TDR

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Tomas Schmit

A Fluxus Farewell to Perfection

an interview by Günter Berghaus

Introduction

Tomas Schmit was born on 13 July 1943 in Thier in the Rhineland, near Cologne and Düsseldorf. He chose not to follow a formal academic training, but rather to go through a practical "apprenticeship" by collaborating with such Fluxus artists as Nam June Paik, George Maciunas, George Brecht, Addi Koepcke, and Ludwig Gosewitz. Schmit became one of the core members of the Happenings and Fluxus movements of the 1960s. Although some of his performances and "pieces" (his name for a performance script) bear resemblance to Happenings, his main activities were always in the Fluxus genre. He was personally involved with the first "official" Fluxus event, Paik's *Neo-Dada in der Musik* concert on 16 June 1962, and four of the major Fluxus festivals. As he explained in an interview conducted on 9 April 1992, he was at that time a young man who had just left school. He had taken an interest in avantgarde art and music and gained some theatre experience through occasional work as a supernumerary at the Cologne municipal theatres.

At that time, the Rhineland possessed the most active and innovative art scene to be found in Germany.[1] All the latest trends coming over from the U.S.A., France, and Great Britain were exhibited in Cologne or Düsseldorf. But Schmit was not too impressed:

> In the 1950s, art was again going through a rather curious academic phase. Ideas one had learned about in the academies were displayed on canvasses one had expertly learned to stretch over a frame. Musicians knew how to splice tapes together or how to construct serial music. So, since content was not exactly in great demand, artists had no other alternative but to produce pure art gestures. And that's exactly what Fluxus did. (1982:99)

There were only a few artists who signposted possible ways out of academic abstractionism and purism. For Schmit these were John Cage, Piero Manzoni, Yves Klein, and David Tudor. Then came the Happenings

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Performance Chronology

Tomas Schmit

1962 16 June: Performer in Nam June Paik's *Bagatelles Americaines*. "Neo-Dada in der Musik," Kammerspiele, Düsseldorf.

23–25 November: *Zyklus für Wassereimer*. "Fluxus Musik og Anti-Musik. Det instrumentale Teater," Nikolaj Kirke and Allé Scenen, Copenhagen.

5 October: Performer in Nam June Paik's *Moving Theatre No. 1*. "Parallele Aufführung neuester Musik," Galerie Monet, Amsterdam.

3–8 December: Performer in various Events. "Festum Fluxorum: Poésie, musique et antimusique evènementielle et concrète," American Center, Paris.

1963 2–3 February: *Sanitas 2, Piano Piece for George Maciunas no. 1, Zyklus für Wassereimer*. "Festum Fluxorum Fluxus: Musik und Antimusik. Das instrumentale Theater," Staatliche Kunstakademie, Düsseldorf.

11–20 March: Artistic collaborator with Nam June Paik. *Exposition of Music. Electronic Television*. Galerie Parnass, Wuppertal.

23–28 June: *Zyklus für Wassereimer* and *Sanitas 2*. "Fluxus Festival, Theatre Compositions, Street Compositions, Exhibits, Electronic Music," Hypokriterion Theater, Amsterdam, and Bleijenburg behind the Stadsschouburg, Den Haag.

6 July: *Piano Piece for George Maciunas no. 1*. "Fluxus–A Little Festival of New Music," Goldsmiths College, London.

25 July–3 August: Various pieces. "Fluxus Festival of Total Art," various venues in Nizza.

27–30 September: *Lexikon-Poem* and *Sanitas 79*. "2 Internationale Koncerter for nyeste Instrumental (Theater og Anti-art)," Nikolaj Kirke, Copenhagen.

18 December: *Zyklus für Wassereimer*. "Internationaal Programma Nieuwste Muziek, Nieuwste Theater, Nieuwste Literatur" [Fluxus Concert], De Kleine Komedie, Amsterdam.

1964 11 April–23 May: *Sanitas 35, Sanitas 165, Zyklus für Wassereimer, Sanitas 135, Piano Piece for George Maciunas no. 1, Sanitas 151, Sanitas 79*. Also, performer in Wolf Vostell's Happening, *You*. Fluxus Concerts, 359 Canal Street, New York.

26 June: *Anstelle von...: Eine Veranstaltungsverunstaltung*. "Bloomsday 1964: Actions, Agit-pop, De-coll/age-happening, Texte, Ausstellung," Galerie Loehr, Frankfurt/M.

20 July: Participant in "Actions, Agit-Pop, De-coll/age-Happenings, Events, L'Autrisme, Art Total, Re-Fluxus," Technische Hochschule, Aachen.

4 September: *Sensatorium minimaximum* and *Anstelle von...* [both distributed in printed form to passersby]. "Maj Udstillingen (7 Concerter Nye Koncertfaenomener, Happenings, Action-Music)," Billed Huggersalen Charlottenborg, Copenhagen.

1965 28 May: *Selbst- (material-) bestimmtes* and *Sensatorium minimaximum*. Galerie René Block, Berlin.

5-6 June: *Aktion ohne Publikum*. "Vierundzwanzig Stunden," Galerie Parnass, Wuppertal.

25 August–11 September: Various pieces. "Third Festival of Avantgarde," Judson Church, New York.

30 August–1 September: Various pieces. "First World Congress: Happenings," St. Mary's of the Harbor, New York.

28 November: *Eintagesverlag*. Action with Ludwig Gosewitz at the Telegram Office Winterfeldstrasse, Berlin.

17 December: *Sensatorium minimaximum*, *Komposition für einundzwanziguhrdrei*, and *The Wet Sheet of Paper Piece*. "Poex," Den frie Udstillingsbygning, Copenhagen.

1966 28 January: *Selbst- (material-) bestimmtes* and *Sensatorium minimaximum*. "Sie sind eingeladen teil zu nehmen," Galerie Patio, Frankfurt/M.

