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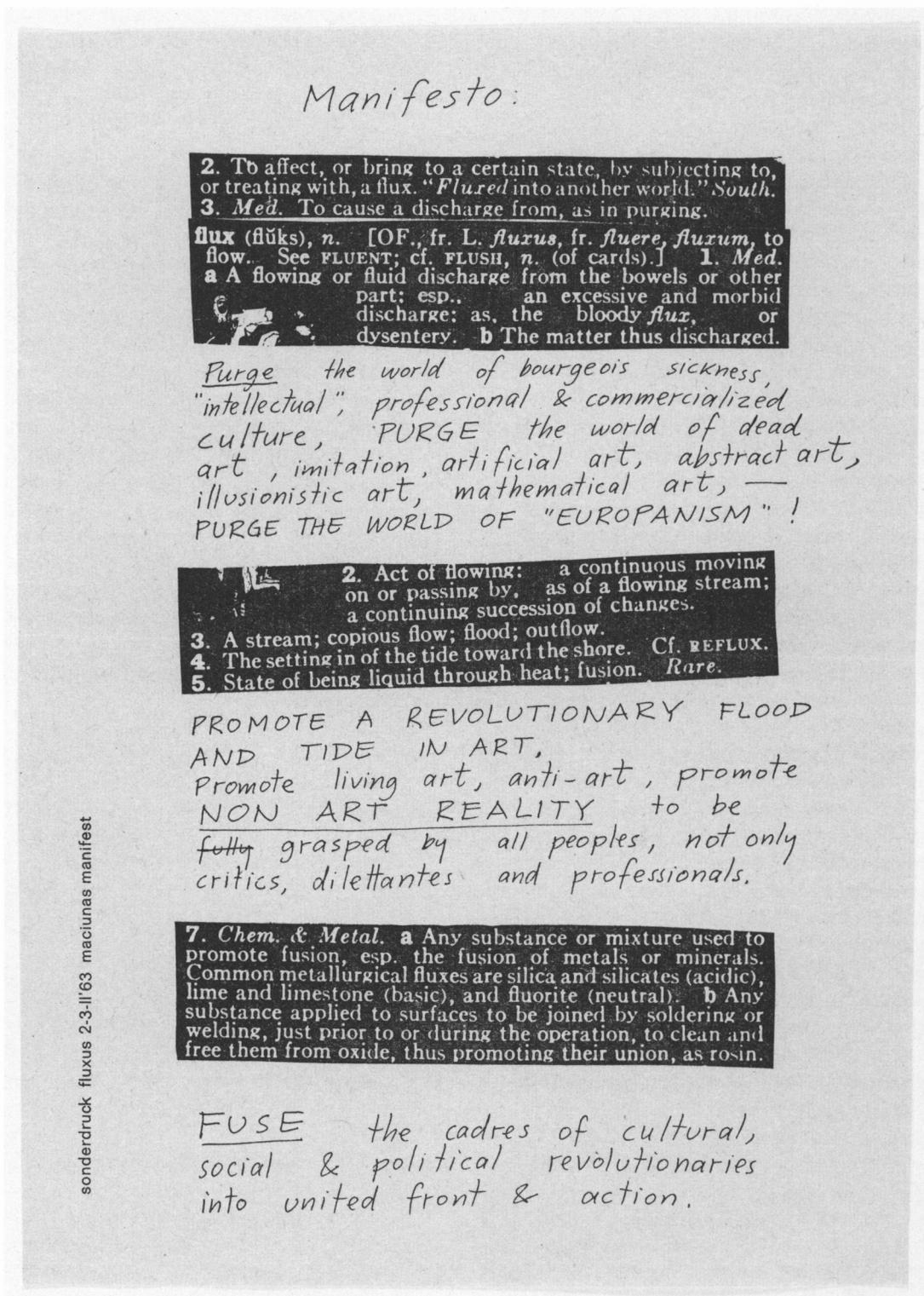


Figure 1. George Maciunas, *Fluxus Manifesto*, 1963. Offset, 8 3/16 x 5 11/16 in. (20.8 x 14.5 cm). The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Gift, 2008. Courtesy of Billie Maciunas. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, New York.

The readymade metabolized

Fluxus in life

DAVID JOSELIT

In 1978 the video artist Nam June Paik claimed that the *distribution* of artworks had begun to matter more in Fluxus impresario George Maciunas's work than their *production*. Paik wrote:

Marx gave much thought about the dialectics of the production and the production medium. He had thought rather simply that if workers (producers) OWNED the production's medium, everything would be fine. He did not give creative room to the DISTRIBUTION system. . . .

George Maciunas' Genius is the early detection of this post-Marxistic situation and he tried to seize *not only* the production's medium *but also* the DISTRIBUTION SYSTEM of the art world.¹

This insight has everything to do with Paik's own engagement with television—the mid-century distribution system par excellence—but its relevance reaches beyond video. As Paik noted, Maciunas is one of the first artists—if not *the* first—to take distribution itself as his medium. He did so in at least four ways: by distributing artists physically through an international network of Fluxfestivals featuring an evolving repertoire of performances; by distributing information about the history of art in countless charts, diagrams, and publications; by distributing artworks inexpensively in a variety of innovative multiples and Fluxstores; and by distributing real estate ownership through his cooperative Fluxhouses, or artists' lofts in Soho.

