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After Dada: Fluxus as a Nomadic Art Movement

In this article Stephen Wilmer applies Deleuze and Guattari's concept of nomadology to the Fluxus art movement that spread across the world, breaking down barriers between art and life, privileging concrete and conceptual art, and staging unusual events. He traces Rosi Braidotti's development of Deleuze and Guattari's concept into her notion of the nomadic subject in which she favours factors such as geographic movement, transnational identities, common space (in accord with the Deleuzian differentiation between the divisible earth or private property, and nomadic space which belongs to everyone), polylingualism, desubjectivation, becoming minoritarian, and thinking and acting differently. With this as a philosophical and political context, the author investigates some of the artistic practices of specific Fluxus practitioners, especially the shamanistic performances and fat and felt installations of Joseph Beuys that supposedly owed their inspiration to his experience with nomadic Tatars. Stephen Wilmer is Professor Emeritus of Drama at Trinity College Dublin. He co-edited (with Audronė Žukauskaitė) *Resisting Biopolitics: Philosophical, Political, and Performative Strategies* (Routledge, 2016) and *Deleuze and Beckett* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). He edited 'Theatre and the Nomadic Subject' for *Nordic Theatre Studies* (2015), and co-edited (with Azadeh Sharifi) 'Theatre and Statelessness in Europe' for *Critical Stages* (2016).

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IN THEIR 'Treatise on Nomadology' in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari praise the work of nomadic artists from different periods of history. However, they stop short of contemporary artists. Because of their emphasis on the importance of creativity and the key role of the artist in society, it seems surprising that they avoid 'direct references to contemporary art practices' in this and their other works.¹ According to Stephen Zepke and Simon O'Sullivan, rather than focusing on contemporary artists, Deleuze and Guattari's 'texts are full of references to painters, writers, musicians, and film-makers who lie squarely within the Western canon'.² And so one wonders what they would have made of Fluxus, a neo-Dadaist group of artists from the 1960s. In her book *The Invention of a People*, Janae Sholtz goes so far as to propose the Fluxus movement as 'a model for speaking about a minor people and a minor art [and] a people-to-come'.³ This article lends support to her argument by identifying certain nomadic

features of Fluxus that could be considered as Deleuzian.⁴

First, it might be useful to give a brief overview of Fluxus. The common theme of their approach was to undermine the commercial value placed on art, to produce random, cheap, ephemeral, frequently comical art works and events, and to break down the barrier between art forms, and between art and life. Their self-declared chairman, George Maciunas, did not like abstract art, and instead promoted concrete art. Differentiating between the two, he wrote:

Now in music let's say if you have [an] orchestra play, that's abstract because the sounds are all done artificially by musical instruments. But if that orchestra is trying to imitate a storm say, like Debussy or Ravel does it, that's illusionistic now. It's still not realistic. But if you're going to use noises like the clapping of the audience or farting or whatever, now that's concrete.⁵

According to Ken Friedman, who led Fluxus West (based in California), the twelve main

characteristics of Fluxus were: globalism, unity of art and life, intermedia, experimentalism, chance, playfulness, simplicity, implicativeness, exemplativism, specificity, presence in time, and musicality.⁶

In her *Nomadic Subjects*, the Deleuzian disciple Rosi Braidotti discusses specific features of her own nomadic lifestyle that could be useful in assessing the nomadic character of Fluxus.⁷ She privileges geographic movement, transnational identity, common space (as opposed to private property), desubjectivation, becoming minoritarian, and thinking and acting differently.

In terms of geographic movement and transnational identities, Fluxus developed in New York and spread across the globe, extending from the United States, throughout Europe and into Asia. Several of its leading artists advocated a transnational perspective. For example, George Maciunas created a base for Fluxus in New York with regional headquarters in California, and Western and Eastern Europe. He organized events in many cities of Europe, including the initial concerts in Wiesbaden in 1962. Yoko Ono shuttled between New York and Tokyo in the 1960s, performing in both cities and encouraging Asian artists to work with Fluxus in New York. Likewise, Friedman, who proposed a *Passport to the State of Flux*, and Joseph Beuys, who founded the 'Free Democratic State of EURASIA' without dogmatic or physical borders, made prominent gestures towards transnationalism.

