

**ART IS OFTEN A BASTARD,  
THE PARENTS OF WHICH WE DO NOT KNOW**

**Judy Durey**

**‘Art is often a bastard, the parents of which we do not know’.<sup>1</sup>**

## **Synopsis**

Whilst positioning my research within the area of Performance Studies and, more particularly, my installation praxis within the broader area of contemporary art, I am reminded of the creative ‘freedoms’ I now take for granted as an arts practitioner in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In this paper, I reflect on the radical avant-garde arts collective known as the *Fluxus* ‘laboratory’ which emerged across Europe, America and Japan during the 1950s and 60s. These artists questioned the rational, progressive and utopian ideas supporting modernism. They welcomed process and chance and rejected notions of ‘truth’ and arrival. Many early *Fluxus* works are now famous through documentation. Their modes of production and presentation no longer arrest us nor necessarily point us in the direction of new thought. Many of the radical influences then, have now become main-stream although, in the spirit of *Fluxus*, ‘intermedia’, multimedia, and technological innovation in the arts is still strong. Social critique through art is alive as many artists directly engage with local, global political concerns, through their work. The ‘attitude’ of *Fluxus* is healthy as many practitioners ‘push the envelope’ and challenge the *status quo*.

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<sup>1</sup> These words of Nam June Paik were cited in Florence de Meredieu, *Digital and Video Art*, trans. Richard Elliott, Chambers Arts Library, ed. Camilla Rockwood, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Chambers Harrap Publishers Ltd, 2005).



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I was originally drawn to Nam June Paik's words in the title through the hybrid nature of my arts practice which employs multi-screen video installation and performance. Paik's words provide an ironic starting point when trying to unravel the origins of current hybrid and cross-cultural arts practice today. Ironically, his irony also touches my own interdisciplinary project which is based on (il)legitimacy and adoption' where bastardy is also part of the story!

*Fluxus* claimed that it was not a 'style' dependent on Western art history for its references. Any genealogical claim to such a lineage would have been an anathema. *Fluxus* was 'ant-art' in any canonical sense, demanding a more

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<sup>2</sup> *Zen for Film*, Nam June Paik,

democratic, political dimension to praxis that not only represented life, but where there was little distinction *between* art and life.<sup>3</sup> Like Dada, *Fluxus* saw the powerful potential within art to confront social and cultural norms - to change the very practices of life.<sup>4</sup>

When referring to notions of categorization, or the naming of any discrete genre or movement within art history, Nam June Paik played a major role as a member of *Fluxus* in challenging normative traditions and ‘modernist’ classifications within Western art and culture. By merging disciplines and genres and experimenting with new forms, including electronic communication, the Korean born, New York based Paik, like the many other international artists associated with *Fluxus*, questioned Western cultural assumptions associated with Enlightenment thinking by raising an awareness of Eastern philosophy - the *experience* of art and its relationship to contemporary life and culture. In Eastern philosophy, the experience of art is generally understood in a much more holistic or metonymic sense opposed to traditional Western understandings of symbolic representation through the art object itself.

Following Futurism, Dada and Surrealism, a form of Neo-Dadaism, which underpinned *Fluxus*, began to take shape after the conflicts of the Second World War. During the 1950s and 60s, the work, attitudes, and ideas of like-minded artists largely influenced by Marcel Duchamp’s ‘readymades’ and John Cage’s commitment to Eastern thought, came from a variety of disciplines and dispersed locations across Europe, the United States and Japan. They were actively brought together predominately through the networking efforts of Lithuanian born entrepreneur, George Macuinias.

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<sup>3</sup> For a more in depth account of Fluxus refer to, Owen Smith, *Fluxus: The History of an Attitude* (San Diego: Atticus Press, San Diego State University Press, 1998), Ken Friedman, *The Fluxus Reader* (Chichester: Academy Editions, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Dada was the name of the avant-garde group associated with Marcel Duchamp and others following the First World War.

Macuinas was a designer, musicologist and amateur art historian who was particularly interested in ancient philosophies himself. In his studies, he found that some of the Pre-Modern philosophers, such as Heraclitus, were referred to as ‘fluxists’ due to their belief in change and impermanence as a basis to reality.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the name *Fluxus* emerged, and Macuinas organised the first *Fluxus* Festival, or *Fluxfest* in the City Museum in Wiesbaden, in 1962. Many *Fluxfests* were to follow across Europe and America. Initially, the festivals were intended as a ‘countering process to conventional notions of high culture’ and were usually held within institutional spaces<sup>6</sup>. At the 1964 *Fluxhall* in New York, Alison Knowles and Ben Vautier performed, ‘Music by Alison’ without playing a single note in any traditional sense. The later performances such as *Fluxmass* and *Flux-sport* at Douglas College differed from the earlier festivals in that they were usually held in ‘ordinary’ spaces, and celebrated every day experience using humour. Performances such as *Hotel Event* and *Street Cleaning Event* were less concerned with traditional culture and more concerned with daily life.

