Fluxus Vision (Blink)

During a brief encounter with Fluxus in the mid-1960s, John Cavanaugh produced a film called *Flicker*.\(^1\) Included in the 1966 program of Fluxfilms assembled by George Maciunas, *Flicker* consists of alternating frames of black and clear celluloid that, when projected, assault the eye with a battery of flickers in extremely bright white and pure black (Fig. 9). After a few seconds of this flickering, the eye becomes fatigued. Vision fades into a temporary blindness characterized by slowly moving, pulsating, colorless blobs that hover over the continuous flash of film, a response due to the inability of the optic nerve to register the flickering frames.

In *Flux Year Box 2* from 1968, a handheld projector was included with the films for manual operation (Fig. 10). With it the viewer, blinking while watching the film at variable speeds, slows the pace of the flickering frames, just as rapid blinking slows the pace of the flickering spokes.
Various artists, *Flux Year Box 2*, 1968; assembled and designed by George Maciunas. Wooden box with mixed media, $8 \times 8 \times 3\frac{3}{4}$ in.; includes handheld projector. Photo by Brad Iverson; courtesy of the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, Detroit.
of a spinning bicycle wheel. Blinking lessens the fatigue of the optic nerve, which may recover sufficiently to take in some part of the flicker again—that is, until the muscles around the eye grow fatigued as well, rendering the rapid, rhythmic blink physically impossible. In the end, the eye is simply too tired to continue its futile effort to race the mechanical projector, or to coordinate with the uneven rhythm of the handheld one.

Staring or blinking or manipulating the film’s projection exposes the physical limits of the viewer’s eyes. The viewer experiences the limitations of both the visible (what is seen in the world) and the optical (how humans see these things). There is neither a tangible object that corresponds to the colorless blob that hovers over the flicker, nor an objective framework that determines the precise form the blob takes. In this manner Flicker creates an optical experience that lies beyond the realm of the visible, where visible refers to an objective world of things “out there” that can be perceived or observed by the eye “in here.”

An optical experience beyond the realm of the visible may seem self-contradictory. How can something that is not objectively there be seen? The answer, it seems to me, lies in rethinking the proposition that if something is not visible, it does not exist or cannot be seen.

The possibility of seeing the invisible calls into question the common phrases “Seeing is believing” and “I’ll know it when I see it.” The simultaneously optical and invisible experience of Flicker shifts one from the sense of sight toward something else, such as “Feeling is believing” or “I’ll know it when I experience it.” Clearly, something that is not visible can be seen, as it is in Flicker, even though what is seen is not a physical object. Rather, it is an image produced by optical fatigue—though there are other causes of invisible visions (such as ghosts, dreams, hallucinations of all kinds, images caused by eye malfunctions, mirages, magic, and games of illusion). Experientially, then, Flicker initiates a visual impression—the colorless blob registered by the optic nerve—that is radically distinct from what is shown, namely, alternating frames of black and clear celluloid. Viewers ultimately witness the boundary of their visual capacity—their limits as seeing persons—in response to an “outside” stimulus. Put differently, the experience is neither subjective nor objective. The stimulus (film) is not what is seen (the blob), nor is it independent of what is seen. Rather, what is seen combines a world “out there” and a self “in here.”
Because it occurs in this interstitial location between objective and subjective, *Flicker* works against the belief that experience is mediated by clearly delineated senders (objects) and receivers (subjects) of information, a duality that lies at the core of the Western philosophical tradition. With few exceptions, in this tradition ideas are located exclusively in the mind. They are therefore distinct from an objective world or, conversely, illustrate the unknowability or lack of existence of that objective world. In contrast, experience of *Flicker* is based within an indivisible object/subject matrix or field. In other words, the most striking effect of *Flicker* is that experience of it is simultaneously self-reflexive—the viewer witnesses the fatigue of his or her own optic nerve—and externally triggered: the eye constitutes the organic boundary of a person watching a movie shown on an external screen. Experience of the film cannot readily be dissected to locate elements exclusively in one or the other domain; it occurs equally within both. Experience of *Flicker* is therefore consistent with John Dewey's conception of aesthetic experience as that which "signifies complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events."

Put differently, *Flicker* illustrates the mutual nature of, or correlation between, so-called sense data and stimulus or matter. J. L. Austin describes this correlation: "One of the most important points to grasp is that these two terms, 'sense data' and 'material things,' live by taking in each other's washing—what is spurious is not one term of the pair, but the antithesis itself." Fluxfilms offer rich evidence in Austin's favor.

At the other extreme in pace from *Flicker* is Yoko Ono's film *Eyeblink* (1966), included in the same Fluxfilm program, which consists of a blinking eye filmed at two thousand frames per second on a high-speed camera by the Fluxus photographer Peter Moore. Shown at a regular speed, the film presents an extremely slow motion image of a blink. The slow and partial pulse of muscles in the fatty tissue of the lower lid, the pull of each muscle to move the lid, the tears flowing over and around the eye during the blink, and the partial dilation of the pupil during a fraction of a second only gradually become apparent. The viewer's own blinking action punctuates the pace of the model's (Ono's) blink shown in the film. Significantly, a quick reflex movement—the blink of an eye—has been extended almost unendurably in close proximity and sharp focus.

Since during a blink the eye is never fully open, most of *Eyeblink* shows the eye while it is not seeing—at least while it is not seeing visible things. Rather, the
image on the screen shows a prolonged space or interstice between normative visual experiences. From the perspective of the film’s viewer, the red curtain of the subject’s eyelid closes and opens on the seeing eye of the viewer, who might in turn imagine the fractal patterns seen during the interim by the model. Like *Flicker*, then, *Eyeblink* invokes an invisible visual experience, this time not by way of extreme optical fatigue, but instead through the protracted representation of a space between normative visual experiences. The experiential breadth and limits of the apparatus of perception itself are (once again) the explicit subject matter of the work.

In both films, vision has been placed firmly within the body. The embodiment occurs in *Flicker* through the effect of fatigue on the viewer’s optic nerve and eye muscles and in *Eyeblink* through the protracted representation of an interstice of vision. Through this embodiment of nonobjective (yet visible) elements, *Flicker* and *Eyeblink* offer alternatives to the continuous, objective field of vision, or scopic unity, associated with commercial film. They do so by replacing the illusion of a unified field of representation (the perspectively coherent film space) with primary experience. In contemporary art historical jargon, by forcing the eye to the limits of its visual capacity (*Flicker*) and by accessing the break in visibility characterized by a blink (*Eyeblink*), these films undermine the authority of the disembodied gaze.

The destruction of the disembodied gaze is likewise the subject of Daniel Spoerri and François Dufrêne’s *Optique Moderne*, a book displaying altered spectacles. One page shows pins attached to the lenses of a pair of glasses and pointing at the eyes (Fig. 11). One imagines the composed young man (Spoerri) contorting in pain and darkness when the pins pierce his retina. If we understand the pins as single points, this deceptively simple piece seems to reference the destruction of vision as it is subjected (through the trickery of illusion) to the vanishing point of perspective and (through the physiology of glasses) to the focal point of lenses. The problem with such a strict interpretation is that it explains the work only negatively vis-à-vis the lens of the eye. The work thus becomes merely anti-illusionistic and antiretinal—which it is, but only in part. There is another way of looking at it, a positive one: perhaps the artist sees the points coming and, with deliberation and composure, embraces the broader experience of blindness to follow.
Other spectacles were included in *L’Optique Moderne*, among them found prescription and reading glasses with bent earpieces that enabled each to be held at any distance from the eyes. These altered the viewing distance within the normally fixed geometry of the lens/focal length and eye ratios, effectively allowing for increased control of multiple visual experiences by the user. Held at distance $x$, one sees $y$, and at another distance, $z$.

As a whole, then, these glasses do not destroy vision. Rather, they enable new visions of the world by replacing normative vision with various alternatives that are controlled by the viewer. In this manner Spoerri and Dufrêne’s *Optique Moderne* provides models for experientially embodied vision similar to those found in *Flicker*, with its exploitation of muscular and optic nerve fatigue, and *Eyeblink*, with its reliance on interstitial visual experience.

