Fluxus, Eric Andersen and the Communist East

_Peter van der Meijden_

**Abstract**

Although Fluxus was a Western avant-garde art phenomenon, its self-appointed General Secretary, George Maciunas, has always had a fascination for the Communist East. Therefore, when Fluxus associates began to get the opportunity to perform on the other side of the Iron Curtain, their way of presenting themselves was met with keen scrutiny from his side. So when Fluxus delegates Ben Vautier, Serge Oldenbourg and Jeff Berner performed in Prague in October 1966, at the same time as Dick Higgins and Alison Knowles, who had recently fallen out of favour with Maciunas, care was taken to present the former group under the name of “Fluxus” and the latter under the name of “Hry” (Games). Things sometimes happened the other way round as well: when Arthur Køpcke, Eric Andersen and Tomas Schmit performed in Prague in April 1966, they took care NOT to mention Fluxus because they had distanced themselves from it. This tour became an important event in the history of Fluxus.

From very early on, George Maciunas (1931–1978), the self-appointed General Secretary of Fluxus, conceived of his creation as a travelling community. During the late 1960s and the 1970s it was first and foremost mobility in general that counted – at various times Maciunas considered buying a minesweeper and an aquaplane to realise his dreams – but until the mid-1960s there was a certain direction to the movement: eastwards. That Maciunas, an exiled Lithuanian who spent most of his life in the US, should dream of conquering the East rather than the western frontier of American popular history is not entirely surprising: already in 1961 he had begun to move in communist circles, and his vision of Fluxus as he developed it between 1962 and 1966 was profoundly influenced by, if not communist, then at least extreme left-wing thinking. Nevertheless, it seems paradoxical that someone who fled to the West from the Red Army as a child should dream of conquering the communist East by means of a conception of art that was itself based on Western concepts but inspired by communist thinking.

Maciunas’s ideas were by no means shared by his Fluxus associates. They appreciated his organisational efforts and enjoyed the company of the other artists that he had managed to gather under the Fluxus banner, but his attempts at providing Fluxus with a theoretical or ideological basis were met with scepticism,
the occasional angry outburst and, first and foremost, a good deal of amusement. Maciunas himself, however, felt the pull of the East very strongly and was motivated by it in many of his actions. His relatively feasible plans from early 1962 for a touring European Fluxus festival, for example, took on a fantastic dimension as more and more cities were added and the Fluxus performance train, in his mind’s eye, drove off into the East. At first, he listed the Soviet Union, Poland and Czechoslovakia as a “maybe”, but the “maybe” soon became a fairly concrete plan to buy a bus and perform “in all towns & villages” in Eastern Europe “like a circus or carnival”.\(^1\) The bus tour then became a tour on the Trans-Siberian Railway with performances along the way, in the manner of the agitprop trains of the early years of the Soviet republic, and finally, the proposal to establish a collective farm in Japan at the end of the journey was added.

Mixed in with these grand visions were references to the Soviet authorities, suggesting that Maciunas was in some sort of communication with them. In February or March 1963, for example, Maciunas wrote to Robert Watts that “the USSR is VERY SLOW in accepting Fluxus & I want to flood them with FLUXUS – fests in every town, maybe right across Siberia” (Hendricks 1983: 151). Some suggest that, as early as 1961, before he had even coined the name “Fluxus”, Maciunas had sent Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev (1894–1971) a letter, urging him to encourage “realistic art” – in the sense in which he (Maciunas) himself used the word “realistic”, namely, as non-illusionistic and concrete – as the right type of art for a realistic economic system such as the Soviet one (Yoko Ono in Williams and Noël (eds.) 1997: 92). And in May or June 1963 he wrote a letter to his American Fluxus associate Emmett Williams (1925–2007) that manages to suggest direct contact with Khrushchev, even though a closer reading indicates that it is very probably nothing more than a suggestion:

Chrushchov [sic] is not hot on Fluxus at this very moment, although he agrees with us in being against abstract art. So he is closer to Fluxus then [sic] say New York ‘Abstract Expressionists’ or French ‘Tachistes’, yes? So I believe that Fluxus has best breeding ground in Soviet Union, which was not spoiled yet by abstractions (or at least Stalin corrected that!) We must all work towards eventual Fluxus in S.U. OK? [...] [T]o work through political agitation and present Fluxus as what they have been looking for all along [sic] [...].