

tomas schmit: on fluxus

at a pond in tiergarten park at dawn.

a little white sea gull comes swimming over, how NICE; oh dear, is it just a ball of picnic paper?, how NASTY; or could it even be a birdie, folded from paper, perhaps by children?, how DELECTABLE.

a confectionery shop owner in cologne once proved that he knew, what his business was worth: what is this fly doing in my cake?!, the lady with the silver spoon exclaims in disgust; you what?!, he laughs, that's a raisin!, grabs it with the tips of his fingers, and with a beaming smile puts it in his mouth and consumes it, the cockroach, always at your service m'am....

looking across the big pond now, i can feel anything about f. from relaxed to enthusiastic happiness, as well as repulsion which gives me goose bumps, and although i know, how much i owe f., i'll try here not to declare insects to be dried fruit, though i'm not necessarily immune to interpreting one fly or another into my mouth and raisin into my own pocket....

to put it roughly: what i consider to be the essence of f., is still underestimated. the rest, the stuff as a whole, is nowadays highly OVERestimated!

let me sort a bit,

- a. the performances,
- b. the publications,
- c. the friends,
- d. the theory, the ideology,
- e. the style.

a. the *klartext* aesthetics.

what was or has become or in any case stayed important to me in f. shows best in the performances (especially of the european f.-festivals). a new kind of realism. george brecht's „solo for violin: • polishing“ (1962): sitting on stage and polishing a violin. just like – no, not at all like you would polish your violin at home; there, you would do it in a more relaxed or precise way or just more casually. but also not in the way an ACTOR on stage would try to treat the violin as relaxed etc. as a violinist at home. but rather polishing a violin just in the way you polish a violin when you sit on stage. and emmett williams' „counting song“: he counts the audience, until he knows, how many people are sitting down there, that's it.

and maciunas' „olivetti-piece“: strips of (as far as art is concerned, random) number-columns from a calculator serve as the score. each performer is assigned a number and a brief action. a metronome or a conductor counts from row to row. and whenever your number comes up in the row, you perform your action.

and so on, one piece after the other, without frippery, without hokums.

(the rosy image i have preserved from these events has

only been slightly tainted due to maciunas' illogical tendency to wear old fashioned, formal clothes, making it all a bit operetic, gaglike, haoxy. sometimes it even seemed as though maciunas had no real understanding of the trail he was blazing.

later, after f., i.e. maciunas, had returned to n.y., this tendency to corny, party-joke stupidity increased obviously also in the performances to what i felt unbearable...).

the term „concept art“ was shaped in an essay by henry flynt in 1961, which appeared in „an anthology“ in 1963. in this very same „anthology“ la monte young already presents one of its figurehead pieces (the others are in brecht's „water yam“), a piece from 1960!: an envelope is glued on a page of the book. inside the envelope, a white card with a straight black line approximately through the middle. written on the envelope, besides the title, etc.: „the enclosed score is right side up when the line is horizontal and slightly above center“ (!).

– – the slippery staircase (the indication).

the caretaker's wife is cleaning the stairs with soft soap, she warns me.

next thing, a mob of children roisters up the stairs, she warns them, too: watch out, children, the stairs are SLIPPERY.

they fall silent, almost in sheer aw. as if they were witnesses to the *kasperle* facing a particularly dodgy adventure, breath-taken and on their tip toes they experience the slippery stairs.

before, they were nothing, at most steep, exhausting, expectation enhancing, an ignorable gap between this position and that, in any case just an end-mean – all of a sudden they've become something in themselves, the stairs. they're slippery. really nicely slippery. – –

a piano can – if not just as a podium for a flower vase (which in turn is indeed a brecht-piece...) – not only be used to move one's fingers in the way mr. liszt and friends came up with.

it just is to be indicated, now and then.

la monte young's „piano piece for david tudor #2“ (1960) remains my favourite piece: open the key cover of the piano, without letting it make the slightest sound. try as often as you like. until it works or you give up. the audience will (at most...) get the indication. for the performer, the piece is a spectacular amusement.

b. draw no line and follow it.

f. came from the new york action music- and concept-activities of people like la monte young and george brecht; after maciunas had come to wiesbaden, f. initially saw itself as reservoir for just about anyone and anything that wasn't expressively and abstractly pedaling right through the middle of mainstream art of the time (which can easily be seen in the wiesbaden festival program and the first publication announcements); very soon, however, it condensed itself to a group of quite specific people and quite specific activities; and after maciunas

had returned to new york, it soon evaporated into a hodge of mish and podge of mash...; no wonder, that a diffuse perception of f. has prevailed, and that everyone (even of those involved!) sees something else in f., and that nowadays the strangest people refer to f., cling to f., etc....

