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Fluxus Art-Amusement: The Music of the Future?

In his provocative and eccentric book *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, originally published in 1977, French economist Jacques Attali presents a utopian vision of the music of the future. He suggests that the future production of music will take place under the rubric of "Composition," by which he means that listeners, who now are only consumers of music, will become its producers as well. In Attali's view, although music once served important social functions as symbolic ritual, music is now completely subordinated to its status as a mass-produced, recorded commodity: "[W]hat was an element in the social whole appears as a work of art to be consumed."¹ The future music he envisions would completely reject commodification: it would exist purely as an end in itself rather than a means to profit. Attali does not envision Composition as a nostalgic return to a time before commodification when music enjoyed a more important social position. "Make no mistake. This is not a return to ritual," he declares: "Nor to the spectacle. Both are impossible, after the formidable pulverizing effected by the political economy over the past two centuries. No. It is the advent of a radically new form of the insertion of music into communication."²

For this to be the case, individuals would have to create their own idiosyncratic music entirely for their own pleasure, without regard for whether or not anyone else would (or could) appreciate it. The division of labor that currently defines music production would be completely eliminated. There would be no distinctions between musicians and audiences or, for that matter, between musicians and nonmusicians. Conventional musical training and skills would no longer be required: everyone would be able to produce something they could call and enjoy as "music." Inasmuch as Attali implies that the perfect instrument for creating this kind of music is the video camera, which he quaintly calls an "image recorder," it is apparent that he aims to shatter conventional definitions of music completely. Even avant-garde composer John Cage's definition of music as "organization of sound"³ is not broad enough for Attali, who suggests that music need not even be defined as sound—the distinctive visions rendered by each person with an image recorder would constitute their "music."⁴ It is worth observing that Attali

himself describes Composition as "an abstract utopia," a theoretical social model not necessarily to be taken as a real possibility.⁵

Musicologist Susan McClary, writing in 1985, identifies musical phenomena that she considers to be harbingers of Composition, including the do-it-yourself aesthetic and anticapitalist stance of early punk rock (which she calls New Wave), as well as the emphasis on live, multimedia, sometimes participatory performances that resist the definition of music as recordable sound to be found in the work of such composers as Pauline Oliveros.⁶ To update McClary's account a bit, I would note that Attali's discussion of the image recorder anticipates the dominance of music video and its role in making the experience of popular music as much visual as aural. I will also suggest that such practices as rapping, scratching, and sampling can be seen in relation to Composition.⁷ Each of these practices has enabled people with no formal musical training to make music using immediately available means: voices, turntables, old records. They have also helped to redefine what "music" is for the late twentieth century. Rapping is a way of making "music" out of words that are organized in terms of rhythm and rhyme rather than melody. Scratching and sampling have expanded the definition of music to include pieces constructed out of existing recordings by mechanical or electronic means. Neither is unprecedented, of course: rap is a form of oral poetry, and the concept of producing new music from previously existing recordings was pioneered by practitioners of *musique concrète* in the 1950s. Although the music produced by rapping, scratching, and sampling has proved itself only too readily commodifiable, as had punk before it, the impulses behind these practices suggest an affinity with Composition as defined by Attali.

Although these recent and current musical practices illustrate important aspects of Composition, even better examples can be found in the work of a segment of the New York avant-garde of the early 1960s, the Fluxus group. The ideas underlying Fluxus resonate in many ways with Attali's concept of Composition, and it is certainly the case that Fluxus "music" has never been commodified in the conventional economic sense (though Fluxus has entered the canon of the avant-garde through scholarly studies, museum retrospectives, and the other forms of symbolic commodification prevalent in the art world). In the remainder of this essay, I will offer a brief history of Fluxus, review some of its philosophical bases, and identify some of the performance practices in which it engaged and the relationship of those practices to Composition. I will conclude by suggesting some speculative connections between Fluxus and two other musical phenomena of the 1960s: a piece by the American avant-garde composer Ben Johnston on the one hand, and the destruction of musical instruments by rock musicians on the other.

Fluxus has a complex relationship to the concept of textuality this vol-

ume addresses. Although its avant-garde credentials are beyond dispute, Fluxus was not antitextual. Far from it—Fluxus artists embraced textuality in a way that their contemporaries who made happenings did not. Fluxus performances were conceived as music and were based on the textual model that informs classical music and musicology. Each Fluxus performance was the interpretation of a text, a score identified as the work of a particular composer. Fluxus did not privilege performance over text or consider performance an autonomous entity separate from text. Rather, Fluxus emphasized a text/performance relationship considered anathema to, for instance, theatrical avant-gardes that have reacted against the dominance of the playwright.

The relationship between score and performance may be seen in two different ways, depending on whether one is looking at musicology or music itself. Classical musicology considers the scored work an urtext that gives rise to “a variety of subordinate and derivative texts.”⁸ In this respect, the musicological view is not significantly different from a literary perspective that sees theatrical performances as mere adjuncts to dramatic texts. Looking at the nature of musical works themselves, however, Stan Godlovitch argues that musical scores of all historical eras are “intrinsically undetermined, skeletal and incomplete” works that do not determine performances in any strong way. Far from imposing textual authority, musical scores invite “a collaboration between the scored work and the performer.”⁹ Fluxus can be seen as addressing both of these aspects of music as a scored work. Fluxus’s undercutting of the self-conscious “seriousness,” pomposity, and elitism that characterize the culture of classical music mocks the worshipful attitude toward the score displayed in musicology. Yet by refusing to dismantle the basic textual structures of classical music (i.e., composer, score, audience) and their canonical relationships to one another, Fluxus emphasized the potential for freedom and collaboration that Godlovitch considers intrinsic to the particular textual conformation of the musical work and its relationship to performance.

