

ALTERNATIVE TRADITIONS IN THE CONTEMPORARY ARTS :

SUBJUGATED KNOWLEDGES AND THE BALANCE OF POWER

ESTERA MILMAN



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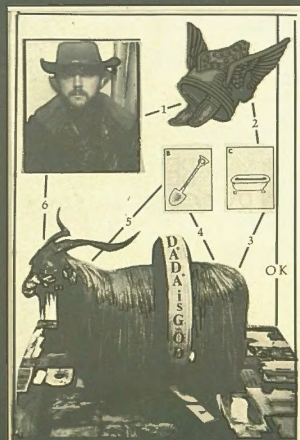
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ALTERNATIVE TRADITIONS IN THE CONTEMPORARY ARTS :

SUBJUGATED KNOWLEDGES AND THE BALANCE OF POWER

ESTERA MILMAN

with contributions by
Ken Friedman, Stephen Perkins, and Owen Smith

THE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA MUSEUM OF ART

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U.S.A. SURPASSES ALL THE GENOCIDE RECORDS!

KUBLAI KHAN MASSACRES 10% IN NEAR EAST

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2.7 U.S. Surpasses All The Genocide Records, c. 1967, designed by George Maciunas



Those people have been in actual control of the Museum's policies since its founding. With this power they have been able to manipulate artists' ideas; sterilize art from any form of social protest and indictment of the oppressive forces in society; and therefore render art totally irrelevant to existing crisis.

Interestingly enough, despite *Bloodbath's* disruptive and unmistakably confrontational presentational format, the museum public who witnessed the action remained aware that this particular event was distinguishable from the anti-war protests then taking place in the streets. That the "audience" remained conscious that they were instead positioned within a culturally sanctified (that is to say, protected) artistic arena is evidenced in a brief statement included in the Guerrilla Art Action Group's Communiqué of 18 November which explains at the close of the event, and just prior to the late arrival of the police, the crowd spontaneously applauded, "as if for a theatre piece."

In his essay "Fluxus Theory and Reception," Higgins attempts to disassociate the early historical accomplishments of the collective from what he remembers to have been the pejorative connotations of the then widely applied rubric "neo-Dada". He writes:

In the 1950s, the journalistic image of Dada was considered to be the limit of the extremely crazy in art ... Thus, early happenings and fluxus (like the works of [Robert Rauschenberg and [Jasper] Johns were often dismissed as 'neo-Dada.' This was, of course, extremely annoying for those of us who knew what Dada was or had been.¹⁰

In the early 1960s, Andy Warhol was counted among the select group of neo-Dadaists to have been singled out for membership in the newly delineated (and soon to be canonized) North American Pop Art consortium. When asked in 1963 if "pop was a bad name," Warhol (who was to continue to maintain his affiliation with the underground through his loose-knit association with some of the Fluxus people) replied:

The name sounds so awful. Dada must have something to do with Pop—it's so funny, the names are really synonyms. Does anyone know what they're supposed to mean? ... Johns and Rauschenberg—Neo-Dada for all those years, and everyone calling them derivative and unable to transform the things they use—are now called the progenitors of Pop.¹¹

George Maciunas (Fluxus' primary impresario and master of ceremonies) opened his 1962 manifesto "Neo-Dada in Music, Theatre, Poetry, Art" with the observation that "neo-dada, its equivalent, or what appears to be neo-dada, manifests itself in very wide fields of creativity."¹² For Maciunas, what appeared to be neo-Dada was "bound with the concept Concretism, [the extreme conclusion of which] is beyond the limits of art, and therefore sometimes referred to as anti-art, or art-nihilism."¹³ In a 1992 letter to me addressing my reference in print to the choice of the title "Neo-Dada in der Musik" for one of the earliest Fluxus-related European concerts, Higgins insisted that it was only because the proto-Fluxus community had no name, that they "used Neo-Dada *fait de mieux*, though [they] knew it was inaccurate."¹⁴

It is generally acknowledged that the resurgence of interest in Dada during mid-century was responsible for a shared conviction among groups of artists that art activity must be withdrawn from its special status as rarefied experience and resituated within the larger realm of everyday experience. While it is true that by the early 1960s the rubric was regularly evoked as a pejorative term by some formalist critics, what is rarely discussed is that neo-Dada was concurrently considered to be coterminous with cultural and socio-political artistic activism by other members of the art world.¹⁵ By 1963 such art writers as Barbara Rose felt compelled to correct what they understood to be "popular misconceptions that the new Dada [was] an art of social protest [and that it was] anti-art."¹⁶ Rose would also concur with many of her colleagues who insisted that John Cage had provided a "common origin [for diverse practitioners of] the new dada."¹⁷

