

Fluxus, Feminism, and the 1960's

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In the 1960's, people were trying to re-imagine a new society. The aftermath of a heavily conservative post-World War Two North America in combination with the Vietnam War served as a catalyst for exploring new possibilities. The historical and cultural conditions of the time fed into and flowed off of one another creating a spirit of discovery, exploration, and drive to change that permeated many groups of people, disciplines of knowledge, and new social and political movements. Fluxus, a self-described anti-art movement of the time was of this spirit, and was highly influential in birthing subsequent contemporary arts practices. Fluxus was an international and interdisciplinary collective of artists, musicians, and philosophers that aimed to dissolve the boundaries between art and life, and promote the upheaval of oppressive sociopolitical systems through their philosophy and arts practices.

Fluxus created an equal playing field across race, gender, and culture, which created conditions for women to thrive within it. Some of the members challenged the engendered power structures in North American society both overtly and subtly. This situates Fluxus as an art as well as philosophical movement that was additionally a catalyst for, and innovator of feminist philosophy and practice. There are many reasons as to why this is the case. Specifically, this essay will focus on highlighting the embodiment of feminist ideas and practice in Fluxus through exploring the influence of George Maciunas' influence and personal vision for Fluxus, and then by focusing in on some of the women of Fluxus and their works.

Maciunas the 'Den Mother' of Fluxus

George Maciunas was heavily influential in guiding the direction of Fluxus, particularly within North America. He helped to centre Fluxus by supporting many artists in a variety of artistic and financial ways, and by giving Fluxus a shared conceptual direction. He saw himself as the unofficial leader of Fluxus.¹ Maciunas took his vision and his role as the Fluxus leader very seriously. Artist Sara Seagull describes Maciunas as the “den mother, and authority figure, and someone who made pronouncements and judgements.”² He would sometimes proclaim certain artists as banished from Fluxus practice for falling too far outside the lines of what he considered Fluxus. His vision of Fluxus can be easily seen through *The Fluxus Manifesto*, which was drawn up by himself and the artist Joseph Beuys. The manifesto is interspersed throughout collaged sections of the dictionary defining Flux, Purge, and Fuse. It calls to:

Purge the world of all bourgeois sickness, “intellectual”, professional and commercialized culture, PURGE the world of dead art, imitation, artificial art, abstract art, illusionistic art, mathematical art, purge the world of “Europeanism”! Promote a revolutionary flood and tide in art, promote living art, anti-art, promote NON ART REALITY to be fully grasped by all peoples not only critics, dilettantes and professionals. FUSE the cadres of cultural, social and political revolutionaries into united front and action.

It is this directive that allowed for artists of all races, cultures and genders to be accepted into Fluxus practice. Barbara Moore recalls Maciunas as being “colour blind, gender blind, whatever kind of thing you could think of. He was just interested in ideas and welcomed ideas from anyone who had good ones.”³ The Fluxus creed that accepted all artists in combination with the post-war prevalence of air travel made Fluxus a very international movement.⁴ Groups of artists from different backgrounds and genders worked in

collaboration with each other. This spirit of collaboration gave female artists the opportunity to interact with male artists as peers and not subordinates as was commonly seen in all other art movements. Mieko Shiomi illustrates this well in the following passage:

The best thing about Fluxus, I think, is that there was no discrimination on that basis of nationality and gender. Fluxus was open to anyone who shared similar thoughts about art and life. That's why women artists could be so active without feeling any frustration.⁵

Surprisingly, given the domestically referenced activities at the heart of many Fluxus performances, creating musical sounds with everyday life acts such as eating, or reading the newspaper, there was little to no dominating influence of traditional gender roles within the performances. Even in Fluxus weddings or divorce performances, there was room to subvert traditional gender roles. A good example of this is Maciunas' own Flux wedding in 1978 to his girlfriend Bille Hutchins where they switched traditional roles as he played the bride and Billie played the groom.⁶ However, when performance pieces were done solo by female artists, an unavoidable engendered context was present. The female body was at the center of the performance, carrying with it traditional connotations, and in true Fluxus form a possibility for questioning these connotations. Many female Fluxus artists started to use and play with this context bringing light to what we would now refer to as feminist issues. Three artists that were responsible for the creation and exploration feminism in Fluxus were: Shigeko Kubota, Kate Millett and Yoko Ono.