Fluxus: A Little History

The origins of Fluxus are traceable to a course in music composition taught by John Cage at the New School for Social Research in New York City in 1958. The membership of this class included Dick Higgins and George Brecht, who would become two of the principal Fluxus artists. Also in attendance were Allan Kaprow, who is usually credited with inventing the performance art genre of the happening; Al Hansen, who authored many happenings in his own right; and others. As Fluxus historian Peter Frank has

observed, "Arguably, the whole American school of Happenings came out of this class. Inarguably, the seeds of the Fluxus sensibility were sown in this class."¹⁰ Although Fluxus events are often discussed as performance art or as a relative of happenings, the artists who made them called them music, and it is in that light that I shall discuss them here.¹¹ Whereas Kaprow and other artists who participated in Cage's class considered the happening to be a new art form, Higgins, Brecht, and other Fluxus artists presented performance work under the traditional rubric of music, though the concept of music they received from Cage was hardly traditional.

The Fluxus group was organized by George Maciunas, a Lithuanian immigrant art dealer who undertook a series of concerts and lectures focusing on experimental music at his gallery in 1961. Maciunas also designed the publication of a collection of experimental music scores and writings entitled *An Anthology of Chance Operations*, which he hoped to continue as *Fluxus* magazine. The magazine never appeared; late in 1961, Maciunas closed his gallery and fled to Europe to avoid his creditors, taking with him the materials that would eventually be published in the *Anthology*. He continued his activities in Europe. By September 1962, Maciunas had assembled an international group of artists and was ready to launch the first Fluxus event, the Fluxus Internationale Festspiele Neuester Musik (Fluxus International Festival of the Newest Music) at Wiesbaden, Germany. Other Fluxus events followed in Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Paris, and Nice.¹²

These European Fluxus manifestations indicated that Fluxus had metamorphosed from a publishing project into a performance organization operating in the context of music. When Maciunas left New York, Fluxus did not exist; when he returned in 1963, it was a fledgling international art and music movement. Within four months of his return from Europe, Maciunas put together a working Fluxus apparatus in New York. But whereas Fluxus in Europe had emphasized performance, New York Fluxus once again emphasized publication. The *Anthology* finally appeared; *V TRE* (or *CC V TRE*), a broadside begun independently by George Brecht, became the official Fluxus organ, carrying advertisements for performances, sample performance scores, articles, and photographs of Fluxus events. Maciunas also began publishing editions of books and objects by Fluxus artists. In the spring of 1964, Maciunas opened the Fluxhall, a loft on Canal Street, which served as his residence, a shop where Fluxus editions and publications were offered for sale, and a performance space. Despite Maciunas's authoritarian tendencies and desire to control the membership of Fluxus, Fluxus functioned successfully for a brief period as an artists' collective. Intense Fluxus activity began to drop off as early as 1965, when George Brecht went to live in Germany. The artists associated with Fluxus dispersed (some were excommunicated by Maciunas), sometimes carrying the Fluxus name with

them, with or without Maciunas's permission. But most of the energy drained out of Fluxus during the second half of the 1960s.

The Fluxus Sensibility

Given the diversity of the artists who worked under the Fluxus banner, it would be wrong to characterize the Fluxus sensibility in any monolithic way. Nevertheless, it is worth taking a look at some of the founding ideas that informed Fluxus. Cage, who exposed the members of his class at the New School to concepts of art originating with avant-garde movements from earlier in the twentieth century, was certainly a major influence. Cage's definition of music as "organized sound" is a sympathetic echo of the Italian futurists, who argued both that noise could be music and that the sounds of nature as well as those of urban, mechanized society should become the raw material of composition.¹³ Whereas the futurists were content to create noise as music and to re-create natural and industrial noises using special instruments, Cage sought to frame the sounds of life itself as music, thus achieving an identity of art and life to which the futurists did not aspire. "I think daily life is excellent," he writes, "and that art introduces us to it and its excellence the more it begins to be like it."¹⁴ He talks of using art, of consuming it: "We should be able to consume it in relation to the other things in our lives which we consume."¹⁵ In this regard, Cage's ideas are similar to those of dada, particularly those of Marcel Duchamp, whose earlier concept of the "ready-made" implied that objects from daily life, consumer objects in particular, could be reframed as "art" by the artist's act of designating them as such.¹⁶ Ultimately, in both art and life, Cage sees individual perception as the only valid ordering principle: "We are concerned with the coexistence of dissimilar and the central points where the fusion occurs are many: the ears of the listeners, wherever they are."¹⁷ Beginning in 1950, Cage advocated expanding musical practice in the direction of theater, arguing on perceptual grounds that "art form more than music resembles nature. We have eyes as well as ears, and it is our business while we're alive to use them."¹⁸ In keeping with his desire to unify life and art, Cage's definition of theater is as expansive as his definition of music: "I would simply say that theater is something which engages both the eye and the ear. [T]he reason I want to make my definition of theater that simple is so one could view every-day life itself as theater."¹⁹ In Duchampian terms, Cage saw daily life as ready-made theater. Cage's emphasis on performance that goes beyond the conventional bounds of music and his concepts of unifying art and life, of constructing art forms that we experience in the same ways as the rest of life, and of trans-

forming life itself into art resonate with the legacy of the historical avant-garde and proved of crucial importance to Fluxus.

But Fluxus was not simply derivative of Cage. *An Anthology of Chance Operations*, to which Cage himself contributed, contains writings indicative of other avant-garde aesthetics of the early 1960s, the context in which Fluxus arose. Among them is conceptual artist Walter DeMaria's brief essay "Meaningless Work" (dated 1960). Although DeMaria was not a Fluxus artist, the proposal he makes in this essay reflects exactly the kind of thinking that animated Fluxus.

