

# EXPERIMENTALISM ESIMYEHLO

*The New York Avant-Garde and Its Limits*

**Benjamin Piekut**



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# Introduction

## *What Was Experimentalism?*

This book tells the stories of four disastrous confrontations within the world of New York experimentalism in 1964, plus one more about the extension of experimentalist techniques out of the city's avant-garde community and into the foreign realm of popular music a few years later. In February, the New York Philharmonic gave their notorious performance of John Cage's *Atlas Eclipticalis*, during which the musicians reportedly played scales, chatted among themselves, and even destroyed the composer's contact microphones. In April and September, the composer and activist Henry Flynt led raucous public demonstrations against Karlheinz Stockhausen and the American artists who performed his works in concert. Also in September, the cellist and impresaria Charlotte Moorman premiered her full version of Cage's 26' *I.1499" for a String Player*, in an interpretation that the composer would liken to "murder." In October, the trumpeter Bill Dixon formed the Jazz Composers Guild, an organization that forcefully, albeit briefly, proclaimed its independence from the exploitative jazz marketplace. Finally, that autumn the composer Robert Ashley premiered his sonically assaultive vocal piece *The Wolfman* at a Moorman-produced festival. He would take this work back with him to Ann Arbor, Michigan, where it became the inspiration for a young Iggy Pop to experiment with avant-garde techniques in his band, the Stooges.

I was guided to and through these stories by an appreciation of what the literary scholar Fred Moten refers to as "the very intense relationship between experimentalism and the everyday."<sup>1</sup> Anyone familiar with the

work of John Cage will recognize the importance accorded to the quotidian within American experimentalism. However, like any avant-garde, experimentalism performs not simply a return to daily life but an intensification of it—a peculiar mix of the commonplace and the singular. Experimentalism is both ordinary and extraordinary. It is the everyday world around us, as well as the possibility that this world might be otherwise.

This study is situated in New York City during 1964. That means that other important formations of experimentalism—most important, those in San Francisco and Ann Arbor—come up only tangentially here (though Ann Arbor figures prominently in the epilogue). There is no deep reason for this; my book is about New York, not those other places. In fact, I maintain that there is nothing special about the New York stories that I discuss in this project—they are simply a way in, a collection of opportunities to explore experimentalism in the most ordinary fashion.

But New York was also extraordinary in the 1960s. And 1964 was certainly a special year, with three important festivals, each reflecting a different notion of commonality. Under the direction of Leonard Bernstein, the New York Philharmonic's Avant-Garde concert series, presented in January and February, linked Cage, Morton Feldman, and Earle Brown with Edgard Varèse, Iannis Xenakis, Stefan Wolpe, György Ligeti, Aaron Copland, and Larry Austin. At the end of the summer, Moorman organized her Second Annual Avant Garde Festival, with almost two full weeks of concerts involving dozens of composers and performers. (She would produce these famous yearly festivals until 1981.) Finally, Dixon's concert series, the October Revolution in Jazz, marked the formal emergence of that avant-garde's second wave and paved the way for the founding of the Jazz Composers Guild later that month.

The year 1964 was also special for many of the individuals featured in this study. Although the writer and critic Amiri Baraka (then known as LeRoi Jones) would not found the Black Arts Repertory Theatre and School until the spring of 1965, the black nationalist sensibility was already taking shape in 1964, and that was also the year in which Baraka's popularity was reaching new heights. Flynt's demonstrations against Stockhausen represented a culmination of sorts and were the most explicit and public articulations of his anti-imperialist and antiracist critique of the European-American avant-garde. Moorman premiered her famous interpretation of Cage's *26' 1.1499" for a String Player* in this year, and also began her fruitful collaboration with Nam June Paik in 1964. The New York Philharmonic's performance of Cage's *Atlas Eclipticalis* bestowed a measure of prestige on the composer and his "tradition" that had never before existed.

During the same weekend as that of the *Atlas* concerts (February 7–9), the Beatles arrived in New York to appear on the *Ed Sullivan Show*, a broadcast that set off a year of Beatlemania and radically altered the public tenor of youth culture and popular music. It was an important year in the civil rights movement as well, with the signing of the Civil Rights Act in July, Mississippi Freedom Summer, the founding of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, the murder of three activists in August, and riots in Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant in protest of police brutality.

However singular, however extraordinary New York might have been in 1964, that time and place is more an evocative trope symbolizing the unity of my case studies than it is the uniting principle itself. Quite to the contrary, my reason for bringing together these five cases is perfectly ordinary, nothing more than the network forged through the everyday connections made by the actors in these stories. Indeed, the conflicts, meetings, and attachments that arose hardly seem special in a time and place when ordinary overlap was the rule. The major and minor characters of my marginal universe moved regularly through a variety of cultural, institutional, bohemian, and political milieux in this period. This point cannot be overstated, especially in a study like this one, which devotes substantial attention to the free jazz movement existing underground alongside the European American scene downtown. The key task for a fresh appraisal of 1960s experimentalism is to register the ambivalence of the connections between these two avant-gardes, the ways in which these communities were both connected to, and separated from, each other in powerful ways.