In contrast to this experiential modeling of vision, Renaissance perspective, with its disembodied gaze, was, according to the philosophical historian Paul Virilio, “the nodule in which the modeling of vision would develop and, with it, all possible standardization of ways of seeing.” This viewpoint makes it very difficult to introduce another visual mode in a post-Renaissance context, for it will inevitably be seen in opposition to perspectively organized vision. Virilio further suggests that stylistic opposition to the controlling gaze of perspective threatens to destroy all visual connection to the object of scrutiny (i.e., the world): there is no body (social or individual) left viewing when the controlling lens is exposed as a limited means for understanding visual experience. By freeing vision of its definitive and militaristic component, the abandonment of perspective renders order untenable. Without the grid/screen, chaos reigns. “In the West, the death of God and the death of art are indissociable; the zero degree of representation merely fulfilled the prophecy voiced a thousand years earlier by Nicephorus, Patriarch of Constantinople, during the quarrel with the iconoclasts: ‘If we remove the image, not only Christ but the whole universe disappears.’”

Robert Romanyshyn, in *Technology as Symptom and Dream*, describes vision in terms phenomenologically similar to Virilio’s (“When the world is viewed through a window, the world is well on the way to becoming an object of vision”) but adds that “a profound difference remains between this objective body of knowledge created in distance from oneself, and one’s living body, between the body which one has and the body which one is.” In other words, the screen or “devices for seeing”
that for Virilio objectify the world in all veristic art by “dispensing” with the body are only one part of visual experience. There are other logics of cohesion. We must not forget the “body which one is.”

Both approaches to vision have implications for understanding *L’Optique Moderne, Flicker,* and *Eyeblink.* The Renaissance model expounded by theorists like Virilio finds mere chaos and disintegration beyond the field of scopic unity or spatial illusionism posited by perspectival art and photography. The only alternative to scopic unity is experiential disunity. The embodied vision expounded by Romanyszyn, in contrast, allows for the indomitable “body that is,” that lives and takes manifold forms. From Virilio’s perspective, the two Fluxfilms and the Spoerri-Dufrêne object would merely resonate negatively with the scopic unity of film and illusionistic images, while from Romanyszyn’s perspective the films and the object would affirm the broader physiological basis of vision. By giving the fatigue of the optic nerve or eyelid a physiological framework (*Flicker*) and by representing the eyelid as it blinks (*Eyeblink*), the Fluxfilms locate the eye within the human body, with all its motility and sentience. Together, the three Fluxworks offer an alternative to scopic unity, at the same time rejecting the notion of experiential chaos.

To argue for an embodied eye deep in the core of the viewer seems merely to move the vanishing point into the viewer proper, since it means that the visual logic of the work is oriented to the viewer’s world. For the iconoclast, in nonperspectival work the vanishing point of perspective in effect turns in on the viewer, such that the viewer disappears. If we understood the body as a mere extension of passive vision, something simply tacked on behind the eye, this argument might be persuasive. However, the embodied model of vision is dynamic. The experience occurs only if the viewer puts something into it: far from vanishing, the viewer asserts his or her existence in front of the vanishing point.

The effort to make this happen can be described as the performative element of all Fluxus work: the audience has to do something to complete the work. Blink hard. Stare hard. Pick up the glasses. Fluxus artists have consistently described their work, particularly the objects they produce, as performative. The artist and performance scholar Kristine Stiles notes that “Fluxus originated in the context of performance and the nature of its being—the ontology of Fluxus—is performative.” She continues in terms that bear directly on this discussion: “The body, in
addition to its role as subject, is itself presented as an object. Together, subject and object create a changing and interrelated perceptual field for the investigation between actions, language, objects and sounds.”

This “changing and interrelated perceptual field” of performativity is succinctly illustrated in another Fluxus work that invokes the blink. The Scissors Brothers’ Warehouse Sale graphic, also called Blink, was produced in 1963 by George Brecht, Alison Knowles, and Robert Watts (Fig. 12). In addition to being made into a print on canvas, the Blink image was printed on bathing suits, pillowcases, matchbooks, and shirts—meaning it could be slept on, worn, and struck. As something used in everyday life, Blink suggests that to blink is to inhabit one’s body.

The silk-screened image, divided into three horizontal bands, is roughly square and has a brilliant yellow ground. It is thus both fragmented (the bands) and unified (the field of yellow). The top band depicts a wedding ceremony taking place in a thatched room: on the right, a man and woman face the viewer, and on the left, a man stands with his back to the viewer. The bodies of all three are covered with square spirals and vegetal patterns. The bottom band graphically represents three pairs of scissors equally spaced and pointed menacingly upward. Squeezed in a narrower horizontal band between these two registers, in primary red, is the word BLINK.

Because the spaced-out red capital letters appear in the middle register of the image, centered on its width, they word they spell creates an effect something like that of a traffic sign. Instead of commanding me to stop, however, the canvas orders me to blink. I become aware of the act of shutting my eyes: they open on a scissors (blink), then on the woman’s face (blink), then on a letter (blink), then on another scissors (blink). They open on another viewer (blink), then on a letter (blink), then on the man’s back (blink), and then on another pair of scissors.

Blink plays with one’s sense of the visible: like L’Optique Moderne, Eyeblink, and Flicker, it suggests that some component of the optical experience is predicated on discontinuity in the visual field. Furthermore, even if viewers do not blink themselves, the registers flicker like bands before their eyes, like film frames creeping slowly across the viewer’s field of vision. Thus the three-part structure of the image, as the gaze moves across its surface, gives it a serial quality, somewhat like that of Flicker and Eyeblink. However, unlike the repetitive frames of Flicker (black and clear, black and clear) and the continuous image of Eyeblink, each band of Blink contains a very different image.
The scissors below the word blink invoke the sense of touch. Opening from left to right, it is as if they are moved by an invisible hand. They seem to be printed from the stuff they are made of, their bright silver ink like polished steel. Mundane objects, they nonetheless look interesting to handle, sturdy, useful, and cool to the touch. In these ways they contrast emphatically with their brilliant yellow background. They are not an implicit part of a larger context, a sewing table or factory, for example, that might make them seem real in the faked space of the canvas. Instead they simply hover over the indeterminate yellow field.

This is a haptic image, one that belongs to a “system of perception based on contact values,” or touch. Haptic images tend to occur in shallow space and suggest touch by emphasizing the surface textures or outlines of things. Trompe l’oeil images are haptic in this sense. The urge to touch makes an encounter troubling, especially in museums. In the case of Blink, the surrogate reality of the represented scissors flickers with an odd sense that they are printed with the stuff from which real scissors are made. By inviting viewers to look closely, to touch, and to imagine the object as actually presented instead of represented, Blink offers a multisensory experience.

As a group, Eyeblink, Flicker, Optique Moderne, and Blink combine visual and visceral elements. This happens phenomenologically in Flicker, iconically in Eyeblink, through the use of visualizing instruments in Optique Moderne, and by way of a haptic presentational framework and verbal content in Blink. These Fluxus works expose the distinctions between the optical and the visual by locating vision in a physiological middle ground, by exploring the visual elements in the interstices of normative visual experience, and by explicitly directing the viewer to blink.

The realism of the scissors in Blink deflects attention from a negation of standard vision and toward a tactile, empirical, and therefore rich subjective experience (in this it is like Optique Moderne). Svetlana Alpers, in her study on seventeenth-century Dutch painting, The Art of Describing, depicts the opposition between the empirical quality of the northern tradition and the narrative, spatially contained approach of the Italian Renaissance tradition:

Attention to many small things versus a few large ones; light reflected off objects versus objects modeled by light and shadow; the surface of objects, their
colors and textures, dealt with rather than their placement in a single, legible space; an unframed image versus one that is clearly framed; one with no clearly situated viewer compared to one with such a viewer. The distinction follows from a hierarchical model of distinguishing between phenomena commonly referred to as primary and secondary; objects and space versus the surfaces, forms versus the textures of the world.\(^{18}\)

The discursive framework of Alpers’s account helps to explain how vision operates in *Flicker*, *Eyeblink*, and *Blink*—not merely in the denial of scopic control, but in the affirmation of human experience. The *Blink* graphic is “descriptive” in Alpers’s sense in that it provides no clear place for the viewer, who hovers above the scissors but in front of the thatched space while scanning the word as if it were on a page. Instead of “many small things,” the viewer is treated to a serial image of an insignificant thing—the pair of scissors that, printed in silver ink, literally reflects light from the viewer’s space.