Meaningless work is obviously the most important and significant art form today. The aesthetic feeling given by meaningless work can not be described exactly because it varies with each individual doing the work. . . . Meaningless work can not be sold in art galleries or win prizes in museums. . . . By meaningless work I simply mean work which does not make you money or accomplish a conventional purpose. For instance putting wooden blocks from one box to another, then putting the blocks back to the original box, back and forth, back and forth, etc., is a fine example of meaningless work.²⁰

DeMaria clearly shares with Cage and the historical avant-garde the idea that everyday activity can be understood as art. But there are also crucial differences in their respective formulations. Whereas Cage argues that art can produce a form of attention through which everyday life can be perceived as art, DeMaria suggests that everyday activity must be divorced from its quotidian context to function as art—it must be rendered "meaningless." DeMaria's explicit stance against the commodification of the artwork differs from Cage's comment that we should consume art in the same ways as we consume everything else. There is also an element of gratuitousness in DeMaria's conception of "meaningless work" that is absent from Cage but present in Fluxus. While Cage's notion that any sound can be music may seem gratuitous by comparison with more traditional definitions, his formulation is in service to a concept of realism. The arbitrary elements in his music make it, in his view, a more faithful representation of the arbitrariness of real experience. As his use of the word *meaningless* suggests, DeMaria does not invoke such high-minded principles. Finally, and most important, Cage's ideas are based on essentially conventional assumptions about the relationship between the composer (and performer) and the audience. For Cage, the audience makes the ultimate synthesis of the materials offered to it by the composer and performer, but does not participate in the production of the work itself, only in its reception. In this respect, Cage is at odds with the avant-garde ten-

dency toward decentralizing authorship by creating performances based on collaboration between performers and audience members or by breaking down that distinction. By contrast, DeMaria does assault the performer/audience distinction: “meaningless work” is something you perform for yourself. You perform the work and are also the sole audience for that performance; you are simultaneously the only producer and the only consumer of the performance.

A manifesto-like statement by George Maciunas, circa 1964, gives a sense of the Fluxus synthesis of these ideas. Opposing art to Fluxus art-amusement, Maciunas proclaims that

To establish the artist's nonprofessional status in society, he must demonstrate the artist's dispensability and inclusiveness, he must demonstrate the selfsufficiency of the audience, he must demonstrate that anything can be art and anyone can do it.

Therefore, art-amusement must be simple, amusing, unpretentious, concerned with insignificance, require no skill or countless rehearsals, have no commodity or institutional value.

The value of art-amusement must be lowered by making it unlimited, massproduced, obtainable by all and eventually produced by all.²¹

The idea that “anything can be art” comes from Cage and Duchamp, of course; Maciunas also retains Cage's idea that the artist has a specific function, which can be distinguished from that of the audience—at least until everyone becomes an artist. Maciunas's opposition to commodity and institutional value in art clearly resonates with DeMaria, as does his idea that art-amusement dwells on insignificance. The term *art-amusement* itself points to an aspect of Fluxus that is not foregrounded by either Cage or Demaria: a robust sense of humor. Although Fluxus was very much a product of the kind of ruminations on the nature and limits of art in which Cage and DeMaria were both engaged, it inflected those ruminations with an antic sense of humor that was frequently manifest in the rowdiness of Fluxus performances. Placing Fluxus at the juncture of high-art avant-gardism and more explicitly comic or ludic traditions, Maciunas concludes that “it is the fusion of Spikes [*sic*] Jones, vaudeville, gag, children's games and Duchamp.”

It is worth noting that Maciunas took very seriously the populist, democratic ideology of Fluxus he alludes to when he talks about mass production and mass accessibility. That kind of mass production was what Maciunas strove for in the Fluxus program of publishing books and multiples. Like André Breton, the “pope” of surrealism, Flux pope Maciunas tried to align

his group with a leftist ideology. Ultimately, Maciunas was no more successful in imposing that ideology on Fluxus than Breton had been with the surrealists.

Fluxus "Music"

I have already referred to Fluxus productions as "performances" and mentioned that they often have been grouped with other forms of performance art of the 1960s and 1970s, to which they certainly bear a family resemblance. It is crucial to keep in mind, however, that unlike the makers of happenings and other forms of performance art, Fluxus artists generally defined and presented their performances as *music*, often at music festivals and venues such as the Carnegie Recital Hall. Like classical music, Fluxus performances were generated from scores. Unlike traditional classical music notations, these scores are usually verbal, though some involve graphics. By preserving the basic textual structure of classical music, Fluxus was able both to mount a critique of the cultural pretension surrounding classical music and to avail itself of the indeterminate, collaborative aspects of the musical score as a textual form. Rather than presenting an exhaustive account of the performances done under the Fluxus banner or attempting to address the work of all participants, I will focus here on two types of pieces: satirical, sometimes violent, commentaries on the conventions of musical performance, including the uses of musical instruments, and gentler, more contemplative works.

