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Fluxier-than-Thou: Review Essay

Fluxus Experience. Hannah Higgins. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002. Pp. xv + 259. \$29.95 (paper).

Teddy Hultberg, *Oyvind Fahlström on the Air—Manipulating the World*. Stockholm: Sveriges Radios Förlag / Fylkingen, 1999. Bilingual text, Swedish and English. Pp. 337. 2 CDs: *Birds in Sweden, The Holy Torsten Nilsson*. SEK 400 (\$52.00) cloth.

Reviewed by Marjorie Perloff, Stanford University

"Fluxus," Dick Higgins has observed, "was not a movement; it has no stated consistent programme or manifesto which the work must match, and it did not propose to move art or our awareness of art from point A to point B. The very name, *Fluxus*, suggests change, being in a state of flux. The idea was that it would always reflect the most exciting avant-garde tendencies of a given time or moment—the Fluxattitude."¹ Hannah Higgins, the daughter of Dick Higgins and Alison Knowles, both of them foundational Fluxus intermedia artists, agrees. Again and again, in *Fluxus Experience*, she insists that Fluxus was not, as is usually thought, an iconoclastic avant-garde movement but a way of life, a "fertile field for multiple intelligence interactions" (193) that has strong pedagogical potential. In keeping with her father's theory of intermedia (see Figure 33), Hannah Higgins uses a Deweyite approach to map possible intersections between Fluxus and other disciplines so as to "allow for a sort of cognitive cross-training through exploratory creativity" (193). Within our existing university structure, a potential Fluxus program "would by definition be unspecialized . . . it would emphasize exploration and expression of individual skills" (197). For it is,

after all, “through creative play that new solutions to problems may be found” (206).

This utopian and nostalgic “model for a multicultural, multilingual society that is characterized by both difference and group feeling, and by a sense of connection to the physical world” (207) is not quite borne out by Higgins’s own incisive account of Fluxus, which details not only specific performances and publications but also the heated political controversies between George Maciunas, the movement’s self-declared *chef d’école*, and such other Fluxartists as the less flamboyant Dick Higgins. Indeed, the non-movement called Fluxus had, by Hannah Higgins’s own account, a specific point of origin: namely the 1957-59 classes in musical composition offered by John Cage at the New School in New York. “The most durable innovation to emerge from that classroom,” Higgins writes, “was George Brecht’s Event score, a performance technique that has been used extensively by virtually every Fluxus artist. . . . In the Event, everyday actions are framed as minimalistic performances or, occasionally, as imaginary and impossible experiments with everyday situations” (2). Thus Brecht’s *Keyhole Event* (1962) was a handwritten card that contained the single word “keyhole” in large block letters, and beneath it the words “through either side / one event.” In another Event, *Drip Music*, devised by Brecht and performed by Dick Higgins, the instructions read:

For single or multiple performance.

A source of dripping water and an empty vessel are arranged so that the water falls into the vessel.

Second version: Dripping.

Such “scores,” typeset and published as Fluxus editions or multiples, were placed in Fluxkits—an offshoot of Duchamp’s *boîtes en valise*-- containing

such everyday objects as rubber balls, beans, shoe laces, blow horns, chess pieces, and prophylactics.

One of the best known fluxkits is the vinyl briefcase *Finger Box* by the Japanese artist Ay-O (1964), in which, Higgins argues, rows of yellow wooden blocks with holes in their centers challenge the viewer to engage in manual exploration:

When users plunge a finger into the box, their curiosity has overcome the sense of fear inherent in exploring the unknown. That several *Finger Boxes* contained nails indicates Ay-O's determination not to sidestep the challenge the work could issue: the danger to the instinctively apprehensive, hesitant user, who must touch the box, but carefully, with an 'enquiring human gesture' (40; see Figure 16)

Such solemn appraisal of what is usually held to be the witty, playful, and purposely ephemeral production of Fluxus artists gives the movement an odd spin. As Andreas Huyssen has suggested, the "success" of Fluxus was precisely its failure to be coopted, collected, and "musealized" by the art world—at least in its initial phase. Sometimes labeled "Neo-Dada," Fluxus worked out of an aesthetic of negation: "negation of the art market; negation of the notion of the great individual creator, the artist as hero or redeemer, negation of the art object as reified commodity, negation of traditionally defined boundaries between music, literature, and the visual arts."² Like other avant-garde movements that have preached the need to break down the wall between art and life, it was not long before Fluxus did enter the very museum it despised and before its Events and performances were exhaustively documented in scholarly catalogues and monographs. Such Fluxus figures as Nam June Paik and Yoko Ono, moreover, went on to become established artists in various media.

