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The 1990s and Fluxus in Lithuania¹

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Sjūdis is the Lithuanian equivalent of the word 'flux'²

Peter Frank

The interest of young Lithuanian composers in the Fluxus movement in the late 20th century paralleled in paradoxical fashion its renaissance in the West. To quote Dietel Daniels, "Fluxus, almost forgotten in the 1980s, came back into focus in the 1990s, primarily because, without the emergence of any more striking new direction in art, [...] something that may have been overlooked in the past was now being turned to"³.

What happened to be the least constrained means of artistic expression turned out to be the form of Western culture that best corresponded

1 This publication is a result of the research project DAINA 1 No. 2017/27/L/HS2/03240 funded by The National Science Centre (NCN) in Poland.

2 Peter Frank, "Kunst um das Lebens willen: Der Einfluß von Fluxus auf die zeitgenössische Kultur", *Kunstforum*, ed. by D. Daniels, 216 (216–224).

3 Dieter Daniels, "Fluxus: Ein Nachruf zu Lebzeiten", *Kunstforum* Bd. 115 (September–October 1991), 100 (99–111).

to the cultural and political climate at the time of the restoration of Lithuanian independence. It perfectly reflected the intentions and technical possibilities of the younger generation of creative talents: the genre itself inspired eclecticism, interdisciplinarity, a simplicity of musical language, a search for new sounds, links with other fields of arts, and an active relationship with the environment and the audience. Improvisation, spontaneity, collectivity, anonymity as well as the hybridisation of styles and a variety of tools became a new means of conveying an artistic message. The creators' focus was not so much on the search for new possibilities as on the rethinking of the creative act itself and the artist's position in society. The feeling of being in everyday life and being in a creative – euphoric – state was born out of instability, unpredictability, and a sense of new hope and anticipation, analogous to the political situation of that time.

The year 1989 was a time of dramatic change, thanks to the emergence of the *Sąjūdis* Reform Movement, and the disintegration of the former political system and its replacement with a new one still in its infancy. Music participated in this *space of change and time of change* by recording, enabling, visualising, and conveying emotional and constructive testaments to that brief, yet politically and creatively intense period. The wave of happenings, which brought previously unknown artists to the forefront in the West, quite paradoxically coincided with the rise of Eastern and Central European artists in the 1990s, not only in art but also in politics. The reason lay not in any close connection between art and politics at the time; rather, it occurred because it was artists, and not former Soviet political functionaries (who had never encountered political opposition in a unified political system), who came with innovative ideas and had the courage to look for unexpected solutions and to implement them. "In the West Ken Friedman argued with regard to this period, the boundaries between life and art sometimes seemed to tighten, while in the former East, it was a wonderful time for the experimenting artists we knew. Milan Knižak was offered the post of Czechoslovak Minister of Culture, but he refused, and instead later became Rector of the National Academy of Fine Arts. Jaroslaw Kozłowski became Rector in Poznań, Poland. Beke

Laszlo entered Parliament in Budapest, while Vytautas Landsbergis took a similar path in newly independent Lithuania also.”⁴

Fluxus and independent festivals

The first independent festivals, dating from 1985, provided the most flexible form of creative expression, as they were not too costly to organize then and were the least dependent on the still functioning political censorship. They also most accurately reflected the spirit of the period. Furthermore, they offered a collective, often anonymous, improvisational, socially and politically engaged medium of creative activity that best matched the philosophy of Fluxus. It is not for nothing that Dieter Daniels emphasised both the *universality* of Fluxus, calling it “the first international modern movement to emerge simultaneously in Europe and America,” as well as its *intermediality*, which “both juxtaposed music, theatre, film, art, literature, and electronic media elements and also provided an opportunity for the emergence of new, expanded forms of art.”⁵

Four festivals established at the time ought to be considered closest to the spirit of Fluxus:

- *Druskininkai Chamber Music Days* (1986 to the present, Druskininkai-Vilnius). Initiator: composer Ričardas Kabelis.
- *Free Sound Sessions* (1987 through 1988, Vilnius-Kaunas-Panevėžys). Initiators: composers Arūnas Dikčius and Tomas Juzeliūnas; musicologist Giedrius Gapšys.
- *Happenings Seminars* (1988 through 1990, Anykščiai-Nida). Initiator: composer Gintaras Sodeika.
- *Musical Action Festival* (1991 through 1997, Panevėžys-Vilnius). Initiators: composers Liutauras Stančikas and Snieguolė Dikčiūtė.