One of the least violent of Fluxus compositions that nevertheless involves the abuse of a musical instrument is Benjamin Patterson's *Variations for Double Bass*,²² an instrument Patterson himself plays. The score reads, "17 variations are performed, such as locating pin of bass over location of performance on map, attaching clothespins on strings and rattling them, agitating strings with comb, corrugated board, feather duster or chain, eating edibles from peg box, posting a letter through the *f* hole, etc., etc., etc."²³ Through the indignities to which he subjects an instrument important to both classical music and jazz, Patterson pokes fun at the status of musical instruments as sacred objects. He even makes light of the avant-garde's own mockery of that sacred status. Placing clothespins on the bass's strings is reminiscent of the kinds of "preparations" Cage made in his pieces for "prepared piano," such as the *Concerto for Prepared Piano and Orchestra* (1951), for which the piano is altered by the insertion of various wooden and metal objects into the strings. Cage was concerned in those pieces to widen the piano's timbral range and to introduce an element of chance into piano playing, since the exact behavior of the elements placed on the strings cannot be predicted. Patterson's piece can be seen as satirical of Cage's intentions. The musician seems to be

preparing the bass, but never playing it. Some of the "preparations," such as posting a letter through the hole, are comic bits with no specifically musical significance. Patterson emphasizes the performative (visual) side of Cage's approach at the expense of its musical (aural) aspect. In this way, the Fluxus definition of music was even more radical than Cage's. Whereas Cage posited that any sound could be musical but defined the realm of the gestural as theater, Fluxus asserted that music need not produce sounds but could consist solely of performed actions.

Patterson's misuse of his bass and mockery of musical conventions are mild in comparison with the humiliations suffered by music and its instruments at the hands of Nam June Paik, the well-known video artist who was a Fluxus mainstay in the 1960s. Paik's pieces are often sensationalistic and overtly aggressive. At the Dusseldorf "Neo-Dada in der Musik" concert in 1962, Paik performed his most notorious piece, *One for Solo Violin*, by raising a violin very slowly over his head, then bringing it crashing down on a table. Whereas Patterson's assault on his bass is essentially good-humored, Paik's performances were often perceived as expressionistic and fueled by strong, negative emotion on his part. Dance and performance art critic Jill Johnston, writing in the *Village Voice*, noted in her review of the 1964 Fluxus concert at the Carnegie Recital Hall that whereas Paik had previously performed *One* in a detached manner, on this occasion he seemed genuinely enraged.²⁴

In his *Suite for Transistor Radio*, Paik suggests disrupting a symphony concert by playing a portable radio between movements, adding, "I love quite much the distorted twist coming loudly from the cheap transistor radio of a teenager."²⁵ In this score, Paik takes on the role of the boor present in every symphony audience who exhibits a lack of understanding of the conventions of symphony audience behavior by applauding between movements and exaggerates it through an even less acceptable piece of behavior. By implying that the radio should be playing popular music, Paik also proposes a challenge to the distinction between the symphony as high art and the twist as popular culture. To play the twist between movements of a symphony is to create a musical work incorporating both.²⁶ It is worth comparing Paik's radio piece with Cage's *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* (1951) "for twelve radio sets playing twelve different programmes simultaneously, with their tuning, dynamics and durations (whether of sound or silence) all determined by chance."²⁷ In Cage's piece, the random noise produced by the radios under Cage's arbitrary manipulations becomes music; for Paik's piece to have its disruptive effect, the radio must be perceived as producing noise that is unacceptable within the context of symphonic music. After all, if the audience is really open to hearing all random sounds indiscriminately as music, it would not be upset at Paik's playing a radio during the symphony, and his gesture would not be

provocative. Whereas Cage uses radio noise to expand the definition of musical sound, Paik reifies the existing, conventional definitions against which his piece is an aggressive provocation.

Paik's *Étude Platonique I*, like Patterson's *Variations*, satirizes classical and contemporary music simultaneously. The score reads, in part: "play Beethoven's [*sic*] Krutzer [*sic*] Sonata very sincerely with violin without putting string [*sic*] and piano without hammer." This silent *Étude* clearly evokes Cage's well-known *4' 33"* (1952), a piano piece whose score is blank. The idea of Cage's piece is that all sounds occurring in the performance space during the stated duration of the performance constitute music. Cage's piece is expansive in spirit, inviting the audience to embrace the broadest possible definition of music. By contrast, Paik's *Étude*, like his *Suite for Transistor Radio*, is an act of aggression against the limited definition of music implicit in the classical tradition. While *Suite* interpolates foreign musical sounds into a symphony, thus sullyng its purity, *Étude* is an assault on one of the icons of classical music. Whereas Cage's *4' 33"* implies that a new form of perception can be achieved within the musical, performative, and cultural conventions of classical music, Paik takes those conventions to be rigid ideological structures, then attacks them. Cage seeks to create a new paradigm for music; Paik limits himself to criticizing the existing paradigm. Paik attacks Beethoven by reducing one of his best-known compositions to silence. Rather than using that silence to focus attention on the nonmusical sounds the audience is hearing and proposing they be heard as music, in Cage's fashion, Paik draws attention to the musical sounds the audience is *not* hearing—the silenced *Kreutzer Sonata*—and on Paik's ability to render mute the great Beethoven. Like Patterson, Paik also draws attention to the performance conventions of classical music: with Beethoven silenced, the musicians' gestures as they mime the effort of playing Beethoven "very sincerely" become the performance. Music as an audible phenomenon is replaced once again by music as a visual phenomenon.

George Maciunas, too, attacked musical conventions in his work. Like Paik's *One for Solo Violin*, Maciunas's destructive pieces are acts of violence against musical instruments. *Carpenter's Piano Piece* consists of nailing down each key of a piano, from lowest to highest (in a photograph, Maciunas is seen performing the piece on what appears to be a derelict instrument). His *Solo for Violin* (1962) is related to Paik's violin piece: "Old classic is performed on a violin. Where pauses are called for, violin is mistreated."²⁸ The strings are scraped and broken, pebbles placed inside and shaken, the violin is sawed, drilled, and hammered upon, dropped, bitten, ripped apart, and finally thrown to the audience in pieces. The affinity with Patterson's *Variations* is also apparent. But whereas Patterson's abuses of the bass are whimsical and essentially nondestructive, Maciunas's are violent and polemically anti-high

art. Like Patterson and Paik, Maciunas parodied both classical music and the avant-garde in these destructive pieces.

