On A Table Sits A Grapefruit- A Looking Back on Fluxus

Elaina Barnett

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On A Table Sits A Grapefruit- A Looking Back on Fluxus

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for the Murray State University Honors Diploma

Elaina Barnett

December 2017
Table of Contents

List of Figures i

Abstract xiii

On a Table Sits a Grapefruit- A Looking Back on Fluxus (Intro) 1

The Historical Avant-Gardes 3

Anti-Art as Key in Avant-Garde Thought 12

Fluxus Formation and Precursors 14

East-Asian Philosophies in Relation to Avant-Garde Work 21

The Roles of Yoko Ono and Nam June Paik in Fluxus 23

Fluxus as an Influence on My Work 36
List of Figures

Fig. 1 *Opposite*, Umberto Boccioni, 1911

Fig. 2 *Karawane*, Hugo Ball, 1916

Fig. 3 *Fountain* (signed R. Mutt), Marcel Duchamp, 1917

Fig. 4 *Fluxus Manifesto*, George Maciunas, 1963

Fig. 5 *Painting to be Stepped on*, Yoko Ono, 1961
(from *Paintings and Drawings by Yoko Ono*)

Fig. 6 *Painting Until it Becomes Marble*, Yoko Ono, 1961
(from *Paintings and Drawings by Yoko Ono*) (accordion book)

Fig. 7 *Grapefruit*, Yoko Ono, 1964 (book)

Fig. 8 *Instructions for Painting to See the Skies*, Yoko Ono, 1961
(part of *Grapefruit*)

Fig. 9 *Kuba TV*, Nam June Paik, 1963

Fig. 10 *Magnet TV*, Nam June Paik, 1965

Fig. 11 *TV Buddha*, Nam June Paik, 1974

Fig. 12 *Yard*, Allan Kaprow, 1961

Fig. 13 *Water Walk*, John Cage, 1960
(experimental music performance on television)

Fig. 14 *Endless Box*, Shiomi Chieko, 1963-1964

Fig. 15 *With Callused Fingers*, Elaina Barnett, 2017 (from *Yours,*

Fig. 16 *we must be held afloat like this*, Elaina Barnett, 2017 (from *Yours,*

Fig. 17 detail of *we must be held afloat like this*, Elaina Barnett, 2017
(from *Yours,*

Fig. 18 Installation of poem-call phone numbers, Elaina Barnett, 2017
(from *Yours,*

Fig. 19 Installation of poem-call phone numbers, Elaina Barnett, 2017
(from *Yours,*

i
Fig. 20  Installation of poem-call phone numbers, Elaina Barnett, 2017
(from Yours)

Fig. 21  No one has seen them made or heard them made, Elaina Barnett, 2017
(from Yours)

Fig. 22  detail of No one has seen them made or heard them made, Elaina Barnett, 2017
(from Yours)
Figures

Fig. 1  *Opposite*, Umberto Boccioni, 1911

Fig. 2  *Karawane*, Hugo Ball, 1916
Fig. 3  *Fountain* (signed R. Mutt), Marcel Duchamp, 1917

**Manifesto:**

2. To affect, or bring to a certain state, by subjecting to, or treating with, a flux. “Flushed into another world.”
3. Med. To cause a discharge from, as in purging flux. (Fluxus, n. [OF., fr. L. fluxus, & fluxus, fluxum, to flow. See FLUENT; cf. FLUSH, n. [ME. cardsh.]
1. Med. a. A number of liquid discharge from the bowels or other part, esp. an excessive and morbid discharge as in the blood. b. A stream or stream of liquid.
2. To cause to flow; to pass in a continuous current.

**Purge the world of bourgeois sickness, intellectual, professional & commercialized culture, PURGE the world of dead art, imitation, artificial art, abstract art. illusionistic art, mathematical art, PURGE THE WORLD OF "EUROPEANISM"!**

2. A stream or stream of liquid.
3. A continuous moving on or passing by, as of a flowing stream; a continuous succession of changes.
4. The setting in of the tide toward the shore; to reflux.
5. State of being liquid through heat, fusion, rate.

**PROMOTE A REVOLUTIONARY FLOOD AND TIDE IN ART.**

Promote living art, anti-art, promote NON ART REALITY to be fully grasped by all peoples, not only critics, dilettantes and professionals.

7. Chem. & Metall. a. Any substance or mixture used to promote fusion, esp. the fusion of metals or minerals. Common metallurgical fluxes are silica and carbonates, soda, lime, and limestone fluxes, and fluorspar; neutral fluxes. b. Any substance applied to surfaces to be joined by soldering or welding, to promote their union.

**FUSE the cadres of cultural, social & political revolutionaries into united front & action.**

Fig. 4  *Fluxus Manifesto*, George Maciunas, 1963
Fig. 5  *Painting to be Stepped on*, Yoko Ono, 1961 (from *Paintings and Drawings by Yoko Ono*)

Fig. 6  *Painting Until it Becomes Marble*, Yoko Ono, 1961 (from *Paintings and Drawings by Yoko Ono*)
(accordion book)
Fig. 7  *Grapefruit*, Yoko Ono, 1964 (book)

Fig. 8  Instructions for *Painting to See the Skies*, Yoko Ono, 1961 (part of *Grapefruit*)

PAINTING TO SEE THE SKIES

Drill two holes into a canvas.
Hang it where you can see the sky.

(Change the place of hanging.
Try both the front and the rear
windows, to see if the skies are
different.)

1961 summer
Fig. 9  *Kuba TV*, Nam June Paik, 1963

Fig. 10  *Magnet TV*, Nam June Paik, 1965

Fig. 11  *TV Buddha*, Nam June Paik, 1974
Fig. 12  *Yard*, Allan Kaprow, 1961

Fig. 13  *Water Walk*, John Cage, 1960 (experimental music performance on television)

Fig. 14  *Endless Box*, Shiomi Chieko, 1963-1964
Fig. 15  *With Calloused Fingers*, Elaina Barnett, 2017 (from *Yours,* )

Fig. 16  *we must be held afloat like this*, Elaina Barnett, 2017 (from *Yours,* )
Fig. 17  detail of *we must be held afloat like this*, Elaina Barnett, 2017 (from *Yours,*).

Fig. 18  Installation of poem-call phone numbers, Elaina Barnett, 2017 (from *Yours,*).
Fig. 19  Installation of poem-call phone numbers, Elaina Barnett, 2017 (from Yours,)

Fig. 20  Installation of poem-call phone numbers, Elaina Barnett, 2017 (from Yours,)
Fig. 21  *No one has seen them made or heard them made*, Elaina Barnett, 2017 (from *Yours,*

Fig. 22  detail of  *No one has seen them made or heard them made*, Elaina Barnett, 2017 (from *Yours,*
Abstract:

My intent for this thesis essay is to discuss how East Asian culture and philosophies informed the 1960’s and 1970’s artist group, Fluxus, and how the media and conceptualizations developed by Fluxus, as part of the neo-avant-garde, changed art in ways that still affects contemporary artists, including myself. I will begin with a discussion of the historical avant-garde, the reinvigoration of those ideals in the neo-avant-garde, and the key vanguard concept of anti-art. Following, will be a brief expansion on what aspects of East-Asian culture appealed to the Euro-American vanguard artists of the mid-twentieth century. I will end with an analysis of Yoko Ono’s and Nam June Paik’s roles, as Fluxus artists, in developing newer media such as performance, intermedia, and video; their roles in establishing links and communication between their peers in places like New York, Germany, and Japan; and their overall contribution to Fluxus thought and conceptualization, especially through discussion of their personal work. Once I have established these things, along with a general analysis of what Fluxus was, as a neo-avant-garde group, I will discuss how the media and conceptualizations developed by the group have, like a tree, branched out and effected contemporary art making and thought through a discussion of my current BFA thesis exhibition body of work.
On A Table Sits A Grapefruit- A Looking Back on Fluxus

Art is not a special thing. Anyone can do it. Making art does not have to be so unusual. What I mean is that middle-aged men and housewives, your neighbors, can also do it. Being an artist is not so unusual. If everyone were to become an artist, what we call “Art” would disappear. I think it would be fine if this were to happen and [what I have envisioned] becomes a reality.