my perception of f. is based on its dense time in europe – and this by no means only because that happened to be the time that i was involved in it.

in the european f.-times (1962/63), aside from countless flyers, six very different publications appeared. the tiny presentation of la montes gigantic piece „draw a straight line and follow it“, a consistent, harmonious all around, content-heavy booklet, stands out. same goes, of course, for brechts „water yam“, in any case for the content of the box. maciunas' instant-lettering-rage, though, already strikes at the label..., for nights he rummaged through piles of letraset sheets, to find letters of various possible types and sizes to craft into the weirdest of arrangements – i never understood that, never liked the results and consider this kind of gag-design to be one of the many thorns in the side of f. paik's post music „the monthly review of the university for avant-garde hinduism“, a mailing-action, didn't quite work somehow.

spoerri's collection of glasses „l'optique moderne“ with texts by dufrêne seems a bit strange in the context of f.. a booklet with old-fashioned silly pointer fingers..., first kick of the other cloven foot of f.-design!.... and the long „review-preview-pew“-roll brings on the front side an abundance of announcements (of which only a tiny fraction was fulfilled), on the back at least some pieces and photos.

#### c. the party.

within half a year meeting ludwig gosewitz, meeting addi kōpcke, meeting emmett williams, ben patterson, george maciunas, alison knowles, dick higgins (and all that, because a full half-year before, more or less coincidentally, i'd met nam june paik), later meeting george brecht – THAT WAS THE TRUE FESTIVAL! the others surely felt in a similar way back then. and that's where, and not only from maciunas' tireless motor activity, the energy came from, to make all these performances etc. happen!, where else should it have come from?: there was no money to be made, no fame to be harvested, the rest of the art scene ignored us (besides a few glorious exceptions like wilhelm, jährling), the press managed, at best, to squeeze some malicious commentary on the last page between the calf with five legs and the royal wedding....

well, but wasn't there anything like „enthusiasm for the MATTER“? surely in maciunas. but most of the rest of us weren't exactly fighting spirits....

the flip side of the coin:

the stronger the guys, the less in alliance they were with f., paik only with half earnest, addi more for fun, diter

rot not at all.

last year in zurich, dieter said to me, this (f.) had just been a pair of pliers to pinch other(s/artists?).

yes, sure, there's something to that. and it's a hell of a lot easier to pinch others in the ass with pliers, than to have a nice ass!

#### d. anti-art and art hostility.

luckily, it wasn't common for f.-people then, to express themselves theoretically or even ideologically. apart from maciunas – and that weren't exactly the glory moments of f. then....

(and just being about to vehemently attack poor george here, i remembered, that in 1964 i've committed an essay with a similar heave-ho and bam-boom aesthetics, which when i read it now gives me goose-bumps running up and down my spine...; i had wanted to write, too, that at that time none of us has given a shit about maciunas' ideology...: i at least obviously have let it infect me more, than the present understanding of myself would like to admit...).

„away with ...!“ – „to war with ...!“ – maciunas: serious art, i.e. the fine one, the pure one, the unique one — in being individualistic, professional (thus bestowing the artist his livelihood), parasitic, irreplaceable, elitist, creatable only by the artist and nobody else, having the value of goods, being complex, serious, reflection of the artist's ego, and so on, and so forth — be to be abolished.

in contrast, f.-art-entertainment should show that anything can be art and anyone can make art that is simple, entertaining, without value of goods, thus unlimited, mass-produced, available to anyone and at last producible by anyone, presenting simple natural occurrences, games, gags, etc.; and the (former) artist should earn his living by socially constructive work, by applying to the applied arts, design journalism graphics architecture printing and the like..., whoa.

and finally of course the thorn, that keeps pricking wherever bold ideologies find themselves confronted with the daily routine of their establishment: the current f.-activities, i.e. the concerts and the publications, are just a transitional solution, until the fine arts have finally been abolished and the former artists have been retrained into socially constructive jobs... --- so, f. hasn't been f. yet, f. was just a transition to the real f...., phew, that was close!

mind you, i only reported the above with protest, goosebumps and quotation marks. and i don't know either, whether maciunas actually meant all that and wanted to realize it through f., or whether he just believed, the (make-believe) nonsense of f. needed such a massive and drastic web von *feind- und wunsch- und wahn- und trugbildern* as a legitimating backdrop, or whether he even just took over a historic ideology (he repeatedly referred to the soviet LEF-group of 1929) and foisted it just like that on his and our activities.

