

INTERVIEW WITH EMMETT WILLIAMS: FLUXUS ARTIST EXTRAORDINAIRE



On the occasion of an extraordinary exhibition curated by Paul Schimmel over the past eight years at the Museum of Contemporary Art entitled "Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949-1979" and the ancillary event called "Beyond the Pink" which brought performance artists from all over the world to Los Angeles, I had the great privilege of escorting Emmett Williams, the pre-eminent poet-performer known to many through Fluxus, but who has distinguished himself throughout Europe as a visionary poet, visual artist and performance artist for a week in February. During that time, I asked him if he would be willing to sit down and have a chat, and here it is on the eve of the publication of his book: **Mr. Fluxus: A Collective Portrait of George Maciunas** to be published in the U.S. by Thames & Hudson in May 1998.

I told him that he has been in my vocabulary for at least 25 years, but we never sat down and talked before this very day of Friday the 13th of February. I asked him how he got involved in Fluxus.

It was because of receiving a letter one day in Darmstadt, where I was living, from La Monte Young and he was saying he had seen some of my writings and drawings in a German book called *Movens* (1959) and he wanted to know if he could use some of this material for a magazine they were preparing called *Beatitude*, and I said yes, and all things developed from there. I did have a letter from La Monte that there was this strange guy named Maciunas who was coming to Europe, trying to escape some bad debts, and that he would look me up and talk about performance and things like that. His letters to me are all in the Getty now because of the Jean Brown Collection. Suddenly, there came George Maciunas, and he had heard about my work, and the work of Robert Filliou, Daniel Spoerri, and Dieter Roth, who were all good friends of mine, and Jean Tinguely and so on and so on. Eventually, in September 1962, that was Wiesbaden and that was the beginning of Fluxus as performance festival. It was simply performance. And of course, there were 14 concerts in Wiesbaden and then Paris, and then Copenhagen (1962)

and in early 1963 we went to Dusseldorf for a series of concerts and that was when Joseph Beuys joined the club. What distinguished me was that I belonged to the European faction, because my friends were Europeans, and soon after Dusseldorf, George Maciunas went back to the United States and started the Fluxus thing in the United States. Alison and Dick had been visiting from Turkey and so that's how I got to know them in Wiesbaden. I remained in Europe, and Fluxus became something very important in Europe, much more so than in America, thanks to Beuys, Vostell, René Block and other people who believed in Fluxus in a much more serious way than in the United States. These were very accomplished artists, and they were involved in Fluxus and people took note. They explained what Fluxus was, different from what I thought or what Dick thought, and it remains a very very European phenomenon. George was Lithuanian-born himself and had spent the first part of his life in Europe, shaped by these things. He was the "immigrant boy".

Was the transition in New York, in the heart of AbEx and Pop Art, the reason that Fluxus could not grab on with such competition.

No, no one called himself or herself a Fluxus artist in New York who could match a Vostell or a Beuys or a Kopke or others who remained in Europe and had an entirely different approach. People who made Fluxus created a glorious scene in Europe--Eric Anderson, Kopke, and we did not come out of nowhere, because we had been doing things. My *Opera* was first done in the 1950s, and so much of my work was done before Fluxus. I knew Vostell, Spoerri, Beuys, Filliou, Ben Patterson and Nam June before there was a Fluxus. I remember meeting in Milano before Fluxus went to the Biennale in the early 1990s and Gino di Maggio asked, "How did Fluxus change your work and your life?" Oh, Ben Vautier said this happened and this happened, and I just said, I saw you Ben Vautier in London before Fluxus and you were doing the same things before Fluxus and after Fluxus. When George said, Let there be Fluxus, we didn't change our ways and do something else. He gave us a forum so that we could come together and do things.

Did you come together before Fluxus?

I was very close to Spoerri and Filliou. The first performance of *Opera* in 1959 was with Spoerri and Klaus Bremen and myself in the Keller Club in the Castle in Darmstadt. Daniel was very active in theater at the time, he comes from ballet--the poetry that has come to be identified with me as Fluxus was all there before. It was my work that many people regard as Fluxus work that La Monte saw and that caused Maciunas to phone me and say that I'm coming over to talk about Fluxus.