-Yoko Ono, stated in the film *Aru wakamono-tachi* (Some young people), 1964

Yoko Ono, along with other Japanese artists, performed pieces in the documentary film *Aru wakamono-tachi*, which was broadcasted nationally in Japan, as a means of questioning the air of peace and happiness present in Japan after the 1964 Summer Olympics were held in Tokyo. Through their performative pieces, they critiqued the political and economic atmosphere, while also critiquing the definitions of art, as part of Japan’s vanguard art community. Many critics viewed such works negatively, filtering their analysis through a ‘Western’ Modernist understanding of value in artmaking, seeing as such challenges to cultural norms were still largely in the realm of a budding Japanese avant-garde. Yoko Ono, along with Korean artist Nam June Paik, became influential figures in Japanese and ultimately international avant-garde communities, impacting the exploration of newer media, such as performance, video, and intermedia. The interactions and relationships built between these artists and their East Asian peers, specifically Japanese, allowed for Ono and Paik to

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2 Reiko Tomii. ""International Contemporaneity" in the 1960s: Discoursing on Art in Japan and Beyond," *Japan Review*, no. 21 (2009): 124-129, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25791332. Tomii discusses the lack of need for such dated terms, in an increasingly globalized/interconnected moment in history. The terms ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ will be used, though rather tentatively, in this paper. Their use is somewhat problematic due to the limited colonial connotation they carry. As I will establish in part through this essay, the separations traditionally established anthropologically are not as concrete or realistic anymore, especially due to increasing globalization. These terms will be used in the paper as a means of referring, as is traditional anthropologically, to Asia, specifically East Asian countries (such as China, Japan, Korea, etc.) and Europe/America, respectively.
craft communication between Japanese peers and their peers in New York. Largely impacted by this interaction was the international network of neo-avant-garde artists in the Fluxus group.

The influence of East Asian culture, predominantly Zen philosophies, was already present in American culture well before the formation of Fluxus in 1961, which can be seen in the work of Fluxus precedents, such as experimental musician John Cage who found inspiration in Zen ideas of chance and absurdism. Especially during this time when their East Asian culture was highly interesting to ‘Western’ pop culture, the East-Asian artists who were connected with Euro-American avant-garde artists and thinkers became important links between Fluxus members in America, Europe, other East Asian countries, especially Japan. This network of interactions and information lead to a development of new media and conceptualizations within Fluxus and art as a whole.

In this thesis, I will establish the goals of the historical and neo-avant-gardes, describe Fluxus as a neo-avant-garde group, and analyze the roles of Ono and Paik in Fluxus, specifically. In the discussion of these two artists, I will illustrate their impact on the promotion and development of newer media such as performance, intermedia, and video; their roles in establishing links and communication between their peers in places like New York, Germany, and Japan; and their overall contribution to Fluxus thought and conceptualization, especially through their personal work. Once I have established the development of Fluxus, I will demonstrate how the media and conceptualizations developed by the group have, effected contemporary art making and thought, by discussing works in my own practice.

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As witty art critic Jerry Saltz wrote in his *Sincerity and Irony Hug it Out* (May 2010), the contemporary art world is moving towards something new, something past Postmodernism, a place where sincerity and irony “earnestness and detachment” can exist hand-in-hand. The combined use of irony and sincerity, shows a self-awareness of the place of art in society and an absurdism, which seems to me to recall neo-avant-garde use of playful absurdity and intention of challenging divisions and roles in artmaking. The attitude expressed in Ono’s statement quoted above sums up much of the twentieth century neo-avant-gardes’ attitudes and intentions towards artmaking. Though maybe not fully realized yet, the quests of neo-avant-garde artists of the 1960’s to reimagine art as something more closely aligned with real life have allowed artists to navigate and draw upon such questioning with a self-awareness that is key to this development Saltz describes. Nowadays, maybe Ono’s claims that art can be of the people and not just of an institution might be taken for granted, but when she spoke those words in that avant-garde Japanese film in 1964, they carried with them a challenge and controversy different from the acknowledgment they carry now. Intentionally evoking such critique of art and society was a stark separation from the roles other movements in the early and mid-twentieth century sought to embody. This is what set Ono and other neo-avant-garde artists in such a vanguard position in art communities. Fluxus artists, as part of the neo-avant-garde, took cues in this ideology from the historical avant-gardes of the early twentieth century.

**The Historical Avant-Gardes**

The term “avant-garde” itself originates in military use during the French Revolution. Over time it developed a political connotation as being anti-monarchy, progressive, pro-collective, and after around the 1920s, had a strong politically Socialist and Communist meaning, which will play

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into the attitudes of the art of the historical and neo-avant-gardes. According to art historian Roselee Goldberg, the avant-garde artists of the twentieth century were “impatient with the limitations of more established forms, and [were] determined to take their art directly to the public.” They were determined to break down the autonomous institution of art in a quickly changing world. The historical avant-gardes, which take place in the earlier twentieth century, felt the beginnings of these changes and pulled upon them as inspiration, as a means to connect to the public in a way that the established autonomous institution of art was unable and uninterested in doing. Miklós Szabolcsi sums this up in his writing *Avant-Garde, Neo-avant-garde, Modernism*,

> What distinguishes the avant-garde from the former is that it not only faces, endures, and registers this crisis but also tries to master it, to recreate the unity of art and public, and bring about a radical change in art and society, even if these attempts at a solution are sometimes utopian and anarchic.

Neo-avant-garde goals were to breakdown the separation of art from life, recognizing the futility of artmaking autonomous from the world around it. Though avant-garde and neo-avant-garde works were often utopian or anarchic in their political views or ideological intentions for their work, they were self-aware of the public’s separation and frustration with art, seeking to change this through their artwork.

From roughly the middle of the nineteenth century, form had become the content of the artwork being created, starting with such movements as Aestheticism and Symbolism. Art’s separation from life and the public defined the established institution of art at that time and yet also

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furthered the institutionalization of art, becoming the content of the art produced, as discussed in art historian Peter Bürger’s book *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. According to Bürger, the modernist institution of art operated largely through its concern with autonomy from the society around it, maintaining its independence. After bourgeois society started to grow, art became farther and farther removed from its historically aristocratic, political, and ritual role, leaving society to question its function. The autonomous role art took on, expressed through its increasingly formal content, was an attempt to be independent of the middle class and the “demands that it be socially useful.”

The artists of the historical avant-garde were dissatisfied with the lack of engagement modernism offered, they were inspired in varying ways by the change in the world around them, and wanted to bring the public, and cultural changes, back into the art they were making. In doing so, avant-garde artists aimed to break down the structures and values of the institution of art. With the historical avant-gardes came a change in the way artistic movements and groups viewed and critiqued each other. Past art movements tended to critique the schools of thought before them, while the historical avant-gardes of the twentieth century allowed for a self-critique to develop, criticizing art as an institution and what role it played in bourgeois society. As a response to Aestheticism’s formal content and ideology, the historical avant-gardes sought to raise questions, to shock, to defamiliarize the contemporary concept of art and allow for reassessments and a different kind of viewer-artist-artwork engagement.

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12 This is operating through a Eurocentric art historical view, referencing largely the changes from a more feudal society, to one in which the middle class began to grow and dominate. Such landmark historical events such as the French Revolution can be referenced in relationship to this change in societal structure.


14 Ibid., 22.

15 Ibid., 17-18.
The historical avant-gardes were of the Eurocentric or ‘Western’ art historical tradition, referring to such groups as the Futurists and Dadaists. Of these two, the first group to form was Futurism. This movement began with the first Futurist manifesto, published in 1909 in the popular French newspaper *Le Figaro*, and written by the passionate Italian poet Filippo Tomasso Marinetti, who was the leading and formative voice of Futurism.\(^6\) The function of the institution of art at the time, as an autonomous body and the work produced by this body, had proven to Marinetti and other avant-garde artists that such autonomy resulted largely in social inconsequence at a time of much unrest and change, when discourse was crucial.\(^7\)

Italy was, at this moment in history, a country that had been moving further into political change largely in developments in socialist, fascist, and nationalist attitudes, as the change of the century had occurred.\(^8\) Marinetti and his Futurists saw the significance of the unrest that surrounded them at the beginning of the twentieth century, drawing on this moment of change as fuel for their work, all while working to further it, also. Marinetti and his Futurists would be loud voices against the Italian government’s handling of war at the time, stating in his manifesto the Futurist’s passionate support of war and violence as a source of cleansing and therefore positive change.\(^9\) Through their artistic work, they attempted to bring together the Italian political reform and, with it, destroy the institutions of art.\(^10\) The defining Futurist ‘insistence on ‘activity’ and ‘change’...[as] an ‘art which finds its components in its surroundings’,” performance, political

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\(^7\) Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, xiv.


statements, and an adoration for mechanization, resulted from the flourishing of industrialization.\textsuperscript{21} For example, in their performative Futurist Evenings, they would “[rage] against the cult of tradition and commercialization of art,” accompanied by enthusiastic support of patriotic nationalism, war, and violence.\textsuperscript{22} The aggressive, violent nature of Futurist language and ideology was intentionally used as a means of provocation. Paired with their interactive performative intermedial Futurist Evenings, they sought to evoke public interest, to reject logic and technique in an effort to convey the here-and-now with energy.\textsuperscript{23} In this way though, their work was abrasive and aggressive; Futurist works brought the public back into the conversation that art had severed them from participating in. On this topic, Marinetti wrote the manifesto \textit{Pleasure of Being Booed}, encouraging many ways of inciting anger from audience members, as a way of keeping them aware and not “intellectually intoxicated.”\textsuperscript{24} Avant-garde art, especially the historical avant-garde, tends to be aggressively opposed to the audience interacting as passive onlookers. The neo-avant-garde artists would take up this attitude also, inspiring a continued push into performative work.\textsuperscript{25}

The Futurists used performance as a way to break down walls and categories of separation, between art and the public, artwork and the viewer, and different artistic mediums.\textsuperscript{26} This aspect of their art is later taken up by Fluxus artists, who likewise used performative art as a means of redefining artist and viewer roles and heightening engagement. As seen in \textit{Opposite} (figure 1), a drawing by Umberto Boccioni (1911), Futurist Evenings were chaotic layered experiences. Their performances were a conglomeration of poetry, painting, music, experimentations with noise

instruments, and bodily gesture.\(^{27}\) Variety theater was an influence on these performances, being nonlinear, collaborative, and able to easily communicate about even complex ideas such as politics. This kind of performance inspired and appealed to Marinetti through its “anti-academic, primal and naive” nature.\(^{28}\) In this way, a performance such as that, destroyed the things that separated art from life.\(^{29}\) No sacred religiosity, no formalism for formalisms sake, no sublime speculation of our own mortality, no contemplation of morals through gesture scenes; and because of this, Futurist Evenings were able to be a very different experience for the audience than their normal interactions with art had likely been up to that point. Such experiences would be drawn upon as inspiration for later Fluxus performances constructed around similar absurdism and yet relatability.