Each of these festivals sought new forms of artistic expression and gave rise to an individual, sometimes very distinctive, style:

- The *Free Sound Sessions* employed combinations of previously unknown sound media (computers, objects, etc.). The session

4 Ken Friedman, “Vytautas Landsbergis ir Fluxus”, trans. Linas Paulauskis, *Šiaurės atėnai* (16.10.1992), 3.

5 Dieter Daniels, *Ibid.*

programmes consisted of “specially designed” “avant-garde only” works that suggested the renaissance of electronic and experimental composition, focusing on the stylistics of primitive electronics, *free jazz*, and meta-music performed with theatricalised elements.”⁶

- The *Happenings Seminars* made art out of, and recorded, the body as well as physical and geographical space, providing them with musical dimensions.
- The *Musical Action Festivals* sought connections and coherence between sound, stage gesture, and theatrical elements.
- The *Druskininkai Chamber Music Days* enabled participants to reflect, name, and comment on ongoing changes not so much during the concert itself, but in the oral and written spheres: it was the only event to organise conferences and to prepare a series of festival-related publications called *Jauna Muzika* [Young Music].

After fifty years of political and cultural occupation, it was more important than ever for Lithuanian artists to speak freely and without restrictions in the “international” language of art and to again feel part of modern art. The idea of art as everyday life resonated with the philosophy of John Cage, and the idea of art as action, as an engaged commentator on social change, resonated with the philosophy of George Maciunas (Jurgis Mačiūnas). It was no coincidence that those two key personalities of the 20th century avant-garde art were present at the first *Druskininkai Chamber Music* festivals, while the ideas of Fluxus directly inspired the emergence of the *Anykščiai Happenings Seminars*:

I can say unequivocally that the idea dawned on us during the Druskininkai, when we felt a bit more freedom, and the chamber music festival was organized differently from what we were used to seeing during the Composers’ Union plenary meetings or congress concerts. I then got my hands on some Polish literature about the happenings of various *Fluxus* authors. Although Maciunas was not identified as the leader and was mentioned only as one of the authors, I was interested in the fact that he was a Lithuanian. So, I thought that, even though Druskininkai was taking bolder breaths,

6 Dovilė Trumpytė, *Interdisciplinarity of Contemporary Lithuanian Art: from New Media toward Social Activity*, Master’s Thesis, Vilnius, VDA, Rare Prints Department, 2005, quoted in *(Ne)priklausomo šiuolaikinio meno istorijos* [Stories of (In)dependent Art], ed. by V. Michelkevičius, K. Šapoka (Vilnius: LTMKS, 2011), 72.

it was an even more radical thing than I had ever known before. I thought that this would call for a separate event⁷ (Gintaras Sodeika).

The influence exerted by Fluxus on the first festivals of Lithuanian musicians can be determined from several viewpoints:

- For artists, the act of organizing themselves within creative groups that formed the core of each festival was not governed by certain rules regarding how to *join a group*. George Maciunas, who initially established a three-principle rule for prospective Fluxus members

(Fluxus is a cooperative; every member works for all members; 50% of everything presented or published must be of Fluxus content and be called Fluxus), discovered over the course of time that what really mattered was “not rules, but deep existential trust and solidly based core values.”⁸

- The presentation of new works in a *festival format* was also connected with the beginnings of Fluxus’ existence: after founding *AG Gallery*, publishing *An Anthology*, and deciding to publish an unconventional magazine called *Fluxus*, which would feature the works of the *Anthology*’s artists, Maciunas moved to Wiesbaden (1961). There, he decided to hold a large festival called Fluxus that would last 5–10 days and which would serve as an advertisement for the first issue of *Fluxus* magazine. The aim of the festival was to “unite everything that was ‘new’ in the world of art at that time”⁹. What was called the ‘new culture’ was actually comprised of radical compositions by La Monte Young, John Cage, George Brecht, and Philip Corner (such as Ben Patterson’s *Variations for Double-Bass* or Philip Corner’s *Piano Activities*, during which a Steinway was broken to pieces with axes, hammers, saws, and screwdrivers). They accounted for only a tenth of the programme, but the entire festival was described by the German public as the “actions of crazy young people”¹⁰.
- The uncertainty, instability, unsustainability, processuality, and incompleteness encoded within the name Fluxus also corresponded very

7 *Hepeningų festivalių tąsa būtų buvusi prasminga [Continuing Happening Festivals Would Have Been Meaningful]*. Vita Gruodytė interviews composer Gintaras Sodeika, in *Kultūros barai* 7/8 (2020), 38.

8 Ken Friedman, “Wer ist Fluxus”, *Kunstforum* Bd. 115 (September–October 1991), 195 (189–195).

9 Ben Patterson, “Ich bin froh, dass Sie mir diese Frage gestellt haben”, *Kunstforum* Bd. 115 (September–October 1991), 174 (166–177).