So many of the Americans allegedly came out of John Cage's class. The only comparable thing in Europe was the summer courses in music outside of Darmstadt where I first met these Americans like Earl Brown and John Cage. I was more interested in those days in Karlheinz Stockhausen, Bruno Maderna and Pierre Boulez--whose ideas of notation changed the nature of my poetic work and gave me ideas of structuring my performances.

I was in Europe from 1949 - 1966 when I went to New York to become the Editor-in-Chief of the Something Else Press. My closest friendship there was with Ay-O, and we are more than brothers to this day. And there were others. And during the years when I taught at Cal Arts, Nova Scotia College of Art & Design, and the Sabitas Girl's School in Massachusetts and at Mt. Holyoke and then the culminating teaching experience in the United States was at Harvard. Ann Noel and I had the finest time at Harvard. We had marvelous students, many friends, and we did not want to stay there forever, because it was far too comfortable. In 1980, I was invited to be a guest artist in the DAAD program in Berlin, and we went to Berlin and have been there ever since. Gary, our son, is now a composer studying in Canada, and Annie and I see our old friends who are still alive and with whom I collaborate: Spoerri, Hamilton and Roth. Al Hansen finally came to Europe, but he dropped dead recently. My friends and collaborators remain European. It is significant that the only prize I ever won was the first Hannah Höch prize, given to me by Berlin, and it was so funny for an American to get this. It made me feel very comfortable. This year, Vostell got the prize. It's very interesting that this marvelous award should go first to an American, and the next year to Vostell and it is for lifetime achievement in the Arts. I'd like to think that it was given to me in Berlin by Germans.

Berlin has been very good to you, recognized your merits, given you a great studio. It's very unusual for an American to be embraced so much by this German city.

It is really very nice, and I do this not as a Fluxus artist. When I have exhibitions, I do not say I am a Fluxus artist, I say it is my work. And that makes me very comfortable. And it's nice to outlive descriptive titles like that. There are not too many people who know about my background. They come to my shows and buy the work, because they like it.

The 30th year anniversary of Fluxus seemed to stimulate the interest in Fluxus with students, curators, and art historians. It was not only in history, but with actual performances, objects, and installations.

The beginning of the anniversary in 1982, and then in 1992 had international repercussions. But many people misunderstand what Fluxus artists complain about--that is, that the museums had ignored their work, but in the beginning there was no work, there was nothing to put on the wall and nothing to look at, so it wasn't until there came to be things by Fluxus artists to put on the wall that they came to see things on the wall. In fact, what distinguishes the US Fluxus from the European is that Fluxus USA began to make boxes, and we in Europe continued in the tradition of performance. We did participate in the box program, but we didn't do boxes exclusively.

But coming to the States in 1966 to become Editor-in-Chief of Something Else Press obviously attracted you.

Well, I would never have done it on my own, but the fact is that Dick Higgins knew the French edition of *Anecdoted Topography of Chance* of Daniel Spoerri, and I translated and re-anecdoted that book and Dick Higgins published it as a Something Else Press book and invited me to the United States to be his editor-in-chief, and passage was paid for this translation, and there is that connection. I had no intention to come to the US for a signing party. I came because to it was to help pay for the translation.

Two years ago, in London, Atlas Press brought out an absolutely staggering new version of *The Anecdoted Topography of Chance*, all reworked, so that except for Robert, and Topor presented a little introduction, and we all went to work and re-anecdoted the thing again--it is much thicker and more beautiful--and the British press just raved over it. They liked the first thing I had translated, but the *Times Literary Supplement* said this is the classic of its time--etc. And this time around, of course, the publisher used Fluxus. He said he personally felt that this was the most important Fluxus document ever published--From my point of view, I don't think so at all. And Daniel would certainly disagree with that, since he wasn't so hot about Fluxus when he first did that book, and the word doesn't even appear in the original book. Now it does, because it is inevitable and in the book, we debate that. Dieter Roth translated for the German edition of the book my anecdoted notation in German and re-anecdoted that, so the Dieter Roth German appears for the first time translated into English. Dieter didn't like Fluxus and didn't like George (from the **Mr. Fluxus** book) and Dieter has always been considered a Fluxus artist, and George Maciunas hoped and believed that he might be, but Dieter thoroughly rejected George's ideas of design, etc.

