement or tendency in 20th Century art eventually has become housebroken, entering homes and museums not with a bang but a whimper.

Fauvism, Futurism, Dada, Surrealism, Conceptualism—all passed from a shock phase into domestication, more often than not expressly against the creators' wishes.

So the exhibitions and performances that in Chicago "celebrate" the 30th anniversary of Fluxus, a lightheartedly anarchic association of artists, poets, filmmakers and composers, give one more of de-radicalization in the art world, a process that has wended its way through the entire modern period.

In the case of Fluxus, this process may seem more a violation, as it goes contrary to virtually everything the group was about. "Fluxus was supposed to turn into life and fun," wrote Ben Vautier, one of its European exemplars. "Today it is art archeology."

Anyone not minding the dig will, however, find a lot.

"In the Spirit of Fluxus," a traveling exhibition organized by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, contains more than 1,000 objects that fill the Museum of Contemporary Art.

"Fluxus: A Conceptual Country," from the Franklin Furnace in New York, has brought more than 300 pieces to Northwestern University's Mary and Leigh Block Gallery in Evanston.

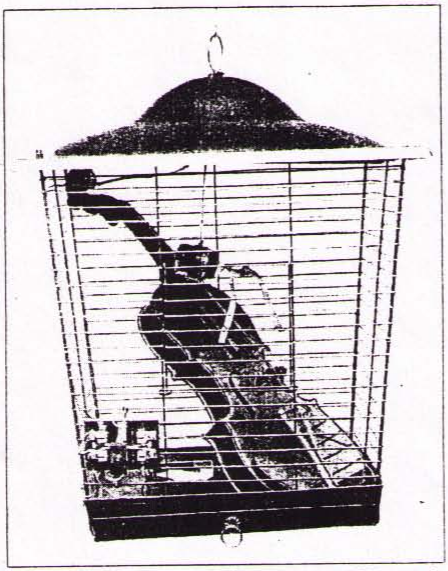
"Influx," at Gallery 400 of the University of Illinois at Chicago, presents 65 works indicating Fluxus' influence on contemporary artists.

"Fluxus Vivus," at the Arts Club of Chicago, offers vintage posters and videos as well as concerts, poetry readings and a "Lewd Food Fluxus Banquet."

Whether this is overkill or merely thorough exhumation, an autopsy is scheduled for performance next February through April in a lecture series on Joseph Beuys, the most prominent German Fluxus artist, at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Any venture so ambitious will have some things go better than others. Here coordinators have timed the shows oddly, opening the most extensive one last, months after the exhibition at the Block that includes material best seen in relation to, and in comparison with, pieces by the same people at the MCA.

Still, if a single, smaller, more freewheeling show on the order of the one at the 1990 Biennale in Venice might have been most appropriate, taken together our orthodox historical efforts are overwhelming in their drive toward completeness, and one scarcely can imagine anybody who attends them ever needing—or wanting—to see a Fluxus exhibition again.



Joe Jones' mixed-media "Violin in Bird Cage" (circa 1965) is part of the Fluxus exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art.

Of course, that might have happened in any case, insofar as any Fluxus show contains a lot of photo-documentation, written statements, machinery and installation pieces of cheap, throwaway materials that opposed most accepted notions about what constituted art.

An exhibition of Dada, the movement that arose just after World War I, would present a similar sort of material. But Dada was blackly nihilistic. Several of its artists had witnessed on the battlefield horrors that 19th Century values had not prepared them for, and they bitterly sought to do away with all vestiges of a culture their experience had shown a lie.

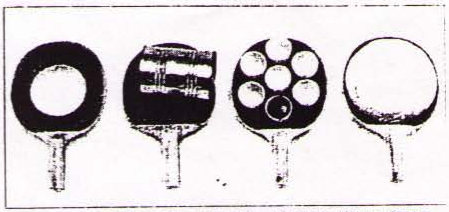
Fluxus artists wanted to rid themselves of art in favor of celebrating small, almost meaningless acts of life. Their attitude was playful, good-natured. And, generally, their work arose from an open-hearted embrace of the everyday rather than a moral recoil.