*Fluxus* originally began as an idea for a magazine to publicise the work of its artists. Those such as Dick Higgins, Joseph Beuys, Wolf Vostell, Paik, George Brecht, Ben Vautier, Alison Knowles, Allan Kaprow, Carolee Scheeman, La Monte Young, Jim Dine, Yoko Ono, and Ken Freidman, amongst the many others associated with the *Fluxus* ‘laboratory’ became part of the much larger twentieth century radical avant-garde, not only wanting to change traditional notions of art, but particularly, in the wake of WWII, wanting to change the way people perceived the world, and cultural difference.<sup>7</sup> The post War decades were a critical period of social and political upheaval. Activism was galvanized by such events as the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961, the Cold War and anti-war protests, the Civil Rights

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<sup>5</sup> Smith, *Fluxus: The History of an Attitude*.

<sup>6</sup> See Smith, *Fluxus: The History of an Attitude*. p. 208.

<sup>7</sup> Smith, *Fluxus: The History of an Attitude*.

Movements, the Paris student riots in 1968, and the rise of feminism in the 1970s. In art historical terms, *Fluxus* represents the anarchic journey away from modernism's introspective, Eurocentric 'grand narrative' of 'isms'. *Fluxus* stood against capitalism, materialism and Western individualism, leading towards socialism, internationalism, community, and collaboration.

This thinking was a reaction and counter position to 'serious culture', as Macuinas called it - a counter to art's system of commodification supported by the taste of dealers and collectors, who were in turn, influenced by the powerful role of the critic and the art curator. In his *Manifesto*, Macuinas promoted 'living art, anti-art, and a NON ART REALITY, to be grasped by all peoples, not only critics, dilettantes and professionals'. In his words, he wanted to 'fuse the cadres of cultural, social and political revolutionaries into a united front and action'.<sup>8</sup> Macuinas' enthusiasm was apparent and appreciated within the group although some regarded him as too extreme.

From within the seemingly monolithic label of modernism, the development of 'modern art' had been traced to this point through a linear, chronological series of stylistic movements. Each style was seen as progressive as it usurped its predecessor with the 'new'. In 1935, as the first director of the new Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, Alfred H. Barr published *his* genealogical map of these stages within 'modern art', showing in his view how each phase or movement came to a close and where each new progression linked into the past. According to Barr's diagram, everything linked towards Abstraction, where the New York School of Painting and Abstract Expressionism held a central position.

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<sup>8</sup> George Macuinas' *Fluxus Manifesto* (1963) in Jurgen Becker and Wolf Vostell, eds., *Happenings, Fluxus, Pop Art, Nouveuu Realism* (Hamburg: Rawohl, 1965). p. 203. Extract cited, Tracey Warr and Amelia Jones, eds., *The Artist's Body* (New York: Phaidon Press, 2000). p. 202.

In 1939, New York based, art critic, Clement Greenberg extended Barr's 'map' by publishing two influential, and well argued papers in which he circulated his own theory of progression within 'modern art', towards a movement, to which he termed *Formalism*. Much of Greenberg's thinking echoed that of Russian Suprematist, Kazimir Malevich, whose 1913 painting, *Square*, is seen by many to be the forerunner of Abstract Art and Minimalism. Greenberg espoused a 'truth' to materials and form, where a painting, for example, was a flat, completely self referential surface which leant ultimately towards pure abstraction - thus a work which resisted any other representational influences or other layers of meaning.<sup>9</sup>

Greenberg's notion of 'purity' also applied to three dimensional form, where the art object stood 'true' to itself and its materials, isolated within space. His theory relied on a disassociation from all other art forms such as music, theatre, poetry and dance. Greenberg's views were enormously influential in academic circles, and were supported by Western theories of individualism, psychoanalysis and the timely popularity of existentialism, with its focus on pure essence. This *formalist* idea of 'purity', particularly within painting and sculpture was countered by *Fluxus*' attitudes which emphasised the productive dialectic between and across media. In 1964, Nam June Paik's installation of his clear film projection, *Zen for Film*, referenced earlier, was an act of defiance against the highly aesthetic image and any notion of a pure art form. In Point 5 of his 1963 *Fluxus* Manifesto, George MacQuinn promoted a 'state of being liquid through heat and fusion. ....in order to PROMOTE A REVOLUTIONARY FLOOD OR TIDE IN ART'.

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<sup>9</sup> Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch"  
 " *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, ed. Frances Frascina (New York: Harper and Row, 1985). cited in Eleanor Heartney, *Art & Today* (London and New York: Phaidon Press Limited, 2008).

