

“Mythology of Fluxus”, Obieg, 7-8/1991, text by Adam Kalinowski, Center for Contemporary Art, Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw.

Revitalising and buoyant is the feeling that the culture adventure of art is endless and Fluxus is only a small episode on its road. This road, however, is not a well-beaten track, but it divides itself into plenty of entangled paths which we can even leave and go further, “resigning” from art. It makes possible the ethos of the “artist-hole” through whom the energy of the world is flowing, the ethos which for a long time will be still alive in our European culture. The lesson of Fluxus is the ability of LISTENING as a state of mind, or, to put it in the language of mystics, “listening to the emptiness”, thus art means nothing more than e.g. walking in the street.

Let’s look at one of the Fluxus activities: a language proposal or an object. They are the instance of one, inter-media Event form about which it would be more proper to say that is rather the immanent element of the stream of life, than a form. In any Fluxus activities elements of everyday social experience are organized in new and temporary sets of activities (the Fluxus real activity in the form of language proposals to perform or an assemblage) which are not intended to petrify in the structure of social behaviour. It means that Fluxus is an attitude which is characterized by non-*instrumental* disposition towards the world, and it is not an “artistic practice” or the technique of existence creating “new” culture events. In other words, relations “joining” the Fluxus real activities with the stream of life are of “magical” (syncretic) character, but not of objective one. The Fluxus real activities are as if statements of the “magical speech” which must be incessantly again and again generated, because otherwise they become conventionalised and will lose the magical power of influence. Georg Brecht, an American artist living for 20 years in Köln, was for Fluxus as an important personage as for Dadaists Marcel Duchamp. Since the middle of the sixties he has been creating “Book of the Tumbler on Fire”. In the title there is the word “book”, and the author treats his enterprise as a book, for, as he himself explains, “there is no theoretical reasons for which his work could not be recognised as a book. This enterprise could be seen as a kind of the imagination about the book, or a kind of the dream which is the book, and we, the audience, are the part of this dream – we belong to it by taking part in it. Speaking more formally, it is the game with the idea of the book, because having nominally pages, chapters and volumes it consists of real objects and assemblages among which there is even the “normal” book of G. Brecht.

This object are pages grouped into chapters, and then into volumes. The whole enterprise began in 1964. Particular pages are in many places on the Earth – mostly in European and American art galleries, museums, private collections or in the artist's possession. Thus, the person experiencing particular "pages" of this book is in incessant travelling across the real stream of life which is the inseparable context for them.

The space of this book is the real world with all possible to be experienced combinations of senses. The Brecht's "book" is full of anomalies, e.g. chairs of different colour with objects chosen at random and notes chosen from *Guinness Book of Records* are the reference marks for pages of the first volume; in chapter four of the first volume every "page" consists of the single frame of the film which was found by Brecht in the street in Rome. Every frame was to be sent to different persons, later they were to be collected together again, and projected as a film with the appropriate comments about their history. Part three of the third volume is the book which was written by Brecht in cooperation with P. Hughs under the title *Vicious Circle and Infinity* (published in 1977 in the Penguin series). The book is devoted to the different kinds of paradoxes (logical, visual and the like). Let's have a look at page two of the fifth chapter in volume one – it consists of the not painted wooden chair on which the transistor radio lies. Below there is a note functioning as a "footnote":

"The highest price ever paid at auction in Europe is 760.000 guineas (£798.000) paid by Norton Simon Foundation from Los Angeles. California.USA for "The portrait of the artist's son – Titus" painted by Rembrandt, in Christie salerooms, Manson Woods LTD in London 19.III.1965". This "page" is in the collection of Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

This activity has no title; it is a plain chair with the transistor radio laid on it, standing in a museum. We can clearly see the difference between the Duchamp's ready-made and this object. In the ready-made the object is separated from the everyday context of use. For Duchamp it was enough that a dryer we recognise as a dryer, while the possibility of using this object in conformity with its function was not so important. What differs these two "artistic" objects existing in artistic spaces, museums, is the fact that "on the Brecht's chair one can sit down" or do anything with it, while with the ready-made one "should not" do this, but important is the fact of recognition of the dryer as a useful object which no longer has such a status. The Brecht's work is equipped with ordinary meanings connected with the use of consisting it objects.