How did you pick up artists?

George said, we have this museum in Wiesbaden, let's do something. We have this church in Copenhagen and let's do something. Mind you, we paid our own way. Why did we pay our own way? Because nobody had a dime. George had a job and I had a job, but I was raising a family and we had real jobs in Germany working for the government. He was supporting Fluxus and his mother, and I was supporting my family. He paid for all of his boxes out of his own pocket. He didn't have a work ethic, because he didn't have a play ethic. It was all work.

Is Fluxus a movement?

It was enough of a movement so that Spoerri and Tinguely had a big argument about it, because Daniel and Tinguely and Yves Klein were Nouveau Realistes. When Daniel got involved in Fluxus, Tinguely, his best friend, told him to leave it alone--it's no good. You have to go in a straight line--that was Tinguely's warning. But Daniel said, I never go in a straight line, and participated in it. It didn't mean he was the great champion of Fluxus, but he joined it.

As far as Christo and Jean-Claude, they were very friendly to Fluxus and proposed a thing for George, and their contribution to **Mr. Fluxus** was very sweet in the book. They remember him very kindly.

Then there are embarrassing things. Nam June talks about how Maciunas knew so and so and worked at Cooper Union, and George knew Oldenburg--so I wrote to Claes and asked him to tell me about his relationship with George. He answered that it wasn't like that. I have documentary proof that George and Claes didn't work together.

I worked with Claes about the *Store Days* book in 1966, and I don't think we ever talked about Fluxus. Claes was teaching me all about Pop Art and the American scene which I had missed while I was in Europe. He did not talk about Fluxus at all.

When you were with Something Else Press, what was the distribution problems?

Dick and I tried to get a campus bookshop to get interested in the product, but they said they never got involved in the "vanity press" publications. Dick joined up with Aperture and the Small Press thing Michael Hoffman directed--and there was a meeting with the salesmen. I remember that I was so proud of the international success of a book I did with Hansjorg Mayer, *Sweethearts*, which Richard Hamilton loved and Duchamp loved it, and eventually Dick decided to publish it. He published it, and Duchamp was very happy to put the *coeur volant* on the cover. So I had to listen to a salesman, who said, well there was one book,

Sweethearts, by Emmett Williams, you know it's printed back to front--how are you going to sell a book like that to a bookstore, you ought to burn the whole edition.

This very thing of considering it printed back to front has generated an essay about that, placing me in a class with Jewish mystics by Jean Sellem at Lund. He sent me the outline of his essay and I told him that he was convincing me! It's nice to know that the ambiguities are there to allow critics to re-interpret the book far from the intentions of the author.

What about your Anthology of Concrete Poetry?

I supposed I was the ideal person to do it, because I was doing that before I came to New York in 1966. I had published my first book of concrete poetry with Daniel Spoerri in 1958, and published quite widely, and I knew all the poets and they had my work and I had theirs. I had brought most of it to become the core of this book (1966-67) and this was seen in America widespread for the first time in that book. With 18,000 copies sold--quite an achievement for a small press. And in Budapest, so many people there had a copy of my book. I consider some of my best work is in the German language now which is not known to those who do not have the language facility.

For those you know you only as a "concrete poet", doesn't that seem a limited view of Emmett Williams?

I am a poet, visual artist and performer--and those objects are what sells. What I'm involved in now and for the next couple of years is a project of tongue-in-cheek history of post-studio art from 1960 to the present day (there are going to be 100 of them, and I've already done 75)--and 12 ceramic pieces in Verona--learning how to do ceramics--and two of those things are going to be made into tapestries in Pakistan. It was not my decision.

