

## **BEN PATTERSON IN LOS ANGELES: A FLUX-INTERVIEW**

*Ben Patterson was in residence in Los Angeles to launch his exhibition at Gallery 2211 owned by Michael Solway here in Los Angeles, as well as to attend the wonderful Seminar on David Tudor at the Getty Center. I had the great pleasure to interview him while he was here to share with all of you:*

### **How did you become first an artist and then a Fluxus artist?**

Music has always been part of my family, and I just started learning the piano and violin from my father at a young age. It kept growing and eventually in high school, I started playing double bass and by the time I was finishing high school, I decided I wanted to be a musician, a double bass player, and a composer— all of those at once and so I went to the University of Michigan where I studied composition and double bass and other string instruments. Also where I met Gordon Mumma whom I saw at the Tudor Festival this past week (at the Getty). We were in the same class together all the way through, so it was wonderful to see him again. And then from there there was an interlude of playing in a couple of orchestras in Canada and being in the Army, and when I came back, I was in Ottawa and there was a small electronic music group by Hugh McCain and I worked for a year with him and for the summer went to Cologne supposedly to investigate what was going on in the studios there. It turned out I wasn't particularly interested in what Stockhausen was doing, but at the same instant John Cage and David Tudor appeared in town for an alternative festival to the official International Society for Contemporary Music Festival and gave a series of three concerts at Mary Bauermeister's studio where I saw for the first time LaMonte Young, George Brecht, as well as hearing live some of Cage's cartridge music etc. And so it was an overnight conversion from serial music to whatever this was. I just said, it's what I've been hearing in my head all my life and I never thought that would be something that you could find public acceptance for or other people were hearing the same things. I ended up not just staying for the summer but for the next three years and started meeting other people who were interested such as Emmett Williams, Robert Filliou, Daniel Spoerri and a few other people, Cornelius Cardew was around then, and then at some point or other, George Maciunas fell into our lives and the Wiesbaden Festival happened. Up until then, we were making our thing, whatever that was, and George was making neo-Dada at the time in New York,

but the Wiesbaden event which was about to publicize his magazine ended up giving all of us the name Fluxus, and after that we became Fluxus artists, "radical" before that, but we became Fluxus artists from that point on.

### **Who made the most impression upon you—George gave you a label, but Tudor and Cage gave you a turning point.**

Yes, the concerts of Tudor and Cage were the turning point, but on that program were the works of La Monte Young and George Brecht and of course Cage's cartridge music. Later, Robert Filliou and Emmett Williams were both influential and good friends, exchanging among ourselves, and when I came back, Robert Watts whose work I always admired. I was at the New York Public Library then working and Bob and George Brecht and I had a sort of regular Wednesday afternoon lunch meetings in Bryant Park.

### **Did you feel Germany was much more nurturing as far as the arts, when you went there in the 1960s?**

Yes, it was then and still is now. Through the radio station WDR, which is government-sponsored. At the time, that was where everyone's paycheck came from, if you were involved there. I was not, and my money came from selling my extra bass, an automobile, or whatever. I was on a Poorbright, not a Fulbright! Germany was subject to change in regard to aesthetics and philosophy at that point, which made everybody curious and open to change, and during its long history of revolutions in the arts. It has a longer tradition of artists being an important part of society. You can still have dinner with one of the richest people in a city and they would listen to what you would say. That wasn't the case here, except with few instances.. The second violinist wouldn't be meeting with Rockefeller, but maybe with Leonard Bernstein once in a while.

### **Did you meet Nam June Paik in Wiesbaden?**

I met him at the same series at Mary Bauermeister's studio. He was living in Cologne then and we met quite frequently and regularly. As a matter of fact, the very first event that George appeared in public to mention "fluxus" at Wuppertal at Jährlings' gallery, Galerie Parnass. George had wanted Paik to perform at that event, but Nam June had a previous commitment. We were very close then and continue to be.

### **When you returned to the States, how long did you stay?**

I stayed until 1991-92. I started going back in 1989 for a couple of weeks, and in 1990 for a couple of months, and then it became more than six months, and in 1994, I finally closed the door in New York and went to Germany permanently.

**You weren't the only one heavy into music.**

A great many Fluxus artists were into music. Of course, there was the Cage class with non-musicians: Al Hansen, Alan Kaprow, Dick Higgins, Phil Corner, LaMonte Young among the early Fluxus people oriented toward music: Terry Jennings, Terry Riley: Juan Hidalgo, Marchetti were both musicians. All came out of time-based art and immateriality, which formed the original aesthetic for events, performance work, disposal. A great deal was sound.

For those who were ready for change, it was wide open, because in the series of Bauermeister, the evenings where I met John and David and Cage's earliest work and recordings such as Radio Music, so I introduced myself and he asked me to perform with them the next night. And it was like a duck taking to water, and it was so natural for improvisation.