Shigeko Kubota

Shigeko Kubota grew up in Japan and began her art career working closely with Japanese Avant-garde groups but eventually left for New York, as the scene was very dismissive of female artists. There she worked very closely George Maciunas, who named her the Vice-President of Fluxus for her

assistance in organizing and distributing Flux mail, and other Fluxus events. Kubota's most famous piece *Vagina Painting* was performed in New York on July 4th 1965. In *Vagina Painting*, she attached a paintbrush to her underwear, dipped the brush in red paint, and moved crouching over a piece of paper. The action of the painting through spontaneity of form can be seen as representing the abstract expressionist tradition⁷ which was a heavily male-dominated sphere containing artists such as Jackson Pollack, Willem DeKooning and Franz Kline. The red paint symbolizing menstrual blood re-contextualizes, reclaims, and pokes fun at action painting's male-dominated tradition.

Kate Millet

Kate Millet's involvement in Fluxus often goes unrecognized as she is much better known for her work post-Fluxus as a highly influential figure of second wave feminism. At the beginning of her career, Millet was involved briefly in the Abstract Expressionist New York art scene, but found herself turned off by the misogyny that she felt was destroying female artists around her. She moved to Japan, which had a significant influence on her arts practice as she was introduced to the Japanese avant-garde scene, and to artists like Yoko Ono. Ono introduced Millet to Fluxus, and eventually she moved back to New York in order to work more closely with Fluxus. Maciunas took a shine to Millet and supported her in a number of Flux activities including her work *Stool*, a piece of Flux furniture that Maciunas intended to mass produce as a sort of Dadaist *readymade*. *Stool* was simply a relatively plain wooden stool top; the legs were shaped like women's legs that wore striped stockings and shoes. This piece served as inspiration for her large installation work *Trap*. *Trap* opened in 1967, and was inspired by the real-life story of the kidnap, torture and murder of Sylvia Likens.⁸ It featured a series of installations, all utilizing imagery of women's body parts and cages which conjures up imagery of violence and sexual abuse. The section titled *Brothel: City of Saigon* was comprised of a series of striped stocking

covered pairs of legs coming out urinals lined up evenly on a brick wall in a caged in area. *Butcher shop* contains a number of hanging mannequin legs and feet. Millet says our society "tends to hold women in contempt" for their sexuality.⁹ The results of this contempt leave women feeling trapped, imprisoned by, and punished for their sexuality as if it were a crime.

Yoko Ono

Yoko Ono is perhaps the most famous of Fluxus artists given her visibility in pop culture as John Lennon's wife. She was often stereotyped into a variety of negative roles by the media. One major stereotype was that she was perceived as was a sidekick to John Lennon. The Barenaked Ladies Song *You can be My Yoko Ono* draws on this stereotype of her in the lyrics "you can be my Yoko Ono; you can follow me wherever I go."¹⁰ She is also portrayed as a menacing *dragon lady*¹¹ who broke up the Beatles. An insulting phrase often used jokingly as a warning to women to not become too controlling of their men is "Don't be a Yoko." These stereotypes of Ono are extremely demeaning considering Ono's success, prominence, and influence in her own career as an artist. Ono grew up moving back in forth between Japan and the United States. Her artistic life began when she moved to Manhattan with her first husband, a musician who introduced Ono to John Cage.¹² Through this introduction to Cage, and subsequently many other artists who frequented Cage's social circle, Ono began to become very involved in Fluxus collective performances, solo exhibitions, and solo performances both in New York and in Japan. Her performance *Cut Piece* was done a few times throughout her career. The first performance was in Japan in 1964, and shortly after it was performed again in 1965 at Carnegie Hall. In *Cut Piece* Ono sits on a stage fully clothed and invites the audience members to come up one by one and snip away pieces of clothes until she is naked. Ono remembers it being difficult for people to come up, and that difficulty would create long periods of silence. The silence

