

## Play What You Like: Fluxus, Music & More . . .

Colby Chamberlain

In September 1962, George Maciunas organized the Fluxus International Festival of the Newest Music in Wiesbaden, Germany. There, compositions such as Nam June Paik's human-paintbrush performance, *Zen for Head*; Dick Higgins's haircut duet, *Danger Music Number Two*, and Maciunas' office supplies opera, *In Memoriam to Adriano Olivetti*, were presented together for the first time. The most memorable account of the concerts comes from someone who wasn't actually there, Maciunas's mother. In an autobiographical essay, she wrote:

This extraordinary performance was even going to be shown on television. The evening arrived and I, fortunately, didn't see the program (we didn't have a television). The next day I met the former landlady of our hotel on the street and I was grieved by her sympathy, as if some kind of terrible grief had come to me. They had seen the previous evening's program and had been horrified. It showed how several young people, including my son, had destroyed a piano with hammers and axes. Even if the instrument was old and useless, it was noble, someone had once played on it, had evoked beautiful sounds, it had served talented hands which had given the public joy and rapture. It was painful and terrible to watch how the chips flew, to hear the complaining twanging of the severed strings.

This willful destruction of a dilapidated piano was in fact a composition, Philip Corner's *Piano Activities*. Footage from the concert shows Maciunas and his Fluxus cohort dismantling the piano with calm determination. The audience giggles, then applauds. Maciunas' mother seems to have understood better than most the implications of the action. Hacking at a piano was tantamount to assaulting Western music's whole inherited tradition.

Without a doubt, John Cage inspired this assault the most. Whenever he could, Cage made half-serious swipes at Beethoven to convey his disdain for classical music's codified conventions: the hushed decorum of the concert hall, the subordination of musicians to a conductor's cues, the whole hackneyed notion of a composer's tormented genius washing over the audience. Cage's long career amounted to a sustained effort to dismantle the legacy that Beethoven (as well as the piano) had come to represent. He systematically broke down the divisions between music and noise, sound and silence, audio and visual. Perhaps most of all, he sought to eliminate intention, to excise his own taste and personality from the process of composition. For this, he employed chance techniques, introduced indeterminacy into his scores, and treated magnetic tape, vinyl records, and radio transmissions as sonic material that could be randomly selected and distorted.

*Play What You Like* surveys how Cage's assault has been taken up, renewed and reworked by subsequent generations. In Cage's own *33 1/3*, indeterminate composition and audio technology converge in bins of Lps that the audience is free to play on twelve amplified record players, generating an aural environment of unanticipated juxtapositions. For his *Destroyed Music* series, Milan Knížák willfully damaged the surface of Lps to yield a music structured around error and anomaly. Nam June Paik and Charlotte Moorman tinkered with the conventions of the concert hall by retrofitting Moorman's Southern belle comportment and classical cello training with the electronic exhibitionism of their *TV Bra for Living Sculpture*. The likes of Christian Marclay, Laurie Anderson, and David Byrne have experimented with how Cage's legacy might contaminate the commercialized

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trappings of pop, rock, and punk—drawing a line between the footage of the Fluxus Festival and the music videos on MTV. Needless to say, dismantling a piano in a concert hall is a markedly different gesture than smashing a guitar in an arena, where rebellion is ritual. In *Play What You Like*, these instruments are smashed together. Watch the chips fly. Hear the sounds of severed strings.