Following the growth of Minimalism and Conceptual Art, in her 1968 essay written with John Chandler, Lucy Lippard, draws on *Fluxus*' ideas concerning 'the dematerialisation of art', that is, the move away from the art object *per se*. She refers to John Cage as the prophet of 'the so far unrealised 'intermedia' revolution'.<sup>10</sup> Cage's demonstrations and classes at Black Mountain College, in North Carolina, initially inspired experimental 'new music' and were attended by several *Fluxus* members from 1952 onwards, including Nam June Paik and la Monte Young. During the 1940s, Cage was greatly influenced by Zen metaphysics and the works of French philosopher, Henri Bergson. According to Zen philosophy, 'the world is a united web of interrelationships that are in a constant state of flux and change'.<sup>11</sup> Cage was later noted for his own works centred on 'silence' and 'indeterminacy'.<sup>12</sup> Bergson similarly held that everything is related through process and change, and that 'everything interpenetrates, ultimately transcending the limits of reason'.<sup>13</sup> This sat in direct opposition to modernist Eurocentric attitudes and rational notions of organisation and strict linear categorisation. Crossing social and cultural boundaries, disciplines and genres, *Fluxus* became a radical cross-medial, performance based collective engaged in dynamic forms of art.

Cage, like Duchamp, also rejected modernism's notion of the artist as a lone genius, the primacy of the art object, and art's elitist function in Western society. He believed that art should harmonise with the natural processes of chance and change, so that chance and change would thus become part of the

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<sup>10</sup> Becker and Vostell, eds., *Happenings, Fluxus, Pop Art, Nouveau Realism*. p.203, Cited, Warr and Jones, eds., *The Artist's Body*. p. 202.

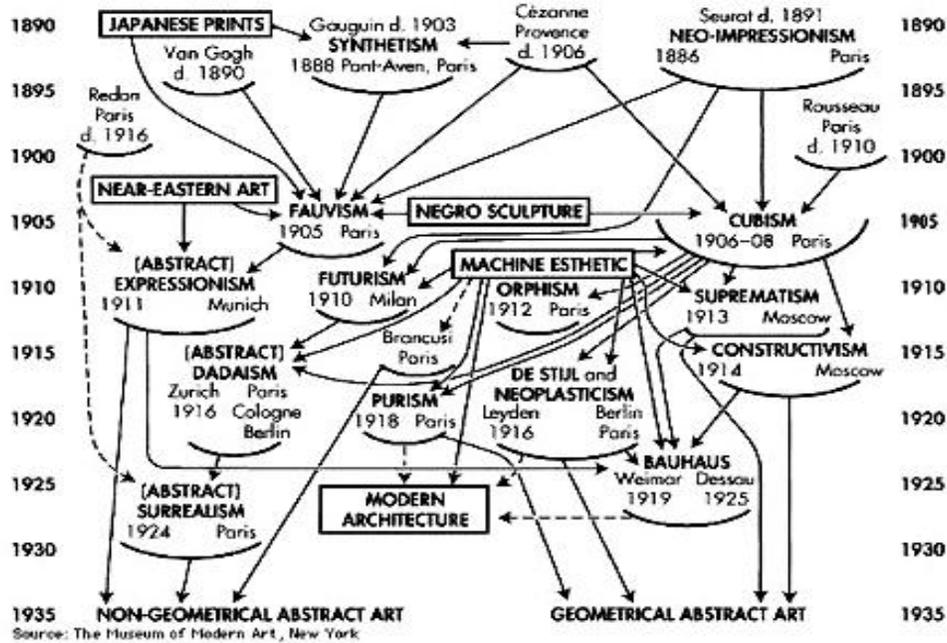
<sup>10</sup> Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, "The Dematerialization of Art " *Art International* 12.2 (1968).

<sup>11</sup> Cited in, Smith, *Fluxus: The History of an Attitude*. p. 21.

<sup>12</sup> John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1966).

<sup>13</sup> Smith, *Fluxus: The History of an Attitude*. p. 21. In Bergson's, *The Introduction to Metaphysics*, he draws on the tension between the 'Absolute and the Relative'. In 1966, Postmodern theorist, Gilles Deleuze revitalised Bergson's work in Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson, Fourth Edition ed. (New York and London: MIT Press, 1997).

artistic process. He extended Duchamp's critique of the elevated artistic experience over the 'ordinary' by suggesting that art should reflect nature's non-hierarchical values. In this way, Cage believed, art could create an important awareness of one's actual environment.<sup>14</sup>



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In line with Barr's 'map', mentioned earlier, '[a]bstraction emerged as modern art's highest achievement, and the expression of pure opticality as its rarefied mission'.<sup>16</sup> In 1934, Barr paid little attention to the radical element within the avant-garde of which Duchamp had already become a prominent figure.

In 1917, during WWI, and again following WWII in 1953, Marcel Duchamp presented his now famous and then, controversial work, *Fountain* within the

<sup>14</sup> Smith, *Fluxus: The History of an Attitude*. Also refer to, Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings*.

<sup>15</sup> Alfred H Barr, the first director of MoMA published his genealogical map outlining the stages within the development of 'modern art' in 1935.