Fluxus was an international, constantly changing enterprise with events in many languages across North America, Europe, and Asia.⁸ Moreover, the works themselves were adapted to the particular circumstances, and their execution depended on the individual artists available to present them. Thus, the same artistic works could change considerably from one event and from one country to another. According to Owen Smith, 'Fluxus became a shifting group based around a core of works that were constantly being added to and changed as artists and performers did or did not participate with the group.'⁹

In terms of promoting common space and desubjectivation, Maciunas – inspired by the

agricultural co-operative movement in Eastern Europe and the notion of the *kolkhoz* or collective farm – spent much of the late 1960s and early 1970s buying and developing co-operative living spaces for Fluxus artists in New York. He also travelled around Europe and the United States looking for suitable locations that could become communal retreats for artists. He recommended collective artworks and the anonymity of the artist, declaring: 'Fluxus is against art as a medium for the artist's ego . . . and tends therefore towards the spirit of the collective, to anonymity and ANTI-INDIVIDUALISM'.¹⁰ However, he was not always consistent in this, sometimes naming artists as Fluxus artists and at other times crediting them with their own copyright and creating individualized Fluxkits.

With regards to becoming minoritarian and thinking and acting differently, Fluxus was an iconoclastic movement, presenting eclectic and highly original artworks and events, frequently involving multiple or mixed media, and often avoiding institutional spaces such as galleries and museums. Fluxus performances and events could happen anywhere, often in the streets or in public spaces, and in various unconventional forms, or in multiplicities of form.

Fluxus was open to diverse ethnicities, nationalities, and backgrounds, including an unusually high proportion of female artists such as Shigeo Kubota, Yoko Ono, Charlotte Moorman, Carolee Schneeman, Mieko Shiomi, and Alison Knowles. Furthermore, these artists presented early examples of feminist corporeal performance art, as well as gay films and early forays into performances of diverse gender identities. Although, by comparison with Braidotti's notion of desubjectivation, Fluxus did not initially go very far in celebrating queer, transgender, or subaltern identities, and men tended to dominate the group, it was relatively progressive for the era. According to the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) website, 'the prevalence of female participants in its diverse activities was unprecedented'.¹¹

Fluxus exhibited another feature of becoming minoritarian through its opposition

to commodifying artworks as capitalist products. Maciunas encouraged artists to regard themselves as amateurs rather than professionals and suggested, with Beuys, that 'everyone is an artist'.¹² In characterizing the Fluxus movement, Maciunas differentiated the role of the normal professional artist from the Fluxus non-artist, explaining:

To justify [the] artist's professional, parasitic and elite status in society, he must demonstrate [the] artist's indispensability and exclusiveness, he must demonstrate the dependability of [the] audience upon him, he must demonstrate that no one but the artist can do art.¹³

By contrast with the normal professional and specially trained artist, Maciunas described the work of Fluxus as non-professional and something that anyone could do:

Art-amusement must be simple, amusing, unpretentious, concerned with insignificances, require no skill or countless rehearsals, have no commodity or institutional value.¹⁴

Fluxus was thus breaking down the barriers between art and life, between individual art forms, between elite and public, between audience and performer, as well as between the United States and rest of world.

Another feature of the fluidity of the Fluxus movement was its nomadism. It is difficult to identify who the Fluxus artists were. Maciunas tried to determine what was legitimate as Fluxus art and wrote manifestos to articulate his aims. He kept a list of those he considered to be members, and he tried to keep control of the type of art that they produced. Moreover, he practised a form of expulsion when he was unhappy with the work or attitude or practices of a particular artist.