I did some fascinating prints a year ago with a genius in Hanover who does these extraordinary special effects things--and people said it's some of the best work I've ever done, but it's not really me, since he did them--but I hardly take credit for them. Annie and Gary always want to bring me up to date with these machines, but I do it my way.

We've made some trips to Africa, and I've made designs of the little people I make--and decided they should go on large wheels and shields--and so these were carved by natives in Kenya (not artists) and they are large and in such bad shape (transport, etc.) and it takes weeks and weeks to get them in shape in order to paint them, and so Annie and I are working on 25 of them. And it will be smashing when they're all done. The wood has to be dried, and then we have to plane it down.

When did you think about Mr. Fluxus? Was it a long-term project?

When I was in New York--after the death of George--I had been in Harvard and came down for a weekend. And Ay-o and I decided that wouldn't it be fun to do a book about George--the dozen important people in Fluxus who had been there--called **The Book of George**--because we saw that after the death of George, funny things were happening. Someone released a story that "I will be in charge of Fluxus"--others said, he was nothing. Two of my friends said well there is not very much to say about George--he's an overblown figure.

So I asked certain people to give five anecdotes about George Maciunas so that we could get to know him through the anecdotes that people remember him by--from Watts, Shiomi, Dick Higgins, Alison Knowles, Ay-o, myself, about a dozen. We thought how to do this--Ay-o went to Japan and I to Europe, and we forgot the whole thing. I mentioned occasionally that Ay-o and I had been planning to do this, and Michele Verges said I'd publish it if you gave it to me.

I started working on it again 10 years later, trying to find people. It took about 10 years to get letters, manuscripts to me to get them all together--and then to bring it together. I wanted to do a book "from womb to tomb" in the words of other people--sometimes with anecdotes--the story of his life, of his death and how he was loved, hated and feared by all these people and their assessment of what he was--great or terrible. Out of the most devastating is that of Allan Kaprow, who zeroes in on the feud with Stockhausen.

And what about this Love-Hate situation with George Maciunas?

We were all kicked out--only two were not kicked out: Ken Friedman and Ben Vautier. We were all prima donnas--all kicked out. Vostell was never let in; George hated his guts. Beuys was never let in. George absolutely despised him, but Beuys loved him. George not only kicked me out--Kopke, Anderson out of Fluxus, but he denounced us to the Soviet press and to the world as fascist thugs--and this was a joke that Eric did: Eric was making a trip through Eastern countries and started to send letters and postcards from Moscow, etc. how we were performing Fluxus in various cities and George believed it, and we were dismissed.

Bici (Hendricks) has one of the most beautiful accounts of the dying. But it was only after he had died that we knew that it was "gossip". We only renewed our friendship when Jean Brown brought George to an exhibition of mine at Mt. Holyoke-- and George said that maybe we can be friends again and gave me a beautiful name box--but I told him we had always been friends,

but "you didn't believe it". But he never forgave Dick Higgins for Something Else Press.

There are those books which dictate Fluxus as defined only by George Maciunas. What is Mr. Fluxus about?

George does not have the last word in this book. There are some 70 people pro and con telling what they think Fluxus is and what Fluxus is not. This is not hero worship. 75% ended up in the garbage, and they could save it for their books, but not this one. And I told some contributors that I was returning stuff asking whether they could try again?

Ken ended by saying he hardly knew him. Ben Vautier loved George very much showing a maximal amount of respect for George with a poem that he wrote. Catalogs have served as amazing new data about Fluxus. René Block's 1962 *Wiesbaden Fluxus 1982* is still one of the best. The Fluxus in Germany catalog I believe is the best documentation and it's too bad it has not been translated.

Do you think that art history books in the future will give Fluxus its due?

I don't see how they can avoid Fluxus. the time hasn't quite come yet, but you have some first-rate historians such as Thomas Kellein whose small book on Fluxus published by Thames & Hudson has been translated into German, Japanese and English, and the English edition is now reprinted in a second edition.