There is, however, a conceptual paradox that results from taking distribution as one's medium. It hinges on a concept that is often cited in relation to mid-twentieth-century art but seldom carefully parsed: namely, the relationship perceived between art and life that Robert Rauschenberg so famously summarized when he stated "Painting relates to both art and life. Neither can be made. (I try to act in that gap between the two.)"² While a great deal of lip service is paid to the liberating effects of

a collapse between aesthetics and everyday experience (which Rauschenberg himself was careful to finesse by positing a "gap" between them), there is surprisingly little acknowledgment that their most successful elision occurs in the so-called culture industry where life and visual production are fused with such force and influence that artists can hardly compete. To put it bluntly, film and television accomplish the rapprochement of art and life more fully than any artist could, and it is in the blockbuster exhibition, not the downtown Happening, that the art world approaches ordinary experience for anyone who is not already an insider.

Maciunas and his Fluxus colleagues were well aware of this double bind and they approached it in a variety of ways, including an unapologetic engagement with entertainment. As Maciunas stated in the "Fluxshop/Fluxorchestra/Fluxmanifesto on Fluxamusement" of 1965:

FLUXMANIFESTO ON FLUXAMUSEMENT—
VAUDEVILLE—ART? TO ESTABLISH ARTISTS
NONPROFESSIONAL, NONPARASITIC, NONELITE
STATUS IN SOCIETY, HE MUST DEMONSTRATE
OWN DISPENSABILITY, HE MUST DEMONSTRATE
SELSUFFICIENCY OF THE AUDIENCE, HE MUST
DEMONSTRATE THAT ANYTHING CAN SUBSTITUTE
ART AND ANYONE CAN DO IT, THEREFORE THIS
SUBSTITUTE ART-AMUSEMENT MUST BE SIMPLE,
AMUSING, CONCERNED WITH INSIGNIFICANCES, HAVE
NO COMMODITY OR INSTITUTIONAL VALUE. IT MUST
BE UNLIMITED, OBTAINABLE BY ALL AND EVENTUALLY
PRODUCED BY ALL.

In other words the art object itself could wither away if artists succeeded in producing a form of entertainment capable of transforming experience. If one takes this goal seriously, then instead of merely signifying everyday life by incorporating cast-off readymades or by introducing performative actions into one's art, one must confront the more intractable problem of how to invent an aesthetic practice situated beyond the narrow precincts of the art world—one that is capable of entertaining as well as edifying. The Fluxus artist and philosopher Henry Flynt was acutely aware of one of many corollary difficulties attendant on such a project—namely, that in order to be truly effective, the artwork would have to

1. N. J. Paik, "George Maciunas and Fluxus," *Flash Art* 84–85 (Oct–Nov 1978): 48.

2. R. Rauschenberg, "Untitled Statement" (1959), in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, ed. K. Stiles and P. Selz (Berkeley, 1996), p. 321.

become absolutely customized to address the particular sensory apparatus of individual viewers. Reflecting on his concept of “brend,” or the “just-likings” of an individual—which for him was the proper objective of art—Flynt declared retrospectively in 1990, “My anti-art theory was a philosophical argument that if taste is subjective, then nobody is more able than me to create an experience to my taste . . . the artist is in the same false position as the fashion designer who says ‘Wear my clothes to be yourself.’”³

Flynt’s statement embodies the central paradox faced by a Fluxus program. On the one hand, Maciunas (and Flynt) understood entertainment, or brend, as the objective of art; Maciunas, at least, had no compunction about using existing markets parasitically to disseminate his various wares. But, as Flynt states, the Fluxus embrace of entertainment sought to avoid commercial culture’s trap wherein an individual is supposed to embrace a mass-produced product, a readymade, as the special sign of his or her own identity—a form of misrecognition which, for Flynt, is exemplified by the false promise that wearing designer clothes will allow one to express his or her “true” self. By contrast, the experiential transformation sought by Fluxus must necessarily be tailored to each individual person. How can an artist resolve this dilemma—how can he or she make a work that allows access to a broad community in the context of everyday life, and yet manages to address each individual’s just-likings, or brend? Maciunas’s solution was to replace art objects with experiences that satisfy two of life’s basic needs: *nourishment* as provided by a variety of Fluxus banquets, and *shelter* which Maciunas collectivized in cooperative artists’ lofts which were planned as part of a broader art and entertainment precinct in Soho. For Rauschenberg, the term *life* did not signify *biological* life but rather everyday activities and objects. In certain of Maciunas’s works, however, *life* is rooted in biology—he invented, among other things, a model of the metabolic readymade appropriate to what Zygmunt Bauman has called “Liquid Modernity.”⁴ It was precisely by linking individual bodies—what might be called wetware—to the hardware of global markets that Maciunas opened an aesthetic paradigm in which organic flux was metabolized as art—as *Fluxus*.