These meanings are equally important as the meanings belonging to a whole on the ground of being an art object. This is the game with all cultural meanings which are thinkable. For instance:

- the chair as an object, being the product of craft or applied art, characterizing by the definite aesthetic properties,
- the chair as a material object; we can tap our finger on it, raise it, push it, check the smoothness of its surface,
- a chair as a “chair”- the object of everyday use,
- recognition of this chair as similar to the chair on which we once were sitting,
- the light creating the shadow of the chair,
- the fact that the chair is just in this environment and in this place,
- there is a transistor radio on the chair; we can switch this radio on and we can then hear something that is “usually” heard in radio,
- the chair – the radio – the note – together as an artistic object (assemblage) and the like, etc.

These existing meanings are important in so far as they must be in a peculiar manner transgressed, that is, they are neither merely those functional objects, the chair and the radio set, nor are they so called art-objects, sort of assemblage.

The chair – the radio – the note – chosen at random and put together in one whole (the metonymical relation) – create the non-instrumental meaning structure (the relation of symbolization)¹. The object is the metaphor of such, for example, temporary composition – the floor/the legs of the person watching the object/ his/her hand in the trouser pocket - with which our object is connected metonymically. The experience of meanings of this activity makes visible that all kinds of compositions existing naturally have the equal status, are equivalent of the composition which is our object. And also vice versa: “those” compositions are the metaphor of “this” composition. In consequence of the experience of activity’s meanings, differentiation between “these” and “those” compositions becomes groundless.

Chairs are objects willingly used by Brecht. Together in “Book of the Tumbler on Fire” there are almost thirty ones. The whole enterprise contains several hundred “pages” which are connected with each other by metonymical relations and relations of symbolization, and these relations unite in one syncretic relation. What unites the whole enterprise in a “whole” is just this kind of syncretism which encompasses the

whole stream of life in whose context it exists. That is to say that the question does “Book of the Tumbler on Fire” creates the whole is analogous to the question: is the stream of the everyday individual experience felt as consistent, continuous process, because by no means this “book” is merely a literal whole, but also any purposely structured whole where necessary it would be methodical “reading” page by page, chapter by chapter, and so on. This “book” is a certain whole only in the general sense of the adventures of mind disposed towards transcendence of existing cultural meanings which because of its real manifestation in the Fluxus real activities, are in the inevitable way syncretically connected with any other kinds of meanings.

One can see here that this object, being the new composition of elements belonging to the everyday social experience, is only a **possible** kind of composition of these elements, just as any other compositions of beings are possible compositions of elements. In this sense, this object is the metaphor of any other composition of elements belonging to the everyday experience (and vice versa).

From the magical relation in which this object remains to the world one can extract a myth, the worldview message. Of course, this myth is organically melted into the matter of the Fluxus real activities, the magical-made everyday experience, thereby creating individually realized project of actualization of cultural meanings. Ambiguity of this assemblage makes that, for example, to the question: “What is it placed in the artistic sphere for?” – from the viewpoint of the magical paradigm of sense – we can give the infinite amount of answers and all of them would be equal; thus, there is no concrete reason for which it is there, nor “for which it came into being”.