The overlaps are innumerable, so let one figure serve as a representative example. In the 1960s, the saxophonist, composer, and journalist Don Heckman was best known as a critic for *Down Beat*, where he wrote analyses of Ornette Coleman's music and other treatments of the new adventurous jazz. He had long been interested in both the European American avant-garde and African American jazz experimentalism. Along with his teacher, the Greenwich Village polymath and sage John Benson Brooks, Heckman took Cage's class in experimental music composition at the New School for Social Research in 1960. The presence of Heckman and Brooks goes unreported in accounts that center on the course's other notable attendees: Jackson Mac Low, Al Hansen, George Brecht, Dick Higgins, and Allan Kaprow.<sup>2</sup> Given the pair's jazz orientation, this omission is not surprising. Heckman remembers, "I learned very quickly in asking questions in the class that the fact that I was a jazz musician didn't get me any special cachet at all. [Cage] generally didn't want to discuss it."<sup>3</sup> Heckman recalls later participating in a few of Al Hansen's happen-

ings, and he wrote a thoughtful survey of Cage's aesthetics and music in *Down Beat* in 1964.<sup>4</sup>

Heckman also took part in a famous 1964 production of Stockhausen's *Originale*, directed by Kaprow and produced by Moorman for her Second Annual Avant Garde Festival (and picketed by Flynt). In Peter Moore's documentary film of the performance, Heckman tosses off bebop licks in a duet with Moorman, who concentrates on scattered, dissonant pizzicato chords.<sup>5</sup> The role he was playing, "Jazz Saxophonist," was not in Stockhausen's original 1961 performance in Cologne, nor was it part of the score published in 1964.<sup>6</sup> Heckman believes that the part was probably added for the New York performance by Stockhausen himself, whom Heckman met during the composer's sojourn in the city in the spring of 1964. "I took them [Stockhausen and his then mistress, the painter Mary Bauermeister] out. We went out to hear jazz one night, and it was interesting that I took him to one of the Jazz Composers Guild performances, and he had no interest in it at all," Heckman later recalled. (The Guild did not exist until a few months later, so Heckman misremembered this specific point. His more general meaning, however, is understood: the music they heard was representative of the post-Coleman generation of black avant-gardists in the city and likely involved personnel that would later be associated with the Guild.) Heckman continued:

I was so caught up, as most of the players around town were, with what was happening with these cutting edge things, that I thought, "Oh my God, here's Stockhausen, and he's going to fall in love with this stuff." . . . I thought that he was going to have a very favorable reaction to it, and then we were there for not very long, and he said, "Is there anything else we can hear?" And that was it. We were out of there. . . . We went uptown then, and went to a Roy Eldridge gig, which is what he really wanted to hear. That was his perception of what jazz was, and you know, jazz should be. As it is for many Europeans. But he had no interest in the, sort of, so-called avant-garde music stuff that was happening, jazz things that were happening.

Though Cage and Stockhausen symbolized for many the oppositional poles of "American experimentalism" and "European avant-gardism"—argued most strenuously by Michael Nyman in his *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond*—this anecdote indicates that they shared a mutual ignorance and lack of attention to the most adventurous jazz of their contemporaries.<sup>7</sup> As a noted voice in the swing movement of the 1930s and a major influence on Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, Eldridge was safely situated in the musical past for Stockhausen, and, unlike the jazz avant-gardists, he was not making a claim, either explicit or implicit, to vanguard status.

For her part, Moorman had fewer reservations about integrating “jazz” into her activities. On her First Avant Garde Festival in 1963, she premiered Coleman’s *City Minds and Country Hearts*, which he had written sometime in the previous year or so.<sup>8</sup> Moorman also performed a string quartet by the saxophonist and composer Giuseppi Logan in 1965, and she appeared in concert with the trombonist Roswell Rudd and the saxophonist John Tchicai shortly thereafter.<sup>9</sup> Despite her numerous attachments to the jazz avant-garde, Moorman tapped Heckman to curate the “jazz night” on her Avant Garde Festivals for the rest of the decade, which turned out to feature Jazz Composers Guild–affiliated artists such as Rudd, Burton Greene, Cecil Taylor, Sun Ra, Bill Dixon, and Michael Mantler, as well as such other notable players as Charles Lloyd, Robin Kenyatta, and Heckman.

Such casual connections and confrontations among different musical worlds are not unique to Heckman. They permeate the biographies of downtown artists in this period. Pick a point in this network—composer, venue, critic, publication, performer, event—and follow where it leads. Explain the strange topology that results. At the most basic level, this has been my approach with the five case studies that constitute *Experimentalism Otherwise*. But no matter the degree to which the New York avant-gardes were effectively jumbled in 1964, the view from 2009 offers a well-sorted and stable collection of repertoires (or are they “genres,” “traditions,” “styles,” or “histories”?). This business keeps two sets of books: one with all the messy overlaps and conflicts, and a second in which these attachments have been snipped away to preserve the cohesion and consistency of a bounded tradition. Such a transformation from (near) chaos to (near) order prompts the question of what it is, exactly, we are talking about when we talk about experimental music. As I hope to make clear, this is a question best approached historically. What *was* experimentalism?

. . .