5 April: *Sensatorium minimaximum* and *Yes-Piece*. "Advanced Art, Akce, Novy Realismus, Happening, Event," Statni Divadelni Studio-Reduta, Prague.

15–17 April: *The Dry Sheet of Paper Piece* and *The Wet Sheet of Paper Piece*. "Musikfestival," Forum Theater, Berlin.

31 July: *Eintagestournee*. Action with Ludwig Gosewitz at various venues in Berlin.

20 August: Open-air performance with Ludwig Gosewitz and Gerhard Rühm of *Das Büdinger Oratorium* by Schmit. "Kunstfest Büdingen."

15 July: *Fünf Minuten*. Galerie René Block, Berlin.

1967 5 October: Various Pieces. "12 Evenings of Manipulations," Judson Gallery, New York.

29–30 September: Various pieces. "Fifth Annual New York Avant-garde Festival," J.F. Kennedy Ferry Boat Whitehall Terminal, New York.

1969 6–17 August: *Zwei Inversionen*. "Amadou," A 37 90 89, Antwerp.

10 October: *Lines and Points*. Jysk Kunstgalerie, Copenhagen.

movement, and in Germany this again found its center in the Rhineland. Schmit saw many performances, but never warmed to their formal structures. He regarded them as too "symbolistic and expressionist," more akin to Wagner's operas than to John Cage's minimalism. Through Paik, Maciunas, and Brecht he was introduced to an entirely different concept of art: Fluxus.

The following interview and some theoretical statements indicate what attracted Schmit to the Fluxus movement. First of all, it was different from the modern art he had come into contact with in the late 1950s:

> The Fluxus path avoided all symbolist and expressionist art or any similar imposing frippery. It produced simple, concrete, form-free

> things. It didn't entirely succeed in pushing art off its pedestal (or stage), nor in destroying completely the aura of being "avantgarde," but at least it surrendered them to an open and hearty laugh. (1982:100)

Schmit liked the fact that Fluxus was completely shunned by the official and unofficial art market. A Fluxus performance did not leave behind any traces apart from what it achieved in the minds of the spectators. It produced no collectable objects and therefore there was no money or fame to be gained from it: Fluxus was pure "gesture." Schmit vehemently opposed the later development of Flux publications and Flux boxes which nowadays are exhibited in museums and art galleries.

To Schmit, the young and unspoiled artist, Fluxus offered a home, a family, or as he put it, a club where every member was free to pursue his or her own line of work, and "the stronger the personality, the less wedded they were to Fluxus" (1982:97). The very fact that Fluxus was an open house where everyone could participate (even the girlfriend of the son of the porter of the hall where they performed) made it very different from any of the previous and exclusive "art movements." For this reason he had no problem becoming involved in Fluxus festivals even though he was opposed to some of the aesthetic, political, and organizational concepts Maciunas was pursuing. The reservations he expresses below were even more accentuated at the time of his Fluxus performances. In the essay, "About F.," he criticized Maciunas's walk on a tightrope extended between the two poles of avantgarde anti-art and mass entertainment (1982:98), but he also admitted that some conceptual crutches, even if they were ideologically suspect and undesirable, were nevertheless necessary for the production process. The explanation he offered for this is typical and symptomatic of the "New Realism" Fluxus never propagated but effectively adhered to: Simply to go to the baker in order to buy a few rolls is not art. However, when the walk is announced as a performance, it becomes art, but without the usual aura attached to it. Here, life becomes art because the walk to the baker is more than just a necessary act in the daily task of feeding oneself. It is art without being raised on a pedestal; it is simple, concrete, and everyone is able to produce it.

Such ideas were, of course, not entirely original. Schmit reveals in his publications a sound knowledge of Dada art, of the works of Kurt Schwitters and Marcel Duchamp, of the proto-Happenings of Manzoni and Klein, Henry Flint's early Concept Art and Cage's Zen philosophy. Schmit's performances have to be seen within this context (see Berghaus forthcoming). The key points that connected him to other artists of the period he himself has neatly summarized:

(1) Farewell to the occidental mania of perfection
(2) Use of chance methods, not only because of their beauty, but also because they make life easier
(3) Welcome to pieces that do not require loads of fluency and can be performed by just about anyone
(4) Doing something in a simple, concrete and straightforward manner, devoid of expressiveness and symbolism
(5) Embracing reality with an open, unprejudiced mind
(6) Paying tribute to the fact that art, like the world, exists in brains and in our concepts of art and being
(7) Ridiculing academic art and cultural traditions and having a pleasurable time whilst doing so. (1972:39)

Unfortunately, there are no descriptive reviews, no film records, and only a few photographs of Schmit's actual performance events. With any other form of theatre this would pose enormous methodological problems. But not so with Schmit's performances. They consisted of simple and concrete actions that could be neatly scored in a script. The carrying out of the action could be varied according to the specific performance situation, but none of these "accidentals" are relevant to an interpretation of the "substantials" indicated in the script. Let's take his opus 1, *Cycle for Water Buckets* (1962):

> The performer stands in a circle of 10 to 30 water buckets (or bottles). One bucket (or bottle) is filled with water, the others are empty. The performer takes the full bucket (or bottle), pours the content into the next bucket (or bottle) in the circle in a clockwise manner and places the empty bucket (bottle) in its place. He takes the second, now full bucket (bottle) and pours its content into the next one, etc....until all water is evaporated or spilt.[2]

In this case, the action consists of pouring water from one receptacle into another. It is irrelevant whether it is a bucket or bottle, whether the performer wears jeans or a suit, whether the action lasts one hour or a whole day (as in fact it did during the Happening *24 Hours* at the Galerie Parnass). However, what does matter to Schmit is the attitude of the performer toward the action. In a 1978 note he commented that his piece had nothing in common with Performance Art, which he regarded as "d/ego/utant": ego-centered and therefore objectionable (see Schmit 1978:opus 1). He could imagine his piece being used in order to produce Symbolist, Expressionist, or comical theatre. But the action he had devised had only one aim: to be done. For him it was an action carried out without intervention of the conscious mind and without any attempt at expressing emotion. Doing is a concrete, plastic action. That's enough. Basta!: "[T]here could be many ways to arrange this scene [...] the Fluxus way is the basta one" (1972:39).