intertwined with snipping became “beautiful” Fluxus music.¹³ Ono says that the piece was originally about giving, some scholars have theorized on the nature of the giving as being related to various parables about Buddha or Shinto ideas about pieces of one’s Soul becoming imbedded in a garment that they wear.¹⁴ The fact that Ono’s body is not just female, but is also a Japanese body is leading scholars to look to Japanese religion and mythology. Though there certainly is merit in these ideas given Fluxus’ connection to eastern philosophy, it should be considered that these connections are not there intentionally. Scholar Jien Rhee believes that as Japanese and American audiences view the piece they add different contexts and connotations to it, perhaps validating a variety of interpretations.¹⁵ The act of giving in *Cut Piece* seems to be a giving trust under a situation of vulnerability. The fact that this trust was violated in situations during the performance, like when a male audience member made the motion to stab Ono with the scissors, sheds light on women’s constant vulnerability to the possibilities of men’s violence. This includes domination and/or the lack of ability to trust men in placing women’s well-being as important, and reveals the potential for men to contain hidden intentions when it comes to women. The snipping away of Ono’s clothes as she sits as the centre of attention brings to mind the objectifying male and societal gaze on women and the pressure to look and act a certain way according to traditional roles. *Art and Feminism’s* description of the piece finds a similar connotation as presenting “a situation in which the viewer was implicated in the potentially aggressive act of unveiling the female body.”¹⁶ Because the piece is centred on a women’s body, which becomes naked, Ono’s self-described act of freely giving might be interpreted by some as her giving sex. This assumption reveals some dangerous archetypal female characteristics that are often placed on women by men in regards to sexual behavior. Women are faithful, girlish, virtuous and full of innocence or conniving, manipulating, loose, and whorish however it is not clear if Ono was intentionally playing with these or not. The idea of sexual freedom outside of

these connotations however was being intentionally challenged and picked up on by many countercultural movements of the time.

Fluxus was instrumental in creating a path for expressions of feminism both within the arts and through popular culture by nurturing feminist figures in such as Kate Millett, and Yoko Ono. Later feminist practices such as *Consciousness Raising*,¹⁷ and the street theatre demonstrations of feminist organizations like *WITCH*¹⁸ seem to resonate with the same performative, explorative, self-investigatory, humorous spirit of Fluxus. Misogyny and inequality (along with other anti-human values) continue to dominate in North American society in both public and private spheres. When we live in a world where the leader of the United States can openly talk about harassing women with no consequences, the feeling that society is taking steps back in its progression is hard to deny. The arts have always been a vehicle to question what's wrong in our world and to imagine new possibilities of how to live and be. Despite the lack of support facing artists today, and the state of the surrounding cultural, social and economic systems, perhaps now it is more important than ever for artists and feminists to continue questioning challenging, and exploring art and philosophy through movements like Fluxus.

Notes

¹ Some artists didn't always agree with or follow his interpretations of what Fluxus was

² Midori Yoshimoto, and Alex Pittman, eds 'An Evening with Fluxus Women: A Roundtable Discussion'. (*Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 19) 369–89. (2009)

³ *ibid*

⁴ Pilpot and Hendricks, *Fluxus and the Essential Questions of Life*, 1988

⁵ Yoshimoto and Pittman, 'An Evening with Fluxus Women: A Roundtable Discussion' 2009

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ Abstract Expressionism was borrowing on ideas from Zen ink drawings and the French *Automatist* Movement to try and engage in spontaneity to create a "pure" art form. This knowledge comes from me as a result of Art History courses from my BFA.

⁸ Laurel Fredrickson 'Trap: Kate Millett, Japan, Fluxus and Feminism'. *Women & Performance: A*

- Journal of Feminist Theory* 19 (3): 337–67. (2009)
- ⁹ Millett, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press. (2000) Pg 123
- ¹⁰ Barenaked Ladies song *Be My Yoko Ono* From their Album *Gordon*, 1992
- ¹¹ Heather Marie Stur *Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War Era*. New York: Cambridge University Press. (2011) Page 23
- ¹² John Cage was another key Fluxus figure, many Fluxus ideas began in a class he was teaching about sound and composition that was attended by quite a few Fluxus artists
- ¹³ Rhee 'Performing the Other: Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*' , 2005
- ¹⁴ *ibid*
- ¹⁵ *ibid*
- ¹⁶ Helena Reckitt and Peggy Phelan, eds. 2012. *Art and Feminism*. Abridged, Revised, and updated. London: Phaidon. Page 60
- ¹⁷ Debra Michals "From Consciousness Expansion to Consciousness Raising," (in *The Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and '70s*, eds. Braunstein, Peter, and Michael William Doyle New York: Routledge.)
- ¹⁸ *Ibid*

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