But the artists refused to be controlled. Emmett Williams, who found himself expelled by Maciunas from Fluxus, complained that Maciunas was trying to link Fluxus with the Communist Party, against the wishes of Fluxus artists:

George, high-born friend of the proletariat, had a despotic way of silencing the opposition – the sacrament of excommunication, followed by pub-

lic denunciation – which he administered with a free hand when critics and 'renegades' within the Fluxus family challenged his authority. There were so many purges, through the years, that most of us were in effect outsiders looking in, a situation that in general provoked more laughter than tears.¹⁵

It is also difficult to date and place Fluxus. One way would be to suggest that it was based in New York and existed from 1961, when Maciunas first used the name Fluxus after renting a gallery on Madison Avenue, and continued until he died in 1978.

But in a sense Fluxus already existed before 1961 and continued to persist after Maciunas's death. Many features of Fluxus art predated Maciunas's gallery. Maciunas compiled an extensive chart indicating the many influences on Fluxus such as the Dadaists, Duchamp's ready-made works, John Cage's aleatory practices and unconventional usage of musical instruments, and Allan Kaprow's Happenings.

When Maciunas first opened his gallery in 1961, the artists that featured, such as Ono, Cage, and La Monte Young, had already developed a reputation for their own idiosyncratic approaches, and many other artists in the early 1960s were already experimenting in comparable ways. Smith has argued:

This reality – that Fluxus arose out of circumstances rather than as the product of a pre-determined strategy – is part of the reason why many have rejected and continue to reject the idea that Fluxus was a movement at all.¹⁶

Similarly, despite Maciunas's death in 1978, Fluxus has continued to influence the work of artists up until today, and its name has continued to be used in the work of Christoph Schlingensiefel and many others. Thus, Fluxus had no specific origin or termination date but has been in a constant state of becoming. Dick Higgins commented: 'It is as if it started in the middle of the situation, rather than at the beginning.'¹⁷

As Deleuze and Guattari write in *What is Philosophy?*, using terms that might also apply to Fluxus: 'In itself it has neither beginning nor end but only a milieu. It is more geographical than historical.'¹⁸



The Case of Joseph Beuys

It is useful to analyze some of the nomadic characteristics of one specific artist: Joseph Beuys. Beuys was not only an artist, but also a political activist with a transnational and anti-institutional approach. After being fired from the Düsseldorf Academy of Art in 1972 for allowing students into his classes who had been refused admission by the Academy, he established, with Heinrich Böll, the Free International University for Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research in Düsseldorf. He also created an installation for Documenta V called the Bureau for the Organization of Direct Democracy as a forum for political debate. He was later one of the founders of the Green Party in Germany.¹⁹

Joseph Beuys's career exemplifies the ahistorical and fluid character of Fluxus. When he joined in 1962, he renamed all of his earlier pieces dating back to 1947 as Fluxus artworks. Moreover, according to Claudia Schmuckli, after he was expelled from Fluxus in 1964 over 'philosophical and aesthetic differences', he continued 'to apply the term

to his activities despite his overt rejection by the movement and its leader Maciunas'.²⁰

Like Deleuze and Guattari (and Braidotti), Beuys opposed the state apparatus. With regard to his dispute with the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf and the state authorities, he declared that the state 'is a monster that must be fought. I have made it my mission to destroy this monster, the state'.²¹ The art critic Kay Larsen has commented that 'Beuys is Kafka, warning of the powers of the state'.²² Movement, or what Joseph Beuys called *Bewegung*, which seems to approximate the Deleuzian notion of becoming, was the only force that Beuys considered 'capable of dismantling the repressive effects of a senile social system that continues to totter along the death line'.²³ Like other Fluxus artists, Beuys privileged mixed media and chaotic multiplicities in his artwork. According to Rosenthal: 'Movement and disorder became metaphors, hence Beuys was fond of compositions that have more in common with a stew than with a composed arrangement on a plate'.²⁴

Beuys focused much of his work on the preservation of the environment and featured wild animals and themes of renewal and rebirth as well as mourning and grieving in his performances. Perhaps his best-known pieces are *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965), where he covered his face in honey and gold leaf and carried a dead hare around a gallery space speaking quietly to it, and *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974), during which he lived with a coyote for several days. He also involved stags, zebras, elephants, and horses in his performative events.