on the one hand using nonsense to twit-mock the avantgarde (which, by the way, he didn't consider f. to be part of!) and the high-art, on the other hand (using that same nonsense?) entertaining the masses?...: that's quite tight-ropy. – and the socially constructive arts, i can't help laughing: the graphics and design that maciunas brought into f. was anything but the constructive section of it – that's all so damned oblique from the beginning / < \ > / < \ > / < \ > / < \ > to the end.

if i were to establish a f.-theory, only small parts of the above would appear, and these from quite different views.

because i still believe (well, since quite a while i do...), that proper structures only evolve from proper tendencies, not from power-acrobatics, and that sublime aims and wrong paths belong together like soup without salt.

e. the notf., unf., antif. in f..

one of the ignition sparks for the european f.-activities was the cooccurrence of american lack of style and european sullenness about style, american crawliness and european fantasy, american impartiality and european logic, and so on.

this made blossoms, where it worked, and fierce thorns, where it didn't (and when the band had returned to the u.s.a., the lack of this friction, i say, caused the whole thing to flatten so much).

i consider – besides maciunas' crampy ideology – the design of f. to be the coarsest burden of it!

i've already said how annoying, inadequate and what a pity i find maciunas' letraset-jokes.

according to my perception of f., a f.-typography would be, if that is at all possible, one without style and ambition!, a *klartext*-typography, meaning:

clear, readable, uniform letters from left to right, one after the other, and one line and then comes [from right to left] the next one, etc., and that's it. this occurred far too seldom in f. (although maciunas had the makings for this, as well).

and then came those „v tre“-newspapers..., which i found and find utterly repulsive!, stuffed with old fashioned-queer images from some frilly-nostalgic old books and brochures..., such desperately trying pseudo-humor, that, at best, can only be found in bellowing thigh-slapping bar gossip tabloids for cheerful students or young academics.

when i wrote that to maciunas, he offered me 4 dollars (!...) for a copy of such a paper and apart from that he lapsed into the feudalistic plural, the „committee“ (after all, the quotation marks came from him, at least) had unanimously rejected my suggestions...

and finally all these little jars and objects and thingies and (partly intricate) hokums... – i find it frightening that at the end f. degenerated into a barely mediocre joke article business!!

„f.“ was originally just meant to become the title of the

second volume of the „anthology“, but then, due to all sorts of circumstances, due to maciunas' unstoppable motor activity, due to the dollars he earned in wiesbaden – which meant a lot in those days –, and due to the congregating of various people and their ideas of art, it became something that nowadays some would call a „movement“. it wasn't that at all, the participants remained individuals and weren't at all „members“ (though maciunas later on saw it that way...), the ideological goals were, as far as they existed, diffuse and, fortunately, without great impact. but it influenced art a bit. and some life or another. mine for sure.

after all this whining i don't want to conceal what i consider to be the ACHIEVEMENTS of f. – even at the risk of becoming euphoric now, all of a sudden...; without claiming them to be complete, balanced, and coherent, a few aspects:

like dada, f. was anti-expressionistic and anti-academic. in the 50s, art had once again reached a strange academic stage. the materials that one had got to know in art academy, were arranged onto canvases that one had learned to stretch there (well, in music one would snip tapes or tinker a series or two, etc.), and as content wasn't exactly in great demand, suddenly, all that was left was the pure artist's gesture.

f. succeeded in presenting ART WITHOUT GESTURE!, for instance, by using the number strip of a calculator or the contours of the manhattan skyline or the like as the score for a music or performance piece. such came, of course, – like quite a few f.-thoughts and -people – from cage, f. just developed, objectified and coarsened it a bit.

actually, many f.-pieces were so (in the best sense of the word:) simple, that it made no difference whether an experienced f.-performer did them or someone from the audience or the housekeeper's daughter's boyfriend.

what i learned from f., along with many other things: what can be mastered by a sculpture, doesn't have to be erected as a building; what can be brought by a painting, doesn't have to be made as a sculpture; what can be accomplished in a drawing, doesn't have to become a painting; what can be cleared on a scrap of paper, doesn't need to be done as a drawing; and what can be settled in the head, doesn't even require a paper scrap! – how beautiful that there were so many small, simple, short pieces in f..

exciting the pieces that were so quite seamlessly embedded in space and time of the performance situation. a piece i think by dick higgins: each of the performers stays on stage (such zero-action was quite thrilling), UNTIL a certain incident takes place, that the performer has thought out as cue for his exit. so, for example, that somebody coughs, or a particular person in the audience says something, or a telephone ringing is heard from somewhere, or the like... – well, one day emmett had decided to leave when eric left, and eric wanted to leave right after emmett...; there was made

rather short work, and the piece was edited: these two are NOT still standing there!