He also composed several pieces intended to be performed in relation to another composer's work. His *Homage to Richard Maxfield* (1962), for instance, to be performed after playing one of Maxfield's taped electronic compositions, consists in erasing the master tape while rewinding it, thus destroying Maxfield's work.²⁹ Maciunas's composition is the musical equivalent of Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953)—in both cases, a new work is produced when one artist destroys another's existing work. A key distinction is that Rauschenberg had acquired the drawing and had de Kooning's permission to erase it—but there is no indication in Maciunas's score that Maxfield would agree to its performance.³⁰ This piece reverses the polarity of the others discussed here. In Fluxus pieces involving violence to classical instruments, the "music" comes into being by destroying the instruments. Maciunas's "homage" to Maxfield suggests that the instrument (in this case, the tape recorder) can destroy the music. An electronic composition that exists only as a tape recording can be destroyed by the very same equipment on which its existence depends. (I will return to the issue of violence against the classical music tradition and musical instruments in the last section of this essay.)

The quieter side of Fluxus is best represented by George Brecht, one of the participants in Cage's class at the New School. Brecht's scores were performed at the initial Fluxus concerts in Europe, though he remained in the United States. The scores he had been writing since the mid-1950s were collected and published for the first time in 1963 as *Water Yam*, a box containing each score on a separate card.³¹ The Brecht pieces most often performed at Fluxus concerts both in Europe and New York were his "instrumental" compositions. These fall into two categories: those that call for a task to be performed during a concert and those that are more open to interpretation. Of the former, his *String Quartet* (1962): "shaking hands"; *Flute Solo* (1962): "disassembling, assembling"; and *Solo for Violin, Viola, Cello, or Contrabass* (1962): "polishing" were among the most frequently performed. The performance of each consisted of the action described in the score: four musicians shook hands; a performer took a flute apart, then put it back together; a stringed instrument was polished. These clearly constitute a musical equivalent of "meaningless work" in the sense that performance conventions and routines associated with the maintenance of instruments are performed for their own sake, divorced from their utilitarian contexts.

Brecht's more loosely interpretable instrumental compositions include *Saxophone Solo* (1962): "Trumpet"; *Organ Piece*: "Organ"; *Concerto for Clarinet* (1962): "Nearby"; *Piano Piece*: "Center"; and *Piano Piece* (1962): "A vase of

flowers on(to) a piano." The point of these pieces is the multiplicity of interpretations to which they can give rise. Unlike Paik's or Maciunas's destructive pieces, which make their provocative points only if performed for an audience, many of Brecht's pieces can be performed privately; some even can be realized purely conceptually. *Piano Piece (1962)* has been performed publicly by placing a vase of flowers on a piano. Doing the same thing privately is just as much a realization of the score. The notion that one can perform the piece for oneself allies Brecht's score with DeMaria's concept of "meaningless work." It also challenges a theatrical model of performance that demands the presence of an audience.³² In musical terms, however, Brecht's gesture is arguably less radical. Playing a musical composition by and for oneself is no less a performance of the score than playing the same piece for an audience. However, Brecht takes the issue of textual interpretation into conceptual realms that challenge both the theatrical and the musical models of performance. Because of the diction used in the instruction ("on(to)"), simply noticing a vase of flowers already on a piano is also a realization. *Piano Piece* ("center") has been performed by centering a piano within the performance space. Brecht also made a painting with the words "Piano Piece" along the bottom left edge and a pencilled *x* at the center of the canvas, showing that the score can be realized equally well as a performance and an art object. Brecht's refusal to distinguish between objects and performances reflects his background as a research scientist. He points out that since matter is made up of moving particles, every "object is becoming an event and . . . every event is an object."³³

Others of Brecht's scores have no musical referent and emphasize the idea of private, conceptual performance. *Two Exercises (1961)* can be realized as a physical activity (public or private) or as thought:

Consider an object. Call what is not the object "other."

EXERCISE: Add to the object, from the "other," another object, to form a new object and a new "other." Repeat until there is no more "other."

EXERCISE: Take a part from the object and add it to the "other" to form a new object and a new "other." Repeat until there is no more object.

It is virtually impossible not to realize the score for at least one of Brecht's *Three Telephone Events (1961)* in the course of daily life:

When the telephone rings, it is allowed to continue ringing, until it stops.

When the telephone rings, the receiver is lifted, then replaced.

When the telephone rings, it is answered.

Awareness of Brecht's scores can lead to self-consciousness about daily tasks and activities: every chore becomes the execution of a score and, therefore, a piece of music and a performance. With Cage, Brecht seems to say that every part of life, no matter how ordinary (a telephone call, a vase of flowers) takes on an aesthetic quality when framed as music and treated with concentration. In this respect, Brecht's work can also be seen as proposing a radical approach to textuality that is exactly opposite to the theatrical avant-garde's rejection of textuality. By becoming the execution of musical scores, events from daily life are textualized, framed, and given added meaning by their relations to the scores.

Other Fluxus artists who share Brecht's attitude toward life and art include Alison Knowles and also Takehisa Kosugi and Mieko Shiomi, two Japanese artists who joined Fluxus in its later period. Knowles often designates a specific life-activity as a public performance. The score for her *Proposition* (1962) reads: "Make a salad." *Nivea Cream Piece* (1962) has performers rub cold cream on their hands; the score for *Braid* (1964) reads: "The performers, usually two, find something to braid, hair, yarn, etc., and do so."³⁴ Kosugi's pieces (published by Fluxus in 1964) concentrate more on sensory experience than on the material circumstances of life. The score for his *Organic Music*, performed at the Carnegie Recital Hall concert by having performers breathe through large tubes, states:

Breathe by oneself or have something breathed for the number of times which you have decided at the performance.