Perhaps the greatest contribution of this remarkably international constellation was to music or, more accurately, to sound event. As Douglas Kahn reminds us in his essay for *In the Spirit of Fluxus* (100-121), except

for Italian Futurism, which boasted Luigi Russolo's invention of noise-intoning instruments (*intonarumori*), set forth in his 1914 manifesto "The Art of Noises," the major avant-gardes expressed little interest in music. And even Cage, who proposed that any sound could be used by the composer, in practice, kept ambient sound within a musical frame. His famous 1952 piece "4'33", as Kahn notes, "silenced the expected music altogether and thus tacitly musicalized the surrounding environmental sounds—including the sounds of an increasingly restless audience" (103). Fluxus artists—La Monte Young, Nam June Paik, George Brecht—much as they revered Cage, took his aesthetic a step further, posing questions as to where sounds are to be located in time and space and how they related to the objects and actions that produce them. Sound-producing tasks, for example, do not necessarily produce the expected sounds or may produce sounds incidentally. Thus, in George Brecht's *Incidental Music* (1961), "Three dried peas or beans are dropped, one after another, onto the keyboard. Each such seed remaining on the keyboard is attached to the key or keys nearest it with a single piece of pressure-sensitive tape." Or again, La Monte Young's *Piano Piece for David Tudor #2* (1960) is based on the elimination of whatever incidental sound may take place in the normal course of playing the piano:

Open the keyboard cover without making, from the operation, any sound that is audible to you. Try as many times as you like. The piece is over either when you succeed or when you decide to stop trying. It is not necessary to explain to the audience. Simply do what you do and, when the piece is over, indicate it in a customary way. (See *In the Spirit of Fluxus*, 105)

Young also experimented with repetition. His *X for Henry Flynt* (1960), for examples, repeats a loud sound steadily every one to two seconds, over and over again for an unspecified period so as to show, as Gertrude Stein had already taught us, that there is no such thing as true repetition. The differentials of a given performance, acoustic environment, listening habit,

and the resonant complexity of the sound itself on a particular instrument: all these mean that the sound sequence cannot have a fixed identity.

In these exemplars, as in such Fluxus Event scores as Brecht's already mentioned *Drip Music* or NamJune Paik's *suite for transistor radio*, which begins with the instructions, "in Amsterdam channel, or in middle small river, / burn a violin, and throw it to the river. / connect a thread at a transistor radio singing. / put it into the water very slowly" (110), the relationship between Fluxus and Conceptual art becomes apparent. Hannah Higgins tries to distinguish between "mainstream" conceptual art and what Henry Flynt called, in a 1963 essay, *Concept Art*. Whereas Fluxus always involves physical, concrete embodiment, Conceptual art is ideational, disembodied and "aloof" (116). Fluxus, she insists, "rejects the minimalist form and linguistic scientism" of such Conceptual artists as Joseph Kosuth or Lucy Lippard. But from our vantage point in the twenty-first century, these distinctions seem dubious: there is plenty of conceptual art that is highly material and, conversely, many Fluxus works like George Brecht's *Keyhole Event* that are primarily cerebral.

Indeed, Fluxus has now emerged as part of the much larger Conceptualist-Minimalist aesthetic of the second half of the twentieth-century, an aesthetic whose main thrust is to counter, from various angles, the Abstract Expressionist paradigm of the artwork as the expression of personal emotion and individual "signature"—a paradigm that applies to the "expressivist" poetry of mid-century as fully as it does to its artworks. A text like Alison Knowles's *Big Book* (1967), which can be walked or crawled through, is certainly closer to, say, Eva Hesse's fiberglass wall compositions and installations than to a Mark Rothko painting. In trying to distinguish Fluxus from its neighbors, Higgins inadvertently diffuses its impact. For even as the Fluxus pedagogy Higgins propounds in her last chapter is not likely to influence the ways contemporary art is currently taught and

studied, many Fluxus artists, poets, and concepts are increasingly seen as seminal.