The statement in which we express that it is in the museum so that covered with legs of chairs places on the floor should not cover with dust, is of the same value like the statement in which we state that it is in museum because it is an outstanding work of art. The equal value of these statements, taking them objectively, is the mark of transgression of the existing cultural meanings submitted to this object (composition), and its ambiguity magically “make present” potential ambiguity of any other fact (composition) in “life”, e.g. the hand which the person watching object keeps in the pocket. Simulating (shamming) conceptually this experience of “simultaneousness” or equalization of importance of any thinkable meanings, we could say that the purpose of placing the hand in the packet one should treat as the fulfilment of following exemplarily given reasons:

- so as to raise the temperature of the pocket

- so as to warm the hand
- so as to create on the trousers the convex surface
- so as to have this way and not otherwise positioned shoulder
- so as to imitate a certain style of behaviour
- so as to feel the artery in the groin
- mechanically
- so as to give somebody the sign
- so as not to look at it
- so as to have something to think

We can see that the material of Fluxus real activities makes itself present as if on principle of the echo which later can meet us in “life”. The experience of particular pages does not require the special discipline in the sense of exercising a certain disposition of the mind, for example bringing it to the state of emptiness, which is the aim of meditative techniques. All the more the intellectual discipline does not come here into play (the cognitive purposes are not established here). The relations between pages or chapters are accidental, therefore each person experiencing them creates really private network of semantic relations between particular events. Knowing that particular pages are in many places, we can make a real travel in space and time during which we experience changes of meanings resulting both from changing culture contexts and from next pages of the book which while appreciating magical life, they themselves remain in the stream of life.

The worldview message of the Fluxus real activities is based on showing that the Fluxus real activity is only one case among many others, a possible way of arrangement of cultural meanings which is not “more important”, “better”, “fuller” than any other culture way of organizing these or other meanings – simply, there is no sanction, no valuating criterion. The Fluxus real activities are games with the existing meanings belonging to the everyday social experience in which this kind of valuating qualifications are cancelled. The Brecht’s chair as an “artistic” object is incomparable or better semantically incompatible with a chair – a usable object (and vice versa). There is, however, the potential possibility of adjusting paradigms by “making magical” the whole chain of beings in which the Brecht’s chair-assemblage, the adventure happening to the human mind – is the same case as a chair designed for sitting.

Magically justifying, the purpose of the chair as a being used for sitting is arbitrary and accidental, because the chair to the same degree is designed for sitting, for watching it, and so that covered with legs of chairs places on the floor should not be covered with dust, and so that other places (the world) could be covered with dust particles and so on, and so on. There is no particular reason for which these beings were arranged just in this way and put in just this place of culture space. All existing meanings submitted to the elements of the Fluxus real activities (the set of potential cultural meanings– the world), are “magically” transgressed (cancelled), and simultaneously being valid (are preserved) – such is the sense of Fluxus affirmation. For example, the chair is here important not because of its essence or idea, but because it is just this unique being which is just situated (by chance) in this place of culture space (museum, space of sacrum), which is important inasmuch as it is a (culture) space. In any other place of (culture) space this being (the Brecht’s chair) conveying “magically” would be partly different being. As Heidegger would put it: this being, concealed hitherto by its “handiness”, is now again unconcealed and called into being from the “forgottenness of Being”. In other words, the message assessing life in world-view way is based on the uppermost polysemy of the Fluxus real activities where all possibilities of the beings, being magically equal are unconcealed (present) simultaneously. Of course, the experience of this “simultaneousness” is of pre-conceptual character, for, briefly speaking, it is caused by the syncretic relation, and not by objective one (the linguistic awareness of this possibility is merely the “shadow” of pre-conceptual experience). It is so, because the former becomes present to all “other” beings, removes all oppositions, establishing the magical paradigm of sense.