Each number must contain breath-in-hold-out.

Instruments may be used incidentally.

Shiomi's pieces are similar to Kosugi's in their focus on the senses, but seem more spiritual in intent. *Music for Two Players II* (1963): "In a closed room / pass over 2 hours / in silence / (They may do anything but speak)." Her *Passing Music for a Tree* (1964) reads: "Pass by a tree / or let some object pass by a tree / but each time differently."³⁵

As music, these Fluxus performances can be analyzed fruitfully in terms of Attali's concept of Composition. Overtly satirical and violent Fluxus pieces like those of Patterson, Paik, and Maciunas meet only some of the requirements of Composition. They require no musical skill, can be performed by anyone, and are primarily visual in nature. I have argued here, however, that

they depend on the presence of an audience for their satirical or polemical effect. In that sense, they do not effect the breakdown in the crucial distinction between producers and consumers of music that Attali sees as the hallmark of Composition. These pieces are violent attacks on conventional notions of music and how it is performed, but they do not ultimately present an alternative way of conceptualizing and making music. Violent Fluxus compositions are perhaps best described in the terms Attali uses in a discussion of Cage: "They are not the new mode of musical production but the liquidation of the old."³⁶

The gentler side of Fluxus, represented here primarily by George Brecht, fulfills Attali's vision of Composition more completely. His pieces also require no musical skill to perform and are primarily visual in nature. Additionally, they do not require an audience—Brecht's scores are realized as effectively as private action or thought as they are as public performance. This is a crucial point, for it allows Brecht's pieces to constitute the kind of wholly idiosyncratic activity that Attali envisions, activity that in no way depends on the presence or approval of others, occurs solely for the pleasure and satisfaction of the performer, and thus completely avoids commodification. Since the performer is also the audience, that distinction is broken down in Brecht's work in the way that is central to Attali's vision of Composition.

The one respect in which neither the more violent Fluxus pieces nor Brecht's meet Attali's requirements for Composition is that they all retain the traditional relationship between composer and performer. Whereas Attali envisions a world in which each person defines what music is for him- or herself, creates it, performs it, and serves as the audience for it, Fluxus retains the conventional relationship in which the definition of music and the parameters for its performance are determined by composers who express them to performers by means of scores. I have suggested here that Fluxus did not see this form of textuality as oppressive; rather, Fluxus exploited the undetermined, collaborative nature of the musical score as a textual form. However, the Fluxus version of the composer/performer relationship is a parody of the truly conventional version, since Fluxus scores bear little resemblance to traditional musical notation and often invite idiosyncratic interpretation to a degree traditionally scored music does not. In fact, many of the scores are so widely open to interpretation that it becomes difficult to say that the composer has done anything more than create an opportunity for the performer to select a thought or action and conceive of it as music. It is implicit in Fluxus music not only that anyone can perform it but that anyone can compose it, since Fluxus music requires no more musical training or skill to invent than to perform. Once one becomes familiar with the kinds of possibilities that Fluxus opens up, it is not at all difficult to start creating one's own Fluxus pieces. Even this possibility is not truly what Attali has in mind, since to com-

pose one's own Fluxus pieces is to remain within a particular historical framework, rather than inventing a version of what "music" is that is purely one's own. Nevertheless, the dizzyingly broad definition of what can constitute music and how it can be created proposed by Fluxus represents a large step toward the kinds of freedoms Attali envisions.

In Conclusion: Two Tangents

The question of whether or not Fluxus had a lasting influence is a tricky one.³⁷ Peter Frank has argued that in the 1970s, the artists associated with Fluxus took up teaching positions and exerted an influence on a younger generation of artists.³⁸ It is also the case that certain art forms, including artist's books, nontraditional multiples, and fringe activities like mail art all gained momentum from the participation of Fluxus. But these developments belong to the world of the visual arts—it is far less clear that Fluxus had a direct and lasting influence on music.

Rather than try to argue that point one way or another, I will conclude this essay by discussing two musical phenomena from two different cultural strata—a piece by the American avant-garde composer Ben Johnston and the destruction of musical instruments in rock—that resonate in some way with the Fluxus conception of music. I am not arguing that these examples illustrate the influence of Fluxus, only that Fluxus provides a useful point of reference for thinking about them.

Casta ★ (the asterisk signifies that the performer is to insert one of his or her names into the title) is one of Ben Johnston's three *Do-It-Yourself Pieces* (1969). It can be played on any instrument; the score is a set of written instructions for constructing the piece by means of both recording technology and live performance. Part of the score reads:

Prepare sound and score components: (1) 4 segments, 45 seconds each, of vocal and instrumental noises, at least 1/3 vocal, many scatological; (2) a list of these noises clearly identifying each; (3) 25 standard repertory excerpts, from very brief to a phrase or two in length, many virtuosic.³⁹

In the first phase of performing the piece, the musician records a complex series of tape loops combining the noise segments with each other. In the second part, the musician is instructed to "go to [a] typewriter. . . . Type on file cards 25 of the sounds listed, while humming, whistling and otherwise travesty-ing your repertory excerpts." The last part of the piece brings the recorded material together with the live performance of the repertory excerpts. The musician shuffles the file cards. "Perform repertory excerpts

one by one. After each, perform noise on top file card, throwing card into audience."