la monte young's mentioned piano cover piece: a downright delightful experience for the performer, rather boring, at the most puzzling, for the audience...: maybe a better reference to the „do it yourself!“ than maciunas' (and today other people's as well) ideologic babble.

let's assume there are people who feel well in brahms-concerts. can one imagine a pianist who feels WELL while executing a brahms sonata?? – the f.-performers did feel at least as well as the f.-audience. at least. all right!

european f. took place completely outside the art market!, there were no objects to buy, in any case none were bought, and by no means was it about television rights or anything like that. today, there are hardly any photos of the festivals, not to mention recordings or films....

it was a really open club. i as a shy 18 year old guy was just like that accepted as friend and comrade.

back then, a happening-hero said: you guys, you're just old fashioned, you're performing on traditional podiums, whereas our things take place in slaughterhouses, quarries, marshalling yards!... – well, i prefer new things in a place that is designed, built, and comfortable for such events, to any symbolistic opera type spectacle in some film type environment.

and last night i dreamt of a chair that, every time your ass lightly pressed upon it, electronically produced loud farts....

anti-art and its spreading.

la monte young's „composition 1960 #13“:

„the performer should prepare any composition and then perform it as well as he can.“

and, of course, again and again, from the same year, his „DRAW A STRAIGHT LINE AND FOLLOW IT.“  
: activator becomes passivator and stays both!

maybe it's not quite clear, yet – to me neither –, what i mean by *klartext* aesthetics:

art stands on legs of which some, particularly when the art is ever so rotten and corpsey, make perfect crutches – as there are socle, aura, ideology, and the like. so it may be tempting to try to produce art, which can do without any such supports: a tickling, because impossible venture.

„i'm just gonna walk around three street corners“: as soon as i announce this as an art-event, it has got its socle. if i don't announce it, just do it, but do it differently from the day to day getting rolls and going to the pub, it has got it as well, a sort of inner socle. and i don't want to have roll shopping and bar hopping declared to be art, work should remain work and *schnaps schnaps*....

still there are some true ways to this mock end!  
(are you kidding?, said the snail to the horizon when it finally had reached it.)

one way is to call things by their names. in this context, manzoni's piece remains among the best [\* an ordinary socle is inscribed „socle du monde“ and stands by its UPPER side in the grass].

the f.-way was, to avoid all symbolistic, feuilletonistic, expressive, or any other showing-off gimmicks as much as possible, and to come up with things as simple, concrete, FORMFREE as ever possible – whereby the socle on which they take place (podium, announced event) and the aura („avantgarde!“) wouldn't really be abolished but, however, sort of exposed to open, hearty laughter.

a socle with an art- or *kaiser wilhelm* placed upon it seems nastier to me than one with a keg of beer or a SMALLER SOCLE on it!,

the bumble bee sits on the flower, the flower is in the vase, the vase is put on the piano, the piano stands on stage, the stage rests in art, art squats on life, life is based on matters, matters dash through space-time from final to big bang, the bumble bee stops its ears now and then.

or, the other way round:

a large flat socle, a smaller socle on top of it, again a smaller one on top of this one, again a smaller one on it, and so on and so on (and on top, finally, a sunburn-molecule): the pharaohs already knew to do that.

a sign post, sort of round,  
that says » 0,0 Km – 0 Min. « on it,  
in short: a tree.

9.8.1982: written in german for the catalogue „1962wiesbadenfluxus1982“; translated and 2 little additions\* \* : 11.4.2005

\* when i wrote this first, my time with george maciunas was 19 years ago, now it's almost 42 years ago.... it was rather close: from spring to summer 1963 i stayed in his flat near wiesbaden to help him. mainly typing all the print stuff. on a huge ibm with, quite new to me (or us europeans); *rand-ausgleich*: even the final copy had to be typed twice. in the first go, after each line you could see how many units it was too short, or too long, and you noted this number behind the line. and in the final final typing, in each line you had to add, or pick out, the noted number of units, in a distributed sort of way so that it wouldn't strike, to accomplish the desired *blocksatz*. – though, i'm afraid, maybe i was too young (just switching from 19 to 20) to understand george. i understood much more of him by emmett's (who a few days ago celebrated his 80th!, chapeau!;) wonderful book „mr. fluxus“ (1996)!  
i just want to say: if i were to write an essay like the above one now, i could take over most of it.  
but in any case i'd be much less harsh to george! i mean, he, though 12 years older, never acted in a father's way on me. why should i, 19 or 42 years later, act that way on him?! • t.s.