In Michael Nyman’s influential formulation, a set of “purely musical considerations” sets off experimentalism from its close cousin, the avant-garde.<sup>10</sup> Experimentalism, he writes, offers fluid processes instead of static objects; antiteleological procedures instead of goal-driven works; new roles for composers, performers, and listeners instead of the hierarchies of traditional art music; notation as a set of actions rather than as a representation of sounds; a momentary evanescence instead of temporal fixity; an ontology that foregrounds performance over writing; and a welcoming of daily life instead of its transcendence.<sup>11</sup>

To this familiar list we might add commonly cited ideological imperatives such as the desire to replace an inherited European tradition with a fresh American music; an expansion of the concept of music; an attenuation of intention; an openness to non-Western musics and philosophies; a mission to liberate sounds, stress timbre and rhythm over melody, and explore different tuning systems; an avoidance of stylistic continuity; and a contempt for large orchestral forms and concert halls.<sup>12</sup> Other hallmarks of this consensus view of experimentalism include notions of rugged individualism, a “maverick” spirit, academic nonaffiliation, and general noninstitutionality.<sup>13</sup> All of these qualities are often thought to add up to a kind of radicalism or subversiveness inherent in the experimental impulse.

Although this list of characteristics offers a useful description of the thing that we take to be experimentalism, it is not an explanation or definition of the category. Authors who use this list may think they are explaining what experimental music is, but they assume a grouping from the outset, as if to say, “Let me explain to you what the experimentalists have in common, what they share, what their music does.”<sup>14</sup> But the inquiry needs to be pushed back one step: How have these composers been collected together in the first place, that they can now be the subject of a description? This second question is the proper starting place for an investigation into what experimental music was in the last century. Experimentalism is a grouping, not a group, and any account of it must be able, in the words of Michel Foucault, “to recognize the events of history, its jolts, its surprises, its unsteady victories and unpalatable defeats.”<sup>15</sup> In this study, experimentalism is the *result* of these jolts, surprises, victories, and defeats. It marks an achievement, not an explanation, and my interest is in tracing a few moments of this achievement.

Amy Beal is virtually alone in investigating the formation of the category “experimental” since World War II.<sup>16</sup> Not content simply to reproduce the standard tropes of this formation, Beal is instead concerned to show when and how these tropes were disseminated and proliferated in the postwar decades. As she makes clear in her study of the correspondences among Cage, the West Coast critic Peter Yates, and John Edmunds (curator of the New York Public Library Music Division’s Americana Collection from 1957 to 1961), the years around 1960 were a crucial moment in the emergence of the idea of American experimentalism. She further shows that conversations and contacts in West Germany were perhaps more important to the development of American experimentalism than similar connections were in the United States.

To cite just one of Beal’s many examples, the composer Gordon Mumma

## Demolish Serious Culture!

### *Henry Flynt Meets the New York Avant-Garde*

On the evening of April 29, 1964, a group calling itself Action Against Cultural Imperialism (AACI) mounted a picket line in front of Town Hall on West 43rd Street in New York.<sup>1</sup> Inside the hall took place a “gala concert” sponsored by the West German government, with music by Karlheinz Stockhausen, Hans Werner Henze, Paul Hindemith, and a few others. The performers included Stockhausen, the pianist David Tudor, and the percussionist Max Neuhaus. On the sidewalk in front of the hall marched the demonstrators: the philosopher and composer Henry Flynt, artists Ben Vautier and Takako Saito, Ikuko Iijima (wife of the artist Ay-O), and George Maciunas, the impresario of Fluxus, a loosely organized art and performance movement of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>2</sup> Although he had been invited to participate, Amiri Baraka chose to observe the event from across the street. AACI bore signs reading “Fight Racist Laws of Music!” and “Fight the Rich Man’s Snob Art,” and, according to *Die Welt*, made quite a racket chanting “Death to all fascist musical ideas!”<sup>3</sup> The group also distributed a leaflet in which Flynt attacked Stockhausen as a lackey for the West German bosses and claimed that Stockhausen’s “repeated decrees about the lowness of plebian music and the racial inferiority of non-European music, are an integral, essential part of his art and its ‘appreciation.’”<sup>4</sup>

On September 8, AACI staged another demonstration outside of Judson Hall on West 57th Street.<sup>5</sup> Replacing Vautier was the poet, journalist, and activist Marc Schleifer, later known as Abdallah Schleifer, who was associated with Progressive Labor. Iijima was also absent, but the actor and poet

Alan Marlowe (then married to Diane Di Prima) had taken up a placard and joined the action. Also joining in was the filmmaker and violinist Tony Conrad, a close friend of Flynt and member of the improvising group Theatre of Eternal Music. This time the occasion was a performance of Stockhausen's *Originale*, a wild theater piece that was the centerpiece of Charlotte Moorman's Second Annual Avant Garde Festival. That performance was directed by Allan Kaprow and featured such avant-garde and Fluxus luminaries as Moorman, Allen Ginsberg, Dick Higgins, Nam June Paik, James Tenney, Alvin Lucier, Max Neuhaus, and Jackson Mac Low. The circuslike atmosphere inside the hall carried over to the demonstration outside, with one performer, Ginsberg, extorting his way into the line. The poet wanted to join the protest on his way into the hall, but Flynt refused. Schleifer, who was good friends with Ginsberg (indeed, he had published an early interview with Ginsberg in the *Village Voice* in 1958), threatened to leave if Ginsberg were not allowed to join. Flynt, lacking organizational strength or leverage of any kind, had to acquiesce, a move he later deeply regretted.<sup>6</sup> (In a 1980 interview with Fred Stern, Moorman claimed that she joined Ginsberg in his turn on the line, but both Flynt and Schleifer dispute this claim.<sup>7</sup> A letter draft in Moorman's papers indicates that there had been plans for disruption. She wrote, "Fluxus will picket us because they are against Stockhausen, [and] Paik + [Norman] Seaman said we'll anti-picket the pickets!")<sup>8</sup>