Casta ★ is unlike a Fluxus piece in that it is written for a trained, even virtuosic, musician. In fact, since the piece's full impact depends on the performance of the repertory excerpts, it is imperative that the musician be highly skilled. It also exhibits none of the democratic impulse that informs *Composition*: the frame of reference of *Casta* ★ is the repertory and culture of classical music, and the piece is most meaningful to those familiar with that context. Johnston's piece is like a Fluxus composition, however, in several other respects. The score is a verbal recipe for the construction of a piece out of materials chosen by the performer rather than a specific set of musical sounds to be performed. It is highly open to idiosyncratic interpretation—Johnston's desire that the performer personalize the piece by inserting one of his or her own names into the title indicates as much. *Casta* ★ is like some of Brecht's scores in that it incorporates preparations for the performance of the piece into the piece itself. Just as Brecht transforms the maintenance of musical instruments and the social conventions that precede performance ("shaking hands") themselves into music, so the recording of tape loops and the typing of cards necessary to perform the climactic final section of Johnston's piece are incorporated into it.

Although *Casta* ★ does not call for any violence toward musical instruments, it does exhibit a disrespectful—if not openly antagonistic—attitude toward the classical repertory reminiscent of Maciunas's *Solo for Violin*. The musician is specifically instructed to travesty the repertory selections he or she has chosen. The third section brings together those selections with noises chosen by the musician, some of which are specified to be "scatological." That the classical repertory excerpts occupy no privileged position in this mix is clearly indicated by Johnston's specification that the twenty-five excerpts are equally matched by twenty-five noises. The repertory is treated with an insolent levity that is certainly congruent with the spirit of Fluxus. Johnston's penultimate instruction even bears a resemblance to the vaudevillian, comic spirit evoked by Maciunas's reference to Spike Jones: "[Recording] Technician escorts performer, still playing excerpt 25, from stage." A far cry from the dignity with which classical music performances are usually associated!

Finally, I return to musical performances that do involve the abuse and destruction of musical instruments. Rock musicians more or less contemporaneous with Fluxus also subjected their instruments to violence. Beginning in late 1964, the British band the Who developed a reputation for smashing guitars, drum kits, and amplifiers to climax their performances. In 1967, Jimi Hendrix gained instant notoriety at the Monterey Pop Festival, where the Who also appeared, in part by burning and smashing his guitar.

Although what Hendrix did in burning his guitar is finally quite differ-

ent from what Paik did in smashing a violin, there is at least one parallel to be drawn between Fluxus and Hendrix. Robert Palmer distinguishes Hendrix's destruction of his guitar at Monterey from the Who's attacks on their instruments in the following terms: "Hendrix smashed and burned his guitar, and kept his amps on full-throttle. The sound of guitar strings vibrating and uncoiling as the instrument crumpled and went up in flames wasn't just showmanship, as in the Who's instrument-smashing rampages; it was *music*."⁴⁰ For both Hendrix and Fluxus, then, the destruction of musical instruments was ironically a means of producing music, understood in Cage's expanded sense of music as incorporating both sound and theatrical spectacle. Any resemblance ends there, of course, for Hendrix's gesture cannot in any sense be understood as representing the kind of aggression against a certain musical or aesthetic tradition apparent in Maciunas's *Solo for Violin*, in which the instrument is destroyed during pauses as it is used specifically to play an "old classic." Hendrix's destruction of his guitar does not imply any antipathy toward the rock and blues he played on it that would parallel Maciunas's antagonism toward high art and the classical tradition.

Hendrix's immolation of his guitar was a curious and complex gesture. He explained to the audience at Monterey that he wanted to sacrifice something he loved to them to thank them for the favorable reception he had received at his first important performance in the United States after returning from England, where his British manager had created a group, the Jimi Hendrix Experience, around him. Burning the guitar was, then, both a personal and a spiritual ritual, a gesture of gratitude with Dionysian overtones of self-sacrifice, as if by burning his guitar, which he identified with himself as something he loved, Hendrix were allowing his audience symbolically to devour him. The Who's smashing of their equipment and Paik's and Maciunas's respective violence against classical instruments can also be seen as ritual, but each of these examples constitutes a *different kind of ritual*: I would describe The Who's violence as *social* ritual and the Fluxus destruction of instruments as *cultural* ritual. Palmer's dismissal of the Who's practices as mere showmanship notwithstanding, the Who's audiences saw the group's destructiveness as representing a generalized social antipathy with which they could identify. "Some fans experienced a vicarious thrill, the symbolic act of rage and rebellion carried out by their surrogates on stage."⁴¹ If the Who's performances provided a symbolic outlet for their audiences' antisocial anger, their music performed something of the social function Attali attributes to music in general. Attali analogizes music with scapegoat rituals to argue that all music, not just violently performed music, symbolically channels the violence inherent in society, thus providing an outlet for it and making society itself possible. As ritual, Fluxus music does not have this broad a social function. Rather, I would describe Fluxus violence against violins and pianos as a specifically

cultural ritual, the object of which is to desecrate an aesthetic order—that of high art—by smashing its sacred artifacts in its own sacred spaces.

NOTES

A shorter version of this essay was commissioned for *Art Papers* 23, no. 2 (1999): 30–35.

1. Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 134.

2. *Ibid.*

3. John Cage, *Silence* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 3.

4. It is worth noting that although Attali certainly envisions this future music as highly personal, he does not limit its production and consumption to individuals. “Any noise, when two people decide to invest their imaginary and their desire in it, becomes a potential relationship, future order” (*Noise*, 143). In Attali’s terms, it would be crucial that this order not freeze into a standardized musical vocabulary that could be performed for the pleasure of audiences, rather than solely that of its producers, for that would lead directly back to the kind of commodified music that Attali’s proposal is meant to eliminate.

