

Galleries

Fluxus, Exploring the Art of the Idea

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Special to The Washington Post

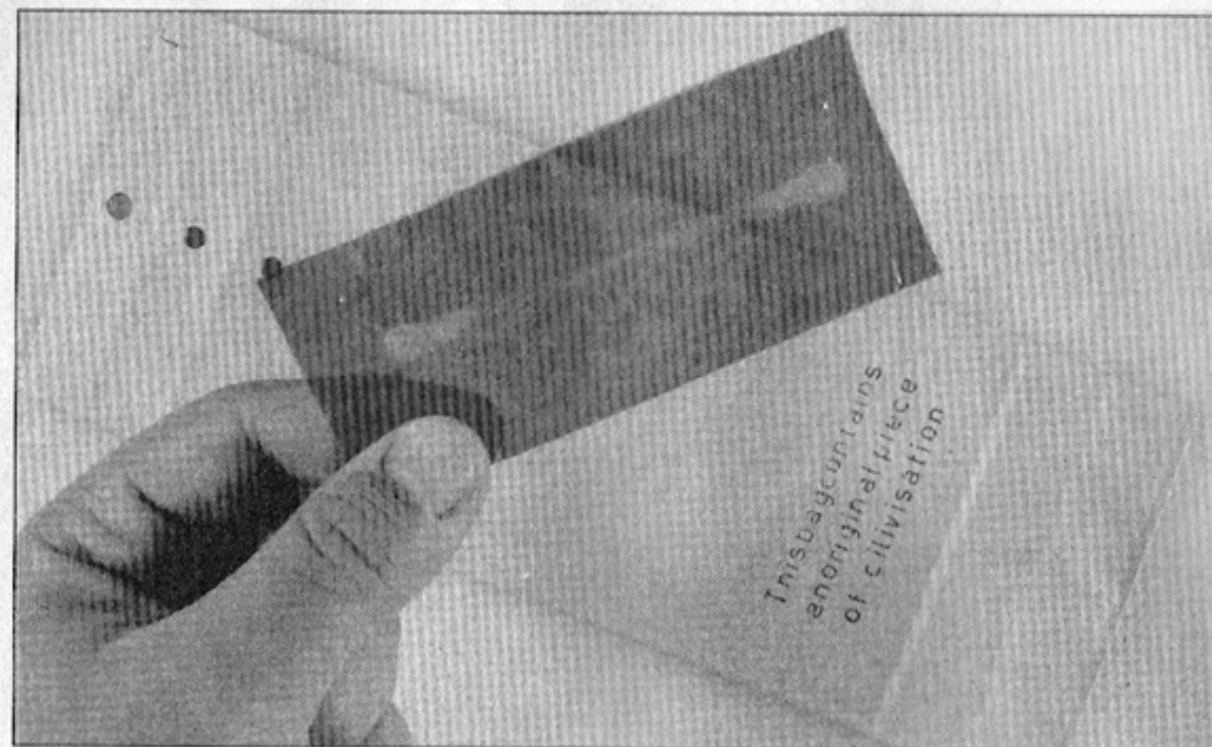
You study the 1960s-era art movement Fluxus as you would a lost people such as the Incas: through artifacts.

In terms of traditional, museum-vitrine-ready artwork, the group left little behind. Intentionally ephemeral, their works included performances and happenings that were impossible to replicate—though many were documented in letters and on video and audiotape. A visit to a Fluxus archive is likely the closest you'll get to understanding them.

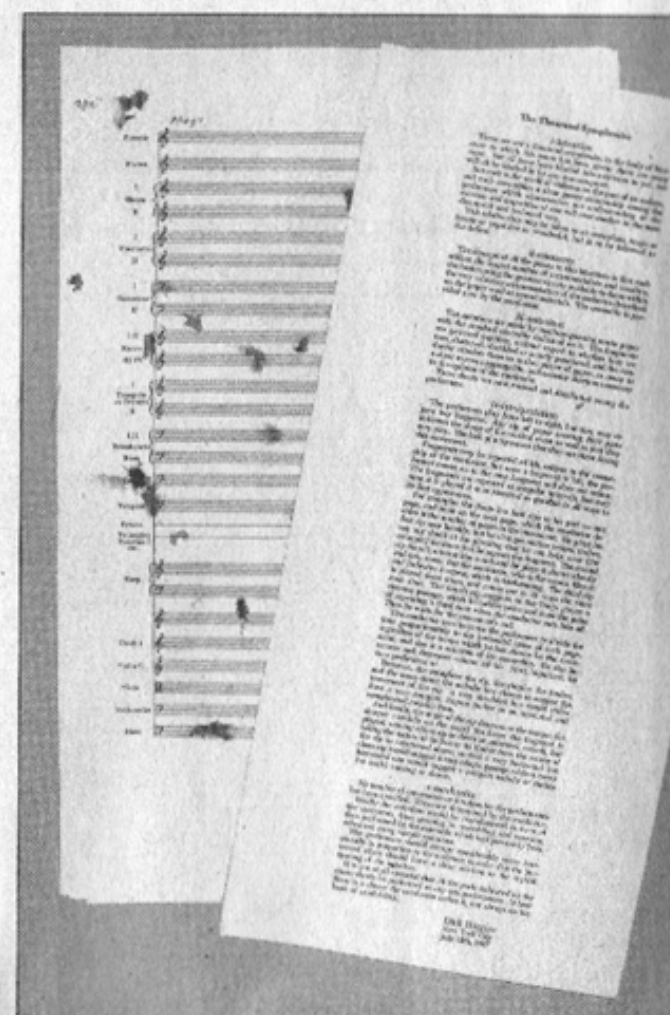
Right now, the curious may get a taste of Fluxus at "Intermedia: The Dick Higgins Collection" at the University of Maryland Baltimore County's Kuhn Library Gallery. On view are Fluxus artifacts culled from a cache donated by the family of Dick Higgins, one of the movement's many founders. An artist, composer, poet, theorist, publisher and pack rat, Higgins amassed an archive that entered UMBC's collections soon after his death in 1998. The current exhibition, curated by UMBC visual arts professor Lisa Moren, offers a flavor of the movement's headiest days and a window into its ideas and practices. Despite the numerous photos, recordings and writings, though, the group remains enigmatic. I think they liked it that way.