10 *Ibid.*

specifically (or perhaps even ideally!) to the mood in Lithuania during the transformation – existing as it did in a state of change without any clearly defined goals or future. The composer Vidmantas Bartulis wrote “in a eulogy to George Maciunas and his Fluxus” that:

... all we have understood in scholarly terms about the birth of art and its perception and impact can, with the advent of the category of fluxus, be thrown on the scrapheap (...) art is a cosmos – without a beginning or an end (...) it is eternal change and movement, absolutely independent of us (...) but which with wisdom and tolerance accepts our empty self-expression (...) as long as we exist.¹¹

- Finally, Lithuanian artists found a connection with the Fluxus movement through their desire to freely experiment with synectics and creative connection-making, which provided the basis of the “intermedia”¹² described by Dick Higgins. According to Dieter Daniels, “in the 1990s, Fluxus’ previous achievements – internationality and intermediality – became relevant once again. It was influenced by [...] the interest in new media in art, which had its own historical reason in the Fluxus movement”; “various 20th century trends had set the goals of internationality and intermediality, yet it was only Fluxus that was able to implement them. It thus ended the era of ‘movements’ in art.”¹³

Engaged art

The political engagement of artists in the 1990s was specifically rooted in the tools of Fluxus: the tone of the festivals was a playful caricature, which, when set against the background of Soviet art ideology, constituted a completely new aspect of art, one that was political in tone, but which never transformed itself into purely political art. The various actions of artists were often limited to social insights or simply highlighted some political aspect of the period.

11 Rūta Gaidamavičiūtė, *Vidmantas Bartulis. Tarp tylos ir garso [Vidmantas Bartulis. Between Silence and Sound]* (Vilnius: LMTA, 2007), 202–203.

12 Dick Higgins’ term (*Statement of Intermedia*) named the characteristic of Fluxus to involve non-art fields in art, thus freeing artists from the limitation of categories.

13 Dieter Daniels, “Fluxus: Ein Nachruf zu Lebzeiten”, 100 (99–111).

Before or after the January events¹⁴ – I don't remember now – we made a kind of a musical collage from Stalinist songs and a poem by a local collaborator "Communists are the Light of the Earth". The collage was intended for the radio, I just don't know if it was ever broadcast (Arūnas Dikčius).¹⁵

Thus, for example, the *Bureaucratic Traffic Stop* happening was

a case of a radical social event that took place on the Kavarskas-Anykščiai motorway. During this happening, one participant, covered with red paint and wrapped in protective tape, simply lay on the asphalt. The scene looked like a traffic accident where the culprit had escaped. Other participants in the happening hid in the bushes on the roadside. If a car was passing by, it would usually stop, the driver would get out and try to find out what had happened. Then the whole group jumped out of the bushes and solemnly presented the driver a letter [an official document of the Lithuanian Composers' Union bearing the signature of the Chairman], written on the spot, honouring the driver the assistance provided and for their active participation in the *AN* Festival. The drivers were usually taken aback and found the event amusing¹⁶ (Šarūnas Nakas).

The performance of *The Last Supper* by a group of artists calling themselves *The Green Leaf* was designed as a kind of ritual, cleansing from bloody Bolshevism:

On an island on the River Šventoji, a long white table and three white figures can be seen. They move slowly and are slowly pouring red paint over themselves. The table is also red. Then the sail goes up and everything catches fire. The white, having turned red, burns in the fire. The reddest man crosses the river and descends to the bank, dripping wet. There he finds another white table and the history of the CPSU written in Armenian on it. The man rips out its leaves with his "bloody" hands and distributes them to the fleeing spectators. After that, he returns to the island and washes himself in the river (Austėja Nakienė).¹⁷

14 The events of 13 January 1991 are meant.

15 Kęstutis Šapoka. An Interview with Arūnas Dikčius, in *(Ne)priklausomo šiuolaikinio meno istorijos [Stories of (In)dependent Art]*, ed. by Vytautas Michelkevičius, Kęstutis Šapoka (Vilnius: LTMKS, 2011), 151.

16 Ibid., 145.

17 "A.N. apie AN – 88" [A.N. about AN-88], in *Jauna muzika, jaunimo kamerinės muzikos dienų leidinys [Young Music, publication of the Youth Chamber Music Days]*, ed. by Ričardas Kabelis (Druskininkai, 1989, 21 (121–123).

The emergence of caricatures on the eve of the regime's collapse highlighted a growing critical distance with the surrounding environment and the desire of the individual for self-analysis within that environment. Numerous examples can be provided here. In the case of Gintaras Sodeika's composition-performance *Baza Gaza* (1988), the "idea was prompted to the author by a long-standing road sign on the Vilnius-Kaunas motorway featuring the inscription *Baza Gaza* [a gas station - V.G.] and the strange "Russian-Chinese-Japanese" sound of the following combination":

At a difficult time for the Homeland, when the Great Homeland faced blockades of gas and oil due to its separatist activities, a young Soviet composer organised (...) an independent Gas Station, which later became known as *Baza Gaza*. How was that done? The content of the form was a huge bag full of smoke (*Fundamentalistico*); thematicism: archaic-sounding tape electronics; *Ostinato*: video images and ornaments (*Presto*); the form of the content: Soviet-sur / socialist-realistic film (*Moderato*). Everything at the same time and in one place – as a counterpoint. Therefore, the meaning became clear in the contradictions and similarities of those textures that varied in nature – or in conjunctions and disjunctions, as Algirdas J. Greimas might have put it in a more intelligent way¹⁸:

Both Faustas Latėnas' work *Albino 2*, dedicated to the victims of Hitlerism and Stalinism (1988), and Ričardas Kabelis' *Siberia* (1991) could be categorised as artistic-political actions, while the happening at the 1990 Druskininkai Festival, when the Lithuanian Quartet was asked to perform in a swimming pool, could be called a double caricature (political and institutional):

Today, when the "middle generation" of yesterday's oppositionists are already, with official cultural con(tra)ceptions, gathering for general congresses, the younger generation – eternal oppositionists – are arriving at their musical Mecca, to Druskininkai. They gather together (...) climb into a swimming pool in the sanatorium. The Lithuanian Quartet arrives and refuses to play, because only millionaires can afford music in a pool. They are persuaded by an immortal phrase from the *Short Course of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolshevik)*: "in the Soviet Union, everything is for the people, everything is for victory" – and, after brief negotiations, a melody of Tchaikovsky, a beloved composer of the young (the 150th

18 *Lietuvos muzikos kontekstai III* [Lithuanian Music in Context III], Muzikos informacijos ir leidybos centras (Vilnius, 2013), 26.

anniversary of whose birth is incidentally being celebrated all over Russia), sounds over the water. Mannequins – (...) one of which is, of course, of the great Soviet composer D. Shostakovich – are quietly lowered into the pool. [...] Russian composers once fought over who would be granted the honour of settling in the villa of the deceased genius (...), and here, in the pool, young Lithuanian “internationalists” are floating and drowning the poor genius! However, the great spirit of Shostakovich and the great plastic – mannequin – did not sink (...). P.S. Confidential information: One enthusiast of the TV plays *Veidrodis* [The Mirror] and *Šėpa* [The Wardrobe] provocatively whispered to me that the two mannequins in the pool were actually Mikhail and Raisa Gorbachev, and the whole pool was an anti-blockade stunt. Of course, that was a provocative statement on the occasion of our Prime Minister’s visit to the Kremlin (Giedrius Gapšys).¹⁹

Caricature also played a rather important role in the first uncensored *Young Music* booklets, four issues of which (1987–1990) were published during the *Druskininkai Chamber Music Festivals*. In his review of the 1988 festival, Giedrius Gapšys wrote:

It is symbolic that, in the festival publication (the theme of which was the years of the authoritarian dictatorship), a part of what had then been discontinued was restored – “‘announcements’ and ‘jokes’ that caused reasonable damage to the Komsomol funds” were published at the end of it, in line with the remaining conceptual content and reminiscent of the free spirit, immediacy, and culture of our former press and journalism.²⁰

The Anykščiai Happenings Seminars were regarded by their participants as “pranks” with a certain symbolic meaning.

The things that happened in the AN-88 seminar might have looked like pranks, childish games with paint and balloons, in short, nothing serious. Still, I would not call us buffoons, because anything that was unusual, that could turn into a symbol or a rite, was undoubtedly of value to our generation which had lost its “religious musicality” (Weber) and was unable to feel the sacredness and mystery of the rite, still trying to rise up towards God in our

19 Giedrius Gapšys, “Perdurtas blokados burbulas” [A Pierced Blockade Bubble], in *Druskininkų pavasariai ir muzika 1985–2014* [Druskininkai Springs and Music 1985–2014], ed. by V. Urbietytė-Urmonienė (Vilnius: Lietuvos muzikos ir teatro akademija, 2014), 236–237.

20 “Apžvalga” [A Review], in *Gaida* 1, ed. by R. Gučas (Vilnius: Lietuvos kompozitorių sąjunga, 1988), 40–41.

minds but unable to believe in Him. I think that, by playing pranks in pristine nature on the River Šventoji, we started to regain our ear for the rite (Austėja Nakienė).²¹

Frivolity was an essential feature of these phenomena. (...) Nowadays, it would be extremely difficult to speak about any specific performances. One thing is clear – they were infused with humour, encompassing both thinking then and later, and creativity in all possible formats. Probably such wisecracking, or hints thereof, has become, at least in part, an element of the style of many of us (Šarūnas Nakas).²²

It should also be pointed out that everyday routines had acquired increasingly comical aspects. An environment full of paradoxes would often become a source of artistic inspiration. These paradoxes came to the fore through overlapping and friction between the attributes of two conflicting political systems: on the one hand, the symbols of independent Lithuania and growing calls to reclaim the history of the Homeland, and on the other, Soviet symbols, still existing in public space yet having already lost their meaning, and thus mechanically performing ideological functions and increasingly resembling the abandoned theatrical scenery of a finished performance:

Until recently, there were stands in the central squares of Vilnius embossed with red-white-green flags, together with an explanation: 70 years since the proclamation of Soviet power in Lithuania. (...) But a malevolent thought was born in the mind of one representative of Vilnius City Municipality: he painted those flags in national colours (...) Thus we are now confronted with a total anachronism: what do our tricolor and the proclamation of Soviet power on 16 December 1918 have in common? (...) Our situation is deplorable: we have to celebrate a holiday that does not exist, with the flag of a state that does not yet exist. (...) What can be done? Let's imagine thousands of children spread out in the streets – for a competition called *Colour in Red*. With red crayons, pencils, and paints and chanting *Let the Sun Always Shine*, they visit all those cardboard easels. It is not a big problem to colour in not only the flags, but also entire sheets – after all, the red is a beautiful colour. And let no one try to say that this is hooliganism. Let them rejoice in

21 A.N. apie AN – 88 [A.N. about AN], in *Jauna muzika* (1989), 123.

22 Kęstutis Šapoka, *Pokalbis su Šarūnu Naku* [An Interview with Šarūnas Nakas], 140, 145.

the same way they rejoice when children paint on the pavements of streets(Giedrius Gapšys)²³.

The paradox of Fluxus

Lithuanian musicians and artists were introduced to the work and ideas of Fluxus founder George Maciunas by Vytautas Landsbergis, a former classmate of Maciunas: he was “the only person who communicated with George (Jurgis) and simultaneously was the only “member” of the Fluxus group in the Soviet Union.”²⁴. He provided a more detailed introduction to the Fluxus movement at the Vilnius Pedagogical Institute in 1966, and later also in the magazine *Kultūros barai* [Fields of Culture] in 1982, and at the first Anykščiai Happenings Seminar (AN-88) in 1988, after the Sajūdis had already come into being:

Landsbergis (...) was our professor, and therefore it was not too difficult to persuade him to come. Thus, one evening we listened to his long, spontaneous story about George Maciunas, Jonas Mekas, Nam June Paik, and others. Then we heard much more about the personality of Maciunas, his character, and about the fact that Landsbergis would receive parcels from him for a number of years. (...) Soon after Landsbergis’ story, we identified ourselves. Back then, our Fluxus seemed very spontaneous and original to us, and when we found out about the Fluxus movement in America, we had some kind of confirmation that we were doing everything right. Sincerely and fairly.²⁵

At that time, Landsbergis was happy to share his stories about Fluxus and Maciunas with various audiences. More detailed information about Fluxus was available from texts circulating in Lithuania at that time in Polish, English, and German as well as from translations in the Lithuanian press. Maciunas’ letters to Landsbergis were published in the booklet *Jauna muzika* for the 1989 Druskininkai Youth Chamber Music Festival, and the entire 1991 Druskininkai Festival was dedicated to the 60th anniversary of Maciunas’ birth. It included a seminar *From Opus to Action*, in which

23 Giedrius Gapšys, *Stabmeldžių apeigos ir nedidelis hepeningas* [Pagan Rites and a Small Happening], in *Jauna Muzika* [Bulletin of the LPS group] 5 (1988), 7.

24 Peter Frank, “Menas dėl gyvenimo” [Art for Life], trans. Vita Gruodytė, *Šiaurės atėnai* (16.10.1992), 3.

25 Quoted in Gaidamavičiūtė, *Muzikos įvykiai ir įvykiai muzikoje* [Musical Events and Events in Music] (Vilnius: Lietuvos muzikos ir teatro akademija, 2008), 201, 203.

music was discussed as an object (Donatas Katkus) and as a form of text (Laimutė Ligeikaitė), John Cage's concept of silence and sound was presented (Vita Gruodytė), compositions of Fluxus classics (La Monte Young, Emmett Williams) were performed, videos were shown, and, at the end of the festival, the *The Green Leaf* [*Žalias lapas*] group held an action called *Lunch*.

The composer Gintaras Sodeika, who founded the happening seminars, saw a political paradox that no one had paid attention to in the 1990s, namely in their efforts to achieve freedom from the communist Soviet Union. Lithuanian artists openly adopted the tools of an art movement inspired by communism:

The ideological basis of Maciunas' *Fluxus* was the radical left. Their ideal was the Soviet Union. They dreamed of visiting the Red Square and seeing the mausoleum, Lenin, and the like. And we were carrying the tricolour! Perhaps this also explains the immortality of *Fluxus*, which reached Lithuania in such a strange way. Apparently, we could at least rejoice in the fact that our political approach during happenings at festivals acquired maximum relevance for that hour. Our politics were limited to our opposition to the system (Gintaras Sodeika)²⁶.

Indeed, as early as in his first letter to Vytautas Landsbergis (1963), Maciunas very precisely defined "the relationship of the latest art with communist principles":

I am happy to find old friends, and I am also very interested in establishing closer ties with cultural and political figures in Lithuania and the Soviet Union. My interest in such collaboration is motivated by the relationship between the latest art and communist principles (which Fluxus is trying to highlight). Such art is:

1. specific and realistic, as it is not prone to artificiality or illusionism, or intellectualism or abstraction – either in its composition, its form, or in its conveyance;

2. folk art, because it is not only intended for professionals, critics, artists, and other intellectuals. Such art can be created, understood, and conveyed by anyone – educated or uneducated. It is for everyone;

²⁶ From a personal talk with Gintaras Sodeika (May 2020).