A dead hare appeared in many of Beuys's works, sometimes in quite disturbing fashion. In *Eurasian Siberian Symphony*, as part of the first Fluxus concert in 1963 in Düsseldorf, he fixed a dead hare to a blackboard and later took out its heart. In a sculpture titled *The Unconquerable* (also in 1963), a giant hare was portrayed as a victim about to be shot by a diminutive toy soldier. Beuys revealed that, for him 'the Hare is a symbol of incarnation, which the hare really enacts – something a human can only do in imagination. It bur-



Opposite page: Joseph Beuys with hare (photo: Walter Vogel). Above: with coyote (photo: Caroline Tisdall).

rows, building itself a home in the earth. Thus it incarnates itself in the earth: that alone is important.²⁵

In *I Like America and America Likes Me*, Beuys broke down the barriers between a human being and a dangerous wild animal. Over a period of several days, he managed a working relationship with a coyote while they were confined in the same room. They began to interact and relate to one another, perhaps approximating Deleuze and Guattari's notion of 'becoming other' or 'becoming animal'. As Deleuze and Guattari wrote in *What is Philosophy?*: 'We become animal so that the animal also becomes something else. . . . Becoming is always double, and it is this double becoming that constitutes the people to come and the new earth.'²⁶ Likewise, in *The Chief* (1964), Beuys wrapped himself in felt and made noises such as

the cry of the stag. . . . The sounds I make are taken consciously from animals. I see it as a way of coming into contact with other forms of existence beyond the human one. It is a way of going beyond our restricted understanding to expand the scale of producers of energy among co-operators in other species, all of whom have different abilities . . . to switch off my own species' range of semantics. . . . Such an action . . . changes me radically.²⁷

In such performances as *I Like America and America Likes Me*, Beuys took on a seemingly shamanistic role, perhaps as a gesture of solidarity with nomadic peoples around the world and an attribution of blame for what the North American settlers did to the indigenous population, but also as a way of engaging the audience by acting as a medium, turning them into what Deleuze calls 'visionary' spectators.²⁸ Like Maciunas (as well as Deleuze and Guattari), who took great interest in the nomadic art of the tribes of the Eurasian steppe, Beuys valued the undifferentiated and smooth spaces of Eurasia and their common land usage for nomadic peoples and migratory animals, as opposed to the divisible earth of Western Europe. He observed that

Eurasia is the vast uninterrupted land mass that stretches from China to the Atlantic, criss-crossed since time immemorial by the movement of peoples and migratory animals. It means unity and diversity and the resolution of polarities.²⁹

Another recurrent nomadic feature in his work was the use of the natural substances of fat and felt. Felt is, of course, a material that Deleuze and Guattari discuss in *A Thousand Plateaus* as a smooth material, as opposed to

the striated character of woven material.³⁰ Beuys, who was a member of the Luftwaffe during the Second World War, claims that when his plane was shot down over Crimea, nomadic Tatars rescued him, coated his body in fat and wrapped him in felt to enable him to recover. Moreover, the renewal of his body may have symbolized for him a kind of spiritual rebirth, both for him, becoming a man of peace and environmental protection, and for his native Germany recovering from Nazism and the Second World War.

Conclusion

In considering whether Deleuze and Guattari should have taken more interest in contemporary art, it can be seen that Fluxus was a nomadic art movement that blossomed in the 1960s and spread rhizomatically across the globe. Many of its affiliated members promoted a transnational politics, performing in many languages, and fostering the common use of public space both for living and for artworks.

Despite Maciunas's at times heavy-handed approach in trying to control it, Fluxus encouraged experimentation in many different art forms and multiplicities that constantly broke down barriers of convention and expectation. It was relatively open to ethnic, gender, and sexual diversity, and it was egalitarian in terms of considering anyone an artist. Although Deleuze and Guattari never wrote about it, Fluxus seems to have shared many of their concerns. Today, as Europe acts more like an armed fortress, countering terrorist acts and controlling immigration, it is useful to remember Fluxus as an artistic movement that tried to overcome such delimitations and to promote a different type of war machine.

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