After the Futurists had introduced bourgeois society to their aggressive non-traditional performances, the beginnings of intermedial thinking, noise instruments, and performance scripts, another avant-garde group came into being, under the name of Dada. Futurists had been all infuriation and provocation, paralleling pacifism with the blind shallow intellectualism they viewed as the sickness of the institution of art, valuing war as an exciting dynamic freedom. Dada was also provocation, but in a different sense, for different political reasons. Dada began in Zurich, Switzerland, an artistic hub even before the First World War, but during which served as a neutral zone and a home for those avoiding the draft.\(^{30}\) Here, Hugo Ball and Emmy Hennings would found the Cabaret Voltaire in 1916.\(^{31}\) Dada’s beginning came at a moment when the people of many countries were beginning to question the dominant institutions of religion, government, the

\(^{27}\) Taylor, Futurism, 17.
\(^{28}\) Goldberg, Performance Art, 17.
\(^{29}\) Ibid., 17
traditional reigning authority figures, largely as a result of the climate surrounding WWI.\footnote{32 Richter, \textit{Dada: art and anti-art}, 13.} Founding Dadaist Hugo Ball saw this moment in history as one when “common sense had to be opposed at all times” as a means of making a better society.\footnote{33 Goldberg, \textit{Performance Art}, 54.}

Like Futurism, the roots of Dada were in provocation and performance.\footnote{34 Ibid. 50.} The Cabaret was the home of endearingly confrontational performances, such as the often sexually confrontational and anti-bourgeois works of artist Benjamin Wedekind.\footnote{35 Ibid. 50-51.} Dada performances were often influenced by the idea of the \textit{Gesamtkunstwerk} (total work of art) that was explored in Futurist Evenings, as a means of combining mediums and experimenting with forms of artwork-audience interaction.\footnote{36 Richter, \textit{Dada: art and anti-art}, 35.} As WWI began, finding a place for art in society had become more difficult. Many artists, such as Ball, fled Germany and Russia to avoid being forced into military service, in favor of places like Switzerland.\footnote{37 Ibid. 54-55.} Ball, among other artists, felt the chaos and struggle of finding sense and meaning in a time dictated entirely by seemingly nonsensical violence and warfare. Unlike Futurism, Dada thought became marked by an intense frustration with the nonsense of war, but similar to their Futurist predecessors, sought to incite a response from the public through nontraditional media and content, viewing art as living and being “irrational, primitive, complex” juxtaposed to very sensical aesthetically produced objects that filled the confused wartime society.\footnote{38 Ibid. 55.} For this reason, Dada artists would work to break down form, and the structure that comes with it.\footnote{39 Hershman, “Touch-Sensitivity”, 431-432.}
When Hugo Ball and Emmy Hemmings started a new cafe-cabaret in Zurich, similar to the ones they had experienced in Munich, their opening evening was comprised of various performances and objects, put together by such artists as: Georges Janco, Marcel Janco, Tristan Tzara, Hugo Ball, Emmy Hennings, and Mme LaConte. Pulling from the aforementioned idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the artists at this Cabaret continued to experiment with the potential of performance. Each artist brought something to the table that was used to further the Dada ideal of the nonsensical and bizarre. Marcel Janco created masks that inspired costumes and strange personas. Emmy Hennings, the sole professional performer, constantly created new performances for the cabaret. Through the combination of the various works of each artist, Dada performances became a very sensory and nonsensical experience, immersing the spectator in the experience in a more involved way than institutional art.

Among these experimentations in combining performative mediums, the Dada performers developed a new performative method, which they called the simultaneous poem. Ball described this as being when “three or more voices speak, sing, whistle, etc. at the same time, in such a way that...the bizarre content of the piece is brought out” and goes on to say “Noises...crashes, sirens...are superior to the human voice in energy,” arguably a continuation of the dynamism and noise experimentation of the Futurist Evenings. Such a subversion of the traditional poem, and use of language, is later seen in the work of Fluxus artists, while the experimentation with use of noises and sounds as poetry would influence later mid-century vanguard experimental musicians and serve as a metaphor for later Fluxus use of daily objects and actions as art. Hugo Ball, continued to play with poetry, inventing new wordless ‘sound poems’, recited like chants, used to “renounce the

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language devastated and made impossible by journalism.” The image of Ball performing his sound poem Karawane, dressed in full costume, standing with a strange stiffness, personifies Dada and to this day is still a rather iconic expression of the movement (figure 2).

The importance of these vanguard ideas explored by Dada artists is expressed in the film Merce by Merce by Paik, by Fluxus artist Nam June Paik,

...art in life and life in art, a theme favored by the late Marcel Duchamp, who believed a toilet bowl could be a work of art. Can we reverse time and bring back Marcel? Artists such as Duchamp explored Dada ideas of strangeness and critique of the institution of art. His Readymades, such as his well-known Fountain (figure 3), place ordinary commonplace objects into a role of ‘art object’ through purely Duchamp’s selecting it and displaying it in gallery settings. Duchamp describes how the choosing of the Readymades is focused around a visual indifference, a rejection of the formal focus of Aestheticism and Modernism. The absurd Dada questioning present in the Readymades playfully, yet critically, called into question the value of the institutionalization of art and impacted artmaking through its breakdown of defining an art object, the artist’s role, and the importance of the artist’s intent. The overt challenge to institutional art, irony, and puns present in Duchamp’s work wins him much attention, most especially as time passes and he himself, along with younger artists look back as spectators and reflect retrospectively on his work. As an iconic figure in Dada, his work helped to promote the anti-bourgeois, anti-art avant-garde ideas that were blossoming.

43 Ibid, 61.
45 Hugnet and Scolari, “Dada”, 6-7.
Anti-Art as Key in Avant-Garde Thought

The modernist institution of art of the first half of the twentieth century, in general, focused on glorifying autonomous art as a product of an artist-genius individual. Duchamp’s Readymades, his declaring mass-produced objects as art, negated the significance of the hand of such artist-genius creators. These works challenged the art market and question the definition of art within bourgeois society.\(^{47}\) The term “anti-art” became a significant term within the realm of the avant-garde, largely after Duchamp’s controversial Dada Readymades are created. This term, though a general descriptor, is used to refer to the important twentieth century avant-garde push to reject the institution and exclusionary definition of art, in an attempt to redefine and reconnect art with life and the public. The idea began with the historical avant-gardes, but was taken back up by the neo-avant-gardes of the mid and late twentieth century, making it an important part of the formation and ideology of Fluxus.

In a letter to German Fluxus member Tomas Schmidt, George Maciunas, the founder of Fluxus as a group, touches on his objectives for Fluxus artmaking.\(^{48}\) Some of his language in the letter demonstrates the anti-art ideal that surfaced in many neo-avant-gardes, including Fluxus. In his letter, Maciunas states that Fluxus artmaking is not focused on the formal, on institutionalized ideas of beauty and worth, but on having a social relevance and interaction with contemporary life. Following this, he explains that these objectives are mainly focused on the elimination of the divisions within the arts and their status as high art. As expressed in this particular letter, Maciunas seems to find the primary issues in the institution of fine art as being its separateness from “socially constructive ends,” making it wasteful as a “non-functional commodity.”\(^{49}\) This function could be,


\(^{49}\) Ibid. 11-12.
as it was for Fluxus, the “function of teaching people the needlessness of art including the eventual needlessness of itself. It should therefore be not permanent…” The function of art, in his eyes, should be functional, useful and engaged in the daily lives of the public.