A loose international confederation of like-minded artists, Fluxus expanded, by extravagant leaps, the definition of Art. Its paradoxical paradigms—that change was the only constant and that art was life and life, art—left the field pretty wide open. Works were often performances—of someone hammering nails, perhaps. Or they were simple sets of instructions—some affixed to a matchbox invite viewers to say "BO" when matches are struck. "When all the matches are struck [sic]," the instructions read, "a concert is over."

For an art movement based on the transitory and the fleeting, Fluxus sure left behind a lot of stuff. The bulk turns out to be ephemera: a photo of John Cage collecting mushrooms, a letter written by Higgins detailing a masked performance in a basement or a tiny plastic container by Yoko Ono labeled "A Box of Smile." Books are a vital part of this show, too, owing to Higgins's founding, in 1963, of Something Else Press. That firm turned out reissues of obscure Gertrude Stein texts alongside new works by Fluxus heavies John Cage, Allan Kaprow, Claes



Serra Fin's "This Is an Original Piece of Civilization," left, and Dick Higgins's "Thousand Symphonies," both part of the "Intermedia" exhibit at the University of Maryland Baltimore County.



PHOTOS COURTESY UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND BALTIMORE CO.

Oldenburg and Marshall McLuhan.

Dabbling in wide-ranging media was a Fluxus hallmark. Higgins's own attempt at defining the movement, in a 1965 essay, generated the term "intermedia" to describe group operations. With it, he captured two key Fluxus tendencies: the emphatic hopscotching between traditional media—a symphony could exist as a set of drawings, for instance—and the inclusion of viewers in artworks.

Like Fluxus itself, this exhibition weighs heavily toward ideas, instructions and manifestoes. It demands concentration, attention and patience. Though Fluxus positioned itself in opposition to the ego-driven abstract expressionism that came before it, a trip through this show makes clear that these firebrands possessed a surfeit of confidence. Take a listen to composer Allan Kaprow as he details, in full didactic drone, the hows and whys of performance on his album "How to Make a Happening." It makes for challenging listening.

So does most of the Fluxus audio cache, for that matter. Though nearly unlistenable, Fluxus recordings steered notions of music into uncharted waters. Harnessing the ideal of chance composition put forward by John

Cage, Mieko (Chieko) Shiomi put 108 marbles inside a piano and started playing, generating unpredictable and unrepeatable sounds as the glass balls clanked and clonked inside the instrument. The point was to obliterate the composer's ego and make universal music. A profound idea, for sure. Never mind that the results sound pretty awful.

By all accounts, Fluxus participants had a blast. Happenings performer Meredith Monk, in an essay in the show's catalogue, is quoted describing Higgins's Guggenheim Museum performance "Juice" in 1969: "The image of Dick painted red from head to toe dancing in large red combat boots remains indelible in my mind," she says. Indeed, the shenanigans seemed nonstop. But walking through this show feels, at times, as if the in-crowd threw a party that the rest of us weren't invited to.

To her credit, Moren does her best to pull us in. The curator has written up a number of classic Fluxus "event scores"—instructions meant to make the viewer act in a certain way—and distributed them on slips of paper scattered throughout the gallery. Pick one up and stage your very own Fluxus performance, or at least imagine doing so. I got Milan Knizak's 1965 "Walking Event." It reads:

"On a busy city avenue, draw a circle about 3 m in diameter with chalk on the sidewalk. Walk around the circle long as possible without stopping." Hmm... remind to try that sometime.

In its day, such whimsy liberated the art world. For decades on, the work borders on opacity. Ultimately, though, the Fluxus legacy wasn't the artwork it generated but its influence on everything that came after. For like Higgins, Kaprow and Cage gave birth to vital new branches of conceptual art: the notion that art need nothing more than an idea; the belief that lines between artwork and viewer could be blurred. Fluxus was a harbinger for nearly all contemporary notions of multimedia and computer-based interactivity. Even Higgins's favored term, "intermedia," has become ubiquitous in most university art departments.

Groundbreaking stuff, for sure. But not much fun.

Intermedia: The Dick Higgins Collection is at the Albin Kuhn Library Gallery, University of Maryland Baltimore County, 1000 Hilltop Circle, Baltimore, to Dec. 13. Open Monday-Friday noon-4:30 p.m., Thursday to 8 p.m., Saturday 1-5 p.m. Call 410-455-2270 for more information.