Here the internet has played a seminal role. A site like Kenneth Goldsmith's Ubuweb (*ubu.com*), now makes available the writings and recordings of La Monte Young side by side with the sound poetry of Henri Chopin or the writings of Vito Acconci. Then, too, in cyberspace, the distinction between materiality and ideation, embodiment and disembodiment breaks down. An artist not mentioned in *Fluxus Experience* but who had numerous contacts with Fluxus is the Brazilian-born Swedish Concrete poet turned conceptualist poet-painter, cartoonist, dramatist, radio artist, and theorist, Oyvind Fahlstrom (1928-76), who has become, in recent years, something of an underground classic. Indeed, if we take Fluxus theories of material embodiment and social transformation seriously, Fahlström may well emerge as Fluxier-than-thou. A recent bilingual edition of his fascinating radio plays *Birds in Sweden* (1963) and *The Holy Torsten Nilsson* (1966) has been published by Teddy Hultberg for the Sveriges Radios Förlag and Fylkingen press in Stockholm. In the U.S., it can be ordered readily on amazon.com.

Hultberg's subtitle *Oyvind Fahlström on the Air* is deceptive because his book discusses all of Fahlström's work from the early Surrealist poems and the twelve-meter scroll called *Opera* with its introduction of suggestive abstract shapes that play the roles of "characters" and yet shift form just enough to produce ambiguities of meaning, to the Fluxus-related works produced when Fahlström moved to New York in 1961, to the radio and theatre works of the later 60s and the political writings of the 70s. A key to all these productions is found Fahlström's Concrete Poetry manifesto, written in 1953 and hence antedating the Concrete manifestos of the Brazil Noigandres group and of the Swiss Eugen Gömringer.³ In this manifesto, reproduced in its entirety by Hultberg (109-20), Fahlström differed from

these Concretists in that he did not conceive of his language games as constellations, in which the formal layout produces meaning, but rather as a system for reforming the language itself:

KNEAD the linguistic material; this is what justifies the label concrete.

Don't just manipulate the whole structure; begin rather with the smallest elements—letters, words. Recast the letters as anagrams. Repeat letters within words; throw in alien words, peavroog-se do; interpose letters that don't belong, aacatioaanniya for action; explore children's secrete code languages and other private languages; vocal glides gliaouedly. And, of course, newly coined lettristic words.⁴

What Fahlström calls "signifiguration," demanded a more rule-governed approach: the individual concrete poem gave way to the temporality of the poet's sequential tables and "cartoon" texts based on the author's own invented systems. The basic rule—and here Fahlström's *worlets* recall Khlebnikov's *zaum*—is that "words that sound alike belong together" (115). For, as Fahlström was to put it later, "the fundamental and fascinating anomaly" of language is "the fact that sound and meaning have nothing to do with each other" (50). Following the axis of contiguity, the poet could let the materiality of the word or its components generate an elaborate system of meanings.

And here Fluxus comes in. When Fahlström moved to New York in 1961, he took over Rauschenberg's old studio on 128 Front Street, where Jasper Johns also had a studio. Like Rauschenberg and Johns, Fahlstrom revered and learned much from John Cage, but his predilection for system made him somewhat suspicious of Cagean indeterminacy. Rather, he turned to Johns's own number and letter series and to "Brecht and Brecht" (48-49). George Brecht, as Fahlström wrote a friend, is "totally free of pre-conceptions, [someone who] repudiates identities, denies the existence of process-objects and refuses to accept form as the defining factor." As for the other Brecht, Bert, Fahlström admired the German playwright's use of

everyday material: newspaper reports, advertising, stories of low life. Both Brechts, he felt, used a critique of language to break down the wall between art and life. But the new collusion of "high" and "low," was to be achieved, not by chance or improvisation, as Cage would have it, but by the adoption of system.

The first of Fahlström's invented languages was called *Birdo*. Using Allan D. Cruickshank's *A Pocket Guide to Birds*, which included phonetic transcriptions of the sounds birds made, Fahlström listed the transcribed sounds according to the vowels of the phonetic alphabet and then in alphabetical order, producing an elaborate network of closely related yet differential sounds. A second invented language was *Whammo*, based on onomatopoeic expressions from American comic strips, where such one-syllable words as *wham*, *slurp*, *fsst*, and *thunk* are used to define the interaction of the "characters." Such catalogues, carefully organized into alphabet groups, recall Kurt Schwitters' *Ursonate* as well as Russian *Zaum*. If Fluxus Events tended toward the minimal—e.g. Brecht's "Exit" or "Three Aqueous Events," which lists the words "ice," "water," and "steam" in a column beneath the title—Fahlström's absurdist productions depended upon elaboration. Thus *Birds in Sweden*, produced at the Swedish Radio studios in October 1962 and broadcast for the first time in the experimental arts program "Night Manoeuvres" on 14 January 1963, combines Fahlström's bird language found text, and poetic prose so as to produce a sequence of intricate soundscapes.