This mixing of personnel might have been partly to blame for the confusion of the journalists covering the event, but it appears that many of the *Originale* performers were just as flummoxed. Shortly after the incident, the *Village Voice* journalist Susan Goodman wrote of "the complete bafflement of the people connected with the performance."<sup>9</sup> Even though the language on the group's leaflet seems quite clear—"Stockhausen—Patrician 'Theorist' of White Supremacy: Go to Hell!"—many commentators actually thought the demonstration was a staged part of the performance, perhaps owing to the Fluxus associations shared by many *Originale* performers as well as Maciunas and Saito.<sup>10</sup> A review in *Time* magazine incorrectly referred to Flynt as a "Fluxus leader,"<sup>11</sup> and Harold Schonberg of the *New York Times* reported, "Some said they were part of the show. Others said no, including the picketers, but nobody believed them. . . . [T]hey looked like the participants in 'Originale,' they acted like the participants in 'Originale,' and they were dressed like the participants in 'Originale.'"<sup>12</sup> Jill Johnston, the dance critic for the *Village Voice* and also a participant in some of the performances, wrote, "I don't know why the Fluxus people were picketing the concert . . . , but it might have





FIGURE 4. Action Against Cultural Imperialism demonstrates outside of the Second Annual Avant Garde Festival at Judson Hall, September 8, 1964. From left: Marc [Abdallah] Schleifer, Alan Marlowe, Tony Conrad, Henry Flynt, Takako Saito, and George Maciunas. Photograph by Fred W. McDarrah/Getty Images.

been interesting if the director had invited the picket line to participate as ‘guests.’”<sup>13</sup>

In 2004, Flynt recalled, “[T]he issue became . . . very confused. . . . I mean, people did not understand even the point that I was making. I would have to say [the demonstrations] were disasters, actually. They were disasters.”<sup>14</sup> Most historians have fared little better than their journalist predecessors, largely because they stubbornly continue to narrate the AACI actions from the perspective of Fluxus, even though that word does not appear in any form on the literature distributed at either AACI demonstration. In the accepted version of the story, then, Flynt is cast as Maciunas’s sidekick, the outside influence who pulled him to the left and set off the internal feuds of Fluxus.<sup>15</sup> Fluxus historian Owen Smith, while acknowledging that Flynt was involved, wrongly states that Maciunas authored the September leaflet and organized the protest.<sup>16</sup> In light of this tendency to assign authorship to Maciunas, Cuauhtémoc Medina makes the strange assertion that, although “the action generally has been attributed to Henry Flynt’s initiative, it is more likely that it was devised by Maciunas in the context of his struggle with the proponents of Happenings [a rival split-off from Fluxus].”<sup>17</sup>

The art historians Michel Oren and Hannah Higgins also frame these protests within the limits of Fluxus history. Oren embraces Flynt and Maciunas’s demonstrations against the avant-garde, claiming that their political program was a major factor holding the Fluxus movement together.<sup>18</sup> Higgins regards the incident as a confrontation between two competing views of Fluxus—as a politically motivated anti-art critique, and as a socially elastic aesthetic based on individual experience—and maintains that “a new framework, one that can accommodate the avant-garde *and* the experiential nature of Fluxus, needs to be proposed for exploring the movement more holistically.”<sup>19</sup> Her holistic approach to the 1964 demonstrations would be significantly enriched were it not coterminous with the boundaries of Fluxus history. Indeed, Higgins’s interpretation exemplifies the kind of misunderstanding that marked the reception of Flynt’s demonstrations from the beginning. Instead of understanding the protests as part of a larger intervention into the public discourse of avant-gardism, European imperialism, and the structures of power and knowledge supporting these systems, the views of Higgins and others are fixed on the level of intertribal feuding.

A more critical observer might look past the apparent confusion and ignorance of the *Originale* participants, their journalist transcribers, and their scholarly supporters to assess what could otherwise be seen as a

campaign to neutralize Flynt's anti-imperialist cultural politics. One such neutralization strategy might be to join the picket line solely for the sake of mockery (as Ginsberg did and Moorman claimed to have done), or to falsely report that other *Originale* participants took part in the demonstration (as Hannah Higgins claims her parents did).<sup>20</sup> Each of these strategies dilutes the coherence of Flynt's critique by subsuming it into an interartistic spat. Allan Kaprow does the same in his 1996 remembrance: "I told [Maciunas], to no avail, to reconsider [the demonstration] for the simple reason that next to the collage of art and life of our version of [*Originale*], a picket would appear to the public and press as a part of it, not an attack. And that's indeed what happened. To make sure, I briefly joined the small group of marching protesters during an intermission of the piece."<sup>21</sup> Kaprow accomplishes a triple feat in this remarkable admission. After first *misattributing* AACI's action to Maciunas, Kaprow then *fabricates* a turn on the picket line *to make sure* that Flynt's intervention would be mistakenly folded into Stockhausen's extravaganza. (Meanwhile, Flynt, Conrad, Schleifer, Moorman, Higgins, and every known account of the incident fail to place Kaprow at the demonstration—to say nothing of the fact that there were no intermissions in *Originale*.)