Bearing this comment in mind, a few more scripts I have translated indicate what some of the Actions consisted of. In 1963, he wrote *Self-(material)-determined*, performed in Berlin at the René Block Galerie on 28 May 1965:

> A large and empty room. Inside, there are various objects on tables. Performers and spectators are only distinguishable by the fact that the former know what's it all about, i.e., actions whose ends are not determined by the hand of the devising author but by their innate finiteness. The performers only have to start. The end arrives by itself:
> a) to fill something (e.g., the room with smoke)
> b) to empty something (e.g., a bottle of beer)
> c) to cover something (e.g., the floor of the room with water)
> d) to uncover something (e.g., peeling an orange)
> e) to assemble something (e.g., a toy tractor)
> f) to destroy something (e.g., a tuned-in radio)
> [...]
> s) to do something until the audience leaves
> t) to do something until the janitor intervenes. (1978:op. 18)

Opus 3, *Sanitas* (1962), consists of 200 pieces. They have no fixed content or meaning other than those assigned to them by the audience. The

from *Sensatorium minimaximum* (1964)

Tomas Schmit

The aim is: TO DO SOMETHING FOR SOMEBODY (: theatre) WITHOUT offering something
- that could distract people from REALITY;
- that would be something else than reality;
- that people could appropriate as their "art," as their "antithesis to everyday life";

THEREFORE: WITHOUT offering something that could be judged, in one way or another, with the categories of "art"!! /– : The purpose of ANTI-ART is NOT: to do something that is different from normal art or stands "in opposition" to it (by avoiding, eliminating, turning on its head everything that until now has been defined as "artistic"–with regard to form, material, content and the relationship of those three to each other) while still manifesting itself in the old formats (: performance / concert / exhibition / book / etc.) since thereby they still can and will be judged with the categories of art and thus, naturally and easily, slide into the categories "snobism," "cabaret," etc. (and–together with all other forms of art–into the category "not that important"!),–

BUT: simply to do things that CANNOT ANY LONGER be evaluated according to the categories of art!! And since evaluation presupposes DISTANCE ("one can't see the end of the universe nor one's own eyes, but more or less everything in-between these two extremes"), the aim is: to CHANGE the DISTANCE BETWEEN AUDIENCE AND ART in such a manner as to render IMPOSSIBLE the classification of the product as "art,"–thereby making it possible to reach the audience in a true fashion–,

THEREFORE: NOT PERFORMING something IN FRONT of an audience / SHOWING something / SAYING something / PLAYING something / ETC. in the ever-so-well/never/proved distance (not large enough to render necessary an effort of thought by the audience, and not small enough to provoke the audience to attack or to force them to react, WHEREBY they would EXPERIENCE something = experience in the way not only children, obviously, can do with their body and soul =) which always is and was common in art and which carries with itself this miserable being-easily-surveyable, which in itself leads to art never being more than a pleasant ALIBI for people: this kind of art relieves them–partly intentionally, but nevertheless–to think in a real way about THEIR LIVES / to alter their lives / to animate their lives / etc.

NOW: one way to remedy this is to BROADEN THE DISTANCE BETWEEN AUDIENCE AND ART TO ABSOLUTE ANONYMITY [...] The other way is to COMPRESS THE DISTANCE BETWEEN AUDIENCE AND ART TO AN ABSOLUTE CONCRETE DIRECTNESS.

This text functioned as an introduction to a series of Actions with the audience. It was published in Becker and Vostell (1965:246–47).

spectators are encouraged to create their own world/art/art-world with the elements or the impulses offered to them by the performers. For example, *Sanitas* reads: "The auditorium is completely dark. The performers arrive. Each throws a small, simple object into the audience. They light their torches and search for the objects. When all have been found, the piece is finished" (1978:op. 3).

Sanitas 79 is more elaborate and bears close resemblance to the environmental happenings organized by Wolf Vostell at the time.[3] Spectators are confronted with everyday reality. However, the framing of the event as a performance provokes people to look afresh at things, to sharpen their consciousness of reality, and to transform reality in their own mind/fantasy into whatever they like. This creative, mental act becomes the work of art. It is purely conceptual and different for every participant. Only the action that provokes it is the same for each spectator: "The audience is asked to board a bus. They are driven 100 km and let out of the bus again" (1978:op. 3).

Other pieces in the series share the concerns of French Fluxus and Happenings artist Robert Filliou, whose concepts of Ludism and Permanent Creation (see Berghaus forthcoming) aimed at stimulating the creative child in the spectator and at enabling spectators to discover that "to be a man or a woman means that one is a genius, but most people have forgotten this; they are too busy exploiting their talents" (Neue Galerie 1970:n.p.). Schmit's *Sanitas 35* is a similar device for unlocking the audience's free creativity: "Empty sheets of paper are distributed to the audience. Afterwards the piece continues at least five minutes longer" (1978:op. 3).

Opus 24, *Instead of* (1964), falls into the same category. Originally written for radio, it became opus 28, an "Arrangement-Dearrangement" at the Loehr Gallery in Frankfurt. Depending upon what the audience happened to be doing, they were asked to do something else, for example: "Instead of reading this book, go and have a drink / let your ears listen to your eyes / be annoyed / water your plants [...]" (1978:op. 24).

Filliou's Permanent Creation stipulates that everyone is a genius and that everything a person does is of equal value, whether it is well-made, badly-made, or not-made. Consequently he arrived at non-art ("The secret of absolute and permanent creation consists of: sitting there quietly, doing nothing" [in Liebig 1973:n.p.]) and a series of No-Plays (1964 ff.) which were performed without anything happening at all. Before him, Schmit expressed the same idea in the *Sanitas* series, in which he states: "It is not enough to have no thoughts; one must also be incapable of expressing them." His version of a No-Play was opus 25, *Composition to Justify a Performance* (1964): "After the performance distribute leaflets: 'We regret having encouraged you to waste x hours and y minutes for art'" (1978:op. 25).