"Hey!—coffee cups can be more beautiful than fancy sculptures," wrote Dick Higgins, a founding member of Fluxus. "A kiss in the morning can be more dramatic than a drama by Mr. Fancypants. The sloshing of my foot in my wet boot sounds more beautiful than fancy organ music." Or, as another member, Larry Miller, wrote: "Fluxus has made an art of nothing and vice versa."

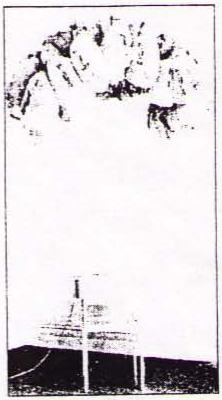
This art was, by its nature, evanescent, impermanent, *in flux*. Hence, the emphasis on such common processes as eating. Where a turn-of-the-century artist/architect might focus on eating by beautifully designing everything from dining table to bread pans, Fluxus artists in the 1960s simply averred they found the process beautiful in itself and documented it.

The influence here was, of course, Marcel Duchamp, who earlier in the century had wittily begun to turn the stuff of his life into art. But Fluxus artists, who were predominantly German and American, were more consistently lowbrow than the Frenchman, as if promoting a music-hall view of his ideas. As George Maciunas, who gave Fluxus its name, said: It was a "fusion of Spike Jones, vaudeville, gag, children's games and Duchamp."

The other great father figure was composer and master of the I Ching, John Cage. Wildly interdisciplinary, Fluxus had more to do with music than any other modern art tendency of the 20th Century. Much of the involvement was only jokey and Spike Jonesish. The part that wasn't came clearly from Cage, who successfully imparted that *any* sound in the natural world, even those coming from acts or processes impossible for humans to hear, can qualify as music, and this became the sort of music encountered at many Fluxus concerts.



George Maciunas' "Four Altered Ping-Pong Rackets: Hole in Center Racket . . ." (circa 1970), on display at the MCA.



Ben Pranger's "Parachute" (1992), at Gallery 400, is made of plastic grocery bags.

If art and music were all around us, perhaps it might bypass the entire network set up to commercialize and sell it. Which is why Fluxus art, in particular, takes the form of relics, documents or mass-produced multiples. Here the artists tried to circumvent the gallery-collector nexus. They meant their art to have as little financial value as possible, and no gain in status could come from owning it.

These were pretty radical ideas in the '60s, so radical that contemporary artists are not close to being done with them. The ephemera so carefully preserved under Plexiglas at the MCA and the Block continues to be a source for younger artists at Gallery 400, where humor, politics and unbridled shagginess blend to create a mess that, oddly enough, feels closer than the other exhibitions to the Fluxus spirit.

The Block installation, while non-linear, is still too straitlaced; the MCA's, which I saw only in progress, gains points on having interactive set ups in each of the galleries, plus a few larger, zanier installations, a room for the simultaneous showing of short film loops and a '90s re-creation of an environment from the '60s.

Each of the shows has works by such famous artists as Beuys, Christo, Yoko Ono and Nam June Paik. But surprise comes equally from people who involved themselves with Fluxus for a comparatively brief time (Per Kirkeby, Claes Oldenburg, Gyorgy Ligeti) as well as scores of others whose names are almost completely unknown yet who persisted until Maciunas' death in 1978, a date scholars have accepted as the end of the movement.

Some years ago, it came as a shock to see the largest and most comprehensive exhibition ever mounted on behalf of the Futurists in the city whose destruction they advocated: Venice. Now it comes as almost as much of a shock to see so much Fluxus in Chicago, a city that was provincial and conservative when most of these radical artists were working.

Seldom does it happen that we have the opportunity to see a significant international tendency in late 20th Century art to as much depth as possible without having to travel somewhere else. But we have the opportunity now, and whatever one thinks of Fluxus or its artistic achievements, the smartest course is simply to immerse oneself in them, leaving contemporary art of the next few years to continue sorting them all out.

Both "Fluxus Vivus," 109 E. Ontario St., and "Influx," 400 S. Peoria St., continue through Dec. 4; "Fluxus: A Conceptual Country," 1967 Sheridan Rd., Evanston, closes Dec. 5; "In the Spirit of Fluxus," 237 E. Ontario St., runs through Jan. 16.