To sum up, this pre-conceptual message can be formulated in following way:

All elements which belong to the everyday experience are equally valuable without any sanction for their equal value, and no ways of structuralizing reality are necessary, but they are also equally accidental and equally valuable without any sanction. They are created in the communicative and uncommunicative fields of culture – by language, science, religion and so on², that is, what communicates the Fluxus activity whose feature is very questioning of its meaning structure is the fact that there is “nothing special” that could be communicated, there is simply no limit for which we should communicate “something special”. According to the Fluxus project, communication which assumes some more or less conventional semantics is

existentially equal to the uncommunicative activities. That is to say that, according to this project, e.g. the linguistic communication could be simultaneously both communication (communicating states of affairs) and the real activity which is submitted to the magical paradigm of sense which, however, preserves “the ordinary paradigm of sense”. The “ordinary” meaning of a being is preserved and at the same time is called in question (This use of metaphors could be vague, but the very essence of syncretic relation just is so “vague”). The aim of the Fluxus praxis (the Fluxus Real Activities which I described as a kind of “cocktail” made out of existing meanings, being, as a matter of fact, the magical game in change of meanings) is **Making “Reality” Present**. It is done by the magically affirmative relation to all beings which is, putting it in the Heideggerian language, going beyond beings towards Being, which always must be carried out by some beings. This “reality” is based on this that “with what” we play (existing meanings) and in “what” we play (going beyond these meanings) is joined in one syncretic relation where metonymical relations “shine through” relations of symbolization (and vice versa)³. If the aim of Fluxus real activities is the affirmation of existing cultural meanings, and at the same time, it is carried out without any sanction, then this “Fluxus game” does not happen only once – it is a process, magical participation in reality. Exactly this evokes the Fluxus real activities: the incessant “game”, which is the affirmation in the accepted sense. It has no end and, in a sense, no beginning either, because in effect one “assumes” here the eschatological sense: this is not an acting subject who decides of making “reality” present, but this reality itself, being already present in the pre-conceptual experience, “thrusts itself upon” man.

Fluxus as an “artistic practice”, a way of life, is as if a game with incessantly changing rules, which occurs naturally in action. This “game” takes place “here” and “now”, therefore in the Fluxus real activities are recalled the most ordinary meanings and are used media, known from the everyday experience. These “homogenous both in the content and in the form” activities, show that cultural meanings made internal during socialisation does not need to be eliminated, but rather in the affirmative way “used”. Making Reality present is not performed here by the change of objective meanings, e.g. by treating and using a chair as a table and vice versa, but by “magical” way which corresponds with the presence, in one syncretic relation, of metonymical relations and relations of symbolisation.

Treating the chair as a table is new objectification of this being, and transgressing existing cultural meanings does not consist in replacing some metaphors with the others. The affirmation of actual and potential culture meanings, which means their equal value without validation, is that what creates the “magical” paradigm of sense without which even the most “Fluxusly” looking real activity has little to do with Fluxus. However, also here there is a chance for Fluxus, namely, if the author of such activity noticed that it was impossible to repeat something that had already come into being. Using the chair as a table can but does not need to be a Fluxus activity, for the Fluxus real activities do not consist in metaphoric communication of some states of affairs. (If communication comes into play, then only as a signal manifestation of some states of affairs, which because of its substance is quite peculiar).

If we say that the Fluxus real activity is this kind of game in which the existing cultural meanings are used in the affirmative way, that is, preserving and, at the same time, transgressing them, then it does not mean the psychological trick which is characteristic to using metaphors, where it is suggested that a new sense is as if the shape of the first sense. The Fluxus real activity is not the metaphor using some conventional semantics in order to communicate new meanings, but is precisely the real activity, which means that its affirmation of existing and potential cultural meanings “happens”, “occurs” directly in the natural stream of life, and not in a fictional reality. This message, which I describe as making “reality” present, is not merely the metaphoric expression of anything, but “magical” taking possession of the whole world. The particular segments of the Fluxus real activities in relation to other segments with which they are metonymically connected are (temporary) metaphors. For example, described Brecht’s composition and any other (“already in life”, with which corresponds unequivocal in one time assignments of meanings) is the chair as an object “used” for putting this radio on it and the chair as “used” for standing next to my leg or any chair (or something else) used as a table, to refer to the former example. Such metaphors (accidental compositions of meanings) are infinite in quantity, and in the view of the pre-conceptual experience which just makes present their fortuitousness and equal value without sanction, it matters here neither the awareness of mosaic interlacement of metonymical and symbolisation-relations (what is the aim of reconstruction), nor the awareness that culture forms are merely conventional assignments of symbolic meanings to a certain objective states of

affairs and using this knowledge in life, which could e.g. to show itself in the intentional use of a chair as a table.