In 1963, Ben Vautier organized a Fluxus Festival in Nice, to which Tomas Schmit was also invited. Between 1958 and 1961, Vautier had developed his concepts of Non-Art and Total Art ("Not-doing: Creation of inactivity. Constructing NOTHING, destroying NOTHING" [1961] or "Everything: If art is in everything and art is in nothing, then art is in emptiness and art is in everything" [1958][4]), which he then developed into art as an act of appropriating everyday reality ("Tout est art"[5]), ending up with totally conceptual works like his contribution to the Venice Biennale of 1966: "400 miles from Venice, in Nice, 32 rue Tondutti-de-l'Escarène, from 18 June during the Biennale of Venice, BEN SHALL LIVE AS USUAL."[6] Schmit was prevented from arriving at the Nice Festival of Total Art on time, so the piece he had written for the occasion (*Prepared Piano Piece op. 21 for Nizza Festival*) remained a "No-Piece," or a pure conceptual Fluxus event: "Two pianos at the beach. Two people playing–it

doesn't matter what—on the instrument. Two others fill one piano with water, the other with sand" (1978:op. 21).

No doubt, such pieces were conceived with a fair amount of provocation in mind. Joseph Beuys later performed a similar Action at the Fluxus Festival in Aachen on 20 July 1964 and was violently attacked by a spectator.[7] Schmit had better luck when he performed his *Piano Piece for George Maciunas no. 1* (1962) on 6 July 1963 at the Little Festival of New Music in London. Here, the piano was used to attack the audience, and not only with concrete but rather hard-hitting sounds: "The performer arranges on the closed lid of a grand piano (placed with the hinges towards the audience) as many objects as possible until it is completely covered. Then he lifts the lid" (1978:op. 4). The audience reacted with amusement and took with them from the concert what had been offered, collecting the objects as souvenirs.

Less aggressive and more Happening-like were the audience-participation Actions of opus 26, *Sensatorium minimaximum* (1964). In order to reduce the "distance between audience and art," the actions were carried out with the spectators, for example, hanging a car tire around someone's neck, sticking a matchstick to someone's forehead, blindfolding a spectator, placing a paper bag over someone's head, putting a hot potato in someone's hand, or some crushed eggshells in someone's pocket.

Another piece that mixed provocation and amusement, but in a much simpler Fluxus manner, was opus 30, *Yes Piece* (1965). It consists of only one line: "Are you able to answer this question?" Such simplicity can be found in many of Schmit's not particularly eventful Events. Doing (Greek: *drama*) is here reduced to being, but the performer's action is still required to remind the audience that being is a flux of existence. For example, opus 32, *Composition for 21:03* (1965, performed at the René Block Galerie, Berlin): "Three leaflets are distributed one after the other, or three posters are successively put up on stage, 'around' 21:03. The first says 'it becomes.' With the beep of the time announcement '21:03' it is replaced with 'is,' and shortly afterwards followed by 'was'" (1978:op. 32).

The same consciousness of real-time is displayed in what Schmit called his "last real Action," *Five Minutes* (1967), performed between 21:00 and 21:05 at the René Block Galerie in Berlin and broadcast live on Austrian television. The TV team had asked to film one of his Actions and he had inquired how long the broadcast could last. Five minutes was the answer, so he said: OK, then I will only perform for five minutes. Following the beat of a metronome he presented 60 one-second Actions and repeated them five times. Such precision was not his usual style, so he actually had to rehearse this piece. It involved Actions such as showing a placard saying "soon," followed by a placard saying "now," followed by "just"; pulling off a calendar leaf; stopping the metronome, and letting it tick again a second later; turning the page of a book.

Tomas Schmit's performance work was imbedded in the general trends of 1960s avantgarde art. His main direction followed the broad parameters of the Fluxus movement. He shared many of the concerns of Paik, Brecht, Koepcke, and Maciunas, but was independent enough to be critical of some of their views and aesthetics. When surveying his career as a performer and writer of Fluxus pieces, one is struck by how many of the ideas explored in the performances by well-known artists such as Vostell, Beuys, and Filliou had already been formulated by Schmit. It seems to me that his shy and unassuming personality prevented him from becoming an internationally renowned performance artist. He was always happy to stay in the second row, to support his colleagues by translating their works into German,[8] to enjoy their company and relish their esteem. He shunned all

1. Tomas Schmit, standing, with (left to right) Marcel, Broodthaers, Arthur Koepcke, and Robert Filliou in Antwerp in 1969 as part of the piece Amadou. *(Photo by Maria Gilissen; courtesy of the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Foundation, Detroit)*

hype and publicity and only did a handful of solo performances. Since 1969, Schmit mainly has been concerned with producing texts, books, drawings, and artists' books. He has had many solo exhibitions and participated in a large number of group shows. In 1986 he was awarded the highly respected and financially rewarding Kurt Schwitters Prize for art donated by the City of Hanover.

From 12 January to 26 February 1994 the Michael Werner Gallery in New York featured Tomas Schmit in an exhibition entitled "Fishing for Nets."

BERGHAUS: People have tended to bracket Happenings and Fluxus together when talking about the theatrical avantgarde of the 1960s.

SCHMIT: Yes, you can lump everything together. But every time I hear Fluxus and Happenings spoken of in one breath I shudder as if I saw a carp fuck a duck. It is possible to draw a dividing line between Happening and Fluxus. The two have very little in common and very much that keeps them apart. Happenings are expressionistic and symbolic, whilst Fluxus essentially portrays the opposite. It says farewell to the mania of perfection. It's concrete, simple, and offers two pleasant hours without great expense.

BERGHAUS: I can see that Fluxus is more to your taste, isn't it?