In the Fluxus manifesto (figure 4) written by Maciunas, he expanded on these ideas, using a collage style writing method by joining dictionary definitions with handwritten statements. The entire statement operates around the idea of anti-art. Fluxus is called to “purge the world of bourgeois sickness,” of dead art, and of Europeanism. It is called to create living non-art; bringing cultural, social, and political issues together into art making. In this collaged and handwritten manifesto, the writing and thinking process is implied to be innately more visible than a typed manifesto. In this first Fluxus Manifesto, a writing error gives illustration to an important Fluxus idea. Maciunas writes “...promote non art reality to be fully grasped by all peoples, not only critics, dialectics, and professionals,” crossing out the word “fully”. This statement illustrates the neo-avant-garde Fluxus desire to connect to the public in a way Modernism had not. It illustrates an understanding that this connection does not have to be a concept fully understood as the artist intended, but can just be grasped in some way, placing more importance on the audience’s role in interpretation of meaning in art. Maciunas’ erasure of the word “fully” subtly illustrates the significant changes Fluxus would make in artist-art-viewer relationships, allowing for a truly kind of new interactive quality in artworks, separate from the modernist art-audience interaction.

50 Ibid. 11-12.
51 Ibid. 11-12.
53 Ibid.
In the aforementioned letter to Schmidt, Maciunas explained that art with function should not be about the individual artist but about more objective concerns. So like Dada and Futurist artists before them, Fluxus as part of the neo-avant-garde placed emphasis on the importance of the collective and life, rather than the individual and institutional autonomy. This stance against the established definitions of high art and the exclusiveness of the institution of art as an autonomous community, connects Fluxus to the historical avant-garde, in its anti-art mentality. At the same time, it places Fluxus in an anti-individualism and, therefore, anti-Europeanism ideology, which I would suggest plays a role in their fascination with East Asian culture and philosophies.\textsuperscript{54}

\textbf{Fluxus Formation and Precursors}

The historical avant-garde can be placed largely within the time frame of 1905 and 1938, followed by a momentary loss of momentum in the avant-garde movements lasting from 1938 through 1945. After this fatigued break, avant-garde ideas were reinvigorated and became significant powers in artmaking, as the neo-avant-garde.\textsuperscript{55} A resurgence of passion to challenge institutions of art, government, and cultural norms was rooted in the disillusionment and frustration that followed WWII and surrounded the Vietnam War. The neo-avant-garde Fluxus collective spirit recalled the historical political associations of the vanguard, calling institutional art into question in favor of a more socially engaged collective art.\textsuperscript{56} Precursors and influences of Fluxus laid the groundwork for such a resurgence of avant-garde ideas.

In 1940, experimental musician and composer John Cage wrote his manifesto \textit{The Future of Music}, expressing his views and goals in music making, which would go on to inspire and inform

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{54} Oren, “Anti-Art as the End”, 11-12.
\textsuperscript{55} Szabolesi, “Avant-Garde, Neo-Avant-Garde, Modernism”, 54.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 50-67.
\end{footnotesize}
many Fluxus and vanguard Japanese artists and musicians.\textsuperscript{57} He wrote, “Wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise...We want to capture and control these sounds, to use them not as sound effects but as musical instruments.”\textsuperscript{58} With this, he was aiming for an eventual incorporation of technology as a means of producing a broader spectrum of musical sounds. He often would refer people to Duchamp’s artworks as a means of understanding this kind of music he worked to create. Duchamp’s works, as artist and founding member of Fluxus Dick Higgins explained, operated through a sort of intermedia working.\textsuperscript{59} The Readymades were intermedial in that they operated outside of the compartmentalized contemporary definitions of artistic media, and similar to what Cage worked to explore in his music, the Readymades were something “between the general area of art media and those of life media.”\textsuperscript{60} Interdisciplinary, intermedia, and interactivity would remain key concepts in the work of neo-avant-garde artists as they explored the blurring and reconfiguring of divisions in art, making, and life.

Cage and Duchamp were not alone in their experimentations, as there was an increasing number of artists exploring this area between and connected to both art and life. One such example was dancer Merce Cunningham, whose performances experimented with using natural and ordinary gestures as choreography in dance. Cage and Cunningham collaborated many times, and were both asked to join the Black Mountain College in 1948, by Josef Albers.\textsuperscript{61} There, they continued to experiment and forge connections with other artists. Scholar, Mary Emma Harris, writes in an article about experimentation in the arts at Black Mountain College, that as of his initial time at the

\textsuperscript{57} Goldberg, \textit{Performance Art}, 123-132. Unless otherwise noted in this subsection of the essay, the biographical information about John Cage will come from this reference.


\textsuperscript{59} Dick Higgins, "Intermedia," \textit{Leonardo} 34 (November 1, 2001), 49.

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 49.

\textsuperscript{61} Mary Emma Harris, "Art As Experiment: From The Arts At Black Mountain College," \textit{The American Poetry Review} 16, no. 3 (1987), 8.
school in 1948 Cage had begun his studies into Zen Buddhism as an influence to his work, but he had not yet studied the I Ching and therefore had not yet incorporated developed ideas of chance into his compositions.  

In 1952, both artists returned to the college and participated in an untitled performative event. At this event, through readings before and after, Cage overtly described his being influenced by Zen Buddhism and other ‘Eastern’ philosophies. The Buddhist belief in interconnectedness was a large driving factor in Cage’s interest in finding means to integrate art and life. Zen Buddhism, specifically, is marked by its concern with keeping the mind free of preconceived notions of reality and the reading or telling of kōans, nonsensical riddle-like sayings. From this tradition of thought he pulled models of chance and improvisation, which he valued in its breaking down of hierarchy and separation between art and life, and also for its ability as “non-intentional music” to place action and meaning in the role of the listener, not in the composer or performer alone. This will later be an influence on the kinds of relationships Fluxus will work to redefine between artist-artwork-viewer.

Cage’s interest in Zen was not uncommon among artists at the time. Zen Buddhism had a romanticized, fad-like quality to it in the U.S. during the 1950’s through the following couple of decades. This was not the U.S.’s first exposure to the philosophy, though, seeing as such fascination spans back through the nineteenth century, and can even be seen in avant-garde movements’ fusion of Buddhist and anarchic ideas in the 1930’s and 1940’s. This interest in Asian philosophies it seems to me is attributed to a number of factors, such as: colonial orientalism, romanticism, and anti-war sentiments. Writing on the issue of this cultural appropriation and

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62 Harris, “Art as Experiment”, 8-9.
64 Munroe, The third mind, 45.
fascination, Sociologist Barış Büyükokutan states, “...New Buddhism emerged [with] its favorite practices, sitting meditation (zazen) and study of irrational riddles (kōans), were thought to free the mind from limits [of rationality]...artists...found justification of art’s continued existence in modernity in the mystic strand’s attack on instrumental rationality.”

Regardless of the presence of East Asian philosophy and culture in the U.S. being rooted in this kind of westernized ‘New Buddhism’ and appropriation, avant-garde artists did draw on such ideas in their work as they attempted to make a new kind of art in contrast to the limitations of the Eurocentric institution of art.

Cage’s means of education in Zen Buddhism came largely from westernized sources such as Alan Watts and D. T. Suzuki, and though this calls into question his authenticity in reflecting Japanese Zen ideals, it does not change how what he learned of Zen did indeed frame his composing and discussion of the arts. Cage’s interest in Zen-inspired chance and improvisation was seen in his work, such as his 4'33", which operated from a score, or script, like many later Fluxus works, allowing for multiple original performances by the same name. This composition featured a performer at a piano, very intentionally not playing the piano in the traditional sense. This piece brings attention to the sounds existing within the silence, or lack of expected music, and the non-intentionality present in these surrounding sounds as musical. The audience understood that every sound in the silence around them was the music of this composition; their act was as meaningful and additive to the musical performance as the player who sat at the piano on stage. The non-intentionality, chance, and somewhat paradoxical nature of Cage’s work, like this piece, seeks to

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66 Munroe, The third mind, 27.
channel the way Zen teachings are created with the intention of bewildering the mind as a means of bypassing the limits of rationality to achieve enlightenment.\textsuperscript{67}

Cage’s drive to explore the incorporation of life into art continued in his well-known Experimental Music class, which he taught at the New School for Social Research starting in 1956. His classes were full of many artists who would go on to be important avant-garde figures, such as: Allan Kaprow, Jackson Maclow, George Brecht, Al Hansen, Dick Higgins, and Toshi Ichiyanagi. Many of these artists had already been pre-exposed to chance and non-intentional acts through Dada and Surrealist work. Many of these artists would remain linked together as a network, bringing in new people over time, meeting and performing routinely at places such as: Café A Gogo, Larry Poon’s Epitome Café, Yoko Ono’s Chamber Street loft, and the AG Gallery owned by George Maciunas and Almus Salcius. Many of the artists that participated in these performative meetings would go on to be associated with the artist collective, Fluxus.\textsuperscript{58}

Outside of the U.S., artists were also experimenting in avant-garde performance and intermedia works. For example, Japanese artists such as Takesisa Kosugi, Shigeko Kubota, and Toshi Ichiyanagi, who all came to New York after creating vanguard work in Japan, “where the Gutai Group of Osaka...had presented their own spectacles.”\textsuperscript{69} The Gutai group was one of many Japanese avant-garde collectives which were interested in interactivity and redefining art and its role in life. Though art historical texts tend to filter their analysis through a one-way influential relationship of Eurocentric art on non-‘Western’ art, as art historian Midori Yoshimoto explains, it is important to recognize that there were indeed Japanese precedents to Euro-American avant-garde


\textsuperscript{68} Munroe, \textit{The third mind}, 31-32.