3. social, because such art would ultimately eliminate the profession of the artist and assign (former artists) more productive activity socially.²⁷

In his letter Maciunas also expressed his intention to visit the Soviet Union:

I would very much like to visit the Soviet Union and Lithuania (maybe in the summer of 1964). I would be especially interested in organising a series of concerts in Lithuania and elsewhere (new music and “theatre” or “eye-kinetic-music”). I could prepare such concerts with local help. Could you help me with the organisation and preparation of these concerts? Do you have contacts with agencies that could provide a hall, prepare advertising, etc.? I would come at my own expense, and I would not charge any fees for the concerts. Maybe I would come with two composers - one from Japan, the other from America. We (i.e. FLUXUS artists) have already organised 5 festivals. We gave 14 concerts in Wiesbaden, one in London, seven in Copenhagen, eight in Paris, and last week, two in Düsseldorf, at their Art Academy. This spring, we plan to travel to Poland; in the autumn, to Florence, Milan, and New York, and in the winter of 1964, perhaps to Japan, so it would be best for us to come to the Soviet Union via Siberia (and also to organise some concerts there).²⁸

Moreover, Maciunas asked if Landsbergis could get a photo copy of *LEF* magazine, at one time edited by Mayakovsky, because he wanted to print a facsimile in the Eastern European issue of Fluxus, and if Landsbergis could find out what the procedure was to be able to study in the Soviet Union, as one colleague from Fluxus, the “politically credible” Henry Flynt, would like to take some courses there.

The Universal Fluxus

It may seem strange that (unlike painters) no Lithuanian composer was active on the happening and performance scene for any long period of time or accumulated any more serious creative capital. Gintaras Sodeika, the founder of the Anykščiai Happenings Seminars and the current director of the Jonas Mekas Visual Arts Centre in Vilnius, may

27 Letters of Jurgis Mačiūnas to Vytautas Landsbergis, *Jauna muzika* 1989, 113 (113–119).

28 Letters of Jurgis Mačiūnas to Vytautas Landsbergis, *Jauna muzika* 1989, 115 (113–119).

be regarded as an exception. He is the only musician among those who used to give performances and organize actions who remained faithful to the ideas and spirit of the happenings. In 1997, he organised an additional Anykščiai Festival to commemorate / reminisce about its three predecessors, and from time to time he was involved once again in individual art actions (the last took place during the Congress of the Lithuanian Composers' Union in the spring of 2020).

In his final interview, Sodeika admitted that the festivals "could have continued" and regretted that he had not set about organizing future events²⁹. They would undoubtedly have led to the emergence of conceptual music in Lithuania, and perhaps have even established an authentic, or at least a unique, tradition in this area.

The further development of Fluxus in Lithuania was probably hindered by a conservatism that had its roots in early 20th century culture and that was reflected, e.g., in the conflict between "serious" opera and "frivolous" operetta, which prevented the latter from establishing itself in interwar Lithuanian culture. Thus, in the late 20th century, creativity was still perceived – at least unconsciously – as a "serious" activity, a "serious" sphere, a "serious" occupation, and a "serious" object of research. Fluxus, meanwhile, was radically opposed to such a notion of art, and that was why it became an ideal tool during the transformation period, which was perceived and experienced as a vacation, a rest from academic art, or, as composer Arūnas Dikčius put it, as a "sanatorium for improving one's creative health":

In fact, we were all fascinated by the Fluxus life and creation. However, all the composers and musicologists of that time chose academic activities. (...) We told each other that the essence of our activities is not happenings, but something more (...) What we meant by that, and what that "more" was, I cannot, unfortunately, say now – I no longer remember [...] the *AN* festivals were like a Fluxus sanatorium for improving one's creative health (Arūnas Dikčius)³⁰.

French musicologist Jean-Yves Bosseur emphasised that Fluxus "art/ games must be simple, playful, without making any claims, be interested in insignificant things, and require neither specific skills nor extensive

29 Ibid.

30 Kęstutis Šapoka, *An interview with Arūnas Dikčius*, 151.

rehearsal and have no commercial or institutional value.”³¹ Fluxus also had no commercial or institutional value in Lithuania. It inspired the emergence of *intermedia* forms during the “intermediate”, i.e. transitional, political period. Political issues predetermined, and simultaneously limited, the configurations of the Lithuanian Fluxus movement. On the other hand, in the Lithuanian milieu, with its immanently moderate views, and where the synthesis of opposites and the “golden mean” promoted by composer Juozas Gruodis were sought more often than not, it was not easy for any fairly radical trend in art to take root, and its continuity and future were questioned by many. The vast majority of composers, despite the changes brought about by that time period, remained rather critical towards the movement and were more in line with the views of the composer Bronius Kutavičius, a contemporary of Vytautas Landsbergis and George Maciunas:

I don't believe in this art. I don't understand it. If I lie down on stage and raise my bare feet - will it be Fluxus? It seems to me that this is improvisation for the sake of humour (...) let's say they break the piano on stage. Landsbergis used to say, oh, how beautiful, let the instrument having served its time die on stage. That's scary for me. It's exactly the same as taking a corpse and continuing to kill it with a knife. Well, isn't that the case?³²

Thus, in Lithuania, the Fluxus “movement” provoked neither autonomous tendencies nor a trend towards politically engaged music, irrespective of the fact that many artists and musicians participated in the *Sąjūdis* political movement that led to the restoration of Lithuanian independence.