This kind of knowledge in practice has nothing to do with the Fluxus making “reality” of the world present, but it is only the conceptual simulation of this pre-conceptual experience. The Fluxus real activities are not metaphors either in this sense that by performing the Fluxus real activities we are not getting closer to any, at least symbolically, articulated “sacrum” as it is opposed to the sphere of “profanum”. “The Fluxus sacrum” consists in abolishing the division between the realm of sacrum and profanum, therefore intentional striving for any “sacrum” has nothing to do with Fluxus.

“The Fluxus sacrum”, being already “here” and “now” “present” of our culture existence, is not, of course, any sacrum, because “sacrum” which is at the same time “profanum” is of the same value as a chair which is simultaneously a table. It seems to be obvious why the Fluxus games are games in which are used any existing cultural meanings. Simply, any element of the cultural universe is important because existing at the same time it means, it is not semantically indifferent (pansemioticism), and as such could be used in the Fluxus real activities where it begins to have meaning in the “magical” way. Syncretism of its material makes that “everything is everything”; it is impossible to separate the “content” from the “form” of action, and the particular Fluxus games are the transcendence of “all” existing cultural meanings together.

The attitude of Fluxus one can describe as the mythology realised in an individual way – as the experienced Utopia – which takes place “because of” and at the same time “in” the stream of life. The fact that the Fluxus real activities are of communicative character makes that they have to be included in the communicative sphere of symbolic culture, but as activities abolishing the project of making itself conventional semantics, they differ from others, seemingly similar to them activities. For example, hunting “sacrum” by means of semantics of language, which is made by hermeneutics. For “The Fluxus sacrum” makes itself present “in” and “by” real activities (but not by linguistic metaphors) where the conventional semantics is no longer valid. If the hermeneutics simulates⁴ merely thinking-acting of a magical kind, for it itself after all functions on the discourse level, then is it also so in the case of the Fluxus activities? I think it is not, because the Fluxus real activities are true “*parole*” without “*langue*”, but not merely an imitation of this state of affairs. Therefore “the

language” of the Fluxus real activities cannot be conventionalised, because in the strict sense of the word it is not an artistic language which would pay attention to its semantics, but it is **the real activity** in which one can use anything, without regarding some intersubjectively functioning rules⁵. It is the gist of the Fluxus real activities, the activity “here” and “now”, using these materials and in this moment of our cultural existence, for which, like for the activity itself, there is no sanction – they appear before us in unlimited polysemy. In this sense they are non-instrumental sense-structures about which “one can only be silent” or with which one can only be silent.

Therefore, any attempt of “digging out” the way of Fluxus thinking-acting is more or less arbitrary, while seeing these statements as objective ones is misunderstanding both if we do this in the everyday practice and in reflection upon this phenomenon. For example, they could be expressed by means of instructions: “we treat all beings equally”, or “let’s see the conventions (symbols, metaphors) of our culture literally (i.e. objectively)”, where the sense of using the former one would be: “so as to experience their diversity, uniqueness and so on”, while the latter one – “so as to reveal this conventionality, symbolism of given facts, which covers their objectivity”.

This kind of instructions as heuristic tools could be used for everything and with any intention, but first of all cognitively. That is why they cannot have anything to do with the attitude and practice of Fluxus. Within the Fluxus attitude one does not conceptually formulate any instructions – practically effective or ineffective. In other words, for gaining the “ultimate” value – which I described as experiencing or making “Reality” present, which means mystical Being, based on syncretic interlacing of metonymical relations and relations of symbolization composing a whole – one does not point out any directly, practically available values which could be an instrumental means of realisation of this ultimate value. What’s more, this value makes itself present in life itself, that is to say, it is as if in the direct way practically available value. There is the possibility that we admit the situation of the lack of any practically effective instructions to be one practically “effective” instruction (which is at the same time directly, practically available value), which seems to “be suggested” by the Fluxus attitude. It could be formulated more or less in the following way: so as to gain the ultimate value (which would be the experience of making Reality present), we can do anything⁶ that we only decide to do.