In its disparate sources, as if snatched from various locations; its lack of clear framing; and its emphasis on surface texture, as opposed to location in space, *Blink* seems a direct descendant of seventeenth-century Dutch still lifes and trompe l’oeil images, with their elements of photographic vision: the fragment, the arbitrary frame, and the sense of proximity or tactile immediacy. Equally important for my purposes, descriptive, empirical works offer access to “phenomena commonly referred to as primary,” a reference to the sense of immediacy induced by direct physical contact with things. As *Blink* illustrates, in some Fluxus works representation invokes this direct contact with things. Alpers’s logic of description, however, occurs even more directly in other Fluxus works that transport the tactile itself into art, effectively bridging vision and the sense of touch. This is true even when a work is only visual, as in the *Blink* graphic, or primarily so, as in George Maciunas’s *Fluxpost (Smiles)* stamps (Fig. 13).

These stamps use a dialectical logic to stake part of their claim. In the popular imagination, smiles are pretty (these are not), smiles bespeak happiness and well-being (these do not), and smiles demonstrate wealth in the form of access to good dentistry (these do not). The Fluxsmiles could be construed as an inversion of advertising smiles and family photographs (“cheese”), illustrating poor dentistry in emerging cultures or the inequities of privatized dentistry; by extension,
George Maciunas, *Fluxpost (Smiles)*, 1977–78. Perforated postage stamp paper, 10\(\frac{3}{4}\) × 8\(\frac{1}{4}\) in. Courtesy of the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, Detroit.
it might seem that capitalism and its international counterpart, capitalist imperialism, are targeted. Such an interpretation follows a relatively linear path to its logical conclusion.

To understand *Fluxpost (Smiles)* exclusively by such secondary meanings, however, is to miss much of its power, since in this interpretation the experiential element is left out. The chain of signifiers that the image evokes—Western models of beauty, medical access, and health—misses what David Howes calls “the interplay of the senses” in the work. The taste in my mouth as I look at the page of *Fluxpost (Smiles)* is momentarily strange. My teeth feel too smooth, like hardware, as I scan the decayed mouths and teeth depicted on the stamps. The point is not so much that the linear interpretation of the work as cultural criticism is incorrect, as that it misses the experiential dimension of the work.

*Fluxpost (Smiles)* in fact is linked to the mouth-altering *Flux Smile Machine* of 1970–72 (Fig. 14), an implement of mechanical torture that undoes the normally pleasant association of smiles with physical pleasure or mental happiness. The *Flux Smile Machine* pinches the soft flesh of the inner cheek, gouges the gums, binds the lips, flattens the tongue; it scrapes against the enamel of the users’ teeth and sits awkwardly in the mouth, causing excessive salivation or drool. The mixture of blood and metal tastes terrible. Experientially, then, the *Flux Smile Machine* (and therefore *Fluxpost [Smiles]*) belongs as much to the private world of physical discomfort as to the more prosaic world of hardware stores and dentist chairs, not to mention that of high art.

In other words, even where Fluxus works are made to be seen, as in *Fluxpost (Smiles)*, they are often also intended to be felt (or, as in the case of *Blink*, worn). This experiential dynamic, characterized by the interpenetration of human consciousness and the world of things, is not unique to the Fluxfilms or objects examined thus far. Far from it. Much of the most evocative work made by Fluxus artists bears this thrust. The art critic and Fluxus scholar Henry Martin links the experiential quality of Fluxus to the “unremitting research” into the relationship between sensing and knowing that “contribute[s] to a sense of integrity and fullness,” a quality that is the basis of Fluxus. Martin’s phrasing resonates with the words of John Dewey, who described the mechanics of this integrated aesthetic sensibility: “In art as an experience, actuality and possibility or ideality, the new and the old, objective material and personal response, the individual and the universal, surface and depth,
sense and meaning, are integrated in an experience in which they are all transfigured from the significance that belongs to them when isolated in reflection.” Aesthetic experience, in short, occurs in an intermediate space between the apparent opposites outlined by Dewey.

To interpret Fluxpost (Smiles) only as a form of negative cultural criticism places undue emphasis on Dewey’s polarities, and thus necessarily falls short of either integration or transfiguration, terms commonly associated with mysticism that are anathema to the dialectical method. Yet ironically, it is the integration of cultural dualities and personal transformation that characterizes Fluxpost (Smiles) and the metal object of the smile machine, whose physical effects resonate with the culture of smiling. Similarly, experience of Flicker, whose black and transparent frames are common to all film, but whose blobs are formally unique to each viewer, is at once a shared and transfigured experience. The same is true of Blink, which, in its form and seriality, partakes of an ideal or universal geometry, although the objects it comprises are prosaic and have personal associations.

To conceive of Fluxus vision in experiential terms does not mean that any- and everything creates an aesthetic experience. Rather, again in the words of Henry Martin, the experiential basis of Fluxus “can continue to be a motto and a principle no matter how radically [the] gap between art and life may [in theory] reduce and grow slim…. When the gap is slim enough, the observance of this principle can itself be seen to be a way of contributing to life’s enhancement.”

Information and Experience in Fluxkits and Events

Edward S. Reed, in The Necessity of Experience, argues for experiential knowledge in terms that bear directly on this discussion:

As this is written, billions of dollars are being spent to create continent-wide information superhighways along which will flow every conceivable kind of information except one. The information being left out of these developments is, unfortunately, the most important kind: the information—termed ecological—that all human beings acquire from their environment by looking, listening, feeling, sniffing, and tasting—the information, in other words, that allows us to
experience things for ourselves. . . . For understanding our place in the world, ecological information is thus primary, processed information secondary.  

Fluxfilms, like the *Blink* objects and the *Flux Smile Machine*, offer the ecological form of experiential knowledge that Reed says allows us to understand “our place in the world.” In particular, the *Flux Smile Machine* uses three of the senses he lists: it is felt, seen, and tasted when in use. It is also a Fluxkit—one of the many small boxes of inexpensive materials assembled for personal use that Maciunas invented in 1962.

The first Fluxkit, *Fluxus 1* (see Fig. 4), was designed by Maciunas and contains objects, visual work, and essays by thirty-nine artists, not all of whom were Fluxus artists as defined by social integration or friendships with the group. The various items in *Fluxus 1* yield multisensory, primary information. These include a song, with words and melody (therefore involving sight, motility, and hearing); a napkin, meant to touch hand and mouth (therefore involving tactility and perhaps taste); a medical examination glove, with the look and smell of latex (therefore involving touch—both in and through the glove—sight, and smell); photo portraits, which appeal to the eye; performance and music scores, which involve all senses (and are thus synaesthetic); and visual and sound poems, meant to be read, heard, and performed (which therefore involve the eye, the ear, and the body of the performer).

Some of the Fluxkits subsequently made by individual artists are full of boxes with finger holes and mysterious contents for touching, instructional performance cards, Event scores, balls, real food (beans), plastic food, blow horns, a chess set with pieces identifiable only by smell, and prophylactics, to name but a few. *Orifice Flux Plugs* by the American Fluxus artist Larry Miller typifies the primary experience offered by the Fluxkit and theorized by Reed (Fig. 15). The scale of the individual plugs invites the user to hold and finger them: to unroll condoms; to consider soft, small plugs for insertion into the nose, ear, vagina, or anus; to examine statuettes that might enter any orifice of the user. Where would this fit? Could I really use this? How blunt is this tip? How sharp is this edge? Will the fuzz shed all over the inside of my nose or ear? It is difficult to reroll a condom. Who else hates the smell and feel of latex? Will I break out in a rash? What if this is used?
Larry Miller, *Orifice Flux Plugs*, 1974. 9 × 13 × 2¼ in. Photo by Buzz Silverman; courtesy of the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, Detroit.
The tactility of these orifice plugs suggests how the users of Fluxkits are linked to their physical environment through a sensory encounter with it. An analysis of the history of prophylactics would miss the point of the work, since “The fact that I can touch an object, hold it, push it, gives me a sense that there is really something there, that I am not the sport of a trick or an illusion.”

In the *Flux Smile Machine*, *Fluxus 1*, and *Orifice Flux Plugs* the stuff in the Fluxkit makes an experience for the handler that is the sensation contained in it; the Fluxkit is not *about* the sensation. The operative word *about*, like the word *of*, insists on the distance between object and user: “That is a painting about pain” or “of a pipe.” In the Fluxkits, actual stuff is present—“That is a pom-pom”; it is not *about* a pom-pom unless a particular user proceeds down that path of association. Removing *of* and *about* represents two challenges to entrenched patterns of thought: first, if a piece is not *about* things but actually *is* them, then the signifying chain often applied to visual art in semiotic analyses needs to be modified to make physical or actual experiences central to the process of signification; second, and more important for my purposes, these works problematize the Western metaphysics since Plato and Aristotle, which insists on dividing primary experience (the feel or scent of the pom-pom) from secondary experience (mental concepts about it).