**Because there was so little money, you probably helped each other by doing something else?**

That's right. There was no money involved, and people worked at the radio station, around the radio station, getting money here and there, played some gigs with Kagel, but in terms of Fluxus, there was the need to find money for materials. I was hitchhiking between Wiesbaden and Paris, which was possible then.

**There was a sense of community then, and the antenna was up?**

I don't think any of us would have done anything else. A kind of internet without the Internet. It is amazing to realize how this whole world was connected from Japan to behind the Iron Curtain that went to South America, East and West Coast of the States, all through Western Europe by simple letters, before the Internet, and more or less, once the Network got started, we knew within a week what somebody else was doing. But the other interesting thing was that oftentimes, we learned by mail that someone was playing in Japan or someone else was working and creating a work that was so similar to yours within a month's time that either one could have put your signature on the work, using the same vocabulary. In Paris, I made a work with instructions for walking, and it turned out that Dick Higgins had done a similar piece in New York (and I hadn't met him yet). Then my paper

piece, Kosugi with the anima in Japan had done a similar piece.

**What did you think about the 30-year anniversary events where the rest of the world started learning more about Fluxus and could recognize the accomplishments?**

Major recognition just started after the thirty-years, so each generation has to re-invent the world. At that time, we were anti-institutional and pariahs of the institution, so they would not support research. What happened after those 30 years, people began to realize that performance work, video art etc. had their roots someplace, and they had to go back to see the sources in Fluxus.

**Do you think media is the driving force for the marketing of art today? Or the lack of it that didn't allow Fluxus to get historical.?**

Well, George moving back to New York shifted the organizational basis of Fluxus to the States which wasn't ready for that kind of situation. Europe had Dada before so it was not something they didn't know about. I remember after the first performance of a larger work I did "Laments" with Vostell in Cologne in 1961 and there was a debate in the papers for at least three days after that and the all-night sessions after that this is not art, is he a charlatan, or whatever. And when Fluxus did their thing in New York, there was no press coverage. It was too underground for the *Times*, maybe the *Voice*, but not the *Times*. I mean that one would think that if all the news that's fit to print, and it was News, but they never recognized it as such. It wasn't establishment. Probably had George stayed in Europe and not become the continuing basis, there might have been stronger and earlier recognition. For example, a few people went on to be wealthy, you became a little institution of itself. Vostell is doing his own thing and Beuys did his own thing.

But in most places, you had a champion, who found a space, brought you in, believed in you enough so that there was a venue, an event, and an audience.

We only went to those people who invited us. That never really existed in New York, except for what George organized on his own. No institutional backbone to it, but you had a museum and facilities in Wiesbaden. In Copenhagen, George knew where there were established places where things could happen. There was always a quasi-sponsor to make it happen, a gallery which didn't happen in New York.

**In Vienna, Fluxus was really appreciated.**

You need transportation, someone to beat the bushes for an audience, and Fluxus being Fluxus, you need to find the local scrap heap.

**The force of George! Was it so predominant that it drove you all, or...**

In terms of getting the work to the public, George was dominant. In terms of each person's individual creative work, that was pretty much individual. Except when he said, well, let's make 8 mm. films or let's produce multiples, or I'd like a book from you. That's when George was a force. But not in individual aesthetics.

To be quite frank, many of us thought of George as an artist first, but more like an André Breton, a theorist and a circus director. Although there were many wonderful pieces he made, he himself tended to push that off to the side. His importance to Fluxus was his way of putting the name to it and the energy to the networking situation and to producing the multiples and programs, the typography and design and general notion of art as a social function.

I always associate you with found objects, especially toys, which have a whimsy and a playfulness that no other Fluxus artist has. It is predictable that I will smile, because they make me "feel at home" and second of all, they say "wow" because they make me look at it in a different way. You transform the

obvious into something so whimsically playful but so meaningful. Where did the "childlike play toy" come into your work?

I remember answering this: the only difference between men and boys is the price of their toys. And but then I talked about toys as the first learning tools that we have. You learn to relate to the world through your toys as a child and before you start school, before you start to talk, the toy becomes, next to Mama and Poppa, the most important thing in your life. And then there is also the old saying that you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar, which has something to do with the African-American that I am. I was black then, then Negro before that, then colored before that-- my generation still before Civil Rights and even though Pittsburgh was not to be segregated but it was, and the standard Amos and Andy situation of getting through difficult situations with humor with more smile on your face is one of the things you learned as a survival technique. And I assume that that still carries on, when you have a message hard to deliver it goes down easier when it is sugar-coated.

It still is so accessible, and it reaches any audience that sees your work. It brings the audience toward the work.

Found objects give me visual access, but I do have a visual sense through those objects. Their arrangement, juxtaposition, for me brings about the same effect.