Thus, in the realm of the “ultimate” values the same instruction would function as in the everyday experience, thereby experiencing oneself in literal way Fluxusly has

little to do with Fluxus, for it would again divide syncretically united metonymical relations and relations of symbolization. That is why we do not have to wash underclothes by means of sand in order to “realise” Fluxus. Analogically we do not have to wash them by means of the washing powder. We can wash by means of the washing powder or by means of sand – both these activities are valorised in view of the given worldview and systematised by the magical worldview message according to which all culture activities and their meanings are equal without any sanction. Thus, we cannot value these activities according to the “ultimate” or superior value, for example, according to practical effectiveness which in different spheres of our culture is similarly understood and which means the minimization of expenditure of time, energy, resources and the maximization of desirable effects. Washing by means of the washing powder would be more preferred than washing by means of sand considering the awaited effect of quickly and well washed underclothes. In this way understood the efficient action is based on the division of senses of human activity into objective, semantic-communicative and worldview ones, which in the Fluxus real activities join again in one syncretic sense.

“Profits” from washing by means of the washing powder are metaphors of “loss” in washing by means of sand and vice versa – both activities are valued equally, i.e. washing by means of the washing powder we gain in the direct way practically available values: short time of doing the activity and little expenditure of work, losing at the same time other directly available values: longer time devoted to the activity, the bigger effort and contact with different matter, and so on.

This situation could be an example of how any kinds of extensions (the extension of senses), beginning from the most basic, make possible some new values and, at the same time, if the given extensions and their usage are more socially preferable, this situation could be an example of how we are gradually deprived of former values, which was possible by the use of old extensions. For the technological reason the biggest intensification in replacing one extension by another (more effective) is the superior value, and benefiting from its effects is for the consumer worldview the “ultimate” value.

Making Reality present as the value contained in the Fluxus real activities and thereby internally embedded in life is the value which “happens” to us, “meet us” as simply, as we use the washing powder, but as a certain possibility of Being, and not only in view of a superior value, or as Heidegger would put it, because of its

“handiness”. The washing powder is a metaphor of sand and also e.g. of the sun, being at the same time connected with it metonymically.

I would like to once again emphasise that Fluxus is by no means the naïve comeback to thinking-acting of a magical kind, but the confrontation of our culture identity (formed – briefly speaking – by the monosemous culture) with polysemous “open” structure which are the Fluxus real activities. Fluxus acts in just this culture context and uses the meanings which are our meanings, because that is all we have and who we finally are. The Fluxus real activity as a kind of illumination could be for us the important adventure, for it frees us from the conventional culture still holding nineteenth-century ideas of technological and social progress, which today are useless or even harmful.

¹ Compare the conception of myth (mythological thinking) elaborated by structuralists.

² That means that this message can be “expressed” also by the negation of above-mentioned statement or by any real activity – as putting out one’s tongue.

³ Compare the conception of palimpsest elaborated by structuralists.

⁴ Compare Kmita, *Magiczne źródło kultury* [*The magical origin of culture*], “Odra” 2/84.

⁵ If we assume that Fluxus is an alternative for all philosophies of life, then this „competition”, because of language in which the Fluxus message is contained would be quite peculiar.

⁶ That is to give the worldview sanction in the recognized sense to any fact or moment in the stream of life. This “ultimate” value is only as if in the direct way practically available value – therefore doing anything we merely can but not have to gain it. Simply there is no sanction for such compulsion.

This text is the fragment of the bigger whole called: *The Fluxus practice and the Fluxus Attitude*.