In the early twentieth century, William James and John Dewey effectively argued this connective philosophical tradition; Dewey produced a theory of democratic culture based on the importance of experience, a mode with profoundly ecological implications. The tactile tools he used in his educational experiment at the Lab School in Chicago, often containers holding objects destined for a range of multisensory explorations, function strikingly like Fluxkits. In *Art as Experience* Dewey writes, “The senses are organs through which the live creature participates directly in the world about him.” The Lab School kit, like the Fluxkit, thus has the effect of stimulating the individual’s sense of participation. It follows that both kits have a social dimension, which I will address momentarily.

Recently, Hilary Putnam and John McDowell have advocated for a reconstruction of philosophy that favors linking experience with secondary knowledge. Put another way, embodied knowledge produces abstract knowledge, and not the other way around. Putnam’s terms in particular have implications for understanding the Fluxkit (and the Event) as examples of cognitive powers reaching all the way to objects so that subjectivity is not merely a projection of external ideas, as in the
notion of constructed identities: “The natural realist holds that successful perception is just a seeing, or hearing, or feeling, etc., of things out there; and not a mere affectation of a person’s subjectivity by those things.”31 Whereas in the idealist and structuralist philosophical traditions “our cognitive powers cannot reach all the way to objects themselves,” Putnam argues to the contrary that our direct sensation of things forms the basis for cognition itself.32

By criticizing the principle of an affective relationship that separates things “out there” from human subjectivity, Putnam’s account erodes the apparent division between object and subject in perceptual experience. Significantly, since primary experience and perception occur across all senses (sight, sound, scent, taste, and touch), a wide variety of sensation is necessary to the “natural realist” encounter. In this sense, the Fluxkit produces sensate forms of knowledge. Texts and objects are unrolled and unfolded to be heard, seen, and read; plugs are examined. Similarly, in Events water is heard, seen, and felt dripping; the hand feels the wood of the violin through an old cloth, the polish smelling vaguely toxic; a scene is witnessed through a keyhole. As generators of primary experiences, Fluxkits and Events “allow us to experience things for ourselves,” thereby generating a mechanism for our “understanding [of] our place in the world,” in Reed’s terms, and thinking “all the way to objects themselves,” in Putnam’s.

From person to person, these understandings, however similar, also differ in significant ways. Put differently, in offering a primary experience of matter as art, Fluxkits and Events have ramifications that both do and do not necessarily include the normative context called fine art. The multiple experiences of Fluxkits and Events suggest ways of understanding the contested relation many Fluxus artists have to the term art and its association with such features as name, date, style, psychology, context, and fixed meaning.

Insofar as the Fluxkit is multisensory, it exemplifies the modality of knowledge that the philosopher David Michael Levin has called “ontological thinking.” For Levin, that term implies a directive to incorporate into one’s sense of self a greater sense of being than is produced by the visual paradigm of truth that originates with the Italian Renaissance, or by scientific rationalism for that matter:

“Overcoming” metaphysics means overcoming the metaphysical misunderstanding of the being of the human body. It means overcoming our deep-seated
guilt and shame, flaming into a terrible hatred of the body. The history of mind/body dualism and the history of the subject/object dualism are two symptomatic manifestations of a violent, nihilistic rage at the very heart of our metaphysics. ... Ontological thinking is radically different: it engages us in the opening wholeness of our being, and “takes place” as much in the life of our feet and hands and eyes as it does in our head, our brains, or our “mind.”

Ontological thought, then, encompasses multisensory experiences in ways that reinforce our connectedness to the world. This occurs through the specific sensations experienced in the body of the perceiver. Levin quotes from Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*:

> To have senses, sight for example, is to possess that general setting, that framework of potential, visual-type relations with the help of which we are able to take up any visual grouping. To have a body is to possess a universal setting, a schema of all types of perceptual unfolding and of all those inter-sensory correspondences which lie beyond the segment of the world which we are actually perceiving.

Our bodies, far from limiting us in our encounter with the world, simultaneously give us access to what our senses perceive and link us to the whole universe of human perceptions.

I believe that the ultimate goal of Fluxus lies precisely in this task: to form multiple pathways toward “ontological knowledge” and the expansion of the “setting of human experience.” Levin describes this expansion as becoming “more fully human,” which, far from being predicated on any notion of universal human knowledge, is richly determined by a belief in the unique significance of particular experiences.

Similarly, the primary experiences that Fluxkits generate, which make ontological knowledge possible in Levin’s sense, also generate an unmediated truth, even though that truth, by definition, cannot be universal (in the Idealist sense). Other Fluxkits demonstrate the same pattern of leading to experientially based truth.

For example, the most tactile pieces in Fluxus are undoubtedly *Finger Boxes*, by the Japanese Fluxus artist Ay-O. First produced in 1964, these works have subsequently been sold singly and in Fluxkits (Fig. 16). The boxes contain various
Ay-O, *Finger Box* (valise edition), 1964; designed by George Maciunas based on prototype (rear right) by the artist. Mixed media in wooden boxes in vinyl briefcase, $12\frac{1}{2} \times 17 \times 3\frac{3}{4}$ in. Sizes of individual boxes (mixed media in cardboard) vary. Photo by Brad Iverson; courtesy of the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, Detroit.
tactile elements ranging from nails to sponges, beads to cotton balls, and bristle brushes to hair. (An envelope version of this idea, consisting of a slit envelope and—sometimes—a nylon inside, was included in *Fluxus 1.* For all practical purposes the boxes look identical from the outside, which means that the experience of these works occurs only when the user probes within: the realm of touch is supreme as, handled, they prick, cushion, roll against, squeeze, and wrap around an inserted finger. Merely to look at them is to experience them only partially. George Brecht’s *Valoche/A Flux Travel Aid* similarly consists of a box filled with things: twenty-six balls, toys such as badminton birdies, rubber bands, bowling pins (Fig. 17). The balls have different textures and weights. The birdie might be tossed in the air, rolled between the user’s fingertips, or used to fire down a bowling pin. A rubber band could be snapped or used to bundle other things together. Ay-O’s *Finger Boxes* and the items in Brecht’s travel aid kit require careful handling and manual exploration. They give us tactile, cutaneous information, creating an interpenetrative experience.

Cutaneous information is gained by direct contact with materials. Apart from the lips and tongue, the index fingertip is the most sensitive cutaneous organ and is therefore particularly well suited to use with the *Finger Box.* When users plunge a finger into the box, their curiosity has overcome the sense of fear inherent in exploring the unknown. That several *Finger Boxes* contained nails indicates Ay-O’s determination not to sidestep the challenge the work could issue: the danger to the instinctively apprehensive, hesitant user, who must touch the box, but carefully, with an “enquiring, learning gesture.”

By requiring users to handle them gently, the boxes set up the potential for non-destructive knowing. Heidegger distinguishes use from using up in terms that are useful here, and which in turn differentiate the information gained through the enquiring gesture from that gained through a “grasping” for truth: “When we handle a thing, for example, our hand must fit itself to the thing... use itself is the summons which determines that a thing be admitted to its own essence and nature, and that the use keep to it. To use something is to let it enter into its essential nature, to keep it safe in its essence.”

David Michael Levin also discusses this access to the essential characteristic of a thing—or for our purposes, the substance inside a *Finger Box*—in terms of a “careful touch, which is open to feeling what it touches and uses, gets in touch more
George Brecht, *Valoche/A Flux Travel Aid*, various examples, late 1960s–1975; designed by George Maciunas. Wooden and plastic boxes with mixed-media contents. Photo by Brad Iverson; courtesy of the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, Detroit.
deeply and closely than the hand which willfully grasps and clings.” Not knowing what is inside a *Finger Box*, the user must be careful, willing to let the object yield information about itself, instead of “grasping and clinging” to get it. The information gained, however, is not meant to be enjoyed entirely in solitude. Solid little constructions, the *Finger Boxes* are intended for multiple users, so that the experience they offer is potentially social—as is appropriate to the tactile sense they employ. Touch is particularly intimate, not only because of its associations with the sensual, but also because, of all the senses, it can be the most directly social and socially motivated. What is touched touches back. “Touching,” writes Levin, “presupposes our capacity to be correspondingly touched, and this primordial reciprocity calls into question our inveterate tendency to polarize the tactile field into a subject and object.”

Cutaneous information thus works to eradicate the distinction between subject and object in Western metaphysics: “The skin serves both as receptor and transmitter of messages, some of which are culturally defined. Its acute sensitivity allows the development of such an elaborate system as Braille, but tactilism is more basic than such oddities imply and constitutes a fundamental communication form.”