SCHMIT: I've nothing against Happenings, it's just that I find them too steeped in Expressionism and Symbolism.

BERGHAUS: But theatre historians see Happenings much more as a reaction against Expressionist theatre.

SCHMIT: But Fluxus was a more extreme reaction. Certainly, both types of performance are very different from classic theatre and the traditional forms of representation of character, plot, and so on.

BERGHAUS: And as such, Happenings and Fluxus together formed the first truly avantgarde theatre movement of the post-war period. They were often referred to as Neo-Dada and were undoubtedly influenced by Motherwell's anthology *Dada Painters and Poets*, published in 1951. Kaprow's first Happenings grew out of this resurrection of modernist art and the European sources of Abstract Expressionism.

SCHMIT: There's no doubt that Kaprow was the first to use the term Happenings. But what he actually understood by it is less clear.

BERGHAUS: But he certainly didn't think of acting in the traditional sense.

SCHMIT: Certainly not, and neither did George Brecht when he spoke of Events. He simply wanted to find a neutral term.

BERGHAUS: But what did these two terms really mean? Could it be that Happenings and Fluxus were two sides of the same coin? Or did they really represent two different types of performance? And did the American and European artists have the same thing in mind when they used the term Happenings? Perhaps what you see as such heavyweight symbolism wasn't meant to be that by the American artists.

SCHMIT: Sure, the Americans were far more down-to-earth than the European Happenings artists.

BERGHAUS: Possibly because abstract painting had a far more pervasive influence there than in Europe.

SCHMIT: Could be. But American Happenings were just as material-intensive as European Happenings. These guys weren't happy unless they could play around with 200 car tires or 2 tons of animal bones or some other sort of junk. Whereas for a Fluxus event, you hardly needed anything. The essentials could be packed into a small suitcase: a couple of darts, a toy flute, a few balloons, etc. Anything else you could ask for. You simply had to write a letter: Dear Addi, shall be arriving on Tuesday, get me a ladder, a piano, a power drill, and a big pot of paint. And whatever was delivered was used. Difficulties did crop up. Sometimes the organizer would say: Paint a piano? Hang on a second, the paint has to be removable; and drilling into the woodwork or nailing down the keys—well you'd better forget about that.

BERGHAUS: What about the performance spaces? I know you avoided theatre buildings, just like the Happenings artists did. They moved out into the street, a forest, even a railway station, but Fluxus events were staged in another type of revered temple of the muses, namely art galleries.

SCHMIT: You're quite mistaken. We did perform, albeit rarely, in theatre buildings. Otherwise, there was a whole array of performance spaces: concert halls, lecture theatres, churches, assembly halls. What we wanted were neutral, uncluttered spaces. Happenings, by contrast, were of a rather bombastic and Wagnerian character.

BERGHAUS: But not always.

SCHMIT: Sure, just as a sausage can be short and fat or long and thin, so

too there were both "fat" and "thin" performances in the Happenings and Fluxus period. But the Happenings tended to be on the "fat" and the "long" side!

BERGHAUS: Another difference was that Fluxus events were highly improvised, whereas Happenings demanded a lot of preparation.

SCHMIT: Right. Mainly because Happenings needed so many props. How improvised the Fluxus events actually were is hard to say. If you take a piece which says: dismantle a flute and put it back together again—what does it mean? Improvisation, satire, grotesque? No, it simply means you take a flute apart and reassemble it again. Just like that! It doesn't mean anything more than carrying out the action. That's the nice thing about it. The Happenings, on the other hand, had these endless scenarios using masses of materials and loads of performers, who needed to be drummed up, given instructions, organized in rehearsals. No wonder Happenings ended up being such grand operas.

BERGHAUS: If that's what you want to call them. But at least they were operas where the audience could sing along as well.

SCHMIT: Yes, they always tried to blur the boundary between actor and spectator. And this would lead to quite crazy situations: 25 people crawling about in a knacker's yard and ending up as dirty as a bunch of scabby dogs. After a Happening you simply had to go and take a shower. But a Fluxus event could be staged far away from the nearest Turkish baths! That's certainly a key difference.

BERGHAUS: Does that relate to the performers, the audience, or both?

SCHMIT: The differentiation between performer and spectator wasn't always that clear. Or to use the previous metaphor: after a Happening it wasn't always obvious who had to take a shower and who not. But it was better if all of them went off to the bathhouse!

BERGHAUS: Were Fluxus events more directed toward an audience?

SCHMIT: Well, there were some quite curious discussions on the subject. The Happenings artists told us: you're old-fashioned; you perform in cultural institutions whereas we choose everyday surroundings. And we asked: what's so everydayish about a morgue or a police station? They provide symbol-ridden scenery soaked with ideology. What we do is far more neutral and free of all this opinionated claptrap.

BERGHAUS: What about the famous breaking down of the distinction between art and life? It seems to me that Fluxus events were arranged for an audience, who were separated from the stage and had to watch a performance in a way that was similar to looking at a painting or a play.

SCHMIT: Not exactly. The mental process when watching a neutral performance is an odd phenomenon. Take this piece by La Monte Young. It says: Open the lid of a piano in a manner that doesn't produce any sound. Try it again and again until you succeed or give up. Now, when you perform this piece onstage, you soon find out that the lid produces a whole cacophony of sounds. It's wonderful to perform this piece. You try and open the lid and hear the weirdest sounds, but the audience hasn't got a clue what you're trying to do. You follow Young's instructions, you find out it's hopelessly unrealistic, and in the end you simply give up. How does the audience perceive the event? Well, it's totally up to them and their imaginations.

BERGHAUS: Fine. But there were also Events where they could see and hear what was going on onstage. So it was easy to fall back into a passive role.

SCHMIT: I certainly wouldn't call it passive. There were, for example, those boredom pieces, a kind of tactical strategy to undermine the entertainment function art has played for centuries.

BERGHAUS: Couldn't the same also be said of many Happenings?

SCHMIT: No, not at all. There was always something happening—excuse the pun. Everyone involved had a lot of fun.