Indeed, from the beginning, the term *Fluxus* articulated a relationship between two registers of

distribution: the circulation of commodities that Paik identified as central to Maciunas’s art, and the body’s *metabolic* distribution system. In the *Fluxus Manifesto* (fig. 1), which is drawn in part from a dictionary, one definition of *Fluxus* reads as follows: “A flowing or fluid discharge from the bowels or other part: esp., an excessive and morbid discharge.” While it’s understandable that art historians have exhibited a certain reserve regarding this first definition of Fluxus, it does not require much digging to find a host of scatological references and allusions in Fluxus products, including works such as *Excreta Fluxorum* (1973) in which various forms of animal waste are contained in a box analogous to those that hold small readymades or artists’ works in other Fluxus multiples (fig. 2), or a trough of elephant shit to be placed in the obstacle course of the Flux Labyrinth exhibited in Berlin in 1976.⁵ Fluxus thus embraces objects that have been broken down and reconstituted organically in a manner consistent with Bauman’s definition of fluid modernity’s liquefaction of communal bonds:

The solids whose turn has come to be thrown into the melting pot and which are in the process of being melted at the present time, the time of fluid modernity, are the bonds which interlock individual choices in collective projects and actions—the patterns of communication and coordination between individually conducted life policies on the one hand and political actions of human collectivities on the other.⁶

Not coincidentally, for Bauman one of the pillars of Liquid Modernity is an exaggerated emphasis on both individual capacity and responsibility at the expense of collective bodies (like classes or parties) as agents of political action and identification. In other words, Bauman’s Liquid Modernity is consonant in its emphasis on individual taste with Flynt’s brend.

Let me state my thesis explicitly: I wish to argue that Maciunas came to realize that items of food could resolve the contradiction inherent in the Fluxus prescription for art objects. In other words, food could offer a model for the post-Duchampian readymade—a kind of bio-readymade to be literally metabolized both in organic bodies and consumer networks. Maciunas theorized a vestigial artwork—one that would disappear into an entertaining experience—and he wanted such

3. Quoted in M. Oren, “Anti-Art as the End of Cultural History,” *Performing Arts Journal* 15, no. 2 (May 1993): 21.

4. See Z. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Malden, MA, 2000).

5. For a hilarious account of the elephant shit in Berlin, see L. Miller, “Fluxus Vortex,” manuscript, New York, Jan. 3, 1994, in *Mr. Fluxus: A Collective Portrait of George Maciunas 1931–1978*, ed. E. Williams and A. Noël (London, 1997), pp. 252–255.

6. Bauman (see note 4), p. 6.

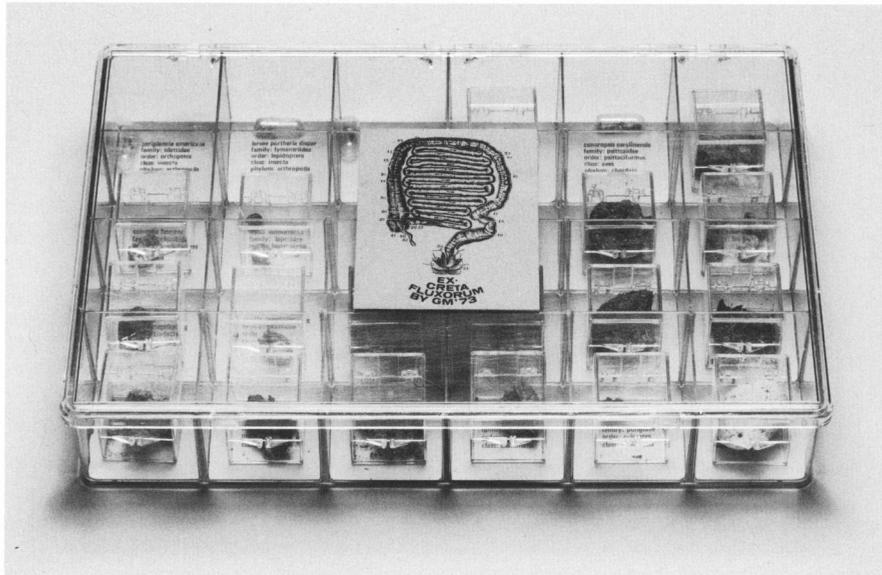


Figure 2. George Maciunas, *Excreta Fluxorum*, 1973. Courtesy of Billie Maciunas. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, New York.

objects to be universally accessible, while capable of invoking a transformative experience in individual spectators. As an object to be consumed, optimally in the context of a pleasurable and communal everyday ritual, food is a kind of readymade that will disappear as a consequence of its liquefaction through digestion. The initial readymade practice as defined by Duchamp functioned by making visible the unconscious contours of a system of distribution—such as the art system. The bio-readymade or food-object, as practiced in Fluxus, visualizes the intersection of two distribution systems that were already present in *Fountain's* rotated urinal: the individual body and the global marketplace.

Maciunas often deployed food as a readymade. He was particularly drawn to processed food, sometimes buying great quantities of cans with missing labels (and hence unknown contents) from discount shelves in the supermarket, and at one point developing an ill-fated business scheme to distribute luxury canned goods from Europe. In his work *One Year*, he arranged all of the empty cans and containers of the food he had consumed in the course of a year in a grid formation reminiscent of the supermarket shelves from which they were probably purchased (fig. 3). In physically indexing the bodily consumption of a single human being, *One Year* links the biological cycles of the artist's body to a market economy, thus interlacing the

organic distribution of nutrients that fuel a person and the distribution of commodities that frames his or her social life. The preserved containers of commercial food in *One Year* thus stand in for the artist's own waste product in a gesture analogous to Piero Manzoni's famous *Shit of the Artist* of 1961, but in this case the "shit" is that of the commodity—its discarded packaging. If this registration of Maciunas's yearly consumption corresponds at once to an *individual's* taste (i.e., his just-likings or breed) and his annual waste or expenditure in the currency of commodities, the various Fluxus banquets (which became more common during the 1970s, contemporaneous with his cooperative real estate ventures in Soho) serve to call a community into being through the ritual of eating.