Because they are premised on the shared experience of unseen materials, Fluxkits in general and the *Finger Boxes* in particular have a communicative dimension that is distinctly community-building, in Levin’s sense. Fluxkits offer, not the perspectively controlled and controlling visual model of veristic art, which the Fluxus films and images discussed above already complicated considerably, but sensory information for a radically empowered experience of art that connects the individual to a greater social or environmental context. It should come as no surprise that other Fluxus artists have invoked the senses—especially smell and taste—to similar ends.

Constance Classen, David Howes, and Anthony Synnott, exploring the social dimension of olfaction, link odor to ontological thought and social communion and division in their book *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell*. Their account contrasts sight, which has direction, with odors, which are amorphous, and explains the ignominy of scent as historically determined by mainstream Western values.

Odours cannot be readily contained, they escape and cross boundaries, blending different entities into olfactory wholes. Such a sensory model can be op-
posed to our modern, linear world view, with its emphasis on privacy, discrete divisions, and superficial interactions.

This is not to suggest that an olfactory-minded society would be an egalitarian utopia with all members harmoniously combining into a cultural perfume. As we shall see, olfactory codes can and often do serve to divide and oppress human beings, rather than unite them. The suggestion is rather that smell has been marginalized because it is felt to threaten the abstract and impersonal regime of modernity by virtue of its radical interiority, its boundary transgressing propensities and its emotional potency. Contemporary society demands that we distance ourselves from the emotions, that social structures and divisions be seen to be objective or rational and not emotional, and that personal boundaries be respected.\textsuperscript{39}

The radical interiority, emotional potency, and physical amorphousness of scent render its relation to the social and philosophical systems of the modern Western world deeply ambiguous.

The \textit{Smell Chess} works created by the Fluxus artist Takako Saito experiment with how scent functions both subjectively and more universally, in mainstream Western culture (Fig. 18).\textsuperscript{40} By assigning specific scents (those of spices, in one work) to chess pieces, she demonstrates how “olfactory codes...serve to divide and oppress human beings,” with the “boundary transgressing propensities and...emotional potency” of scent creating an ironic counterpoint to the highly choreographed, ritualized moves of the game of chess. Each player holds the scent-bottle pieces carefully, even intimately, sniffing them to determine their identity and then to move them accordingly. Saito’s \textit{Smell Chess} therefore links odors to the status and movement of individuals in society generally, and also proposes them as a sensory counterpoint to social boundaries and mobility.

In 1976 a room-size variation on \textit{Smell Chess} was projected (though never realized) for a Fluxlabyrinth built in Berlin. Bodily associations abound in a letter the artist Larry Miller wrote to George Maciunas, his collaborator on the project: “Smell room needed: smells[.] Perhaps the entry door could be whoopee cushion or whoopie cushions somewhere on floor to make a fart sound. Then we could have sulphur smell.” Besides the whoopee cushion and sulphur smell, which refer to flatulence, the unrealized smell room was to have included the smell of tar, hashish, and aerosols.\textsuperscript{41} The visitor entering the room, assailed by a noisome body
odor, might wonder momentarily if another visitor had produced it, and then re-
alize that other smells—the sticky odor of hot tar, the pungent scent of hashish,
or the sweet aromas of spices or flowers—were mingling with it. In each case the
odors, alone or combined, would elicit very different responses from visitors, as
well as varying emotional associations.

In neither Smell Chess nor the Smell Room is odor meant to be isolated from
other sensations. Small, appealing bottles, which must be opened carefully, are
then moved around by hand on a chessboard; a doorway is opened and a room
circumnavigated. In both cases scent is linked to movement. The handheld pieces
or the human body moves through space and time in reference to other pieces on
the board or other visitors to the room. The works assert that scent, despite its
radical interiority, is a profoundly social sense: odors in Fluxus constitute com-
munity phenomenologically by making the “radically interior” sense of smell a
shared sense.

Odors, of course, have no clear, material identity, since, as Classen, Howes,
and Synnott point out, they “cannot be readily contained, they escape and cross
boundaries, blending different entities into olfactory wholes.” They continue: “Olf-
factory signals are transmitted directly via the tiny hairlike cilia at the ends of the
olfactory neurons into the limbic region of the brain, the core of emotions and
memory.” Thus, the evocative effects of Smell Chess and Smell Room have a phys-
iological basis. The radical interiority of smell enables scent-based work to reach
the human brain directly, precisely illustrating that our cognitive powers do in-
deed reach all the way to objects themselves and that perception, as Putnam says,
is “not a mere affectation of a person’s subjectivity by those things.”

The fact that smell is experienced both communally and individually does
not mean, however, that odor can be analyzed as a communications system, like
language. For unlike words, smells offer a primary form of experience; they occur
“in between the stimulus and the sign, the substance and the idea.” The emo-
tional and memory-based associations of smell arise from direct contact with
matter itself—and not from its representation or reproduction. “It is for this rea-
on,” note Classen, Howes, and Synnott, “that matter and meaning become, in a
sense, ‘miscible fluids’ insofar as smells are concerned, which is an abomination
from the perspective of the (always detached) semiotician. This establishes pre-
cisely the irrelevance (or whatever other) dichotomy the semiotician might seek
to impose.” Since smell is not semiotically detached—there is no semiotic divide between the signifier and the signified—smell is ill suited at best to the mediated format of language, despite the vividness with which smell can be experienced and remembered.

This may explain why several prominent epistemologists qualify the usefulness of smell as well as the related sense of taste in certain contexts. For example, in *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, Howard Gardner writes that although “acute use of sensory systems is [an] obvious candidate for a human intelligence . . . when it comes to keen gustatory or olfactory senses, these abilities have little special value across cultures.” And Rudolf Arnheim, arguing for the equation of sight with mind, asserts that “one can indulge in smells and tastes, but one can hardly think in them.”

Many Fluxus works, however little known to a wider public, function through taste and smell. Alison Knowles, for example, produced three food Events: *Make a Salad* (1962), *Make a Soup* (1962), and *The Identical Lunch* (1967–73). The olfactory and gustatory elements of such work, however, tend to be relegated to the margins. This is certainly true of the series of meals called Fluxbanquets (featuring, for example, an array of clear foods, or of rainbow foods), which are routinely described as attempts to revive the movement after the “heroic” period of the early 1960s. These banquets took place on Christmas Day 1967 and New Year’s Day 1968 and 1969 and intermittently until Maciunas’s death in 1978. (Since then, individual Fluxus artists have continued to work with food.) Food at these banquets ranged from distilled coffee, tea, and tomato and prune juices (“all clear like water but retaining the taste”) at one meal, to eggshells filled with cheese, brewed coffee, or noodles at another, two of rainbow foods at a third. Maciunas also imagined a related series of monomeals, in which all foods would have the same basis, such as fish (candy, drink, ice cream, aspic, pastry, pudding, salad, and tea) or milk. Imagine a roomful of artists discussing eggs—how does a cheese egg thump, or a noodle egg spin?—or deciding the substance of a beverage or the sequence of dishes in an all-fish meal. At once highly subjective and broadly social, humorous and earnest, the monomeals were definitely about gustatory perception and knowledge. “Here, try this coffee egg, it’s got a noggy flavor.” “How’s the fish jello?—I’ll bet it’s better with salt.” “How about some black whipped cream with that noodle egg?”
In “Matters of Taste in Weyéwa,” Joel C. Kuipers describes how “taste substances are systematically ordered by a given culture, sometimes in ways that actually transmit messages.” Six basic descriptive terms—Sweet, savory, bitter, spicy, sour, and bland—are transcultural, but the meaning of each in a given society and their combination in particular cuisines are not. Kuipers analyzes the situational, ritual, and morphological marking of taste, its patterns of evolution and sequencing, in the Weyéwa culture. Certainly in American culture, taste terminology and experience are marked as well, and this is precisely what the distilled beverages and fun-filled eggs of Maciunas’s banquets play with. Sometimes expectations would be slyly reversed: looking identical, a cup of distilled coffee might start a meal, while a clear, savory tomato juice cocktail might end it. The notion of a sweet made out of fish—savory fish ice cream, for example—may sound repulsive, but merely for reasons of convention. In the case of an all-fish meal, the diner’s expectations would be compressed into a narrower-margin “fish”: fish aperitifs, fish food, fish beverages, fish desserts. Once the standard is established, even these bizarre food items would be worth trying, just for the experience.