\textsuperscript{69} Goldberg, “Performance Art”, 132.
developments. An example of such is that the aforementioned Gutai Art Association in Osaka preceded Kaprow’s Environments with their own interactive outdoor exhibitions, or similarly such as the work of the Environment Society, a Tokyo based artists collective.\textsuperscript{70} Inspired by this growing international community, George Maciunas founded the artist collective, officially naming it Fluxus. Yoko Ono recalls in one of her writings the Summer of 1961 when Maciunas approached her as a focal figure, like himself, in the vanguard community they both were a part of,

George said we had to have a name for this movement that was happening. ‘You think of this name,’ he told me. I said, ‘I don’t think this is a movement. I think it’s wrong to make it into a movement.’ To me, movement had a dirty sound-like we were going to be some sort of establishment. [...] The next day, George said ‘Yoko, look.’ He showed me the word fluxus in a huge dictionary. It had many meanings, but he pointed to flushing. ‘Like toilet flushing!’ [...] ‘This is the name,’ he said.\textsuperscript{71} Maciunas was attracted to the various definitions paired with the word, the multiplicity of what it could mean, and the absurdity of some of the connotations it carried, thoroughly enjoying the relationship with the daily motion of toilet flushing.

After selecting a centralized name for the group, Maciunas established Fluxus connections in New York, West Europe, East Europe, and Japan. Such a network was key to Maciunas’ idea of Fluxus, metaphorically reflecting the interconnectedness of all things, art and life, person to person, relating to Buddhism, as Cage had. The Fluxus network of artists participated in a communication and a sort of social-networking that was intentionally drawn upon, as it functioned as an active medium that reinforced layered interactive participation, a theme developed on in many Fluxus works. Maciunas lead Fluxus members to correspond through the mail and with games; he also explored networking in another sense, tracking interconnections between politics, economics,

\textsuperscript{70} Midori Yoshimoto. "From Space to Environment: The Origins of Kankyō and the Emergence of Intermedia Art in Japan," \textit{Art Journal} 67, no. 3 (2008): 25-41.
\textsuperscript{71} Biesenbach and Cherix, \textit{Yoko Ono One Woman Show 1960-1971}, 73.
In this Fluxus community, he pushed for a centrality that resulted in disagreements but also in such Fluxus products as the FluxShop & Mail Order Warehouse, collective newspaper, Fluxhouse Cooperative, and many-times revised lists of “official” Fluxus members. These products of Fluxus recall a corporate system; “In order to call that system into question, the artist would have to critically appropriate certain of its strategies...Maciunas performed the system itself.” The contradictions implicit in challenging the structure of the institution of art while making use of the system in which it thrives, was also seen in Dada work, which similarly made use of “mimetic adaptation” to critique an institutional order they saw to be corrupt. So, Fluxus as a collective of varying individuals, a seeming establishment or institutional movement, intentionally placed itself in a paradoxical space, while drawing on absurdism and connections globally, as a means of being a body of change in life and artmaking.

Miklós Szabolcsi describes the role Fluxus took on, alongside other hopeful neo-avant-garde groups.

Pure and homogeneous trends and formations have, of course, never existed...The period itself is one of transition, and there is a section of literature and art that deliberately accepts this transitional character and assumes a mutable, flexible, fluid shape. Fluxus was described as being a group of artists concerned with the breakdown of the separation between art and life, a focus on the collective over the genius individual, a focus on interactions, intermedia, and a challenging of the traditional understanding of art as being highly crafted and formal. As a neo-avant-garde, Fluxus worked to separate from the object-hood of art, and engage with function, relationships, associations, context, and absurdism. The interactive quality seen in the

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74 Ibid. 316-320.
work of many Fluxus artists, is rooted in the idea of what is now referred to as ‘reception theory’.\textsuperscript{76} This term refers to the viewer taking on an active and just as significant of a role in determining value and meaning in art as the artist, and how the meaning of a work can change, existing as multiple different original works.\textsuperscript{77}

**East Asian Philosophies in Relation to Avant-Garde Work**

The common Buddhist tendency to teach through anecdotes and narrative encouraged artists, historically, to explore the innate spatial and narrative advantages of larger surfaces, and most especially handscrolls in their horizontal extension, drawing on the passing of time in an almost cinematic means of storytelling. Screens, hanging scrolls, and handscrolls existed as traditional art objects throughout much of East Asian history. Historian Julia Murray specifies that though handscrolls did exist before the introduction of Buddhism to China, “...there seems to be no tradition of representing narratives in sequential pictures.”\textsuperscript{78} If such a development occurred in China after introduction to Buddhism, it could be argued that a similar development occurred as other East Asian countries were introduced to Buddhist thought similarly, such as Japan in the sixth century. The significance of large, environmental, and time-based art objects served to inform the much later environmental works and time-based media in the avant-garde works of twentieth century artists, such as in Fluxus, especially those Fluxus members who had East-Asian cultural heritage.


As mentioned before, westernized Buddhism was a large part of U.S. vanguard art culture in the mid 1900’s, inspired by the interconnectedness taught in Buddhism, and of the chance and non-intention taught in Zen. Zen Buddhism, a specifically Japanese Buddhism, revolves around the idea of instantaneous enlightenment, an opposite idea of the path to enlightenment than what is found in most other Buddhist traditions. A common teaching tool are Zen kōans, irrational riddles, short absurd sayings meant to pass on Zen teachings and test the mind. By reading or listening to a kōan, a person is attempting to free the mind of its assumptions and rationality to allow for true understanding of a moment, enlightenment.

Kōans reveal and revel in the doubt we should have in accepting anything we think or hypothesize, forcing meaning and truth to be found in the moment of actual experience. The chance non-intentionality conveyed through the instantaneousness of Zen enlightenment and the absurdity of kōans are reflected in not only Cage’s work but also in many of the artists part of that same vanguard community, specifically Fluxus and the Japanese avant-garde artists who also explored performance, intermedia, and experimental music. Also uniting these varying artists is the way in which the audience was given a more active role in determining the subject or meaning of the work, often through multiplicity innately present in the score format of performances and interactivity, recalling the Buddhist belief in collectivity and oneness. In regards to this, the kōan-like art of the neo-avant-garde also serves to remind the audience to doubt the meaning presented to them by institutional art, and to find meaning in the present experience and context of the work, much like the aforementioned concept of reception theory.

The Roles of Yoko Ono and Nam June Paik in Fluxus

Yoko Ono and Nam June Paik were crucial figures in the formation of the connection between Japan and other countries with a Fluxus interaction, most especially America, and in the development of Fluxus concepts and media. Since both were early Fluxus members, their work and presence in Japan helped to promote performative experimentation in artmaking and “brought information on like-minded artists, including those of Hi Red Center, to New York.” Both became a key part of the Tokyo neo-avant-garde community through their roles in performative art, which was received well due to the Tokyo neo-avant-garde’s interest in challenging the social norms of the contemporary Japanese culture.

Ono and Paik were both aware of the identity and authority they held and used it as a means of investigating their own conceptual connections to Buddhism and the neo-avant-garde. Paik and Ono were recognized as ‘East-Asian-artists’ by many ‘Western’ neo-avant-garde artists, who were fascinated with the culture they came from. When asked if he was Buddhist, Paik replied,

No, I am an artist… because I am a friend of John Cage, people tend to see me as a Zen monk…I’m not a follower of Zen but I react to Zen in the same way as I react to Johann Sebastian Bach.83

Both artists simultaneously drew on their culture as part of their identity and as possessing significant historical art and philosophical ideas in general, playing into the watered down westernized view of their cultures as a means of doing so.84 Ono and Paik may have been overgeneralized to a degree by Euro-American neo-avant-garde artists who largely saw them through the filter of being East-Asian artists connected to Zen philosophy by their nationality, but their work

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was not the same. Each of the two drew on their differing backgrounds to inform their imagery and interests, and when combined with their connection to Fluxus ideas, resulted in different kinds of Fluxus neo-avant-garde work.

Yoko Ono was born in 1933 to an upper-middle class Japanese family. Her father, a banker, traveled frequently; and therefore the family was uprooted many times, transplanting from Japan to the U.S. and back. During WWII, her family was economically devastated and forced to move to a rural setting as a means of escaping the dangers of incendiary bombings in Tokyo, remaining there until the war ended. The constant changing of living space and communities made Yoko Ono aware of with the concept of fluctuation and differences in cultural identities from early on. In 1952, she entered Gakushūin University and became the first woman to be part of the philosophy program at the school. After a year there, Yoko Ono chose to move to New York and study composition and literature at Sarah Lawrence College in 1953, leaving Tokyo in favor of being closer to her family who had relocated to the U.S. Though she was only part of the philosophy program at her first school for one year, her base in philosophy likely exposed her to and enabled her to thoughtfully investigate varying philosophies, reflected in the introspective concerns of her art.