Despite this ...

In the early 21st century the entire Lithuanian music scene was affected by a brief period of happenings, actions, and performances. If we were to briefly describe the evolution of action-related contemporary Lithuanian music, we would say that, having begun as “disorganised” artistic activity that disrupted conventional / stereotypical thinking and sought to ignore or shock audiences, it later acquired more “organised” forms, seeking new meanings and audience impact tools.

31 Jean-Yves Bosseur, *Musique et arts plastiques. Interactions au XXe siècle* (Paris: Minerve, 1998), 247.

32 Quoted in Rūta Gaidamavičiūtė, *Muzikos įvykiai ir įvykiai muzikoje* [Musical Events and Events in Music], 203.

The search for boundaries and divides between art and non-art in Lithuanian music finally ended with the emergence of the first independent festivals. The creators who, at the turn of the century, were offering unexpected, original, and multisocial links that enabled them to rethink the status of the creator, the definitions of a work, artistic spaces, and the functions of audiences, began to increasingly pay attention to the *added* value of a work. The hybridisation of artistic/non-artistic fields and the multiplication of interactions were no longer sufficient in themselves. Postmodernism has already rejected “novelty” as a value in art, while the post-postmodern world is looking for other supports that make art meaningful. One of them is the increasingly radical engagement and socially active participation of the artist in the present not only in order to involve members of the audience in the creative act, but also to inspire them, provoke their reactions, and provide them with the status and values of autonomously thinking participants in the creative process.

In the 1990s political critique and caricature constituted the art of collective distancing: “we said that we and Sovietism were going in different directions” (Gintaras Sodeika). The art of contemporary young Lithuanian creators is already, and inevitably, connected with an individualised and personalised social and political position. This is how we would characterise all the contemporary art productions that revolve around stage- and action-related creativity. It includes, e.g., the projects of the new opera production company *Operomanija*³³; works by director Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė, the author Vaiva Grainytė, and the composer Lina Lapelytė (their operas “Have a Good Day!” (2013), and “Sun and Sea. Marina” (2017, winner of the Golden Lion for Contemporary Art at the 58th Venice Biennale); and the recent period performances of the composer Snieguolė Dikčiūtė promoting the artistic integration of people with disabilities (the latest work in this series was the GeoOpera *The Vitruvian Man or FI* (2019).

All such creativity represents the kind of contemporary expression most affected by the spirit of Fluxus. This is not only because it features multisocial expression, synectic hybrids, performance aesthetics, and the tools of musical theatre. It is also localised, socially engaged, has a specific philosophy, participates in the time and flow of everyday life

33 For more information, see Vita Gruodytė, *Opera without Theatre, in The Role of National Opera Houses in the 20th and 21st centuries* (ed. by J. Weiss), Ljubljana: University of Primorska Press (Studia musicologica labacensia 3), 2019), 163–172.

and encourages society to rethink its established rituals. It is ephemeral, situational, and is not attached to place, traditions, or stereotypes.

Fluxus and Fluxus

It should be pointed out that in its current state the Lithuanian variant of Fluxus has taken on a dual form, split into two parts, and seems to contradict itself. On the one hand, it “became what it did not want to be: a product, which has acquired significance, and for some, maybe, it is even a “star system”³⁴. It has acquired the status of a “glorious product” and become a substantiated artistic property with regard to which Gintaras Sodeika, Director of the Jonas Mekas Visual Arts Centre in Vilnius, comments bitterly :

I’ve already mentioned it as a paradox that what Fluxus artists created as pranks, teases, and games with no enduring value, providing joy only in the here and now, has suddenly become something that is bought and sold, and quite expensive, too. It has been musealised. At first glance, this is the complete opposite of the idea behind Fluxus. The musealised objects of Fluxus are different. I look at them with mixed feelings. Let’s say I am interested in traveling with exhibitions because I have the opportunity to deepen my study of the work of the authors we exhibit. However, I get the feeling that I am holding dead things in my hands. Nowadays they – objects of study, the legacy that we present to audiences – look, here is this and that, created at some point in the past, when it was very meaningful. Now we have it all, we can show it and tell you about it. But the emotions can no longer be conveyed.³⁵

On the other hand, the “vibrancy” of Fluxus continues to function as a creative force, as a source of inspiration, engendering artistic attitudes that remain relevant today and a way of thinking that has become an integral part of contemporary professional art.