And now that Mr. Fluxus is almost here?

Well, the jacket by Ay-O is definitely eye-catching. And I was very happy how the critics treated **My Life in Fluxus** with great seriousness. It was not a history of Fluxus at all, but was an attempt to show what one member of Fluxus did, what it was like to be part of Fluxus. In this regard, I had many arguments with Jon Hendricks, because he was basing the history of Fluxus on a collection that Gil Silverman was able to buy, which is not complete and not comprehensive.

Let's talk about Hanns Sohm for a minute.

Well, no Sohm, no Fluxus. The Hanns Sohm Archive was before Fluxus, and it's all there. Fluxus fits into a large and important archive. If you want Concrete Poetry, go there; if you want Ginsberg, Beats, go there. If you want Wallace Berman, go there. The Sohm Archive gives context to all movements. I used to enjoy going to Sohms' and staying there before the collection was sold to the Stuttgart Museum. He looks at the material first, then puts it into context. I send all my material to him at his home, before it ever gets to the museum. I had my Opera performed last summer in a Castle outside Stuttgart and it lasted four hours. Sohm

was there. And he's there when you're short of cash; he'll buy something to keep you going. And the museum of Stuttgart is one of the jewels of Europe, and it's wonderful that the archive is there.

My letters to George and to Daniel Spoerri are at the Getty now, and it's too bad they're not in Stuttgart.

And tell us what plans you have now.

Well, **Mr. Fluxus** has been translated into German, Lithuanian, Japanese and English. The German translation came out first, and it was from the English original. The English edition is larger, since it has more new material in it. And we have several Fluxus books by this one publishing house in England, Thames & Hudson, including the Fluxus show at the Tate. Ben Vautier and I have done a tape of our ICA performances in London.

In March, I have been invited to Australia as President of the Museum in Lodz, Poland and I plan to work with the Aborigines, as well as doing performances in Melbourne. Perhaps I will also visit the Fluxus Collection in Queensland.



UMBRELLA NEWS

According to news about Tony Blair's changes in the Brand-New Britain, bowler hats and rightly coiled umbrellas are no longer seen around the Bank of England.

•The cover of the 26 January 1998 issue of *The New Yorker* has a pope and Castro enjoying the sunset sitting in chairs on the beach, Castro with a typical cigar in his hand and the Pope with a drink and a little umbrella in his drink. Hurrah for the Pope in remembering Umbrella's 20th Anniversary!

•An article in the *New York Times*, under the title of "Coping" by Robert Lipsyte discusses the life of an Egyptian, Khairy Gurgis, who came to New York in 1983, and it was raining. He borrowed \$20 from his wife and bought a dozen umbrellas wholesale, selling them on 6th Avenue for \$3 each. Then he brought a dozen more, and kept doing it. He made \$75 profit that day, after repaying his wife with the initial \$20. It rained the next day, and he was happy to do it again, but the police came and confiscated his goods and directed him to go to Consumer Affairs to get a license. He has been selling things on the street including scarves, hats and gloves for 8 years, as well as manufacturing batik dresses and hand-woven coats under his King Tut label.

Although he has had to go before the courts because the City of New York has issued a list of dozens of streets to be placed off limits to vendors, the public has signed petitions to keep the vendors as a vital component of the community. The Umbrella Man wants to be considered a "real human being with a place in my community".

• "The Umbrellas of Yorgos Zongolopoulos is a lighthearted stainless-steel sculpture that became the emblem of the Cultural Capital of Europe in 1997, Thessaloniki, Greece.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE UMBRELLA MUSEUM

Judy & Chuck Goodstein, Joanne Echevarria-Myers, Melinda Smith Altshuler, Genie Shenk, Pam Scheinman, Guy Bleus, Anna Banana, Patricia Collins, Sandra Jackman, Janet Pyle, Carol Stetser, Judith Stein, Unica T, Carol Stetser, Alicja Stowikowska & Radek Nowakowski