Another neutralization strategy—to criminalize the organization—appeared in the following week's *Village Voice*, which published a vitriolic letter to the editor from Billy Klüver, an engineer with Bell Labs who would cofound Experiments in Art and Technology and served as a technology advisor for numerous artists and composers in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>22</sup> Klüver was a friend and supporter of Moorman, and his wife, Olga, was a performer in *Originale*. In his *Village Voice* letter, Klüver accused AACI of committing a series of criminal acts: stealing recording equipment, making threatening telephone calls, handcuffing Paik to a scaffolding during the performance, and breaking into the home of one of the sponsors and stealing scores and recordings. These claims were repeated by the historian Thomas Kellein in his 2007 biography of George Maciunas.<sup>23</sup>

Regardless of whether these artists, critics, journalists, and scholars were (and still today are) simply confused about the demonstrations or ideologically opposed to them (or both), I hope to show that the AACI interventions represented far more than mere squabbles within the European and European American avant-garde, and that any critical account of Flynt's work must widen the scope of its inquiry beyond the experimental art world. I propose that the handling of Flynt's critique of Stockhausen not only tests the avant-garde's ability to reflect critically on its own position in social and cultural hierarchies but also exposes the inability of subsequent

writers and historians to move beyond the limited scope of disciplinary history so as to place these events into a wider network of discourses.

To correct some of the misunderstandings, it will be useful to introduce a set of references that rarely figure in conversations about American experimentalism and performance in the 1960s. This requires a trip into histories of the Left, the civil rights movement, and popular music styles. I shall construct a reading of the 1964 demonstrations along the axes of three different narrative threads in the life of Flynt. These should be understood not in isolation but as interrelated moments in a more general movement away from European and European American high culture. Two of these threads were the competing musical imperatives that pulled at Flynt between 1961 and 1965. The first was the search for artistic or musical activities so new and strange as to be not only outside of or beyond any existing idiom but also at risk of no longer qualifying as “music” at all. This search, informed and influenced by the downtown experimentalism of John Cage and La Monte Young, also involved revised definitions of performance, as the boundaries separating music from other media were significantly blurred in this milieu. The second thread led from Flynt’s initial exposure to jazz in the late 1950s to his involvement in vernacular and commercial U.S. musics, particularly such African American styles as the blues, R&B, and early rock ’n’ roll, as well as classical and folk music from the rest of the world. I will show how both of these threads involved a critique of European-U.S. high culture, and how Flynt eventually abandoned the downtown avant-garde quest for the new in favor of a roots-music-based populism. Finally, representing the third thread, Flynt was led to the 1964 demonstrations by his involvement with the sectarian Left that had begun in the second half of 1962 and lasted through 1967.

These three life axes help explain what led Flynt to his anti-Stockhausen protests, but this is not to imply that the 1964 events were a culmination in Flynt’s development. (Only in the case of the avant-garde impulse was 1964 a conclusive year.) After tracing this three-part genealogy, I will consider the years following the demonstrations to explore the manner in which Flynt combined his interest in African American popular music with Marxism-Leninism, a synthesis that eventually led to his 1966 political rock recordings. Flynt produced these recordings to demonstrate how a communist cultural policy ought to sound, and he did not regard them as “avant-garde.” Nonetheless, his theoretical treatments of African American vernacular music reveal a continuing interest in such avant-garde predilections as formal innovation, newness, engagement with new sound technologies, and sonic complexity. In connecting these qualities to the

black liberation movement and the wider fight against imperialism, Flynt sought to rearticulate avant-garde concerns within the context of group identity and collective struggles for self-determination.

. . .

Born in 1940 to middle-class parents in Greensboro, North Carolina, Flynt majored in mathematics at Harvard in the late 1950s.<sup>24</sup> He was also a classically trained violinist and, along with his close friend and classmate Tony Conrad (later a well known violinist and filmmaker), became interested in the European and American avant-garde. After withdrawing from the university in the spring of 1960, he devoted himself to philosophical and musical pursuits. He visited New York frequently before relocating there permanently in 1963. He soon fell into the circle of artists, musicians, poets, and writers that had formed around La Monte Young, who had arrived in New York from California in October 1960 and galvanized the post-Cage generation of avant-gardists. One interested observer—the composer John Edmunds, who curated the Americana Collection in the Music Division of the New York Public Library from 1957 to 1961—described Young in a letter only a few months after his arrival on the East Coast: “You’ll be hearing about La Monte Young soon—the farthest out of all the new people. A stimulating combination of daring, originality & downright offensiveness. . . . He has the start of an idea that is basically electrifying.”<sup>25</sup>

The artists in Young’s circle shared a debt to the aesthetics and philosophical approach of Cage. The older composer’s influence was very strong by the early 1960s, after the publication of his scores, the distribution of his *Indeterminacy* LP recording, the well-attended twenty-five-year retrospective concert at Town Hall in 1958, and, finally, the publication of *Silence* in 1961.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, Cage had taught several composers of the younger generation in his experimental music composition classes at the New School between 1957 and 1960.<sup>27</sup> Like Cage, Young took music and performance seriously; though provocative and mercurial, he avoided showpersonship and any appearance of playing to the crowd.