Other examples of Fluxus gustatory work feature a certain randomness that similarly disrupts the traditional sequence of flavors in a meal. Beginning with the Fluxus Festival in Nice in 1963, Ben Vautier, in his Flux Mystery Food, purchased unlabeled cans of identical size in the grocery store and ate whatever was inside them—whether lychee nuts (as at the first performance) or salmon, canned sausages or sauerkraut; in 1966–67 he launched a variation on this theme, having Maciunas relabel each can as “Flux Mystery Food.” In these Fluxus food works the food appears the same or very similar, thus relegating differentiation by sight to the periphery of the eating experience. Habitual flavor markers (such as sweet for ice cream or candy) are altered, or foods are left unidentified until ready to be consumed, to challenge culture-wide gustatory expectations and expand personal experience. Other Fluxus food work has emphasized the ritual of eating, associations between food and nonfood, and the obsessive measuring and counting of foods characteristic of a society preoccupied with personal hygiene and self-control.

Beginning in 1967, Alison Knowles began each day to eat the same lunch—a tuna fish sandwich on whole wheat toast with butter, no mayo, and a cup of buttermilk or the soup of the day—at the same time and location, Riss Foods Diner in Chelsea. With Philip Corner, this became an extended meditation, score, and
Repeating the gesture made the meal a self-conscious reflection on an everyday activity. Friends and interested artists joined in. Receipts were kept, and slight differences in the meal noted. The Identical Lunch thus became a carefully documented experience of both the taste and habits of a particular diner. In 1971 Maciunas suggested an adaptation: put it “all into a blender.”

Other Fluxus food works aim to create associations between food and nonfood items. In 1969 Knowles cooked a mashed bean dish that Maciunas subsequently misidentified as “Shit Porridge” for the New Year’s banquet. That same year he proposed a series of nonedible eggs filled with whites (paint, shaving cream, and so forth). More recently, in 1992 Ben Patterson grilled several dozen ducks under a Citroën 2CV automobile for the opening of “Fluxus Virus” in Cologne. All these works associate something edible with something inedible through resemblance. The Citroën, which is virtually unknown in the United States, actually resembles a duck, while “Shit Porridge,” well...

A last category of food-based Fluxus work involves measuring and counting. Over the course of 1972–73, for example, Maciunas carefully collected all the food containers he used. Because his diet was famously monotonous, the collection included staggering quantities of similar containers such as those for frozen orange juice. Maciunas assembled all the containers as a wall object, calling it One Year. Obsessive accumulation has a logical counterpart in obsessive division or measuring, which many other Fluxus works focus on as well. Of particular note for this discussion is Eric Andersen's invitation to an audience in 1993 to eat a brick of cheese by dividing it in half repeatedly. He provided microscopes so that divisions could be precise.

Although there are many other Fluxus food works, those I have described suggest a strong inclination on the part of Fluxus artists to work with food and taste. The problems of analyzing the works are significant, however. Few epistemologists have theorized on taste and smell, nor have art historians considered these elements in art. Fluxus food works are effectively marginalized, therefore, both because they fail to conform to a visual model of artistic practice and because few practical texts exist on which to base an analysis.

We can look for guidance, however, to two literary figures, Walter J. Ong and Marshall McLuhan, who theorized multisensory thinking in the 1960s. After seeing his magnum opus, The Gutenberg Galaxy, to publication in 1962, McLuhan
collected his and others’ attacks on literary modes of thought, which were seen as based too much in the head or mind, publishing the anthology *Verbi-Voco-Visual Explorations* with Fluxus’s Something Else Press.\(^{58}\) In his essay “The Shifting Sensorium,” meanwhile, Ong, insisting “that man communicates with his whole body through all his senses,”\(^ {59}\) discussed how the “ratio or balance of the senses” varies from culture to culture. The implication for my argument is that the strong basis of smell and taste in Fluxus work stands apart from the standard hierarchy of senses in the West, where vision is followed by sound, then touch, and, at a distance, smell and taste. It does not follow, however, that these last two are capable of triggering only minor art forms. Elsewhere, they reign supreme (as in the Weyéwa mentioned above).

The meals, like the films and Fluxkits—whether they present users with art based on sound, touch, smell, or taste—frame art as experience in Putnam’s natural realist sense. Much Fluxus work rejects the representational approach to art. Instead it is generally presentational or reality based. Even a Fluxus artist choosing a representational mode, as in the *Blink* image or Fluxfilms, uses it at cross-purposes to conventional representation, to undermine the tenets of Western illusionism and push representation itself toward the primary mode of experience discussed here.

Like Fluxus films, Fluxkits, and Fluxus meals, which yield primary information to the senses—taste, smell, and touch—the Fluxus Event also has a sensory basis. A typical Event like George Brecht’s *Drip Music* (see Fig. 2) may occur by chance or by choice and in accordance with almost any circumstances, being neither site specific, performer specific, nor specific to a performance situation. Brecht’s scores for various works, handwritten and mimeographed in about 1962, suggest similarly aleatory and nonspecific formats for Events (Fig. 19). A string quartet shakes hands; a vase of flowers is placed on a piano; a flute is assembled and disassembled. Each Event, in other words, comprises a wide range of possible experiences.

These can take a caring, exploratory form or a destructive one. (Many accounts of Fluxus are flawed in their overemphasis on the iconoclasm or destructiveness of the Events, which are then simply dismissed or heralded as mere anti-painting.\(^ {60}\) Two Events are particularly useful for establishing the range of Fluxus in general from destructive to nondestructive, and of Events in particular: Brecht’s
Solo for Violin, Viola, Cello, or Contrabass (1962; Fig. 20) and Nam June Paik’s One for Violin (1961; Fig. 21). The dichotomy is explicit. Brecht’s score reads simply “polishing,” whereas in Paik’s piece, “the performer raises a violin overhead at a nearly imperceptible rate until it is released full-force downward, smashing it to pieces.”61 These Events might be performed in the same evening, thereby demonstrating both the caring and destructive aspects of Fluxus and offering a range of experiential options, from the protective to the nihilistic.

Another example. In Philip Corner’s Piano Activities, performed in 1962 at the first Fluxus-titled festival in Wiesbaden, Germany, Dick Higgins, George Maciunas, Alison Knowles, and Emmett Williams engaged in the apparent destruction of an old, unplayable piano belonging to the Kunstverein. They did destroy the instrument, but not haphazardly. Figure 22 shows fine gestures: the careful rubbing of a brick over the strings, patient waiting for the right moment to use a hammer.

According to David Michael Levin, “The things we handle will always reciprocate the treatment they receive in our hands. Thus, when our gestures become very caring, they receive back from the things we have handled with care a much deeper disclosure of their ontological truth.”62 This concept of the reciprocal relationship between things and their handling is relevant. Levin postulates the possibility of radically multiplied experiences if we focus on simple gestures at least temporarily, thereby effectively divesting them of their secondary associations. Caring takes many forms: Levin’s point is that meaning has a visceral basis. In the three Events I have described, the artists get to know their instruments on many levels, by polishing, smashing, or altering them. Subsequent meaning appends to the physical action.

But the visceral basis of meaning only partly explains the internal logic of the Event. As the scores discussed thus far imply, the Event originated, both practically and conceptually, in Cage’s 1958–59 music composition class at the New School. The Event must therefore be understood as relating somehow to Cage’s musical idiom, wherein time (rhythm in a broad sense) is the determining standard for musicality. Cage accepted whatever sounds occurred within a specific period of time. Those sounds determined the music—but not in the prosaic sense. Attentiveness and concentration (the listeners’ intentionality) are required, or the sound is mere noise. Similarly, in Brecht’s Events, the minimalist structure and
reduced format elicit the participants’ focus on the activity at hand. In Figure 23, depicting an unidentified Event, the performers’ level of concentration is striking. Because of the focus on the action at hand, the Event format is not well suited to political activism or to the service of artists’ individual egos, which require clarifying exchanges with an audience on the one hand, and self-expression on the other. Is it confusing matters, then, to suggest that the musical basis of the Event means that it is a fundamentally abstract, even aesthetic, art form?

Heidegger’s description of music as radically visceral confirms the positive effects of musical thinking in Events. Music, he says, “stands for and encourages resistance to all forms of reification, totalization and reductionism [and] encourages epistemological humility, a rigorously experimental attitude, always provisional, always questioning, always alert to the fact that the being of beings is such that beings continually offer themselves to a multiplicity of interpretations.” Heidegger’s state of “being” here fits the open-ended musical nature of the Event. The “epistemological humility” that music in general and Events in particular foster is intimately bound up with its everyday aspect, its directness, its experimental quality, its provisionality, its availability to multiple realizations, and its rigorous placement in time. The violin may be polished or destroyed, the piano adorned with a vase or eviscerated, a piece of paper carefully inscribed or rolled up, torn to bits, and thrown at the audience, as in Ben Patterson’s Event classic, Paper Music (Fig. 24).