<sup>16</sup> Heartney, *Art & Today*. p. 7.

gallery space. Through his anti- aesthetic frame, this recontextualisation of a mass produced urinal in glazed sanitary ware was offered as an aspect of everyday life, and art. This was, perhaps, the strongest statement yet against the bourgeoisie, and high art. Here, Duchamp challenged the opticality of Abstract art and Formalism. In a move away from what he termed ‘retinal’ art, he supported a leaning towards conceptualism. Given that religious iconography had initially preceded the exalted status of the high art object, Duchamp intended to question the iconic status of art, and the subsequent separation of art from life. As an advocate of DADA in 1918, and then later as an inspiration to *Fluxus*, Duchamp’s earlier ‘disrespectful’ gesture of putting the urinal on a pedestal, not only encouraged a re-evaluation of everyday experience as being on a par with ‘art’, but undoubtedly subverted the ‘value’ of the ‘once off’ art object *per se*. His use of a series of ‘readymade’ objects was also an influential precursor to the idea of the ‘multiple’. *Fluxus* took on the ‘multiple’ which gained particular importance between 1965 and 1969. The multiple became a form of communication, production and documentation taking the form of Flux magazines, Fluxletters, Fluxboxes and Fluxkits.<sup>17</sup>

In terms of early ‘installation art’ and the ‘reading’ of art, Duchamp was also one of the first artists to critically play with the spectator’s movements within the exhibition space. In 1942, when curating the ‘First Papers of Surrealism’, he ‘installed’ / threaded a ‘Mile of String’ back and forth across the gallery, between the hanging art works, requiring the ‘visitor’ to physically engage with the space and making it difficult to actually view the ‘art’. In his now famous work of 1946, *Etant Donnes*, he further challenged the expectations and intentions of the viewer when ‘reading’ his work. The ‘visitor’ was invited into a small designated space within the Philadelphia Museum of Modern Art, where s/he was tempted to look through a tiny peephole lit only

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<sup>17</sup> For a more detailed account on *Fluxus* multiples see, Smith, *Fluxus: The History of an Attitude*. p. 165-203

after stepping on a concealed switch beneath the carpet. In the ‘reading’ of what was beyond the peephole, the viewer completed the artwork by becoming the ‘voyeur of a sexually provocative scene, quite unlike other nudes on exhibition elsewhere in the gallery’.<sup>18</sup> Duchamp must have known that the image would be controversial, particularly in the museum context, and so he clearly seems to be considering the differing attitudes and expectations that the ‘visitor’ might bring to a work of art within this particular space, or gallery situation. Thus, it also appears that Duchamp was incorporating the shared social meaning of the museum space into the work itself, as is understood in the reading of any contemporary site-specific installation.

Ten years later, as a member of a panel discussion at the *Convention of the American Federation of Arts*, in 1957, and ten years prior to Roland Barthes’ famous essay on the ‘Death of the Author’,<sup>19</sup> Duchamp incorporated the viewer into a two fold process of meaning-making which he publicly outlined in his interpretation of the ‘creative act’:

All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualification and thus adds his contribution to the creative act.<sup>20</sup>

Here, Duchamp considers both the intention of the artist, and the various assumptions and experiences brought to the reading of a work by the viewer who is also part of the ‘external world’. However, in this statement, he does

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<sup>18</sup> Mark Rosenthal, *Understanding Installation Art: From Duchamp to Holzer* (Munich. Berlin. London. New York: Prestel Verlag, 2003). p. 38.

<sup>19</sup> Roland Barthes initially presented his paper as part of special edition of the Journal *Aspen*, now known as *The Minimalist Issue*. Barthes’ paper was one of 28 boxed items which included, two other essays, films, drawings, an artist’s book by Sol Le Witt, a cardboard model, a music score by John Cage amongst the many other exhibits. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," *Aspen* 5+6.Fall - Winter (1967).

<sup>20</sup> Marcel Duchamp, "The Creative Act," *Convention of the American Federation of Arts* (Houston, Texas: 1957), vol.1

not directly articulate a spatial element in which this process of meaning-making takes place, or overtly attribute the social meanings associated with the actual space, toward the overall reading of the work. As a precursor to *Fluxus*, Duchamp's stand in challenging the art object and Western value systems within art has come to be regarded as ground-breaking. In December 2004, the BBC News announced that Duchamp's work *Fountain* had been voted the most influential artwork of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

It was during the late 1950s and 60s that prominent *Fluxus* artist, Allen Kaprow coined the term 'happenings', at which audience participation within a particular space was the key. As a painter, Kaprow initially blurred the borders between painting and theatre by *directing* the audience through the gallery space over a long period of time. He later referred to his some two hundred 'happenings' as 'activities', and the intimate spaces in which these 'activities' took place, he called 'environments.' Kaprow, famous for *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*, examined every day behaviours and habits. 'Happenings' often went on for hours, even days, moving away from popular notions of 'entertainment' within a particular genre or time frame. These activities were ephemeral and usually documented photographically or on film. The ephemerality of performance works and the temporo-spatial and contextual experience of installation-based pieces brings up this question of documentation. Does secondary documentation adequately represent the bodily experiences of a 'visitor' within a space during the initial live performance? What forms of documentation 'act' as sufficient evidence of the original and/or, does secondary representation become another piece of work in its own right and/or, is this then part of an ongoing generative process? Interestingly, in terms of 'contemporary art', following on from Neo-Dada or *Fluxus*, many ephemeral works have only become well known and politically important through their documentation, rather than through the few people who experienced the original event in the *first place*. I was reminded of this when viewing a traveling exhibition of 'New Media Installation' from *La*