BERGHAUS: Really? I have my doubts. Going to a 24-hour Happening meant that you had to be prepared for extended periods of boredom.

SCHMIT: But usually there was a hell of a lot of action in a Happening. I can't forget this Action Addi Koepcke, Eric Anderson, and I once did in Prague. We were given a hall and there was an invited audience. After a short while they got very annoyed because there wasn't enough action in this Action. The organizer responsible came up onstage and shouted: "Akce, Akce!—Do something, folks!" These people had heard of Happenings and were expecting something weird and wonderful. But what was happening didn't square with what they'd hoped for.

BERGHAUS: I always thought that Fluxus events were quite entertaining. Firstly, because they were so short; secondly, because of their polemical stance; and thirdly, because a Fluxus evening contained so many different pieces that if you got bored with one of them, at least you knew they were short and in 20 minutes something new and possibly more exciting was going to happen. An evening of anti-art and polemics always has some sort of entertainment value.

SCHMIT: Sure, but part of the polemics had to do with boredom.

BERGHAUS: This may have been the case. But anyone can stomach a few minutes of boredom. When I read these collections of Fluxus pieces, I can't help but smile about some of them. Some do sound pretty boring, yes; but others are really funny. And presented onstage they would certainly have made me laugh. In comparison, the endless Happenings scenarios offer a much heavier diet. Reading them is OK, because I can skip a few pages when I get too bored. But when presented onstage, you have to suffer them, like it or not.

SCHMIT: You're right. I also find these Happenings boring. But not because of a lack of action. They just have the same effect on me as a Wagner opera.

BERGHAUS: Let's move to another topic then. An important difference between European and American Happenings can be found, in my view, in the attitude towards sex and politics. The break with traditional forms of representation was linked to a sociopolitical liberation movement. I'm talking about 1968 and the events leading up to it, and the so-called sexual revolution. The move towards a new art and performance style had roots in a revolt against post-war consumer society, a stagnant political and social order, bourgeois lifestyle, and puritanical sexual morals.

SCHMIT: Of course, American and European culture at that time was incredibly conservative and prudish. But the sexual and political needs to be

looked at separately, step by step. Take the Viennese Actionists: for them, the sexual question was really important.

BERGHAUS: Or Lebel. He was always talking about the sexual revolution.

SCHMIT: I'm sorry, but I don't take his talk seriously at all. All those naked women strutting about in his Actions, they made for a salacious, but not particularly serious spectacle. It got him into the local newspapers, but what else did it achieve?

BERGHAUS: I agree, Lebel was by no means the greatest artist the movement produced. But there was more to his Happenings than just scandalmongering. In his writings he repeatedly refers to Marcuse, whose *Eros and Civilization* makes use of Freud's theory of sublimation to produce a society whose sexual freedom is achieved by means of de-sublimation...

SCHMIT: It only proves that M. Lebel can read and repeat what others have written. But what's it got to do with Happenings?

BERGHAUS: Quite a lot. Lebel's Festivals of Free Expression dealt with the idea of expressing a liberated sexuality. There was little sign of that in American Happenings.

SCHMIT: You think so? Nam June Paik wasn't exactly a prude either.

BERGHAUS: You mean his Actions with Charlotte Moorman?

SCHMIT: Exactly. Not that I rate them highly. Charlotte—don't be angry with me—but taking off your clothes when it would have been better to keep them on—I mean, with all due respect to the intentions behind the Action, what did it actually achieve?

BERGHAUS: It visualized her intention; that is, to perform music, a type of music that aimed at liberating the mind. Taking off one's clothes is a metaphor for putting aside a conventional cover behind which the essence of music is hidden. Playing the cello in the nude was a small step toward all-embracing liberation.

SCHMIT: But isn't this a rather simplistic metaphor? I'm sure that's what she meant to say, and Lebel was even more simplistic in his thinking.

BERGHAUS: From today's viewpoint we may smile about this and call it simplistic. But haven't most theoreticians of the 1960s sexual revolution thought in rather schematic categories? And isn't it understandable that Happenings artists were caught up in the same mode of thinking?

SCHMIT: Exactly, that's why the erotic component in Happenings can't be taken very seriously.

BERGHAUS: And what about the political aspect?

SCHMIT: Let's take Maciunas's political ideology. It was a mosaic of quasi-revolutionary elements. He talked about it a great deal. But where does it come out in the Fluxus activities? Everyone knew that Maciunas had some very mixed-up ideas. I probably advocated them in the same manner at that time. But today I have to ask myself: What role did it play in our Actions? Did any of us seriously believe in these ideas? I was young; I thought Maciunas was great. I supported his political ideas as well—I guess more than I would like to admit today. But I also know that others, such as Koepcke or Filliou, didn't take this political claptrap seriously at all. And to be honest, there wasn't much discussion about it either.

BERGHAUS: But Maciunas played an important role as a leader in the Fluxus movement.

SCHMIT: Well, leader of a kind. He regarded Fluxus as being the avantgarde, but in a strange sort of way, namely by being anti-avantgarde. He sat down at night, wrote manifestos and had them printed. We read them together, laughed about them, gave our opinion, and then put them aside. Maciunas had very definite aims, highly illogical ones at that. If you take the time and examine them in more detail, they make neither head nor tail. He was more orthodox- than Leftist-thinking ought to be.

BERGHAUS: Wasn't Maciunas influenced by early revolutionary thought in the Soviet Union? He based his thoughts on LEF [Productivist group and art magazine headed by Vladimir Mayakovsky] and similar groups.

SCHMIT: Yes, and since they were ideas which were only known to a few in the West, he talked about them a lot. Maciunas picked out a few concepts that fit into his thinking and used them as set pieces. I don't think there was much more behind it.

BERGHAUS: I'm not so sure. As a Lithuanian he would have had plenty of opportunity to study Soviet revolutionary arts.