In the late 1940s Cage had served as new music spokesman for the proto-Abstract Expressionist circle. At the time the composer (who later served as mentor, not only for Rauschenberg and Johns, but also for many of the North American participants in Fluxus, including Higgins) was accused, by some of his more conservative contemporaries, of being a "neo-Futurist."¹⁸ By the early 1960s the venerated composer felt it necessary to respond to a new set of pejorative assumptions about his dependency upon historical precedents. In the process he described Dada as a free-floating, inherently malleable trans-historical constant, the essence of which was embodied in Marcel Duchamp. On the one hand,

Cage insisted that the Dada spirit remained capable of invigorating action in response to shifting contexts and presents. He concurrently let slip that, for him, the historical movement did not come into being until after it had migrated to Paris:

Critics frequently cry "Dada" after attending one of my concerts or hearing one of my lectures. Others bemoan my interest in Zen. One of the liveliest lectures I ever heard was ... called "Zen Buddhism and Dada" ... but neither Dada nor Zen is a fixed tangible. They change; and in quite different ways in different places and times, they invigorate action. What was Dada in the 1920's [sic] is now, with the exception of the work of Marcel Duchamp, just art.¹⁹

On 13 December 1962, the Museum of Modern Art organized *A Symposium on Pop Art*. Although this event served as a pivotal moment in the art world's process of identification and codification of an appropriate set of prerequisite defining terms for what has come to be known as North American Pop Art, at this point in time the lines of demarcation among those artists who were about to be canonized and those who were to remain outside mainstream art-historical discourse had as yet not been set. In his introductory comments, Peter Selz (MoMA's "curator of painting and sculpture exhibitions") attempts to explain why "Pop Art" was chosen over "New Realism" as a descriptive term for the new phenomenon that had recently spread from coast to coast. Selz further recounts that "the term neo-Dada was rejected because it was originally coined in the pejorative and because the work in question bears only superficial resemblance to Dada [which] was a revolutionary movement primarily intended to change life itself."²⁰ Contrary to Higgins' aforementioned assertion in "Fluxus Theory and Reception," a number of the MoMA panelists were in agreement that (unlike the new art), historical Dada had mounted a conscious attack against conformity and the bourgeoisie. They further concurred that, motivated by social passion the movement had launched a sophisticated attack on a society held culpable for the First World War. Although Cage is credited on more than one occasion as precursor to the new art, the transcript for the 1963 session includes less than laudatory reference to Duchamp, who served, in turn, as the composer's own mentor. Having accused the new art of appearing to be about the real world, while at the same time remaining dependent upon its sanctification through its "fraudulent relationship [with the] tradition of Dada," Hilton Kramer (then art critic for *The Nation*) continued:

But pop art does, of course, have its connections with art history. Behind its pretensions looms the legendary presence of the most overrated figure in modern art: Mr. Marcel Duchamp. It is Duchamp's celebrated silence, his disavowal, his abandonment of art, which has here—in pop art—been invaded, colonized and exploited.²¹

As had been the case for Kramer in the early 1960s, in his much-used introductory art-

NOTES

1. Tristan Tzara, "New York Dada," in Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray, eds, *New York Dada* (April 1921). A facsimile of this little magazine appears in Robert Motherwell, ed, *The Dada Painters and Poets, New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, Inc. and Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1951/89* pp. 214-18.
2. Wolf Vostell interviewed by Giancarlo Politi, *Flash Art*, nos. 72-3 (March-April 1977), reprinted in *Flash Art*, no. 149 (Nov-Dec 1989), p. 102.
3. "Interview with Milan Knížák," *Flash Art*, nos. 72-3 (March-April 1977) reprinted in *Flash Art*, no. 149 (Nov-Dec 1989), p. 104.
4. Estera Milman, "Road Shows, Street Events, and Fluxus People: A Conversation with Alison Knowles," in Milman, ed, *Fluxus: A Conceptual Country*, Rhode Island, *Visible Language*, no. 98, 1992. This author's definition of Fluxus as a conceptual country was precipitated by Ken Friedman and George Maciunas' *Visa Tourist: Passport to the State of Flux* a piece first proposed by Friedman in 1966 and realized by Maciunas in 1977.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Tristan Tzara, "Zurich Chronicle, 1915-1919," in Hans Richter, *Dada Art and Anti-Art*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1965, p. 226. Tzara is referring to the appearance in print of the first issue of the little review *Dada*, for which he served as editor.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*, p. 227.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 228.
10. Dick Higgins, "Fluxus Theory and Reception," paper presented during "Fluxus: A Workshop Series. The University of Iowa's Alternative Traditions in the Contemporary Arts" (April 1985), unpaginated. Although this essay has appeared in print, I have chosen to refer to the manuscript that the author sent me.
11. Andy Warhol, "What is Pop Art? Interviews with GR Swenson," *Art News*, vol. 62, no. 7 (Nov 1963), p. 61.
12. George Maciunas, "Neo-Dada in Music, Theatre, Poetry, Art" (c. 1962), reproduced in Clive Phillipot and Jon Hendricks, eds., *Fluxus: Selections from the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1988, p. 27. The manifesto was presented by Artus C. Caspari in Wuppertal, on 9 June 1962.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Dick Higgins to the author, "4 October 1992, Buster Keaton's Birthday [1898]."
15. See, for example, Edward T. Kelly, "Neo-Dada: A Critique of Pop Art," *Art Journal*, vol. 22 no. 3 (Spring 1964).