In linking the Fluxus banquet to the work of Daniel Spoerri, Jon Hendricks has stated:

Eating as a form of art . . . was also an idea of Spoerri's that Fluxus adopted. Maciunas organized and planned a number of meals and fantastical banquets for Fluxus. Meals in which food had the same color or meals in which the food was all transparent, with an atlas of food products or once erotic foods, etc.⁷

7. J. Hendricks, "Daniel Spoerri," in A. Bonito Oliva, *Ubi Fluxus ibi motus, 1990–1962* (Milan, 1990), p. 262.

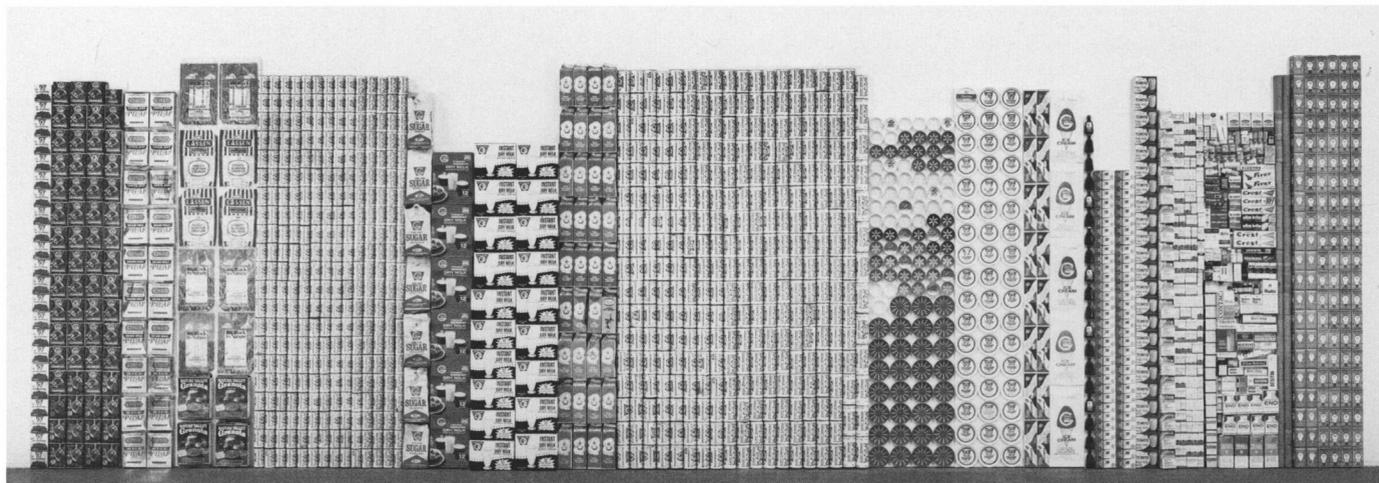


Figure 3. George Maciunas, *One Year*, 1973. Courtesy of Billie Maciunas. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, New York.

This summary, along with other accounts of Fluxus banquets, conveys how an arbitrary mode of systematizing experience was superimposed onto the ritual of eating: matrices of color, geography, or desire are those mentioned by Hendricks. The foodstuff thus circulates simultaneously in the body of the spectator-participant and in the world of art, sometimes behaving more like food (as in the “menu” for the New Year’s Eve Flux-Feast of 1969, which called for a “POTATOMEAL” composed entirely of dishes made from potatoes, for which Robert Watts was responsible) and sometimes more as an object (as in the FLUX EGGS by Maciunas, designated for the same banquet, which might be filled with plaster, urethane foam, shaving cream, liquid white glue, or paint).

By occupying two systems of distribution at once—the most intimate realm of the body and the most public arena of the market—Fluxus food made its particular contribution to the postwar practice of the readymade. This systemic doubling is mirrored by yet another recursive articulation in Maciunas’s production of the foodstuff itself, whose bizarre distillation or transformation is echoed by the concrete physical transformations that occur through the act of eating. As Larry Miller recounts, Maciunas’s transparent meal resulted from laborious procedures in which flavors were denatured and concentrated beyond the narrow precincts of the art world (fig. 4):

For one Flux Banquet, each person brought only foods of a specified color and GM’s chosen color was no-color. He had produced a meal of totally transparent molded gelatines. He somehow reduced the original foods into liquids and

then painstakingly distilled them, a drop at a time, into clear liquids to make the gelatines. You could only distinguish what you were eating by the taste which, surprisingly, still remained present—whether beef taste or onion taste, etc. The transparent, hot liquid also tasted just like coffee.⁸

Art exists here as the articulation of two interrelated processes: the production of an essential taste, and its submission to the taste (and digestive tract) of an individual. Indeed in some Fluxus foods proposed by Robert Watts, for instance, there would be a further step: The diner’s urine would be dyed an unnatural color such as red, blue, green, or orange. Maciunas declared in 1962 that “the primary contribution of a truly concrete artist consists in creating a *concept* or a *method* by which form can be created independently of him.”⁹ In food, Maciunas discovered a type of everyday substance in which form undergoes transformation on three registers at once: production, distribution, and consumption. Food answered Paik’s call for artists to address the medium of distribution, without ignoring either the processes of production or the experiential transformations of consumption. It does so by exploiting the double meaning of taste as a conceptual form of aesthetic judgment—which as Kant famously argued, is *universal*—as well as a physical stimulation of flavor in the mouth.

