

In Flux Art, Naked Meets Nonsense Meets Lard

By Dan Duray
March 29, 2011

The artist Clifford Owens walked out onto the stage of the theater in MoMA's Education and Research Center Friday, naked, his bare feet padding across a long sheet of paper laid along the floor. "I think I need some help," he said, as he slathered the length of his arms with an entire tub of Vaseline, still pacing. "There's just one part of it I haven't figured out yet. Can I get a volunteer?"

After a further coating, Mr. Owens instructed a young man from the sold-out audience to pull him quickly across the paper, leaving a pair of wavy, lubricated tracks that he then coated with coffee grounds. He also rubbed his Vaseline head on the paper, and, at the audience's request, made a few perfunctory "dick prints." "It's for sale!" he announced, as he left the stage. A pair of female museum workers rolled up his efforts silently, clearing the stage for the next tribute to Fluxus.



Mr. Owens' performance was part of an evening devoted to the influential 1960s art movement, and the culmination of a two-day salute to it by the Museum of Modern Art annex. Titled "Flux This!", as if the movement itself weren't edgy enough, it was organized by the performance artist William Pope.L.

The salute's peg was dubious--the museum's current "Contemporary Art from the Collection" exhibit features pieces by Flux legends Yoko Ono and George Maciunas, so, why not?--but Fluxus was never much for formality. Before the performance Friday night, Christian Rattemeyer, a curator at the museum, introduced Mr. Pope.L and praised him for a variety of accomplishments, some completely untrue, adding that throughout his career, he "has delivered blackness where it is needed most." Mr. Pope.L, best known for recently reviving his *Eating the Wall Street Journal* piece for the New Museum, took the microphone humbly, as one does in those situations, and responded with a stream of stuttering nonsense.

Fluxus largely grew out of John Cage's Experimental Composition classes at the New School--one of the iconic Fluxus works, from 1962, involved Cage associate Allison Knowles making a salad for an audience of 300 people. Its adherents valued shock, humor, the mundane and scores, the simple descriptions that outline a performance. For the Friday performance, Mr. Pope.L gave his team of Fluxus greats and working artists a selection of scores from artist Ken Friedman's 2002 Fluxus workbook, and encouraged them to mix and update them as they saw fit. Mr. Owens, for example, took his inspiration from French/Romanian poet Tristan Tzara's "Vaseline Symphonique," whose description

reads simply "Microphone, hands, Vaseline." The added coffee grounds were a salute to Fluxus performer Ben Patterson.

In the words of performance artist Martha Wilson, who stopped by Thursday to see Rob Andrews serenade a coyote pelt that hung above a pile of dirt for two hours, "Fluxus is pretty broad, pretty wide open," she said. "You can pretty much jam anything in there."

"Flux This!" offered both the show and a series of Fluxus-inspired "workshops" held in the education center's mezzanine that came with little guidance. Passersby were encouraged to have their picture taken if they've ever been in love with a black man, and to eat blueberries and think about their deaths. In a classroom adjacent to the workshops, the organizers showed videos of Fluxus performances. In one, Xaviera Simmons' restaged Yoko Ono's famous *Cut Piece*, in which audience members cut away at the Japanese performer's clothes. For her version, Ms. Simmons said she assiduously studied Ms. Ono's body language, mimicking the subtle details like the way she held her breasts as the audience sliced at her shirt. Another video, this one from 1971, featured Fluxus pioneer Geoffrey Hendricks, known for his "headstands for peace," shaving all of his body hair and preserving it in jars. Ms. Simmons' eyes wandered to the Hendricks video. "Oh my gosh, what is this?" she said. "Is someone shaving his butt right now?"

The Observer was lucky enough to have had some preshow backstage insights into Mr. Pope.L's own performance, a nod to Maciunas' great-ape Flux Mass of 1970, staged at Rutgers University. "Genevieve, there's a bit of a Nazi in your character, so don't be afraid to use that in your delivery," Mr. Pope.L told one woman in a gorilla suit at a rehearsal Thursday. Another costumed simian was told to limit his onstage dialogue to the words "Stabilize," "Cerebral" and "Pickwick." Sheetal Prajapati, an education center employee, confided that it was awfully difficult to keep the lard inside of the Barack Obama masks they held at the right consistency. The gorillas had to smear it across each other's faces during the performance, after all, so it couldn't be too hot or too thick.

Lard issues addressed, the trio in gorilla suits and red headlights clamored down the rows of the auditorium Friday with garbage bags filled with crumpled paper and shoved audience members out of the way like they were at a performance of *Cats* for masochists. Once at the front of the auditorium, they strewed paper everywhere and performed a garbled oral history of some post-apocalyptic disease.

After the performance, Mr. Pope.L acknowledged the difficulties in paying tribute to a classic anti-art movement like Fluxus--albeit at a less formal, adjunct wing of the museum. "There was a wandering aspect to it, it would never sit still, but that's what attracted me to it. So in one way, you can never fucking rely on it," Mr. Pope.L said. "The child always wants to exceed the parents, I suppose. But one thing you learn when you get older is that exceeding is not as easy, and it's more lonely. And it's also more arrogant. In exceeding, you always are attached, so why not face up to it and celebrate it?"

The unseen, or unexpected, created some of the better performances. Setting out at noon, Mr. Andrews carried a door from Coney Island to the museum and painted it in the auditorium with the help of an unrehearsed audience member--his wife, actually. "I think I ruined her fucking sweater," he said, laughing. "She's going to kill me."

Mr. Hendricks, of the body shaving, also performed Friday evening. Calling from South Africa, he performed a score by George Brecht that involved a ringing telephone that performers either do or do not answer. Speaking with a member of his New York contingency--a performer by the name of Julie, who'd just finished a marathon headstand--over the auditorium's loudspeakers, Mr. Hendricks grew chatty.

"It's autumn now, and the mushrooms are starting to come up," he said, as a stern-looking woman from the audience approached the phone. "I found a few good edible ones and I had thoughts of John Cage in picking them--" he was cut off, mid-sentence, by the woman, who hung up on him.

It was an evening of surprises all around. Sitting down in the audience before the show, Julie recognized that she was one chair away from Jon Hendricks, the artist's brother, and introduced herself.

"They have a video out there from the '70s where Geoff shaved all his body hair," she said. "Do you remember that?"

"Oh, yes," Jon Hendricks said. "I believe I shaved his bottom."