Ono lived with a constant split in her own identity from a young age, as an American-artist, Japanese-artist, woman-artist, Japanese-American, feminist-woman, Post-war-artist, and Buddhist-thinker. Philosopher Michel Foucault theorized self-identity was a thing in flux, based on the

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individual’s interactions with the models around them, changing based on communication with peers, society, and the surrounding culture.\textsuperscript{88} This is an important idea in regards to Ono’s and even Paik’s work, in that they both created work that intentionally played into their identities as East-Asian artists, but which also called for a more direct role on the audience’s part, as a means of creating further meaning. In Ono’s statement in \textit{The Stone}, a participatory installation, she writes,

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People went on cutting the parts they do not like of
me finally there was only the stone remained of me
that was in me but they were still not satisfied and
wanted to know what it’s like in the stone.\textsuperscript{89}
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Foucault’s reception-theory-like concept of identity relates to not only the goals of Fluxus, to integrate art and life, but serves to illustrate the reasoning for Ono’s work. Yoko Ono draws on her personal history of war, strife, and divisions in social identity to deal with various aspects of our human interactions and aspects of identity in her artwork, focusing on achieving greater love and peace through connections with others and life. Her interests combined with and strengthened the Fluxus neo-avant-garde focus on promoting collectivity and incorporating life into art as a means of breaking down divisions in the arts.

Yoko Ono’s choice to leave Sarah Lawrence to marry her first husband, the Japanese experimental composer Toshi Ichiyanagi would mark the beginning of her significant interactions with the neo-avant-garde and forming Fluxus community. Their move to New York enabled them both to forge connections with important figures in the New York art scene, such as John Cage and


George Maciunas. Ono and Ichyanagi’s shared interest in music composition made them an easy addition to the community that surrounded Cage, and soon Ono began to look for a space to work and show the work of others. A fellow Japanese-American artist, Minoru Niizuma suggested to Ono to look into the warehouse district, where she found and rented the famous 112 Chambers Street loft. This loft would become one of the primary hot spots for neo-avant-garde, primarily Fluxus, events.90 This alone already placed Ono, and her husband, in an influential role as part of the New York artist community.

George Maciunas learned of Yoko Ono through these events, and attempted to start similar events to those at the Chamber’s Street Loft at the AG Gallery, which he and Almus Salcius ran. At this gallery, Maciunas exhibited Ono’s first solo show, *Paintings & Drawings by Yoko Ono*, in 1961. This show consisted of instruction paintings, calligraphic ink drawings, and an accordion book (figures 5, 6). All of the physical objects in her 1961 show exhibited washes and gestural markings, most especially the ink drawings, which recall the significant Japanese tradition of calligraphy as a historical artform.91 Her instruction paintings’ performative quality allowed others to complete the piece in varying ways, and therefore add their own meaning to the piece, viewing “…her paintings not as finished works of art, but rather as mutable propositions dependent upon external conditions and the ways in which viewers interpreted her instructions.”92 One year after her show in the AG Gallery, Ono displayed her *Paintings & Drawings by Yoko Ono* show in the Sōgestsu Art Center in Tokyo, with only the text-based instructions, introducing the Japanese vanguard to her way of incorporating intermedia, interactivity, and performance.

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91 Ibid., 58.
92 Ibid. 45.
These instructional works were included in Ono’s later piece, *Grapefruit* (figure 7), a self-published book of a collection of 150 poetic instructions, recalling Zen kōans, which can be performed of the body or in the mind of the viewer (figure 8). The title comes from Ono’s own personal imagery, referencing the common grapefruit as representing the idea of hybridity. To Ono, the ‘citrus-hybrid’ alludes to the hybridity of many aspects of her life, such as in the intermedia quality of her work, and in her many varying identities. The book was printed cheaply and sold on the streets during the height of the 1964 Summer Olympics in Tokyo, reaching out directly to the international mass of persons in the area as a means of creating a physical network of viewers-turned-artists, as each person took and interacted with the book. By calling upon viewers to act as participators in the realization of a piece through their performative interaction, Ono crafted a new more active role for the audience. The interconnectedness created through these layering of actions in the creation of meaning in a work, speak to Buddhist ideals of oneness and Fluxus collectivity. Such viewer-participator reliance will become a common theme in her work, as it did in the art of many Fluxus artists, using participation as a means of bringing life and art together.

Scores become a significant part of Ono’s work, stemming from the Cagean use of scores. Similar to the instructions in *Grapefruit*, scores, or instructions, were written for her performances as a means of performing the piece many times, mentally and physically. *Cut Piece* is probably Ono’s most discussed performance. The piece features a performer, which was Ono in these first performances, sitting on the stage dressed in their best clothes. The audience is then invited to approach the performer and cut away postcard sized pieces of the performer’s clothing, keeping the cloth. Throughout the performance, Ono would not move or speak, remaining seated in a position

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93 Ibid. 79.
94 Ibid. 11.
95 Ibid. 100.
that recalls traditional polite Japanese sitting. *Cut Piece* was performed initially in Japan, then London, then America, showing the growing vanguard network. This work is interpreted in many ways, often through a feminist filter, placing the audience in a violent predatory role. A less limited understanding of the piece may be through ideas of vulnerability, danger, and meditative presentness. Regardless, due to the score, or instructions, each new performance is an original fully important *Cut Piece*. This allows for an endless, growing meaning to be built into the piece in a “succession of presents”. Like *Grapefruit*, this piece is meant to be performed many times, continually gaining meaning due to the fluctuating nature of cultural context. Ono expanded on the use of scores from being just a musical tool, to being a means of expanding meaning in work and placing more significance in the role of the viewer-participator.

Nam June Paik would also draw on his lifelong connection to music in his artistic pursuits. Born in 1932 in Seoul, Korea, Paik would grow up in a well-off Korean family. From a young age his interest in music blossomed, leading him to choose to study music and art in Japan, receiving his degree in aesthetics with a focus in music and art history, from the University of Tokyo. As was customary of many people of his social class, he subsequently traveled to a part of Europe after he finished school to continue investigation into music. Paik chose to go to Germany, which was known for being a hub of explorations in new music. He studied under composers Thrasybulus Georgiades and WolfGang Fortner; enrolled in the International Summer Courses for New Music in 1957 and 1958, when he would meet John Cage and Marcel Duchamp; and in 1962 Paik showed work in the Fluxus International Festival of the New Music in Wiesbaden. All of these experiences

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combined to further his interest in performance and marks the beginnings of his interactions with the international Fluxus collective.\textsuperscript{97}

In 1963, Paik had his first solo exhibition at the Galerie Parnass, titled \textit{Exposition of Music-Electronic Television}. This exhibition was the first step he took towards developing work in the medium of video art, and away from just his previous work in music and performance.\textsuperscript{98} John G. Hanhardt, curator, art historian, and friend of Nam June Paik’s, asserts Paik’s original and critical role in the formation of video art as a medium, referring to Paik as the “Father of Video Art”.\textsuperscript{99} The works in this first exhibition of Paik’s were a series of televisions laid on the incorrect side, with altered imagery on the screen. One of the works, \textit{Kuba TV} (figure 9), invited interaction, as the imagery on the screen was dependent on the act of the viewer-participator, expanding or shrinking correspondingly to changes in inputted volume.\textsuperscript{100} Not only does this work explore the new media of video and the television as a new commercial communicative object, but also invites expanded meaning due to viewer interaction in its performative realization as a piece. After his show, due to his early exposure to Fluxus and vanguard artists in Germany, Paik decided in 1964 to move to New York. Like Yoko Ono, he became familiar with the art community there, leaving him close friends with experimental creators such as Joseph Beuys, George Maciunas, and John Cage.\textsuperscript{101}

Paik drew from Cage and Duchamp, experimenting in the use of common consumer objects and chance. Connecting to the middle-class consumer, to life, was at the core of much of his work.

\textsuperscript{98} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{99} Hanhardt, Video Art Pioneer, 148.
\textsuperscript{100} "Nam June Paik", Guggenheim.
\textsuperscript{101} Hanhardt, “Video Art Pioneer”, 148.
as a Fluxus artist. Art Historian Patricia Mellencamp discusses Paik’s ability to impact and connect with the ordinary person due to his range:

its internationalism; its movement between forms…; its recycling and transforming of previous images…; its accessibility and conceptual clarity that allow us to ‘get it’… Paik’s work is reciprocal and experiential, a process that completes itself through our response.102

Much of his work involves technology, enabling a new kind of mixing of media and means of challenging boundaries in an intermedial sense. He worked to humanize and explore the technology that was swiftly becoming a daily part of life, through a playful attitude and humor.103 The invention and increasing demand for televisions in homes left many people in an unprecedented state of interconnectedness.