5. *Ibid.*, 145.

6. Susan McClary, “The Politics of Silence and Sound,” in Attali, *Noise*, 157–58.

7. For a critique of Attali in terms of current African American musical practices, see Russell A. Potter, “Not the Same: Race, Repetition, and Difference in Hip-Hop and Dance Music,” in *Mapping the Beat*, ed. Thomas Swiss, John Sloop, and Andrew Herman (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1998), esp. 42–45.

8. Nicholas Cook, “Music Minus One: Rock, Theory and Performance,” *New Formations* 27 (1995–96): 39.

9. Stan Godlovitch, *Musical Performance: A Philosophical Study* (London: Routledge, 1998), 88, 91.

10. Peter Frank, “Fluxus in New York,” *Lightworks*, fall 1979, 29.

11. In my M.A. thesis on Fluxus performance (Hunter College, CUNY, 1980), I followed this path by seeking to place Fluxus in the contexts of avant-garde theater and performance art. Here, I prefer to explore the possibilities of thinking of Fluxus performance as music, the art form with which Fluxus artists themselves identified their performance work.

12. It is my belief that Fluxus found fertile ground for its parodistic approach to the classical music tradition in Europe in part because that tradition has more cultural presence and its historic roots run so much deeper there than in the New World.

13. For a useful discussion of Italian futurist music, see Michael Kirby, ed., *Futurist Performance* (New York: Dutton, 1971), 33–40. It is noteworthy that the most innovative futurist musician, Luigi Russolo, who invented a number of new instruments, was ultimately opposed to using them merely to re-create the sounds of nature and the city. He wanted noise to be appreciated for its own abstract qualities rather than as representation. Russolo’s commitment to the idea that music must be produced by musical instruments is quite different from Cage’s notion that real-world noise can be framed as music, a concept I discuss immediately below.

14. Michael Kirby and Richard Schechner, "An Interview with John Cage," *Drama Review* 10 (winter 1965): 55.
15. Cage, quoted by Richard Kostelanetz, *The Theater of Mixed Means* (New York: Dial Press, 1965), 54.
16. See Wilfrid Mellers, *Music in a Newfound Land* (New York: Hillstone, 1975), 188.
17. Cage, *Silence*, 12.
18. Ibid.
19. Kirby and Schechner, "Interview with John Cage," 50.
20. Walter DeMaria, "Meaningless Work," in *An Anthology of Chance Operations*, ed. LaMonte Young and Jackson MacLow (New York: Heiner Friedrich, 1970), n.p.
21. Reproduced in H. Sohm, *Happening and Fluxus* (Cologne: Koelnischer Kunstverein, 1970), n.p.
22. Where the dates of composition for Fluxus pieces are published, I have included them parenthetically in the main text.
23. Benjamin Patterson, *Variations for Double Bass*, in "Fluxfest Sale," ed. George Maciunas, *Film Culture*, winter 1966, 6.
24. Jill Johnston, "Fluxus Fuxus," *Village Voice*, July 2, 1964, 7.
25. Paik, in Sohm, *Happening and Fluxus*, n.p.
26. Paik's *Suite for Transistor Radio* is similar in this respect to a scenario described by Italian futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in his manifesto "The Variety Theatre" (1913). Marinetti suggests a similar disjunctive juxtaposition of classical and popular musical forms when he proposes to "put life into the works of Beethoven, Wagner, Bach, Bellini, Chopin, [by] introducing them with Neapolitan songs" (in Kirby, *Futurist Performance*, 184).
27. Mellers, *Music in a Newfound Land*, 182.
28. The graphic score for Maciunas's *Solo for Violin* is reproduced in Sohm, *Happening and Fluxus*, n.p.
29. The written score for Maciunas's *Homage to Richard Maxfield* is reproduced in Sohm, *Happening and Fluxus*, n.p.
30. Maciunas's score does allow for what he calls a "chicken variation": "just rewind the previously played tape of R. Maxfield without erasing."
31. Scores for all of the Brecht pieces discussed here appear in *Water Yam* (Surrey, U.K.: Parrott Impressions, c. 1975). The set was originally published by Fluxus in 1963.
32. I argued recently that such theater practitioners as Jerzy Grotowski and Augusto Boal abandoned theatrical performance as such altogether when their interests compelled them to undo the distinction between performers and spectators. See my *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999), 56.
33. Michael Nyman, "George Brecht," *Studio International*, November–December 1976, 258.
34. Scores for the Knowles pieces mentioned here appear in *By Alison Knowles* (New York: Something Else Press, 1965).
35. Scores for the pieces by Kosugi and Shiomi discussed here are reproduced in Sohm, *Happening and Fluxus*, n.p.
36. Attali, *Noise*, 137.
37. Popular musician Beck (Hansen), grandson of Happenings artist Al Hansen, claims to have been influenced by the spirit of Fluxus through his grandfather. See the

interview "Folk-Punk Poke-Fun(k) Hip-Hop Knee-Drop Kick," *World Art* 19 (1998): 92-96.

38. Peter Frank, "What/Who/When/Where/Why Is/Was/Has Been/Will Be Fluxus?" in *Young Fluxus* (New York: Artists Space, 1982), n.p.

39. *Casta ** was recorded as *Casta Bertram* by double bassist Bertram Turetzky for Nonesuch Records (LP H-71237). The score is reproduced on the album cover.

40. Robert Palmer, *Rock and Roll: An Unnuly History* (New York: Harmony, 1993), 228.

41. Paul Friedlander, *Rock and Roll: A Social History* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1996), 124.