SCHMIT: I doubt it. He went to school during Stalin's rule, a time when the textbooks didn't make any mention of the revolutionary art of 1917–1919.

BERGHAUS: You're probably right. Nowadays, we certainly know more about early Soviet art than would have been possible for Maciunas to study in Lithuania. But whatever his sources and however well—or badly—digested they may have been, you believe that Maciunas's political engagement wasn't shared by the other Happenings and Fluxus people?

SCHMIT: We picked up many ideas and talked about them a lot. But most of these were purely and simply provocative. Don't make the mistake of taking them too seriously. We certainly didn't.

BERGHAUS: And what about the '68 revolution? It stirred up many people's passions—the Vietnam War, the barricades in Paris and Berkeley, the Berlin demonstrations against the Shah of Persia.

SCHMIT: If you ask me, by 1968 Fluxus was dead but not yet buried. As far as I myself am concerned, I didn't take to the streets in 1968. I was rather suspicious about the whole thing. Not that I was a Rightist or in any way in favor of the bourgeois state. No, I think I was probably a bit high and mighty about the whole thing, thinking that I had already been a revolutionary in 1962.

BERGHAUS: Another topic: Fluxus is often linked to Futurism, Dada, Schwitters, Duchamp, Picabia. Without doubt there were similarities to be found. But I'm sometimes unsure as to whether we, from today's historical perspective, make connections of which the artists at their point in time were unaware.

SCHMIT: It's difficult to generalize about this. There are certainly overlaps between the concerns of the Dada and Fluxus artists. But what their fundamental concerns exactly were, no one has been able to say.

BERGHAUS: But were the Fluxus artists in any way familiar with the theoretical writings of the Dada movement?

SCHMIT: Well, yes. There was a Dada renaissance in the 1950s. I can remember reading books and brochures about Dada.

BERGHAUS: In America, Motherwell's anthology, *The Dada Painters* of 1951 meant that many Dada texts became available in translation for the first time. In Europe it should have been much easier to gain access to these writings.

SCHMIT: Yeah, we did read this stuff.

BERGHAUS: And what about the Futurist manifestos? Russolo's "The Art of Noise" seems to have a number of apparent parallels to Fluxus music.

SCHMIT: No, none of us knew about this. Each of us approached Fluxus from a different angle. Everyone had a different background and cultural consciousness. I can't speak for all Fluxus artists. I never read Marinetti or Russolo, but others may have.

BERGHAUS: But you talked amongst each other. If someone had read a piece by Tzara or Duchamp, you would have discussed it.

SCHMIT: Possibly. But without keeping a diary you can't really recall it later on. With the best will in the world, I can't remember when I first heard of Duchamp.

BERGHAUS: And Schwitters? Were you familiar with his work?

SCHMIT: Yes, as I recall, it was in 1961 or sometime thereabouts that I saw some of Schwitters' stuff in an exhibition. At the same time I became aware of Cage. I remember, there were three records on the market, limited edition, and I bought number two of them.

BERGHAUS: How come you spent your money on something you didn't really know?

SCHMIT: Well, it's an odd sort of thing how you get involved in this avantgarde business. If you really want, I can recount my own CV to you. It's insignificant, but probably quite telling.

BERGHAUS: Yes, let's go. Tomas Schmit, a shy schoolboy in provincial Germany. How does he arrive at becoming an avantgarde performance artist?

SCHMIT: Radio played a key role in this process. I listened to compositions by the Vienna School: Schoenberg, Webern, etc. Then, there were the WDR [West German Radio] broadcasts in Cologne, my local music scene so to speak–Stockhausen, Kagel, etc. Through them I heard of the New Music Festival in Darmstadt. I remember, I was still at school and took the train to go there. What an experience: David Tudor playing Cage, George Brecht, and La Monte Young. This was getting very close to Fluxus music.

BERGHAUS: What about exhibitions and theatre performances?

SCHMIT: Well, at that time I had a girlfriend and she had a brother who knew about modern art. He showed me the first issue of *ZERO*. Düsseldorf, which was the center of the ZERO movement, was only half an hour away. So I became familiar with Yves Klein and Diter Rot, and of course Tinguely. You could buy these DIY kits in stencilled cardboard: construct your own Tinguely machine and set it in motion. Oh yes, my first plays. Terribly adolescent stuff, outpourings of puberty, somewhere between Maurizio Kagel and Bob Wilson. I showed them to Paik, whom I met in Düsseldorf in 1961.

2. Tomas Schmit performing Zyklus für Wassereimer *as part of the "International Programma Nieuwste Muziek, Nieuwste Theater, Nieuwste Literatur" at De Kleine Komedie theatre on 18 December 1963 in Amsterdam. (Photo by Dorine van der Klei; courtesy of the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Foundation, Detroit)*

BERGHAUS: How did this come about?

SCHMIT: The *Kölnische Rundschau* reported on a concert of his and printed a photograph of Paik turning a piano upside down. The caption called him "this crazy Korean." A few months later I bumped into him at a Pollock exhibition in Düsseldorf. I had no doubt that this guy with a bag of cherries in his hand, spitting the stones at the corners of the paintings, was him. Although I was a terribly shy bloke, I walked up to him and we just started chatting.

BERGHAUS: And this was your entrance into the world of Fluxus?