While I don’t have space here to explore Maciunas’s Fluxhouse schemes, I think a similar argument could

8. L. Miller (see note 5), p. 159.

9. G. Maciunas, “Neo-Dada in Music, Theater, Poetry, Art” [first performed in 1962], in *Ubi Fluxus ibi motus* (see note 7), p. 216.



Figure 4. Colored Meal, Flux New Year's Eve, December 31, 1974. Color slide, 15/16 x 1 3/8 in. (2.3 x 3.5 cm). The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Archive, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York, NY. Photo: Larry Miller. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/ Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, New York.

be made about cooperative real estate development as a readymade practice (fig. 5) in which production, distribution, and consumption are equally elaborated, all within the context of everyday life. I simply wish to assert that one of the great accomplishments of Fluxus was to bring two pillars of life—nourishment and shelter—into dialogue with the readymade tradition in order to invigorate and even reinvent it as a bio-readymade appropriate to Liquid Modernity. Such a claim may sound eccentric until one begins to recognize how widespread such preoccupations have been. In Fluxus itself, several artists including Alison Knowles, Robert Watts, and Daniel Spoerri worked with foodstuffs. In *The Identical Lunch* (fig. 6), for instance, Knowles ate the same lunch daily (with small variations) for a period of years; this was, as Hannah Higgins has put it, “a carefully documented experience of both the taste and habits of a particular diner.”¹⁰ In 1971—and to my knowledge without any direct influence on or from

10. H. Higgins, *Fluxus Experience* (Berkeley, 2002), p. 48. Higgins's book is an excellent source of interesting observations on Fluxus attitudes toward food.

Fluxus—Gordon Matta-Clark and his collaborators, including Carol Goodden, opened a restaurant called Food in Soho as a kind of public complement to the agar sculptures and cooked photographs Matta-Clark was producing in the studio (fig. 7). The performance of cooking and eating was for Matta-Clark a line of investigation complementary to his real estate-oriented projects, ranging from cuttings within abandoned buildings to *Reality Properties: Fake Estates*, in which he purchased and documented uninhabitable parcels of real estate. As Tina Kukielski writes, “What is clear is this: for Matta-Clark, life was a cycle. Birth, life, and death would be followed by new life, and, with that, new and better ways of living.”¹¹ Or, as Matta-Clark himself stated in 1970 with regard to the agar:

Think of it in terms of structural material, building material, which I have some project for actual housing, a living

11. T. Kukielski, “In the Spirit of the Vegetable: The Early Works of Gordon Matta-Clark (1969–71),” in *Gordon Matta-Clark: “You Are the Measure”*, ed. E. Sussman (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2007), p. 35.

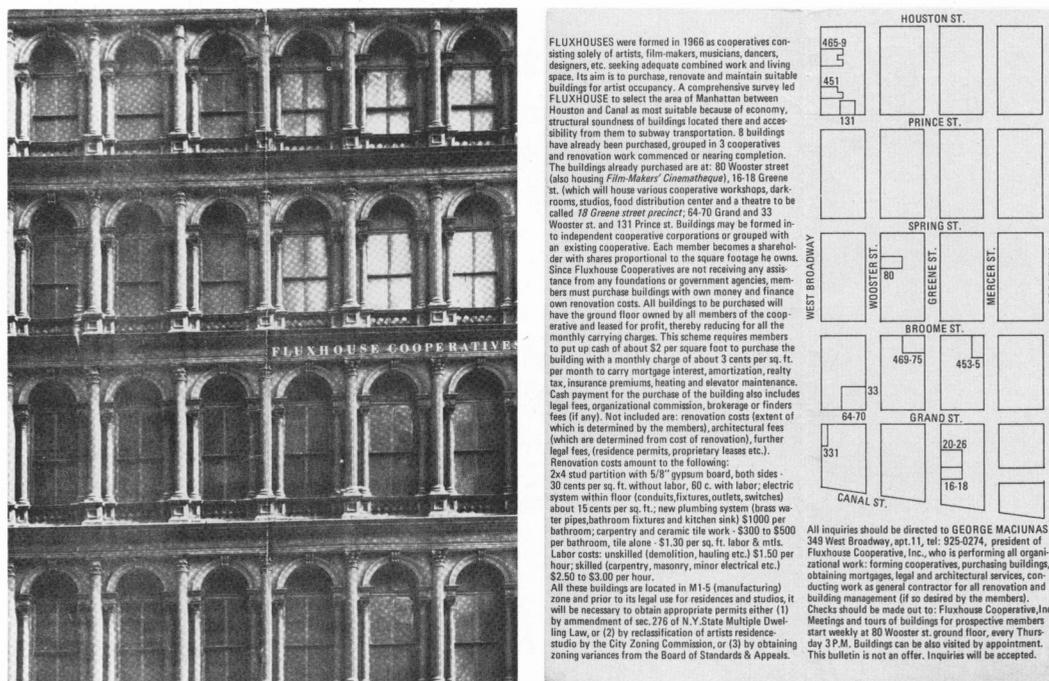


Figure 5. George Maciunas, Fluxhouse brochure (L: cover; R: interior). Courtesy of Billie Maciunas. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, New York.

environment, in a way, putting the theme of home and garden or kitchen and garden back together again. . . . A variation of living the good life.¹²

More recently, Rirkrit Tiravanija has served food free to visitors in certain of his works, often while citing the histories of building and architecture, and Jorge Pardo went so far as to present his own house in the Los Angeles neighborhood of Mount Washington as an exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in 1998.