On radio, *Birds of Sweden* (time=29:38) was first introduced as "a piece of concrete poetry," no doubt because some of the sections are printed in the text as visual configurations: in Fahlström's manuscript (see 80), "Lime Tree Meadow" (Section II), for example, encloses the "Hotel Golden Cage" (with its allusion to the composer) in a square made up of double lines of the word "sol" ("sun"), whereas "'Swan" (V) represents a bird formation

in battle order, reminiscent of one of Giacomo Balla's Futurist *Swallows*. But Fahlström himself found the Concrete label misleading, preferring to think of *Birds in Sweden* as sound-text performance, a collage of sounds, both verbal and musical, ranging from recorded bird song and onomatopoeic rendition of bird cries, to footsteps climbing stairs, doors closing, telephones ringing, sirens blowing, pieces of sound tracks of Hollywood film, snatches of Italian opera, and sequences of *Birido* and *Whammo* passages.

But for our purposes today, what makes Hultberg's bilingual edition of *Birds in Sweden*—text plus CD—so valuable, is that what was originally conceived as an early tribute to magnetic tape recording, with its possibilities for splicing sound fragments from a variety of sources and splitting the poet's own voice so that he appears in canon with himself, can now be seen to anticipate digital poetics in an uncanny way. For with the book in front of me, I can play the CD on my computer, all the while following the original printed text and its translation. The time intervals become especially important, every second producing a new variation on particular sounds and semantic motifs. In cybertext the possibilities for Fahlströmian device are manifold.

Consider the section called "Tongue," which is connected to the preceding "Swan," with its urgent questions about translation and onomatopoeic rendition of the violent, guttural noises of swansong, by the noise from a B-52 jet engine. In the opening minute, the jet engine noise becomes the backdrop for "a short clip from a fencing lesson" in English (138), the metallic clashing sword sounds, interspersed with "That's right," "Go ahead," "Next," and so on. The poet's voice now takes over:

now I missed this drop. . . up there another appears, it is smaller, but wait let's try it again and first we take a deep breath and then let our tongues just hang out of our mouths, just hang out limply, relaxed –you may think that no one is going to do this, but imagine that if someone is doing it, even if it's only a couple of people who at this exact moment, not tomorrow, not as a thought experiment, but they are right

now really sticking out their tongues jut enough to see the tips of them, there may be two people in Stockholm, one in Norrland, and one in Dalarna who are doing it, and you think that if you also are doing it, if you do it now—you know that you and some other people out there in Sweden are sticking out their tongues a little further out each time I tell you to and keeping their tongues absolutely still, by the way you don't have to see it any more you can douse the lights or close your eyes and you'll feel gradually how it widens a bit and simultaneously straightens out, slowly, it is a small feeling, but once that small feeling is here nothing can stop your tongue from growing in your mouth and outside it, a little stiffer and how it gets harder to move it around. (138)

The jet crescendo now drowns out the poet's voice, but as it recedes, he says, "Someone says: it really looks like it," and "Tongue" gives way to the next section "Raven," with the ring of a telephone.

At the opening of "The New Spirit," the first of his *Three Poems* (1972), John Ashbery has famously remarked, "I thought that if I could put it all down, that would be one way. And next the thought came to me to leave all out would be another, and truer, way."⁵ Seen in the light of this dichotomy, we might posit that if the typical Fluxus event—say, George Brecht's *Drip Music*—is a case of leaving it all out, then Fahlstrom's equally absurdist tracking of body movement elects to "put it all down." In either case, the minimalist "event" is highly suggestive, but whereas *Drip Music* allows the viewer wide leeway as to interpretation, "Tongue" takes the pronoun "it" to a particular comic, erotic crescendo, the poet ironically declaring, with reference to the tongue stiffening inside the mouth, "Someone says: it really looks like it." But "looks like it" is also a reminder to the audience that these pieces are visual as well as aural and that we need to take account of all sides of "it," which is also the piece's textuality. Then, too, the patterns of repetition in the seemingly casual prose paragraph of "Tongue" are juxtaposed to the elaborate sound play of the bird passages. And this is especially true as "tongue" gives way to the bravura section of "Birds in Sweden," which is called "Raven" (VII and VIII).