Video technology in the 1960s, through television, was ephemeral and therefore similar to chance performance, a quality Paik intentionally drew upon in *Magnet TV*. The placement of the magnet on the top of the television causes chance images to distort the normal image on the screen, distorting its function as an object and ‘painting’ new imagery through chance (figure 10). Chance and non-intention are key to Paik’s artmaking, like the Cage’s Zen experimental music. Paik writes in *Afterlude to the Exposition of Experimental Television* (1964), “usually I don’t, or cannot have any pre-imaged vision before working;” contrasting his method of creating images through video, to the hyper-planned making of the “pre-imaged ideal” of modernism.104 Rather than playing into the modern artist-genius role, focusing on the artist’s mark, Paik allows his mark to be the disrupting of the object’s commercially designated function, often through chance or interaction. “Video’s ease, simultaneity, and immateriality snugly fit with performance art and happenings,” enabling any

102 Mellencamp, “The Old and the New”, 43.
person to be a video artist. In this way, he challenges the institutions of art and bourgeois culture through non-intention as opposite to the artist-genius’ mark, and through subversion of daily objects, much like Japanese kōans called common conceptions and assumptions about reality into question, as a means of engagement, or interaction with an idea.

Interactivity innately includes the viewer as a participator, and performance (whether physical, mental, or the performative quality of video) allows for a piece to be completed many times, in many varying circumstances, and interacted with by many different active participants. The network of interactions and meanings created through performative and interactive media encouraged viewers to consider the collective and yet also themselves, introspectively. Ono in her *Letter to the Wesleyan People* (1966) writes,

> I think it is possible to see a chair as it is. But when you burn a chair, you suddenly realize that the chair in your mind did not burn or disappear. The world of construction seems to be the most tangible, and therefore final.

She often calls on the viewer to complete pieces in their mind, centered on the idea of Buddha’s symbolic half-closed eyes, referring to introspection through meditation as a key Buddhist ideal. Conveying Ono’s wish that the audience would not only look out, externally, but look introspectively, meditatively. Ono explores the genderless body and meditation through her film *Bottoms or Film No. 4*, which is a ‘single shot film’, a film that is or appears to be one continuous shot long. The way in which Ono films this limits the frame to only the bottom. In an interview, Ono says the piece is “less about bottoms and more about a certain beat,” placing focus on the repetitive visual, forcing the viewer to contemplate the many bottoms in a mantra-like manner.

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105 Mellencamp, “The Old and New”, 41.
framing and one shot quality also bring to mind Buddhist criticism of preconceptions of time and experience.

Paik also made clear allusions to Buddhism, especially in his piece *TV Buddha* (1974) in which a Buddha-figure contemplates the image of himself on the TV, which appears to be a live feed of the Buddha-figure contemplating the image of himself on the screen (figure 11). This can be immediately understood as a visual *koan*, asking the viewer which Buddha is more real, the TV Buddha or the figurine Buddha, and wherein their difference lies. The lack of a time stamp on the video calls into question the construction of time and its truth value. This course of questioning is furthered with the knowledge that the Buddha figure is a Maitreya Buddha, specifically a Buddha of the future, which then relates to the TV as an object surrounded by newness and progress.  

Arguably, intermedial in its strange existence between sculpture, collage, painting, and video media, this piece invites an engagement due to the questioning it evokes, and its rejecting of the limitations placed on artmaking by the institution of art. Video functioned as the means of breaking down barriers between media, and also served as an important method of communication and multiplicity of the body, as the object became a popular consumer good. Ono and Paik drew on their own cultural connection to Buddhism as a way of joining the neo-avant-garde interest in Buddhism, while also recalling the roots of the philosophy.  

Frequently, travel defined Paik’s and Ono’s artistic careers and lives. Travel as a physical act of networking, along with mail correspondence encouraged by Maciunas, helped to reinforce the connections between ideas occurring in the cultures and vanguard communities of Japan and

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Artists in Japan and America explored similar concepts even before such substantial links between the two began to form. The Gutai Art Association of Osaka experimented with outdoor environments and interactivity before Allan Kaprow made his environments (figure 12), along with the Environment Society, whose members explored the concept of kankyō, meaning “environment,” specifically in the sense of being interacted with by people. Group Ongaku, the first Japanese neo-avant-garde group to connect with Fluxus, experimented with using everyday objects to create music without influence or knowledge of Cage’s experimental music (figure 13). Therefore, similar neo-avant-garde challenges to the established understanding of art were occurring in places like Japan before artists such as Cage, Paik, and Ono forged connections between the vanguard in East-Asia, Europe, and America. Though this was the case, such artistic exchanges invigorated by Ono and Paik only enriched the overall international neo-avant-garde pursuits into daily life, interaction, the redefining of viewer roles, and absurdism as a means of questioning established modes of thinking.

The Sogetsu Art Center in Tokyo became a place where many of these vanguard interactions and exhibitions would occur, as Ichiyanagi, Ono, Paik, and Cage would perform there at different points in the early 1960’s. Art Historian Midori Yoshimoto described Ono’s many performances in Japan as significantly helping popularization of the idea of ‘events’ or ‘happenings’ in the art community there. In the way that Ono became a crucial link in the spread of performance ideas, Paik would also become a link through his own performances, such as his 1964 events at the Sogetsu Art Center with Group Ongaku members. He would also go on to encourage some of

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111 The third mind, 33.
112 Yoshimoto, “From Space to Environment”, 41.
114 Yoshimoto, “Fluxus Nexus”, 1-3.
115 Yoshimoto, “From Space to Environment”, 35.
these Group Ongaku artists to share their work with Maciunas, for example Shiomi Chieko’s *Endless Box* (figure 14). Chieko’s piece focused on the musical concept of diminuendo, the gradual decreasing of the loudness of a sound over time. The piece would later be incorporated into performances *A Trick of Time* (1984) and *A Nightingale Has Flown* (1992). Chieko (also known as Meiko) would later go on to coin the term ‘transmedia’, referring not to the using of multiple media as in ‘mixed media’ or the existing of something between existing media as ‘intermedia’, but ‘transmedia’ as an artwork or concept that is fluidly explored and realized multiple times in multiple media.\(^{116}\) Though the term wasn’t coined until after the 1960’s, the art of Ono and Paik both make use of this process, also.

Chieko’s friend, the sculptor and video artist Shigeko Kubota, became connected to Fluxus through Ono, Ichiyanagi, and Paik in the early 1960s, later went on to marry Paik in 1965. The couple would become close friends with Maciunas and live in a co-op building he had organized, along with other artists such as Ay-ô, a Japanese Environment Society artist connected to Fluxus who had created the tactile interactive *Finger Boxes* and the performance *Rainbow Event*, which featured him performing everyday actions he had assigned colors.\(^{117}\) East-Asian artists had begun to come to New York, such as Chieko, Kubota, and A-ô, physically becoming connected in the Fluxus community through making of objects and performances, while also incorporating and sharing their East-Asian vanguard ideas, such as the interactive and playful qualities of the Environment Society.\(^{118}\)


\(^{118}\) Yoshimoto, “Fluxus Nexus”, 17-24. Yoshimoto, “From Space to Environment”, 34.
The interconnections between Japan and America due to East-Asian Fluxus artists Ono and Paik, was enjoyed and encouraged by Maciunas who like many ‘Western’ peoples of the time, were fascinated with Japanese and East Asian culture. His fascination could be seen in the appropriation of Japanese decor in his home, and insistence that he was a Zen practitioner. Euro-American vanguard artists were drawn to Buddhist philosophy, which they associated with East-Asian people, as a means of expressing collectivity, and were drawn to Zen due to its absurdism and chance. Both qualities rejected the formal, rigid, individualistic, autonomous art of modernism. American-German philosopher, Herbert Marcuse states,

In the philosophy of the bourgeois period, reason took the form of rational subjectivity. Man, the individual, was to examine and judge everything given by means of the power of his knowledge.

His words exemplify the exclusive intellectual nature of the institution of art founded in aestheticism and modernist artist-genius mentalities, which Fluxus worked to challenge.

Bürger writes in Theory of the Avant-Garde that though the avant-gardes did not completely destroy art; they did successfully change the understanding and making of art. As in Paik’s works, through his works with TVs, it is crucial to engage with the part of our contemporary culture that is heavily impacted by television and other communication platforms. Such tele-technologies allow for presentness to exceed distance, and bestows a multiplicity on a personal experience. And as in Ono’s works, it is critical to engage with the subjectivity of experiences, to allow for expansion of meaning in interactions. The transmedia-like fluid development of ideas in the works of Ono and Paik bring emphasis to daily objects and interactions. Ono’s use of performance scores as objects,

119 Yoshimoto, “Fluxus Nexus”, 6-12.  
121 Bürger, Theory of the Avant-Garde, 51.
as performances to be physically realized, or to be mentally realized, expanded the boundaries of performance and originality of an art object. Paik’s works in video and use of the television as a key image, would lessen the boundaries between the two-dimensional and three-dimensional, sculpture and painting, and would revitalize the intimacy of a time-based interactive artwork, recalling traditional narrative Buddhist scrolls. Both artists added to the Fluxus effort of redefining art, and redefined viewer-artist-artwork roles, through interaction, performance, and thoughtful engagement without intellectualism required.