The elevated and refined tone Young often cultivated was summarized in a statement that appeared on programs and flyers for a concert series he curated with Yoko Ono and held in her Chambers Street loft: “THE PURPOSE OF THIS SERIES IS NOT ENTERTAINMENT.”<sup>28</sup> The series began in December 1960 and continued through the spring of 1961, presenting Ichiyanagi, Mac Low, Young, Richard Maxfield, Simone Forti, Robert Morris, Joseph Byrd, and Dennis Lindberg. Flynt traveled from Boston for the first two concerts, which featured the composer and saxophonist Terry

Jennings. It was Flynt's first face-to-face meeting with Young, though the two had corresponded for about a year. They discussed music and philosophy, and Young read him some of his new "word pieces," works consisting of simple directions or koanlike imagery and written on index cards.<sup>29</sup> Among the best-known of these pieces are *Composition 1960 #7*, which offers a single dyad of B and F#, with the direction "to be held for a long time"; *Composition 1960 #5*, which instructs the performer to let loose a butterfly into the performance space; and *Composition 1960 #15*, which consists solely of the text "This piece is little whirlpools out in the ocean."<sup>30</sup>

Flynt was attracted to these pieces because they seemed to suggest a link between avant-garde aesthetic practice and Flynt's own interest in logical contradiction and the impossibility of language.<sup>31</sup> Excited by the possibilities he identified in Young's work, Flynt soon began to write word pieces of his own, some of which he circulated later in 1961 in the form of a four-page "anthology." These works display little of Young's poetic style and read more like detailed instructions for an avant-garde high school science class. Some bear the distinct influence of John Cage: "To experience this composition, one must be alone in a quiet, darkened room. Relax, and accustom oneself to breathing slowly so that one's breathing will be as quiet as possible. Then put one's fingers in one's ears and close one's eyes. Listen to the very low sound (subsonic vibration) and the medium high—high noise (the sound of one's nervous system in operation), and 'look' at the changing pattern of light and dark."<sup>32</sup>

Flynt and Young also bonded over their interest in contemporary jazz. Flynt had been a self-described "classical music snob" at Harvard, but he was introduced to jazz by one of his classmates in the late 1950s. Though his opinion was neutral on most of what he heard, Flynt loved John Coltrane; it had been Young who pointed Flynt to the saxophonist's playing on Cecil Taylor's "Double Clutching."<sup>33</sup> At the same time, however, Flynt was interested to learn about other U.S. vernacular musics; he read Samuel Charters's 1959 text *The Country Blues* and sent away for the accompanying recorded anthology. This music, unlike jazz, had enormous impact on Flynt. As was the case for many young whites during these years, Flynt's encounter with black music was a "conversion" experience: "I heard that, and it *completely* turned me *all* the way around. Totally. From that moment on . . . I've been . . . a conscious, dedicated enemy of . . . 'the European vision,'" he recalled with a smile.

Flynt also admired Ornette Coleman and was intrigued by the saxophonist's abandonment of the changes. Young thought Coleman had gone too far, but then Young had been involved with jazz much longer than

Flynt had.<sup>34</sup> According to Keith Potter, “Jazz was Young’s first love, and though not a direct influence on most of the first compositions he would now regard as his own, it dominated his musical activities as a teenager.”<sup>35</sup> Young continued playing the alto saxophone in college, and he was also active in small combos, forming his own group with guitarist Dennis Budimir, bassist Hal Hollingshead, and drummer Billy Higgins. He even sat in with the likes of Don Cherry and Coleman during these years.<sup>36</sup> (Coleman has no specific memory of this meeting but allows that, as he played with countless musicians during his time in Los Angeles, it certainly could have taken place.)<sup>37</sup>

In addition to playing the alto sax, Young also began in the mid- to late 1950s to develop a personal blues style on the piano, which Potter describes as “a continuous alternation of the chords in the left and right hands.”<sup>38</sup> This piano music—often referred to as “La Monte’s Blues”—performed a repetition of the classic blues harmonic pattern, I–IV–I–V–IV–I, without a set duration for each chord; Young would sit on a single chord for an indeterminate amount of time before moving to the next.

Flynt, too, had been practicing the piano, and he had worked out a “translation” of Coleman’s saxophone playing for the instrument. By the time he met Young, in fact, Flynt had already devoted himself fully to improvising in the adventurous style of free jazz—or, at least, in his own very idiosyncratic version of the post-bop language. Since he had no real training in jazz musicianship and deliberately avoided the bebop lyricism of his musical role models, Flynt’s “out” playing during this period sounds more like disarticulated noise.

When Flynt appeared on Young’s concert series on February 25 and 26, 1961, he had planned to play his Coleman fakes for the entirety of the first evening, which was advertised as an informal “experimental concert.” (He later described the night as “unstructured, improvised time-filling.”)<sup>39</sup> According to Flynt, the Coleman piano piece was unsuccessful because the audience was so “square.”<sup>40</sup> He spent some time pacing the floor, considering what to do next, and then began improvising, first on a clarinet he borrowed from the composer Richard Maxfield and then on homemade instruments, one consisting of two toothpicks and the other of a rubber band.<sup>41</sup> According to the dancer Yvonne Rainer, “The outstanding event of the evening was Henry Flynt holding a taut rubber band up to his own ear and plucking it.”<sup>42</sup>

Flynt recounts arguing with Cage after the concert, when he told the older composer that he was giving up “composition” to pursue jazz and R&B. After Cage was informed that Bo Diddley and Chuck Berry were

R&B singers (according to Flynt, Cage was unaware of this), Cage asked, “Well if that’s what you’re interested in, then what are you doing here?”<sup>43</sup> Cage had a point. Despite their importance to the postwar generation of poets and painters, African American jazz and vernacular musics were anathema to an experimental music scene seeking to mark the properties of spontaneity and improvisation as its own (Young’s jazz playing notwithstanding).<sup>44</sup> For his second concert at Ono’s loft, Flynt performed more traditional, notated scores—a piano piece in modified tablature format and a violin work consisting solely of notes stopped between the end of the fingerboard and the bridge; both works were destroyed about a year later.