SCHMIT: You know, at that time they needed performers for all sorts of things. Nowadays, you might invite a young artist round for a coffee; at that time, you invited him round for a performance. Not as a spectator, that is, but as a participant! Paik did the same with me. I came to his studio and he said to me: Tomas, on 16 June I'm doing a Neo-Dada concert at the Kammerspiele. Come along, bring a few friends and we can do a piece together. Holy shit! I thought. I was so afraid. Although I had been working as a supernumerary at the opera house and municipal theatre in Cologne, I'd never before exposed myself as an actor. But at the same time I was very excited. So, a few days before the concert, on 9 June, Paik took me to the "Little Summer Party" at the Galerie Parnass in Wuppertal. That's where I met Maciunas for the first time. He was giving a talk on "Neo-Dada in New York," and afterwards there were a few Fluxus performances. I was roped into them and found myself standing onstage as a

Fluxus performer, making funny noises with my lips in Maciunas's Olivetti piece [*In Memoriam to Adriano Olivetti*]. My contribution to the Düsseldorf concert was of a similar kind. I did something with some old records in Paik's *Bagatelles Americaines*. It was ever so simple. They put these discs in my hand and said: Do something with them. And I did. At the beginning I couldn't quite figure out the meaning of it all. But over time I came to grips with the stuff and made a few nice pieces myself. Paik said: Send them to Maciunas. And I did. For a long time there was no reply. And then this letter arrived: "We have performed your *Cycle for Water Buckets* in Copenhagen...Come to the festival in Paris." Which is what I did, and suddenly I was part of the whole circus.

BERGHAUS: You mentioned ZERO and Nouveau Réalisme earlier on...

SCHMIT: No, I never used the term New Realism.

BERGHAUS: You mean, you didn't know about Restany and his manifestos?

SCHMIT: No, this didn't cross the Rhine that quickly.

BERGHAUS: But ZERO and Nouveau Réalisme were closely related. Both held performance work to be essential...

SCHMIT: But you see, I was only a sixth-former then. I read the *ZERO* journal; I think I still have an issue lying around somewhere. That was the only information I had at the time.

BERGHAUS: This means that you read Klein's and Manzoni's performance projects and pieces published in *ZERO*.

SCHMIT: I came into contact with most of this stuff through Addi Koepcke. That was in 1962 in Paris. He was running this amazing gallery in Copenhagen, where the weirdest things were happening. It was a very important meeting point in Europe. Then Maciunas arrived from New York, where he had organized concerts with people who'd been sitting in on John Cage's classes. La Monte Young and George Brecht, for example, but also others who were more into Musique Concrète. Anyway, Maciunas arrived in Europe with these experiences stacked behind him and a pocket full of addresses. It was a strange list of people, people who never had anything to do with Fluxus. They just belonged to this big pool of artists interested in avantgarde music. He visited them, or wrote to them, and solicited their support. Sometimes they were very helpful and used their connections to get him a concert hall, theatre, or gallery to do a Fluxus show. This explains the totally coincidental choice of places for these events. It all depended upon who responded to one of the many letters sent out every day by Maciunas and on what kind of connections they had. And through these Fluxus Festivals a lot of people who had never met each other came together to perform, to watch, to enjoy. Out of this, a group of hard-core Fluxus members developed, with many hangers-on and people only tangentially interested in the movement.

BERGHAUS: Would it be fair to say that the parents of Fluxus came from Europe, that they conceived the child in America, and then brought it into life in Europe? That is to say, that European ideas had to be exported to the U.S. and be reimported in a more developed form, before they could fertilize the European art scene?

SCHMIT: I'm not so sure about this. Of course, post-war American art

was greatly indebted to the pre-war European avantgarde. But a lot of American art produced in the late '50s/early '60s was also very original, or had other, non-European sources. Cage is a good example of this.

BERGHAUS: But Maciunas knew the European avantgarde and tried to get back into contact with these artists when he returned to Europe.

SCHMIT: No, he didn't. That's why I mentioned his address lists. He collected these addresses in the U.S.A. He'd never met any of the guys before in his life.

BERGHAUS: But he must have had a clear idea of the art behind the artists' names and addresses.

SCHMIT: I'd go as far as saying that no, he didn't. Maciunas asked his friends and acquaintances for addresses in Europe just like a hobo collects addresses before going on a journey. Maciunas needed contacts to organize events in Europe. Any artist outside the mainstream was potentially useful. They often turned out to be of invaluable help in booking a hall or renting a piano. And in some cases they were even roped into the movement. Take Beuys for example, a sculptor and professor at the prestigious Düsseldorf Academy of Arts. He ended up giving wonderful Fluxus concerts and even organized a Fluxus Festival at his academy. Other friends and supporters of Maciunas shared Beuys's enthusiasm but didn't convert to the Fluxus idea.

BERGHAUS: Okay, one last question: Has there been any influence on Happenings or Fluxus from the theatre?

SCHMIT: My immediate answer is no. But I'm probably wrong. As far as my own experience goes, I was never able to develop a taste for the stolid German municipal theatre system. Occasionally I saw an exciting student performance of a Jarry or Beckett play. Or there was a Merce Cunningham ballet in Cologne in which John Cage performed. But otherwise, no, theatre could not offer you any inspiration at that time. You had to search for something new to create exciting performances.

BERGHAUS: This sounds like appropriate advice to a new generation of performance artists.

Notes

1. See *Aktionen, Vernissagen, Personen: Die Rheinische Kunstszene der 50er und 60er Jahre, Cologne 1982* (Kunstverein 1986a) and *Die 60er Jahre: Kölns Weg zur Kunstmetropole* (Kunstverein 1986b).
2. The scripts are quoted from the first volume of his Collected Works, *Werke 1962 bis 1978* (1978). The book is unpaginated, but arranged chronologically, with each piece having an opus number. See also the second volume, *Zeichnungen 1978–87* (Schmit 1987).
3. One of them was *No–Nine décoll/ages* in Wuppertal, 14 September 1963, where the audience was taken on a bus to nine different sites of the city (see Berghaus forthcoming).
4. These "plays" were published in Becker and Vostell (1965:253–260; see also Berghaus forthcoming).
5. At the Nice Festival, Vautier presented himself as God the Creator and invited people to look at him. He then gave his spectators a signed certificate that guaranteed that they had "appropriated" a work of art at the price of FF10 (see Berghaus forthcoming).

6. Exhibited as a poster in the room reserved for Vautier in the French pavilion (see Stedelijk Museum 1973:29).
7. He filled the piano with herbs, leaves, washing powder, etc. (see Berghaus forthcoming).
8. There are many texts translated by Schmit in the Becker and Vostell anthology (1965).

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