**Fluxus as an Influence on My Work**

Overall, Nam June Paik and Yoko Ono utilized their positions as East-Asian artists to further the Fluxus investigation into Buddhism, and to assist in forging crucial connections between the Japanese, American, and European vanguards. The varieties of perspectives and interests of Fluxus artists enriched the development of new media: intermedia, performance, and video-art; and conceptual concerns of Fluxus: collectivity, interactivity, integration of art and life, and critique of the institution of Art. In making these changes to artmaking, Fluxus, as part of the neo-avant-garde, laid the foundation for other later movements, which serves to inform much of the contemporary approach to engaging with an art object or event. As mentioned towards the beginning of this essay, Jerry Saltz describes young contemporary artists as perfectly blending irony with sincerity. This contemporary attempt at honesty in artmaking that would not be possible without the self-awareness of roles in art, brought about by neo-avant-garde artists, such as those of Fluxus.

To illustrate contemporary artmaking in its connectedness to Fluxus, I will discuss some of my BFA thesis exhibition work, which reflects not only myself as a contemporary artist, but my peers, and professors, whose feedback influences my understanding of art. To preface, the most
significant Fluxus quality I see as affecting contemporary artmaking was the way such neo-avant-gardes opened up the way we define and therefore interact with art objects or events. The formal qualities of a piece are no longer the main subject of the artwork. Meaning can be conveyed through almost anything: formal qualities, object-hood, presentation, interactivity, language, process, illustration. Not only this, but Fluxus redefined the artist-viewer-artwork roles, removing the artist from sole authority, and allowing for interaction or chance to bestow meaning on a piece. Maciunas described Fluxus as being concerned with function and having a social concern, which through the changing of roles in art, has re-engaged the artist with a concern for social relevancy.

My BFA thesis exhibition, titled Yours, recalling the sign off of a personal and heartfelt letter, functions as a visual expression of my personal efforts to reconnect with the relationships in my life. Connections and networks, key Fluxus ideas, are important to me in maintaining meaning in relationships and empathy for others. To me, my work is quietly political, much like the works of Yoko Ono continue to be, serving as a gentle reminder of the difficulty but significance of engaging with those around us. This has a relevance currently, due to the division, hatred, defensiveness, and violence seen in contemporary political attitudes and the acts resulting from these views. I often discuss with my peers how we, as young contemporary artists, feel a kinship with the neo-Dada Fluxus artists, who felt frustrated in reaction to old institutional limitations and constant violence in warfare and civil rights. With our 45th American president exemplifying the problems exploding in just this country alone, absurdism and sincerity exist as two constant sides of the same coin.

My drawings, such as With Callused Fingers (figure 15), are expressions of my feelings and thoughts as I try to engage with the people in my life. By no means, do I wish a viewer to leave one of my works thinking there is one particular meaning, instead I hope they relate to the image
through their own experiences, and through empathy can engage with the work. I intentionally use familiar forms of the unidealized figure and domestic objects, along with suggestive titles, as a means of creating a relatability. This relates in part to the Fluxus usage of commonplace objects, sounds, and actions to incorporate life into their art. I realize my work makes use of the way Fluxus opened up life as a source of imagery, but does not do so for the exact same reasons, which entirely has to do with the fact that I am not reacting against a dominate intellectualist institution of art, in the way they were.

*With Callused Fingers* in particular features a distorted body existing in an abstract domestic space, with a dangling phone cord, wall paper trim, and nightstand with framed handwritten note, of words spoken by one of the more significant people in my life. Each aspect of the imagery is specific to my own personal imagery vocabulary but can also be related to, due to considerations of general connotations of each image, such as how the phone cord carries meanings of communication, limitations of movement in that communication, and nostalgia. I take time and care to create detail in the way I draw, as a means of conveying sincerity on my end of the exchange that exists in art, due to my asking the viewer to engage thoughtfully and personally with my work. In my drawings, for example, such detail is not only the cross-hatching and realism, formally, but the consistent use of my own specific body moles on each of the figures depicted. Regardless of if the figure looks like or is actually myself, my moles at minimum convey a continued layering of identity on differing bodies, as a means of showing the layered connections in relationships. In the installation of my show, each drawing was hung an inch or so from the wall, unframed, hanging from thin simple loops of linen. This presentation allows each drawing to exist as a vulnerable, humble, object, much like a carefully written and carefully kept heartfelt letter.
My sculptural works continue on this path of thought, functioning as memorials to the relationships I feel I have neglected. *We must be held afloat like this,* a mattress held upright by amateurly fashioned together external wooden supports, intentionally draws on the function and history of scrolls (figure 16), much in the same way that Ono’s film and books, and Paik’s video art do. The appeal of scrolls to me, is the interactive yet intimate quality they possess, which innately asks effort and openness of a viewer. Effort is also required, due to the time-based nature of scrolls, and in this way is also required in the viewing of my detailed drawings, and the video and sound components of other of my sculptural works. Conceptually, actual effort and time are significant to me in how they allude to the effort and time it takes to maintain real connections and empathy.

In *we must be held afloat like this,* I cut down and sewed together bedsheets to make one long piece of fabric, recalling the single-shot quality of Ono’s film *Bottoms.* On this fabric I screen-printed personal words in the original handwriting of the people who wrote them to me, though each message was spliced and rearranged as I saw fit to express each relationship (figure 17). The whole scroll is looped through two holes in the mattress, held up by the external framework, presented as if being pulled continually. This piece is meant to communicate a dialogue, and the push-and-pull that accompanies it. From its profile view, the piece possesses a boat-like silhouette, which recalls a flash essay I wrote, saying, “we are held afloat by the threads of such exchanges. Their thick, interwoven form, pillowy with tender glances, warm words, and open hands…” As I conveyed in the artist statement for this exhibition, greatly influenced by Yoko Ono’s fluid, poetic use of phrases, I collect phrases from others and write my own, often melding the two.

Language as a means of conveying intimacy and context is important in my work. Chieko’s idea of transmedia, and Higgin’s idea of intermedia, are key in the manifestation of contemporary
works, such as mine. I take specific influence from these ideas, as I tend to view my drawings, sculptures, and writings all as extensions of one another. For example, the language used in 3 poems I wrote relate to the relationships and imagery depicted in my drawings and sculptural works. For my exhibition, I temporarily bought phone numbers which when called would play a partially distorted recording of myself reading one of the three poems I had written in relation to my relationships. Each phone number was written on the gallery walls near the pieces it related to, and therefore would transform in meaning (figures 18, 19, 20). One, titled *honesick*, was positioned near pieces that related to its sense of yearning, for example the sculpture *No one has seen them made or heard them made* (figure 21,22).

In my poems, the spoken breathiness, untrained honesty, imagery in the language of the poem, and the image of each viewer listening on their phones are key. This particular poem reads,

...along your curves and flows,
like honey, sweetheart, my
sweet tooth asks for another
another blossom
another sweetness too sweet
honesick in my stomach
honesuckle on the tip
of my tongue...

An ambiguity yet intimacy is conveyed in the writings of Yoko Ono and is something I work to convey in my writings. The imagery of honeysuckle as a symbol, moves from this poem to the aforementioned sculpture it is positioned near. In this sculpture, feet hang from long awkward legs. Each pair of feet is a person in my immediate family unit, positioned awkwardly to convey the dynamic of change as my brother and I are in college, and parents are separated. The long legs appear like ghostly trees as an atmospheric video plays projected over them onto the floor and wall around them. The video shows foliage and fences specifically from my childhood home. The
foliage are dormant honeysuckle, while the holes in fences highlight other further fences. Both images reflect my poem and the poem referenced in the work’s title, Robert Frost’s *Mending Wall*, which symbolically questioning the reasons we build walls between one another. I work to engage with transmedia and multi-media, like the Dada and Fluxus artists, as a means of best engaging with a viewer and exploring an idea.

In conclusion, the spirit of the historical avant-garde was reinvigorated by the neo-avant-garde, including the experimental collective Fluxus. Existing largely as an international network of vanguard artists, Fluxus benefitted from the connections formed between East-Asian, American, and European artists. Yoko Ono and Nam June Paik, as physical connectors between these differing areas, helped to communicate ideas, and also made leading developments in Buddhist-Fluxus conceptual concerns, collectivity, interaction, and challenging the institution of art as an autonomous body, separate from the public and life. Through their work they lead the way in experimentation in new media, such as video, performance, and intermedia, which contemporarily are relied on commonly as means of making engaging artwork.
Bibliography