The musicality inherent in the Event, then, while critiquing mainstream Western epistemology, also deconstructs the “reification, totalization and reductionism” of structured secondary knowledge formations (the disciplines of art history, musicology, philosophy, and literature, for example). The musicality of the Event enables a certain “openness to Being” (Heidegger’s term), a characteristic strong in the compositions of Cage. The process of deconstruction thus occurs only when the artists and audience members seek out a multiplicity of exploratory, constructive, and destructive experiences.

Levin, commenting on Heidegger, distinguishes between knowledge acquired visually and that gained by listening, in terms of experience as well as philosophical attitudes about vision that originate in the Enlightenment. “The ‘metaphysics of presence,’ ” which is rooted in vision, results in “an observation or contemplation that is immobile and impassive, untouched and unmoved by what it sees . . . the visual Gestalt, reduced to the subject-object relationship, tends to be and often is,
Unknown piece performed at Fluxus Festival, Nikolai Church, Copenhagen, 1962. *From left:* Arthur Køpke, [unknown], Wolf Vostell, Emmett Williams, Dick Higgins. Photo by Eric Andersen; courtesy of the photographer.
From left: George Maciunas, Emmett Williams, Wolf Vostell. Photo by Sisse Jarner; courtesy of Eric Andersen.
driven by the will to power.” The act of listening, however, is relatively interactive and communicative; indeed, for Heidegger as for Levin, the ideal sensory organ for “openness of Being” is the ear—identified with speech, listening, and music. “Informed by an interactive and receptive normativity,” Levin writes, “listening generates a very different episteme and ontology—a very different metaphysics,” one based in “communicative rationality” and allowing for “progressive, emancipatory development of our historical potential.”

Fluxus materials are useful in precisely such an emancipatory sense—not because they construct political ideologies but rather because they provide contexts (the Fluxkit and the Event) for primary experiences. In offering opportunities to gain knowledge by multisensory and performative means, Fluxus has political implications in the unfixed, unassigned, perhaps anarchic sense. (Sometimes the compression of shared experience, form, and content is called concretism, but to avoid confusion with concrete poetry, I will call it “mattering” henceforth.)

On the Problem of Authenticity

Direct perception, primary information, material knowledge, and experience itself are difficult values to sustain in the current art-philosophical climate, and particularly in a movement like Fluxus that is typically described as politically motivated and broadly deconstructive. In Of Grammatology, for example, Jacques Derrida criticizes Heidegger’s experience, “openness to Being,” as evidence of the transcendental signified of Western philosophy: “As for the concept of experience...it belongs to the history of metaphysics and we can only use it under erasure. ‘Experience’ has always designated the relationship with a presence, whether that relationship had the form of consciousness or not.”

Like Derrida, who warns that we must “escape ‘empiricism’ and the ‘naïve’ critiques of experience at the same time,” W. J. T. Mitchell rightly notes the dangers of an unexamined empiricism: “There would be nothing wrong with this sort of redescriptions [of empiricism into aesthetic experience] if it were not advertised as a liberation from metaphysics into a new science... How riddled with notions of indirect, symbolic mediation are the supposedly ‘direct’ perceptual mechanisms of the empirical tradition.” If, as I contend, Fluxkits and Events produce primary experience, my redescriptions of Fluxus as aesthetic runs the risk of
becoming a merely mystifying incoherent religion of Fluxus Experience. However, Mitchell continues, “the sort of contortion and contention that discourse is obliged to undergo, exhaust the resources of the concept of experience before attaining and in order to attain, by deconstruction, its ultimate foundation.”70

In other words, even if experience should be deconstructed as Derrida suggests, and even if it is a product of discourse, as Mitchell maintains, the experiential dimension of Fluxus work nonetheless has the capacity (real or by way of a discourse on the empirical basis of experience) to offer ontological knowledge that connects people to a real world and to each other, expanding the individual’s sense of belonging to a place and a group. Although, following Mitchell, it may be inaccurate to posit authentic experience as the ontological core of Fluxus objects and performances, the aesthetic emotion aroused by Fluxus works is certainly experienced as real. This is, of course, the lure of metaphysics. In other words, the empirical and experiential basis of Fluxkits and Events, graphics and objects, means something as art. The primary information itself is highly temporary, becoming secondary as soon as the experience is set into a framework that makes it matter to a person or a group; it is impossible to devise a system able to account for the vast range of meanings and associations Fluxus evokes for the audience. Instead, Fluxus is better understood on its own terms: as producing diverse primary experiences and interactions with reality, plain and simple. This is not to deny that much can be learned from interpretively studying how, for example, the cheap stuff in the Fluxkits came from seconds bins on New York’s Canal Street, or how the Fluxplugs could have been conceived only during the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, or how Joe Jones deconstructed musical virtuosity by replacing the human performer with a mechanical device (Fig. 25); these observations, however, illuminate only single facets of the complex experiential surfaces created by Fluxus works.

The Event and the Fluxkit argue ontologically for the value of primary experiences over secondary experiences—that is, interpretations or associations. Though present, secondary experience is not the point of the work: Fluxus is not a metadiscourse in the postmodern sense. To account for Fluxus as experience, moreover, does not preclude making other claims for its importance. Rather, to insist that primary experience is paramount in Fluxus counters any move to assign specific and permanent meanings to the work. This discussion thus arrives at an impasse
of sorts: we have liberated the work from the functionalist idealism of a single agenda, only to banish it to the apparent black hole of experience, beyond the realm of language, that seems to “indefinitely and irretrievably distance the world through a system of intermediate signs,” to borrow Mitchell’s apt terms.

The remainder of this chapter presents an attempt to negotiate the impasse, to locate Fluxus in a world of authentic experiences yet at the same time create a discursive context for understanding Fluxus objects. The empiricism of Fluxus objects, after all, was not conceived in a vacuum. With Fluxkits and Events artists were getting at something that either was, or seemed, “real” in an art world that values work according to prevailing aesthetic conventions. Interpretation of the experiential dynamic must therefore be both culturally specific and, however radical vis-à-vis normative artistic practice, arguably conventional vis-à-vis the avant-garde. Think Duchamp. I will return to this point in Chapter 2.

Almost all Fluxus artists, however, far from retreating into a world of artistic habit and forever producing minimal Fluxkits and Events, also work in traditional artistic media, as the Blink graphic demonstrates. Fluxus is definitely not a practice that is exclusively empirical, pretending “to guarantee veridical access to the world”; it originally staked its claim to empiricism in a context of art where personal expression (as in expressionism) was the order of the day. As a project, rather, Fluxus modestly proposed the real value of real things and the possibility of deriving knowledge and experience from these things, in the belief that these proposals had implications for art and for culture generally.

In What Is Art For? the Darwinian art historian Ellen Dissanayake asserts that the production of art is a universal biological imperative, like language, though it differs from language in both form and function. Art produced by all peoples is “special,” she argues, even if these peoples have no notion of high art (as made by fine artists). Dissanayake explores three characteristics of art that transcend both individual practice and cultural norms: all societies produce art; art institutions are integral to social order; and art is a psychologically, psychically, and intellectually pleasurable form of engagement between people. Her findings help explain Fluxus experiences as art.

In the chapter titled “‘Making Special’: Toward a Behavior of Art,” Dissanayake defines the pleasure in art as a bio-behavioral necessity because it marks reality
according to belief systems and therefore promotes human sociality. After describing the importance of play and ritual and their interaction, Dissanayake states:

Art makes use of out-of-context elements, redirecting the ordinary elements (e.g., colors, sounds, words) into a configuration in which they become more than ordinary. . . . Reality is converted from its usual unremarkable state—in which we take it or its components for granted—to a significant or specially experienced reality in which the components, by their emphasis or combination, or juxtaposition, acquire a metareality.72

Art gives things this metareality (that is, transcendent reality) by “redirecting the ordinary” toward significance. The fact that “something, and indeed a very great deal, is always lost when we try to think about art in terms of pre-existent systems” only underscores the notion that Fluxkits and Events, in their intensive studies of things or actions, are not structured according to any one model of describing experience.73 Rather, the Event or Fluxkit is a metarealistic trigger: it makes the viewer’s or user’s experience special.