This ten-minute piece begins with the poet's recitation of a series of internally rhyming, foolishly chiming lines about a seductively slim " [Greta] Garbo at a "King's Court," beginning with "Bright, horribly bright, late at night, horribly late, late at night" (*Rent, gräsligt rent, gräsligt sent, sent, gräsligt sent,*" 139). Fahlström now interrupts himself by "half-singing, accompanied by a (vibraphone) recording by Red Norvo with unknown musicians on bass and drums," an elaborate montage-text, cataloguing kinds of birds and their habitats and culminating in the onomatopoeic bird chant, "'Owntress entress ontréss / ent interesseen ent / ontress: antress / ont: antress" (140). Now suddenly a startling break occurs. We hear, as in the Introduction, a door opening and closing and steps on a stairway (140). The voice that now speaks is Basil Rathbone's, reading the first two stanzas of Edgar Allen Poe's "The Raven" on a Caedmon LP (1954).

At first, Poe's poem (see 141) provides relief from the "nonsense" that has preceded it: after all, at least we can understand these well-formed rhythmic sentences, written in "correct" English ("Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary, / Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore"). But as Rathbone's declamatory and ritualized recital continues, the heavy rhythm and incantatory repetition begins to seem even more "unreal" than the bird sounds that preceded it, especially when, after a snatch from Puccini's opera *Suor Angelica*, Fahlstrom splices in Poe's end rhymes—"remember," "December," "morrow," "sorrow," "Lenore," "Lenore," "evermore"—and then proceeds to recite the passage as translated into the monster-language *Whammo*, which gives us such equivalents as

remember	ringmunchbrrru(p)
or	
evermore	wham-moo—oww

The *Whammo* sounds are in turn translated into the sounds they represent in the comic-book world, so that “ringmuchbrrru(p)” is the sound for “telephone—*munch*—machine gun.” (142). And the whole sequence culminates in a chorus of “song thrushes, cranes and whooper swans, plus . . . ‘Mommy voices’ (dolls) with a new appeal”: “don’t kiss the earth” (143-44). After this crescendo, Section IX serves as a kind of Coda: “Out of the bird noises emerges *Telstar*, the 1962 hit by the Tornados. After a minute the bird noises cease and the music plays out alone, bringing ‘Birds in Sweden’ to a close” (144). The familiar schmaltzy Hollywood dance tune is reassuringly mindless: all’s well, it tells us for a minute or two, until at the very last second, we hear a roar of something unspecified and hence unsettling. And the piece is over.

Hultberg’s superbly annotated presentation of the entire text (both printed and aural) of *Birds in Sweden* as of Fahlström’s later, even more ambitious radio play *The Holy Torsten Nillson* (1966), both with accompanying commentaries as well as their Concrete or visual versions—all these in the context of Fahlström’s earlier poems and painting, manifestos, and correspondence is, I think, a must for anyone interested in the transformations Modernist aesthetic has undergone as a result of the new technologies of the postwar. Together with Fluxus experimentation, as outlined in the earlier chapters of Higgins’s study, it suggests that the avant-garde of the later twentieth century is to be found, not in the stable genres such as lyric or fiction or even film, but in intermedia works. Even if Higgins’s claim that Fluxus was not an historical movement but a way of life is too extravagant, she does point, as does Hultberg even more fully, to the need to expand, quite literally, our verbal/visual/musical/video horizons. In the digital age, intermedia is, as Dick Higgins recognized, not poetry *plus* painting or any other A + B, but, in the name of his famous press, Something Else.

Footnotes

¹Dick Higgins, "Fluxus: Theory and Reception," *The Fluxus Reader*, ed. Ken Friedman (Chichester: Academy Editions, 1998), 217-36; see p. 221.

²Andreas Huyssen, "Back to the Future: Fluxus in Context," *In the Spirit of Fluxus*, ed. Elizabeth Armstrong and Joan Rothfuss (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1993), 140-51, p. 144.

³ I owe this chronology to Mary Ellen Solt, who includes Fahlstrom's Concrete manifesto and of his intermedia "tables" in her *Concrete Poetry: A World View* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), 74-78, 156-57.

⁴ Hultberg, 118; cf. Solt, 78. Solt's translation is somewhat different: it begins "Squeeze the language material: that is what can be titled concrete."

⁵ John Ashbery, *Three Poems* (New York: Viking, 1972), 3.