*collection du Centre Pompidou Musée National d'art Moderne*, on show at ACMI in Melbourne in 2007. I found the documentational aspect particularly poignant when 'presenting' the historically important performance works by, for example, *Fluxus* associates, Bruce Nauman and Vito Acconci.

*Fluxus* performances were often intentionally distilled into simple actions, and difficult to recognize as 'art' in any traditional sense. As artists crossed disciplines and genres, other broader terminologies started to emerge. As well as performance art there was 'visual poetry', sound sculpture, very new music, installation art, land art, environmental art and social sculpture.<sup>21</sup> In this sense artists were no longer defined purely by the material qualities of one medium. They combined media and/or crossed genres and disciplines, bringing a conceptually rich, experimental complexity to the creative arts. In 1966, *Fluxus* artist Dick Higgins coined the term 'intermedia'.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Fluxus* artists, Robert Morris, Robert Smithson, Richard Long and Michael Heizer amongst others were involved with 'land art' and forms of installation which challenged traditional definitions between nature and culture /architecture and landscape. This move away from traditional sculpture and the commodified object is famously critiqued by Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October* 8.Spring (1979).

<sup>22</sup> Dick Higgins, "Statement on Intermedia," *In the Spirit of Fluxus* eds. Elizabeth Armstrong and Loan Rothfuss (Minneapolis: Walker Art Centre, 1993).



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Two years later, the first Masters in Fine Arts (MFA) course in Intermedia was inaugurated at the University of Iowa where visiting *Fluxus* members, including Higgins, worked with students.<sup>24</sup> Endorsing the socialist values of *Fluxus*, Dick Higgins wrote: ‘We must find ways to say what has to be said in light of our new means of communication’.<sup>25</sup> Here, he was also referring to new media innovations using television, video and computer technology. Initially, investment in ‘cutting edge’ electronic communication was funded by governments, the military and industry. Some commercial companies, particularly in the United States and Germany, made the new media available

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<sup>23</sup> *Postcards*, Judy Durey, 2001

<sup>24</sup> This course still runs today. [www.uiowa.edu/~iinterart/](http://www.uiowa.edu/~iinterart/) *Fluxus* follower and artist, Owen Smith founded two other MFA courses in Intermedia, one at Arizona State University, and the other at the University of Maine. This is now a three year postgraduate course. See, <http://www.art.asu.edu/intermedia/> and

<sup>25</sup> Higgins, "Statement on Intermedia." <http://www.intermediamfa.org>

for artistic experimentation. Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) set up multidisciplinary laboratories where technicians and artists worked side by side.<sup>26</sup>

Since the early 1960s the general distribution of television, followed by the computer, has been one of major technological innovations within the arts. These technologies have impacted on our concept of the 'moving image' and installation, and more particularly, on 'intermedial' and new hybrid art forms. The early twentieth century development of television as a system for transmission and reception was followed up by the video camera, video recorder, video projector, the digital computer, satellite technology, the internet, and beyond. The availability of video projectors, then data projectors, facilitated the move from tele-visual installation works towards the proliferation of floor to ceiling projections seen, particularly during the 1980s and 90s, up until the present. Today, new technologies can provide a wide range of experimental projection techniques which can be employed with, or without, other objects in real time and space. Within the realms of interactivity and virtual reality, the 'visitor' can now be transported to other dimensions and imaginary spaces.

Traditionally, film sits within the materially based, process driven 'craft' of photography where the negative is exposed on light sensitive film, developed, edited and linked with sound, before being shown. On the other hand, the new video technology from the beginning was much more immediate enabling live transmission using closed - circuit television which collapsed time and space between the action, and instantaneous viewing. Well known early examples of such works would be Vito Acconci's *Remote Control* (1971), Dan Graham's

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<sup>26</sup>Florence de Meredieu, ed., *Digital and Video Art* (Edinburgh: Chambers Harrap Publishers Ltd., 2005).

*Present Continuous Past* (1974) and Peter Campus' piece, *Interface* (1972).<sup>27</sup> When compared with film, 'video' and computer technologies have gone through constant and radical changes in format over the last few years, creating many stages of electronic and digital obsolescence along the way. Today, the photographic medium of film can be 'shot' on location, developed, digitised, and edited on a computer, before being projected via a data projector or shown on an LCD panel or plasma screen, as in the contemporary filmic installation works of Finnish artist, Eija - Liisa Ahtila. Conversely, digital video can be constructed on a computer using imagery obtained via the internet, manipulated using digital 'plug ins' and projected in a cinematic environment to look like film. Following Paik's words, mentioned earlier, a point of origin to any particular work or image, may be even more difficult to locate today.