On March 31, Flynt produced a concert at Harvard’s Paine Hall of works by Young, Morris, and Maxfield. Flynt considered significant the pieces by Young, who had planned his compositional output for the whole year to consist of twenty-nine pieces based on his famous *Composition 1960 #10* (“Draw a straight line and follow it”). The majority of these pieces were “written” on a date that had not yet arrived. Flynt was drawn to the idea that “in logical terms, [Young] was going to follow a rule which he had planned, but which did not yet exist.”<sup>45</sup> Flynt further expressed his attraction to such apparent violations of the rules of logic by listing his own contribution to the event as *possibly Henry Flynt*. Inspiration for Flynt’s nonevent can be traced the December 1960 Jennings loft concerts a few months earlier, for which Young had written a piece titled *An Invisible Poem Sent to Terry Jennings for Him to Perform*. Many years later Flynt wrote, “It was a composition whose only tangible record was its mention on the program. . . . As the culture, the ordainments, dematerialize, they will not be registered unless one accepts the premise of sincerity.”<sup>46</sup> Flynt’s piece *possibly Henry Flynt* is reminiscent of a George Brecht piece, *Time Table Music* (1959), in which performers use a train schedule to determine moments in time when events may or may not occur; the work could be performed in an actual train station, in which case the audience might either be completely unaware of the performance or so focused on its possibilities that any action is interpreted as part of the work. Just as a piece of this kind threatens totally to destroy its own boundaries, so, too, did Flynt’s listing merely the possibility of his appearance on the March 31 concert. Flynt refined the idea some months later with *Work Such That No One Knows What’s Going On* (1961), which states, “One just has to guess whether this work exists and if it does what it is like.”<sup>47</sup>

Young concluded the Harvard concert with improvised piano playing. Since he was the first musician Flynt had ever met with real jazz or blues chops, Young’s playing had enormous impact on the younger musician.



Following the concert, Flynt spoke with Young about adding melodic lines to his rhythmic piano style. The two agreed to try out some ideas in a rehearsal on April 2, at which Flynt played the violin and song flute, a toylike children's instrument that he had been practicing extensively.<sup>48</sup> Inspired by Coltrane, Flynt had developed a battery of extended techniques on the instrument that allow for the production of multiphonics, squeaks, and squeals. Young continued improvising on the piano in the summer of 1961 with Terry Jennings on alto sax, but he did not play again with Flynt until January 1962.

Flynt continued to experiment with his Coleman-style violin playing. Though Flynt destroyed almost all of his earliest recordings during his intense anti-art period between 1962 and 1963, a recently discovered tape from August 1961, "Tape 14," provides a fascinating glimpse into his musical development.<sup>49</sup> Both tracks last about eight minutes, and consist of Flynt's solo violin improvisations to the accompaniment of his tapping foot, the tempo of which fluctuates considerably. Though it is impossible to be certain, his instrument sounds as though it had been set up in the open tuning B $\flat$ -F-B $\flat$ -F.<sup>50</sup> The middle perfect fourth almost functions like a drone, but it is not heard often enough to function in this capacity. Lacking anything resembling a melody, Flynt's playing consists mainly of double-stops and shrieking glissandi up and down the fingerboard. The style is quite varied throughout both takes, but legato textures are far more prominent than "chop-chop" fiddling strokes. We hear many overtones and scratchy noises, played with manic, messy abandon. About six minutes into the second take, Flynt hints at a repeating two-beat riff for about twenty seconds, but this is the closest he comes to referencing Young's rhythm piano style; repetitive, periodic riffs would not become a central feature of Flynt's musical vocabulary until later in the 1960s.

In early June 1961, Flynt delivered a lecture on the subject of newness to a small audience in Young's apartment. The ideology of novelty was prevalent during this period; Tony Conrad later recalled, "In short, there was a dare in the air, and the most fundamental matters were repeatedly being brought to task by the most successful exponents of the tides of change."<sup>51</sup> In Young's "Lecture 1960," which he delivered in California in 1960, and which bears more than a passing resemblance to the stories of Cage's *Indeterminacy*, he declared, "I am not interested in good; I am interested in new—even if this includes the possibility of its being evil."<sup>52</sup> The competitive edge of this quest for originality held even when it came to the godfather of experimentalism. Just as Cage had set himself apart from European modernists as the most advanced composer on the stage of

history, so too did Young elbow his way to the front of the line, noting in the “Lecture” that “it is often necessary that one be able to ask, ‘Who is John Cage?’”<sup>53</sup> The poet Diane Wakoski, with whom Young had traveled to New York from Berkeley, later described this dynamic in evolutionary terms: “We go against the alpha male, because we want to be the alphas. And so, we’ll form our own pack, where we can be the alphas. And then, hopefully those other alphas will come and either fight with us, or join us, or acknowledge our equality.”