Examples could be multiplied but the important point is to recognize the emergence of a food object that can articulate the metabolism of life with the global circulation of commodities. Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben have influentially argued that in modernity, life itself becomes the locus of power's embrace. For Foucault, such an argument centers on procedures of discipline, in which bodies are trained according to the dictates of power—not only in such explicitly regulated sites as prisons and schools, but also in precincts of entertainment such as the cinema or health club. Agamben locates power's grip on life in the erasure of difference between the citizen as a legal entity

and the body as a purely biological organism. While classical political theory is grounded in the difference between civic life and what Agamben calls "bare" or naked life, this difference erodes in the course of the twentieth century to the point where the state attempts to inscribe itself directly onto the biological being of its subjects. Such a seizure of bare life is evident in the struggles around abortion rights, euthanasia, and the right of gay and lesbian people to marry, which have become central political issues in the West since the 1960s, but Agamben provocatively identifies the concentration camp as the paradigmatic site where bare life is subjected to absolute police violence. While this claim may seem exorbitant it is certainly borne out in the proliferation of refugee camps worldwide since the Second World War, not to mention the U.S. installation at Guantánamo Bay. As Agamben explains:

[T]he birth of the camp in our time appears to be an event that marks in a decisive way the political space itself of modernity. This birth takes place when the political system of the modern nation-state—founded on the functional nexus between a determinate localization (territory) and a determinate order (the state), which was mediated by automatic regulations for the inscription of life (birth or nation)—enters a period of permanent crisis and the state

12. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

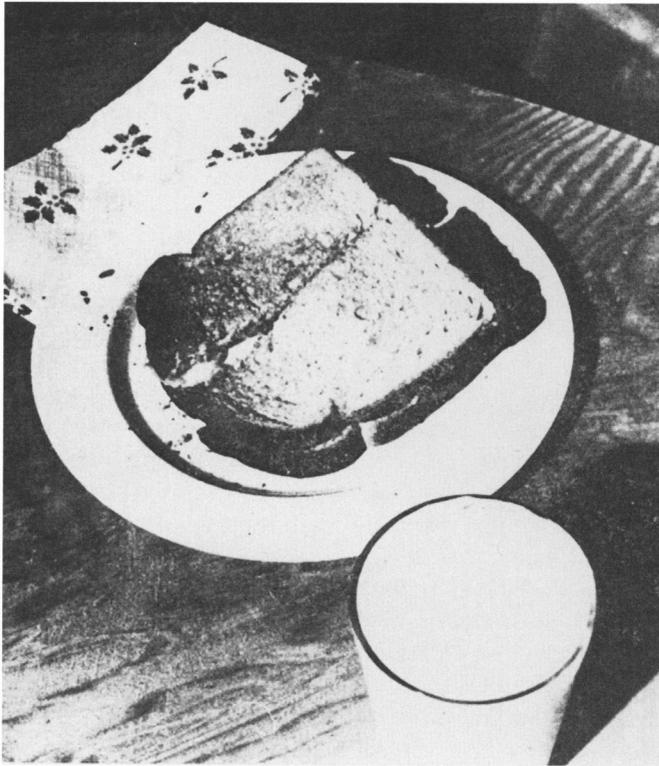


Figure 6. Alison Knowles, *The Identical Lunch*, 1967. Courtesy Alison Knowles.

decides to undertake the management of the biological life of the nation directly as its own task.¹³

The mid-twentieth-century fascination with a collapse or near-collapse of art into life attains new significance if we accept Agamben's diagnosis that the state is now devoted to managing biological life. The bio-readymade or food-object, as explored by Fluxus, sought to wield a new kind of power—the power to administer life. The most effective tool for accomplishing this—as demonstrated by the Cold War's sudden dissolution—was not repression, or the spectacular threat of violence concentrated in nuclear weapons, but rather the seemingly irresistible allure of consumer society and its expanding markets. Unlike the conventional readymade modeled on Duchamp's initial invention in the teens (which he himself surpassed in his later erotic sculptures), the food-object, as served

13. G. Agamben, "What Is a Camp?" [1994], in *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. V. Binetti and C. Casarino (Minneapolis, 2000), pp. 41–42.



Figure 7. Gordon Matta-Clark, *Gold Leafed Photo-Fried Christmas Tree*, 1969. Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark on deposit at the Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal. © 2011 Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York.

up in Fluxus banquets, is consumed over the course of its "exhibition." The banquet was a practical form of amusement whose experience entailed the digestion of objects—foodstuffs—that was perfectly in sync with Fluxus theory. In the food-object, things are literally (and chemically) assimilated by persons, who consume them through eating (after or instead of looking). The act of perception is thereby elided, with physical tactile consumption replacing the more disembodied optical consumption of the eyes. This process reverses the mechanism of reification—often associated with Duchampian readymades—by which persons are transformed into (or assimilated by) things.