Through the expansion of the digital arts, the proliferation of virtual spaces and galleries, and globalized arts networks, the convergence of different digital media in one way or another is now common place. During *Fluxus* activities of the 1970s, artists such as Nam June Paik were already bringing Marshal McLuhan's predictions of a 'Global Village' to life.<sup>28</sup> Paik's experimentation and interest in satellite technology, in order to connect different cultural contexts across time and space, began in 1977 and were followed by his renowned international satellite broadcasts during the 1980s.

Nam June Paik and Wolf Vostell amongst others are regarded as prominent figures in the earlier development of televisual and video installation art. It is impossible to consider multimedia Installation today and the nuances within the development of this term, without acknowledging, in particular, Nam June

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<sup>27</sup> For further reading on early video works see in particular, Lori Zippay, ed., *Artist's Video: An International Guide* (New York, London & Paris: Cross River Press, 1991).

<sup>28</sup> Refer to Eric McLuhan and Frank Zingrone, eds., *Essential Mcluhan* (London: Routledge, 1997).

Paik's innovative contribution over four decades.<sup>29</sup> In *The Artist's Video*, Robert Beck reflects on Paik's career:

Linking the art world and the media, pop culture and the avant-garde, technology and philosophy, Paik's works resonate with an iridescent humour and subversive brilliance that have influenced contemporary art, video and television.<sup>30</sup>

His early works were transcultural, intertextual collages which drew on this global consciousness of the radical avant-garde. Influenced by John Cage, Paik's 'prepared' pianos and instruments soon led to a series of 'prepared' and altered television sets. His first televisual exhibition was held in 1963, at Gallerie Parnase in Wuppertal, Germany. By bringing a magnet into contact with the cathode-ray tube inside each television set, he was able to distort the transmission in a different way on each TV screen within the gallery space. In 1964, after arriving in New York, Paik famously bought one of the first Sony Portapacks. On the same day, he videoed Pope Paul VI's visit to New York from a taxi window, drove to Café a Go Go where he replayed the video to an eager audience. Early televisual /video and performance artists such as Paik, were innovators in cross medial works, particularly during the 1960s and 70s. In 1969, his work featured in *TV as Creative Medium* at the Howard Wise Gallery in New York. By employing the new technology in what was formally the sculptural space of the gallery and affirming Robert Beck's words, the work hovered at the interstice of art, new technology, popular culture and performance. During this period, Paik produced many video performances with avant-garde cellist, Charlotte Moorman, plus a prodigious body of video installations including *Global Groove* (1973), *TV Buddha* (1974) and *TV Garden* (1978), amongst many other works.

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<sup>29</sup> For a closer look at Nam June Paik's career, see Zippay, ed., *Artist's Video: An International Guide*. p. 156-161, Michael Rush, *Video Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003).

<sup>30</sup> Robert Beck, Noicola Smith, Marita Sturken and Lori Zippay, "Nam June Paik," *Artist's Video: An International Guide*, ed. Lori Zippay (New York: Electronic Arts Intermix, 1991). P,157.

Joseph Beuys, another *Fluxus* associate was a prominent and influential artist whose life and work I greatly admire. Beuys' construction of his war time rescue by Tartars in the Crimea served as a strong myth of origin to his art practice. According to Beuys, he was covered in fat and wrapped in felt to keep warm. Both these materials were a constant source of reference in his work. His larger than life persona lives on well after his death in 1986. Beuys is perhaps one of the most iconic figures to have emerged from mid twentieth century art.<sup>31</sup> Through his friendship with Paik, when both were professors at the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf, Beuys became an active member of *Fluxus* in the early 1960s. Following his personal trauma, the realization of the collective trauma of war, and his own reflections on military service under Nazi Germany, Beuys suffered a crisis which lasted until 1958.<sup>32</sup>

It was through his own practice that he recognized the healing potential of art at both the personal and social level. He later famously criticized Marcel Duchamp's 'silence' in art, during the latter part of his career although, it should be stated that Beuys' ideas, 'actions', 'vitrines' and 'environments' are more identifiable with the concept of Duchamp's 'readymades' in his attempt to *change* institutional thinking, than with the more nihilistic, *anti*-institutional stance that Dada and *Fluxus* took. Marcel Duchamp's later life was dominated by the less political activity of playing chess. In Beuys' view, art was the impetus for social action, and a way to change the world – to fight against the forces of 'silence' and apathy - hence his criticism of Duchamp's quieter life style. It was doubly frustrating for Beuys because at this time, there was a renewed interest in Duchampianism by American artists engaged in Pop Art, Minimalism and Conceptualism. For Beuys, art needed to overtly engage with political, live issues.