The Fluxus movement had a huge impact on me and inspired me as a teenager. Naturally, the nature of my work and the vision of art provided by the Fluxus perspective also pervades current creativity. Its playness, ephemeral and, situational qualities, and interdisciplinarity are nowadays important not only for me, but also

34 Jean-Yves Bosseur, *Musique et arts plastiques. Interactions au XXe siècle*, 258.

35 From a personal talk with Gintaras Sodeika (May 2020).

for different spheres of art that are increasingly overlapping one another³⁶ (Lina Lapelytė).

I think I feel a certain pulse of Fluxus on a genetic level – its playfulness and its pantheistic, unregulated Zen laughter prevents one from overestimating one's (creative) actions and helps one to evaluate them from a distance, by turning the process into a joke (Vaiva Grainytė)³⁷.

Thus, Dieter Daniels was right to have pointed out as early as in the 1990s that it was pointless dealing with the ever-present question of whether Fluxus was alive or dead

for someone who wanted to document the *status quo* of this movement. They will get completely opposite answers from artists who all seem to really know the answer. First of all, Fluxus has never existed as an organised movement. Second, as long as Fluxists are alive, Fluxus is alive. In other words, Fluxus is a state of mind that cannot disappear as long as at least one member of the movement is alive. [...] Fluxus is a living story being written before our very eyes. A story in which we can participate, profit from, or question. The question of whether Fluxus is still alive constitutes only the second part of the controversial definition of what Fluxus is, was, or will be. And the fact that Fluxus is now recognised both by the art market and the history of art sometimes brings it very close to being a search for something that does not exist at all.³⁸

The Lithuanian brand of Fluxus does not seem to have lost its Maciunas-character content-wise. It was, and still is, a collective phenomenon, based on pragmatic incentives and dealing with quite favourable circumstance: in the nineties, it was able to unite a group of fairly boisterous artists, while today it is able to inspire performative and socially engaged forms of art, and it undoubtedly has had an impact on overall trends in Lithuanian art. "Fluxus is finally free to be itself," says Ben Patterson: "It turned into that Something/Nothing that George, I believe, ought to be content with."³⁹ Contemporary creativity in Lithuania is also "finally free to be itself", and George, no doubt, would be pleased with that.

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36 From a personal talk with Lina Lapelytė (October 2020).

37 From a personal talk with Vaiva Grainytė (October 2020).

38 Dieter Daniels. "Fluxus: Ein Nachruf zu Lebzeiten", 100 (99–111).

39 Ben Patterson, "Ich bin froh, dass Sie mir diese Frage gestellt haben", 177 (166–177).

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The 1990s and Fluxus in Lithuania

Summary

Being the least constrained form of expression in the arts, the happening turned out to be the form of Western culture that best corresponded to the prevailing cultural and political climate at the time of the restoration of Lithuanian independence. It perfectly reflected the intentions and technical capabilities of the new generation of creators: the genre itself inspired eclecticism, interdisciplinarity, a simplicity of music language, the search for new sounds, links with other fields of art, and an active relationship with the environment and the audience. Improvisation, spontaneity, collective action, anonymity, a hybridisation of styles and a variety of tools became the new means of artistic expression.

The first independent festivals, which began to be launched in 1985, offered the most flexible form of creative expression in the arts. At the time it was not so expensive, was the least dependent on political censorship, which still formally continued to function, and also most accurately reflected the spirit of the time. It was also a collective, often anonymous enterprise that relied on improvisation and a socially and politically engaged approach to creativity, which thus came closest to the spirit of Fluxus.

After fifty years of political and cultural occupation, it was more important than ever for Lithuanian artists to speak freely and without restrictions in the "international" language of art and to again feel part of modern art. The idea of art as everyday life resonated with the philosophy of John Cage, and the idea of art as action, as an engaged commentator on social change, reflected the ideas of George Maciunas (Jurgis Mačiūnas).

The political engagement of artists observed in the 1990s was specifically based on the tools of Fluxus: the tone of the festivals was playful and utilised caricature, which, when set against the background of the ideology underpinning Soviet art, offered a completely new, political aspect of art, which, however, never transformed into purely political art. The various actions of artists were often limited to making social insights or simply highlighted some political aspect of the period.

The entire Lithuanian music scene of the early 21st Century went through a brief period of happenings, actions, and performances. If we were to briefly describe the evolution of action-based contemporary Lithuanian music, we would say that, having begun as a "disorganised" form of art that disrupted conventional / stereotypical thinking and sought to ignore or shock audiences, it later acquired forms of "organised" artistic activity and sought new meanings and audience impact tools.

The Lithuanian brand of Fluxus does not seem to have lost its Maciunas-character content-wise. It was, and still is, a collective phenomenon, based on pragmatic incentives and dealing with quite favourable circumstances: in the nineties, it was able to unite a group of slightly boisterous artists, while today it is able to inspire forms of performative and socially engaged art, and it undoubtedly has had an impact on general trends in Lithuanian art.

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