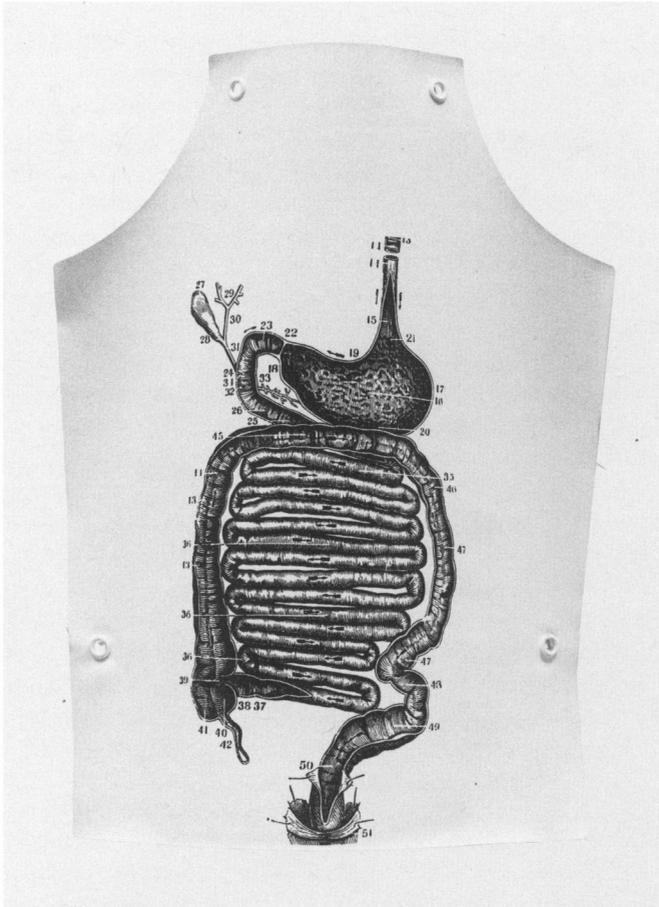


Figure 8. George Maciunas, *Digestive System Apron*, 1968. Screenprint on vinyl. Courtesy of Billie Maciunas. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, New York.

Maciunas thus turned the tables on commodities by reclaiming their singular postwar power to organize everyday life. In other words, the “hardening” of reification is countered with the liquefaction of Fluxus. Maciunas accomplished this in part by creating unique communal celebrations devoted to the life-giving activity of eating, and in part by demonstrating that, like eating, the consumption of commodities generates its own kind of shit. Fluxus, as “A flowing or fluid discharge from the bowels or other part,” projects the body’s internal distribution system onto the external distribution of objects in order to humiliate, but also to humanize, the relentless circulation of things—to get them wet. Such jumps in register, from the organic architecture of individual bodies to the ubiquitous circulatory systems of commodities, capture something fundamental about

globalization and particularly its many vitalist metaphors such as the multitude, in which the human collective is described as though it were a macroscopic version of the body’s metabolic events.¹⁴ Indeed, as both Foucault and Agamben, as well as Bauman demonstrate in their distinct ways, power over the multitude depends on power over each individual bare life.

If Fluxus implies a shift in the locus of art from the production of objects intended for commercial exchange to integrated circuits of organic and inorganic distribution systems, then we must revisit our definition of what an artwork can and should do (fig. 8). Since the Fluxus aesthetic accomplishes a thoroughgoing shift in emphasis from things to actions, this dilemma opens directly onto the question of ethics. What kind of work is the Fluxus banquet, for instance, as a private event experienced by a relatively small number of people? The partisans of relational aesthetics, as defined by Nicolas Bourriaud, might reply that creating human networks is precisely the proper function of art. This, as far as it goes, is valuable. But I’d like to suggest that a second order of distribution might develop in which the actions of a small face-to-face community may circulate more broadly as an ethical demonstration directed to a broader public. Indeed, one could argue that such demonstrations have begun to eclipse more traditional forms of political activity.

In proposing a definition of these spectacular ethical demonstrations, I will turn to a set of arguments that may at first seem remote from Fluxus, but which offer the most concise theorization I know of the present urgency of an ethics of images. These arguments come from a political account of global jihad’s dependence on mass media, and they give an excellent indication of how politics has changed in the era of globalization—an era that dates from the time Maciunas and Matta-Clark were experimenting with food and real estate. In his book, *Landscapes of the Jihad: Militancy, Morality, Modernity*, Faisal Devji argues that nonviolent transnational movements such as environmentalism, which are not usually compared to jihad, nonetheless share with the latter a shift from political activity as traditionally understood, to ethical demonstrations dependent on widely circulated spectacular images. Devji draws a distinction between politics, which works toward

14. The most influential use of this concept is of course that of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. See their *Empire* (Cambridge, MA, 2000) and *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York, 2004).

specific objectives within a controlled field—such as the adoption of a particular policy or set of laws—and ethics, whose activities are both symbolic and speculative, and whose effects may transgress territorial boundaries. According to him, acts of martyrdom such as suicide bombings make an ethical claim rather than a political demand. I want to be very clear that in adopting Devji's definition of ethics, I am not expressing approval of suicide bombings, but rather attempting to specify how certain sorts of visual effects may indicate a new horizon of action characteristic not only of violent dissent, but also of the opportunities and exigencies of art. Devji writes:

[T]he jihad is forced to operate in an ethical rather than a political way by its inability to control or predict the future. Its actions, therefore, while being meticulously planned, do not themselves plan for any future, which thus remains open in every respect. Rather these actions occur as speculative investments in some idea of justice that cannot be anticipated, only invoked in a self-contained performance of ethics, whose effects serve merely as opportunities for further investment.¹⁵

Devji explicitly argues that it is through the *visualization* of jihad that these local actions, disseminated worldwide through media, become influential events. Martyrdom, he argues, is founded in a shared witnessing both on the part of the martyr's partisans and co-religionists, as well as her or his victims and opponents. He writes:

Because martyrdom in Islam is thus connected to seeing in a much more general as well as much more specific sense than in Christianity, it is capable of cohabiting in productive ways with the global practice of news reportage. . . .

Only in mass media does the collective witnessing that defines martyrdom achieve its full effect, as the various attempts by would-be martyrs to film their deaths or at least to leave behind videotaped testaments, illustrates so clearly.¹⁶

The crux of Devji's argument is that under conditions of globalization, where visible and invisible vectors of financial and political influence have made the nation-state absolutely porous and increasingly incoherent, the platform for action has shifted from specific political demands to general ethical demonstrations, which are, it hardly needs to be said, rooted in questions of life and death, and the limits of the individual human body. He declares, "The jihad is a global movement in

this sense, a perverse call to ethics in an arena where old-fashioned politics can no longer operate—because it can no longer control."¹⁷ The crucial insight here, which is indeed as relevant to the actions of jihad as to other forms of contemporary protest, and which holds true regardless of one's position on the morality of jihad, is that as fewer and fewer citizens of the world may exercise political power or even choice in the policies that determine their everyday life, the playing field for dissent has shifted from politics to ethics, and the ground of such actions is delineated by life itself—the living organism. As Devji suggests, a spectacular visual event that may be widely disseminated is an action appropriate to transnational networks that are neither restricted nor controlled by a single state, despite the real impediments information may confront as it crosses national borders. It is in this regard that Devji persuasively diagnoses the current jihad as an artifact of modernity, since it is absolutely dependent upon the spectacular infrastructure of contemporary media. And what this spectacle visualizes is precisely the intersection—indeed the violent collision—of biological life with global markets, with which Maciunas was already experimenting thirty years ago.

At the outset of this essay I cited Nam June Paik praising Maciunas for shifting his emphasis from the *production* of art to its *distribution*, and only a moment ago I quoted Devji claiming that ethical actions "occur as speculative investments in some idea of justice that cannot be anticipated, only invoked in a self-contained performance of ethics, whose effects serve merely as opportunities for further investment." We must develop an image theory founded in distribution and speculation. Such an approach amounts to an ethics because it presumes that images build publics through their *conduct* in markets and networks. Maciunas's greatest accomplishment, and the central principle guiding his heterogeneous practice, was the creation of alternate markets and networks founded in the liquidity of flux. He was tireless in his efforts to create international networks of artists under the aegis of Fluxus, and Fluxus multiples established new markets for the distribution of artworks in order to circumvent the art world's luxury trade. Too many artists operate today as though the art market were the only means of reaching a public. Maciunas's actions demonstrate that the aesthetic challenge of the twentieth century, characterized by the dual emergence of mass consumption and mass communication, is to

15. F. Devji, *Landscapes of the Jihad: Militancy, Morality, Modernity* (Ithaca, 2005), p. 110.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 156.

commit one's body to a speculative future (which may be why performance has had such a marked resurgence in contemporary art). One of the lessons of the Fluxus banquet as well as every other type of Fluxus activity, is that under conditions such as those we currently endure where individuals feel powerless to combat forces whose global enormity is truly sublime, the artist (as well as other types of citizens) may seize on biological life itself as a primary arena of political control and a platform of ethical dissent.

Inspired by Foucault, Agamben, and many others we might—as Maciunas and his cohort did—recognize dizzying hyperlinks between the biological and the global, in which an individual's digestion is linked directly to a political economy of packaged food, or where a violent and destructive death can represent moral conviction to one global audience and terror to another. Such ethical demonstrations of mortality through a person's capacity to liquefy food-objects on the one hand, and her vulnerability to violent liquefaction on the other, may call forth an aesthetic response of witnessing. In his powerful book, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Giorgio Agamben argues that a compulsion to witness arises when the human and the inhuman intersect—a position exemplified by the so-called *Muselmann*, a type of prisoner in Auschwitz who, through malnutrition, overwork, and severe demoralization, slipped below the threshold of the human, merely *surviving* like the living dead.¹⁸ According to Agamben, witnessing occurs at the border between such biological subsistence and genuine human consciousness. Fluxus occupies an analogous space, which while hardly comparable to the violence of Auschwitz, may still benefit from Agamben's proto-aesthetic theory of life derived from the camps. Fluxus stages an art of witnessing: It testifies to the thin line between organic stuff (i.e., food) and human consciousness and sociality, and it marks the fragile border between life and its expiration as shit.

18. G. Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. D. Heller-Roazen (New York, 2002).