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<sup>31</sup> For a comprehensive overview of Beuys' 'Life Course/Work Course', see mark Rosenthal in Susan Brauer, Clare Elliot and Jane Watkins, eds., *Joseph Beuys Actions, Vitrines, Environments* (Houston, Texas: Menil Foundation, Inc., 2004).

<sup>32</sup> Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys*, trans. Caroline Tisdall (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979).

Beuys developed a transdisciplinary perspective of art and was influenced, in particular, by the works of Rudolf Steiner, Carl Jung, Goethe, James Joyce and Leonardo de Vinci. He believed in the interconnection of art and science, and above all, art's power for transformation. Beuys envisioned a social revolution which would be effected by a dramatic transformation of human society.<sup>33</sup> His 'expanded concept of art' was based mainly on Steiner's ideas where art was held on the same level of cultural importance as economic theory. Beuys' 'vitrines' were ensembles of highly significant objects arranged in glass cases, where the work not only carried physical presence but represented important material, alchemic, metaphoric and symbolic value.<sup>34</sup> Joseph Beuys integrated life, art and work. He wanted to rebuild what he saw as a 'senile social system' into the 'social organism as a work of art'.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Heartney, *Art & Today*..

<sup>34</sup> For further reading on Beuys' 'actions', 'vitrines' and 'environments', see, Mark Rosenthal, *Joseph Beuys: Actions, Vitrines, Environments* (London: Tate, 2004), Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys*.

<sup>35</sup> Rosenthal, *Joseph Beuys: Actions, Vitrines, Environments*. P. 36.



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In Beuys' 'action', *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965), he symbolically covered his head with honey and gold leaf as an alchemic reference to the human ability to think and understand on many levels. He then mumbled muffled noises as he 'explained' the various art works within the space, to a dead hare cradled in his arms, ironically suggesting that the dead animal might intuit more than some human beings. The hare is a Germanic symbol of renewal and a sign of transformation. Beuys later referred to the problem of 'explaining' art, and that notions of 'understanding' too, cannot be restricted to rational analysis. He believed imagination, inspiration, intuition and longing all lead people to sense the various levels that also play a part in the understanding of art. He said of his 'actions', that he 'tried to seek out energy in the human power-field, rather

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<sup>36</sup> Still image from 'Fy Mam.Mair. Merthyres', part of *Art Medicine and the Body*, shown at Perth Institute of Contemporary Art (PICA) in 1996.

than demand specific knowledge'. He wanted to 'bring light to the complexity of creative areas - to seek out a reaction to the action'.<sup>37</sup>

In terms of 'making', Beuys considered '[e]very human being an artist, a freedom being, called to participate in transforming and reshaping the conditions, thinking and structures that shape and inform our lives'.<sup>38</sup> In 1967, Beuys with Bazon Brock and Johannes Stüttgen set objectives for the German Student Party. This was the precursor to the Green Party in Germany. Beuys' environmental project for the 1980 *Documenter*, '7000 Oaks', was completed after his death, by his son. The recent environmental push for a sustainable planet has again given recognition to Beuys' earlier work and ideas. In 1974, he coined the term 'social sculpture' and set up his vision of a Free International University (FIU), instigating his Social Sculpture Research Unit (SSRU).<sup>39</sup> The Social Sculpture Unit is still being run at Oxford Brookes University in the UK.<sup>40</sup>

In Installation today, there are those who employ a range of new media in innovative ways that intentionally play with the futuristic 'potential' within scientific advancements, such as the various forms of surveillance technology. Perhaps it could be implied that Bruce Naumann's *Going around the Corner*, in 1970, influenced such works. There are digital interactive and virtual environments today, touched on earlier, which collapse time and space. There are also works which intervene with biomedical research and nanotechnology, pushing the ethical envelope of new scientific discovery.

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<sup>37</sup> See, Joseph Beuys' statement on *How to explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, performed at Galerie Shmela, Dusseldorf, 1965, in Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys*. p.105.

<sup>38</sup> Cited on the Social Sculpture Research Unit website run by Oxford Brookes University, UK in association with the Bauhaus, Weimar, Germany. <http://www.brookes.ac.uk>

<sup>39</sup> Rosenthal, *Joseph Beuys: Actions, Vitrines, Environments*. p. 178.

<sup>40</sup> <http://www.brookes.ac.uk>

When considering the ‘reading’ of the moving image within an installation space, or a performance piece in a specific location, reception varies, not only according to the content of a work, but also in light of the specific social space and cultural context in which it is positioned and the subject positioning of the ‘visitor’. Each person brings their own experience to the ‘reading’ of a work at a particular time, within that space. The same person, a few days later, may respond to another aspect of the work - each time embodying a new ‘significance’, and so on. In 1964, Yoko Ono sat impassively on a stage in a traditional Japanese position wearing her ‘best suit’. The performance score written for *Cut Piece* invites the audience to come up to the stage and cut into her clothing until the artist decides to get up. Traditional art had been contained within a self referential field but here, Ono wants the audience to be involved – to consider how art is produced and how art is experienced by artist and audience. This is a key assumption taken for granted in understanding contemporary art today. Within installation, today, the visitor can stand, sit, walk, or even lie down within the space and *is* therefore more physically, kinesthetically implicated - entering the work in a conceptual and phenomenological sense. A show can also be manipulated to inhibit, or encourage the visitor’s movement as in the early example given of Duchamp’s work. Installation is, more often than not, characteristically ‘uncomfortable’.