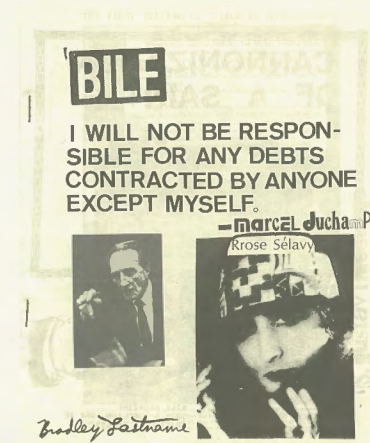
2.11 Flux Year Box 2, c. 1968, George Maciunas, ed. Contributions of objects, games and scores by George Brecht, Willem de Ridder, Frederic Lieberman, Ken Friedman, Claes Oldenburg, James Riddle, Paul Sharits, Bob Shoff, Ben Vautier, Robert Watts, and film loops by: Eric Andersen, John Cale, John Cavanaugh, Albert Fins, Dan Lauffer, George Maciunas, Yoko Ono, Stan Vanderbeek, and Wolf Vostell.

16. Barbara Rose, "Dada Then and Now," *Art International*, vol. 7 no. 1 (Jan 1963), p. 24.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
18. See Estera Milman, "Futurism as a Submerged Paradigm for Artistic Activism and Practical Anarchism," *South Central Review: A Journal of the South Central Modern Language Association*, vol. 13 no. 2-3 (Summer/Fall 1996), pp. 157-79.
19. John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press 1961, p. xi.
20. "A Symposium on Pop Art," *Arts Magazine*, vol. 37 no. 7 (April 1963), p. 36.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
22. Norbert Lynton, *The Story of Modern Art*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1980, p. 319.
23. Max Kozloff, "An Interview with Robert Motherwell," *Artforum*, vol. 4 no. 1 (Sept 1965), p. 37.



24. *Ibid.*
25. Dick Higgins, Respondent's statement, "Fluxus-Forum Symposium," Walker Art Center, 13-14 February 1993, manuscript version, unpaginated.
26. Robert Pincus-Witten, "Fluxus and the Silvermans: An Introduction," in Jon Hendricks, *Fluxus Codex*, New York: Abrams, 1988, p. 16.
27. Hendricks, *Fluxus Codex*, p. 22.
28. *Ibid.*

3. PROCESS
AESTHETICS,
ETERNAL
NETWORKS,
READY-MADE
EVERYDAY
ACTIONS AND
OTHER
POTENTIALLY
DANGEROUS
DRUGS



3.1 Bile, n.d., Brodley Lastname, et.



Steve Boyd & Ken



Teddy



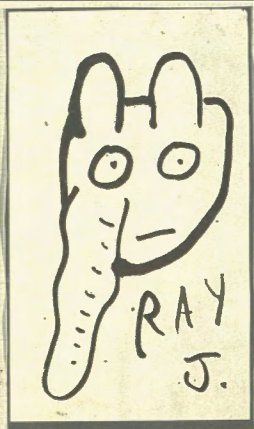
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To K.F.

DOWN WITH DUG DULL DADA!

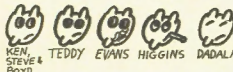
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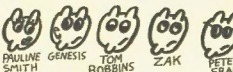
DREVA CAVELLINI BUSTER RAY



KEN, STEVE & BOYD TEDDY EVANS HIGGINS DADALAND



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