Dissanayake’s anthropological framework, though it has no program for evaluating art, nevertheless allows for aesthetics: “Acts of masturbating or carving oneself up in themselves are not artistic activities; performed deliberately for aesthetic reasons, out of context, ‘made special’ by the occasion and making the occasion special and extraordinary, they are.”74 Fluxkits and Events make ordinary reality special as occasions and as objects both in- and outside the aesthetic situations called art. Even though these works occasionally function as art in a relatively traditional sense (they are shown in museums and performed in concert halls), Fluxus artists in New York, working in an art context that privileged painterly abstraction, clearly yearned for something else. Rather than convey their own emotional world abstractly, Fluxus artists directed their audiences’ attention to concrete everyday stuff—addressing aesthetic metareality in the broadest sense. As Henry Martin puts it, “We... learn to make a space in our lives for Events, experiences, emotions and sensibilities that can contribute to a sense of integrity and fullness and that otherwise, and mistakenly, we might consider to be gratuitous.”75

The pattern of the public’s interacting with Fluxus materials and adapting them to their own circumstances suggests the essential fluidity of Fluxus. And my own experience confirms it. In 1966 the Japanese Fluxus artist Hi Red Center per-
formed Street Cleaning Event, meticulously cleaning a patch of sidewalk in New
York City with solvents (Fig. 26). I grew up knowing this work. When I took on
a job in college as a cleaning woman, I recalled it, and it became for me a means
of connecting profoundly with my environment.

The installations of the Danish Fluxus artist Eric Andersen—which extend
into the environment, and everyday lives, of audience members—demand a con-
tinuous interaction with materials. A particularly successful work, Andersen’s Trav-
elling Wall (1985), instructed passersby to move bricks forward from a source pile.
The normally staid plaza of Roskilde, Denmark, was thus transformed into a
maze of brick towers, pathways, and domino-falls at the hands of a spontaneous
crew of brickworkers.

Fluxus often leaks from art into life. For example, my mother-in-law, Laurie
Reinstein, who is on the Women’s Board of the Chicago Museum of Contemporary
Art, is knowledgeable about contemporary art. After the “In the Spirit of Fluxus”
show arrived in Chicago (from Minneapolis’s Walker Art Center) in 1993, I entered
her living room one day and found a clear plastic rectangular box; it was divided into
sections, into each of which she had placed a small, favorite thing—tickets, balls,
pins, and other knickknacks. She has never called this an art object or a Fluxkit, and
indeed in one conversation, she seemed embarrassed by the suggestion. For to call
what she had done “art” would imply hubris: art, after all, is in museums and made
by professionals. Her sort-of Fluxkit was, instead, a box of little things special to her
but undistinguished by monetary value, rarity, or artisanal skill. By putting these items
in a special place all together, she nonetheless claimed, to anyone who looked into
her box, that they were significant. That claim makes possible certain conversations
about her life and interests. In Dissanayake’s terms, she redirected the ordinary to-
ward a metareality, effectively making art in the affirmative, anthropological sense.
In Martin’s terminology, she made a space for events, experiences, emotions, and sen-
sibilities that those around her might otherwise have ignored as meaningless.

To value prosaic materials and experiences seems to me to go some way to-
ward an appreciative (as opposed to cynical) and empathetic (as opposed to alien-
ated) cognitive model that maintains a critical relationship to the subject while
remaining open to it as well. Fluxus in these terms offers tools with which to cre-
ate a sense of belonging in the world. Dissanayake makes a similar point in a
chapter that links cultural survival to the practice of “making special.”
Hi Red Center, Street Cleaning Event, New York City, 1966. Photo by George Maciunas; courtesy of the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, Detroit.
Dissanayake’s next book, *Homo Aestheticus*, expands on this crucial function of art. Her thesis is that art is “an inherited behavioral tendency to act in a certain way in certain circumstances, which during the evolution of our species helped us to survive.” Although she has stated repeatedly that her work is not prescriptive, it is possible to extrapolate from it a sense of Fluxus as a model—Fluxus offers to replace elements of our Euro-American high culture that may not be helping our survival. Dissanayake notes again in this book how things are recognized as special and selected for a realm called art:

While “special” might seem too imprecise and naively simple, or suggest mere decoration, it easily encompassed an array of what is done in making the arts that is generally different from making nonarts: embellishing, exaggerating, patterning, juxtaposing, shaping and transforming. Special also denotes a positive factor of care and concern that is absent from the other words. It thus suggests that the special object or activity appeals to emotional as well as perceptual and cognitive factors—that is, to all aspects of our mental functioning.

Making special is thus a function of the rich interplay of mental functions that include human emotion, perception, and cognition. And the aesthetic pleasure of art (in this case, Fluxus art) gives us insight into these interactions, which supports our survival. By this theory—a radical departure from most psychologizing accounts of art in culture—art is not necessarily a by-product of psychological trauma, though it may be precisely that for an individual or even a culture. Instead, art connects individuals to the culture. Dissanayake, critical of contemporary Western culture, states:

Caring deeply about vital things is out of fashion, and, in any case, who has the time (or allows the time) to care and to mark one’s caring? … Human history has demonstrated that people can endure surprising amounts of hardship and suffering—conditions that usually elicit a serious and religious attitude toward life. Whether people are as well equipped to thrive under conditions of unprecedented leisure, comfort, and plenty is a question that is being tested on a large scale in our present circumstances: the answer does not appear to be promising.

The psychotherapist James Hillman has described the objet trouvé (as in Duchamp’s readymades) as art, in terms that resonate both with Dissanayake’s
conception of the special and with the ordinariness of the Fluxus Event and the prosaic Fluxkit. Significantly, the objet trouvé does not signify an end of art (as it may have for Duchamp, initially), but rather the beginning of a transcendent metareality that for Hillman is alive:

Ordinary things come alive, become metaphors, have humor. No longer just Kmart and throwaway….Rusty girders, or the ruins of an old car, that’s right. It makes me see things that are animated. So I don’t think art is guilty for the neglect of anima mundi. With the objet trouvé, it rescued and made use of discarded materials.77

For “things to come alive,” a certain unpredictability must be admitted into their status as living. This unpredictability does not mean that one should not try to understand things, explore them, consider them deeply. It does mean that the objet trouvé—which for my purposes constitutes the substance of Fluxkits, the dynamic logic of Events, and the many acts of production in Fluxus that evoke tactility and bodily presence—extends toward a vital sense of contextual interplay.78 The interplay of the senses in Fluxkits and Events, along with the interplay of history models and of art movements and discourses that is typical of Fluxus, should be seen, then, not as a mere negation of the Western Idealists’ episteme. Rather, in its materialism Fluxus radically intervenes in human survival, its resistance to rationalizing schemes of all kinds a testament to its experiential breadth.

In The Case against the Global Economy, Jerry Mander argues for deep democracy, tolerance, and attentiveness to all the voices of experience—elements necessary for the survival of all humans.79 The breadth of Fluxus works and the persistence of multiple perspectives on Fluxus in the group make Fluxus a model for deep democracy—despite the anxieties, feuds, and tensions attendant on the consideration of others’ perspectives. Not a happy pluralism that negates action by absorbing it into a to-each-his-own passivity, Fluxus is rather a democracy that, though perhaps fractured at the root, is held together by a common respect for differences.

The most fragile moments in the history of Fluxus, when it seemed most vulnerable to breakdown, have been those moments when zealous members tried to pin it down. Still a living creature, it resists being impaled. Culturally, there is much food for thought in that writhing resistance. As co-performers in a Fluxus artist’s Fluxkit or Event, we need only touch, listen, taste, feel, and look to gain
the sense of place that makes life rich in terms not only of art but also of life. It is a richness that belies convention.

The exploration of prosaic things and activities in Fluxkits and Events generates primary knowledge and multisensory experience. That is the point of Fluxus, even though to discuss this experience necessarily renders it in part secondary or discursive. Far from being cynical and alienating, the Fluxus experience, in its matter-of-factness, situates people radically within their corporeal, sensory worlds. Such materiality is fundamentally incompatible with a radical division of object and subject, of perceiving and knowing.

The substance chosen for exploration—the content of the Fluxkit or Event—is significant, for it is attributed with “specialness” not only by the artist but also by the user of the Fluxkit or the performer of the Event. The materials of Fluxus thus matter profoundly both personally and socially, in part because they gain meaning as art, but also (and more important) because, despite their otherwise unremarkable status in everyday life, they enable transcendent aesthetic experience.