In the spirit of *Fluxus*, Sam Taylor Wood’s 1999 work, *Third Party*, employs seven projectors to screen her multi-filmic ‘real time’ ‘surveillance’ of a cocktail party in London. Copious amounts of film footage document private moments in what appears to be a fairly superficial event. In another work, *Killing Time*, she distils the perceived density of time within a single momentary image, leaving the viewer outside, with a feeling of dissatisfaction, wanting to know more. Finish artist, Eija – Liisa Ahtila expresses a psychic intensity through her complex filmic installations presented in digital format on DVD, creating an aesthetic of emotional

ambiguity. William Yang's post colonial performance work challenges popular assumptions about what is, or is not 'art' as he blurs the boundaries between performance art, theatre and photojournalism. In *Sadness*, his narrative approaches 'difficult' political issues such as racial prejudice, his gay sexuality, the suffering of friends - the devastation of AIDS. In December 2008, Yang presented his tenth performance piece, *My Generation* for the opening of the new National Portrait Gallery in Canberra. This occasion was indeed an endorsement of a multimedia monologue entering into the canon of 'portraiture', signaling a new inclusive policy for a canvas orientated tradition.



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<sup>41</sup> *Cartographies of Loss*, as a performative paper, Murdoch University, WA, 2000. Photograph by Bill Shaylor.

As a flexible, academic ‘container’ grounded in the experiencing body, Performance Studies suits both the hybrid nature of my arts praxis, and my growing cross disciplinary interests. Working with performative text, social research, multimedia installation and site specific, ephemeral works, I have been drawn towards Performance Studies’ inclusive position within research. A confessed lack of ‘discipline’, a non- hierarchical structure and inclusive, international, pluralistic approach to a wide range of cultural studies and working methodologies, strongly aligns Performance Studies to early avant-gardism - the *Fluxus* project, and Dick Higgins’ introduction of ‘intermedia’.<sup>42</sup> Joseph Beuys’ advocacy for the ‘transformative’ within art, his sense of the response-ability of art within community and his incorporation of transdisciplinarity within his Social Sculpture Research Unit, has also laid much of the groundwork for Performance Studies and sits with my own thinking. Richard Schechner’s definition of Performance Studies as ‘unframed, unfinished, open, multi-vocal, and self contradictory’ feels appropriate.

In *The Ends of Performance*, Schechner writes:

Performance Studies is inter – in between. It is intergeneric, interdisciplinary, intercultural – and therefore inherently unstable. Performance Studies resists or rejects definition. As a discipline, PS cannot be mapped effectively because it transgresses boundaries – it goes where it is not expected to be. It is inherently in between and cannot be pinned down or located exactly.<sup>43</sup>

It is nearly forty years since Dick Higgins, as a member of *Fluxus* founded his course in ‘Intermedia’, and Joseph Beuys introduced his ideas for an ‘expanded social sculpture’ and set up his Free International University

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<sup>42</sup> On the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1<sup>st</sup> *Fluxus* festival in Wiesbaden, Germany, *Performance Research*, devoted a whole edition to reviewing the success and /or failure of the *Fluxus* laboratory. Owen Smith, "Avant-Gardism and the Fluxus Project: A Failed Utopia or the Success of Invisibility," *Performance Studies* 7.3 (2002).

<sup>43</sup>Richard Schechner, "What Is Performance Studies Anyway," *The Ends of Performance*, ed. Peggy & Jill Lane Phelan (New York & London: New York University Press, 1998) p. 360.

(FIU). In my own case I draw on Gender Studies, Anthropology, Performance Studies, Cultural Geography, Social Politics – in fact anywhere that potentially offers new meaning to the project. I also consider my debt to feminism in legitimating the ‘emotional’ and the ‘autobiographical’ in art.

In this essay I have reflected on only a few of the prominent vanguard artists of the twentieth century whose work and ideas were radical in their time. As artists today reach into virtual worlds challenging perceptions of reality, materiality and embodied performance, using new modes of communication and technology, they continue to break new boundaries although, they still owe much to *Fluxus*, as instigators of hybrid practice. Today, the terms ‘intermedia’ and ‘multimedia’ are sometimes used interchangeably across the creative arts. Both are well accepted terms although, ‘multimedia’ infers a combination of derivative technologies associated with televisual / screen media and computer arts, whereas ‘intermedia’, I consider, still suggests a broader transdisciplinarity and performance based communication, with which to create and enrich our understandings of art, life and society.

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