In his June 5 lecture, Flynt contended that newness cannot be the sole criterion for judging the value of a work of art because it is a quality applied approvingly to a thing that already “*has some major value* quite irrespective of ‘newness.’”<sup>54</sup> That is, these artworks were already valued as art. For this reason, Flynt concluded, newness is a secondary characteristic of a work, one determined by context. Valuing newness by itself mistakes the context that makes novelty meaningful for a substantive matter. These realizations were important for Flynt because they set the stage for considering newness—which he still thought was an important quality—outside the context of traditional or avant-garde art making. Lifting the qualities of strangeness, originality, novelty, and innovation away from aesthetic practice, Flynt was moving toward concept art and, later, his theory of private aesthetics, called “brend.”<sup>55</sup>

Flynt’s “Essay: Concept Art,” from the summer of 1961, was the next important step in his development.<sup>56</sup> In an interview about the essay with Christer Hennix many years later, Flynt reflected specifically on the kind of paradoxical play of Young’s word pieces, as well as the structural gaming of Cagean chance operations and indeterminacy:

[T]he point of the work of art had become some kind of structural or conceptual play. . . . The audience receives an experience which simply sounds like chaos but in fact what they are hearing is not chaos but a hidden structure which is so hidden that it cannot be reconstructed from the performed sound. . . . So I felt that the confusion between whether they were doing music or whether they were doing something else had reached a point where I found that disturbing or unacceptable.<sup>57</sup>

Flynt attempted to resolve this situation by developing the idea of concept art. “‘Concept art’ is first of all an art of which the material is ‘concepts,’ as the material of for ex[ample] music is sound,” he wrote. “Since ‘concepts’ are closely bound up with language, concept art is a kind of art of which the material is language.”<sup>58</sup> The idea for concept art, the author explained, comes from two antecedents: “structure art” and mathematics. For Flynt, structure art was a vestige of the medieval period and before, when music

was believed to be a branch of scientific knowledge, along with geometry and astronomy. Flynt names fugue and serialism as modern musical examples of structure art. In his denunciation of these forms, Flynt leaves little doubt about his point of view: “[B]y trying to be music or whatever (which has nothing to do with knowledge), and knowledge represented by structure, structure art both fails, is completely boring, as music, and doesn’t begin to explore the aesthetic possibilities structure can have when freed from trying to be music.”<sup>59</sup> If we stop referring to structure music as music, Flynt reasoned, we will see “how limited, impoverished, the structure is.” Flynt located concept art’s second antecedent in mathematics. In his earlier philosophical manuscripts he had concluded that logical truth does not exist, and this premise freed him up to approach the work of mathematics differently. “[S]ince the value of pure mathematics is now regarded as aesthetic rather than cognitive, why not try to make up aesthetic theorems, without considering whether they are true.”<sup>60</sup> Flynt concluded the essay with the suggestion that the word *art* should apply only to art for the emotions, whereas *concept art* could be a new, independent activity—“throw away the crutch of the label ‘Art,’ and . . . crystallize unprecedented, richly elaborated activities around unprecedented purposes.”<sup>61</sup> Concept art, then, was about lifting the layer of structure from art making and developing structure’s own possibilities.

In June 1961, Young moved his concerts from Ono’s loft to the AG Gallery, located on Madison Avenue and owned by Maciunas. When Flynt appeared there on July 15, he offered a concept art work, *Innperseqs*, and told the audience about his new piece, *Exercise Awareness-States*.<sup>62</sup> *Innperseqs* was an experiment in individual perception that involved the tracing of haloes that appear around small lights when looked at through fogged-up glasses; Flynt wrote the score in the language of formal logic, complete with definitions and conditional statements. *Exercise Awareness-States*, which Flynt retitled *Mock Risk Games* for publication in 1966, is a series of amusing games and activities for a single person or couple to perform alone; the work was not intended to be performed in front of an audience—Flynt merely read the manuscript at the July 15 event. Game A1 gave the directive “Walk across the lighted room from one corner to the diagonally opposite one, breathing normally, with your eyes open. You are suddenly upside down, resting on the top of your head on the floor. You must get down without breaking your neck”; game A5 instructed “Walk across the lighted room. . . . The room is suddenly filled with water. You have to control your lungs and swim to the top. Wear clothes suitable for swimming”; and game AA1, scored for a couple, directed: “Face each other

at a distance and walk toward each other. The other's head flies off and hurtles at you like a cannonball. It can swerve up or down, so that you will be hit unless you jump aside. The time you have to jump is about the same no matter what your distance from the other is, because the head accelerates rapidly."<sup>63</sup>

*Exercise Awareness-States* was infused with a droll sense of humor. All the while, Flynt was searching for “new modalities,” activities that are not “true” but nonetheless meaningful and new in a nonaesthetic sense. Addressing the preparations required in a game where gravity is supposed to reverse itself and the participant fall to the ceiling, Flynt wrote, “I am interested in dealing with gravity reversal in an everyday environment, where everything tells you it can't possibly happen. Your ‘preparation’ for the fall is thus superficial, because you still have the involuntary conviction that it can't possibly happen. Mock risk games constitute a new area of human behavior, because they aren't something people have done before, [and] you don't know what they will be like until you try them.”<sup>64</sup> Flynt was careful to locate *Exercise Awareness-States* outside the context of public performance of any kind. This was perhaps the most important aspect of the work; these exercises could be unprecedented only if they no longer relied on the “crutch of the label ‘Art.’”

Most of Flynt's activities in 1961—the concerts at Ono's loft and Harvard, the lecture on newness, and the development of concept art and *Exercise Awareness-States*—were governed by concerns and dispositions of the avant-garde circle around Young, which Flynt summarizes as (1) a nonsensational, noncareerist “quest for refined sensibility,” (2) an obsession with “newness” and its eventual crisis, (3) the discovery that an artwork could be clever rather than sentimental, and (4) an experimental practice that would disrupt and collapse the traditional distinctions among media, performance, and disciplines.<sup>65</sup> Flynt's work during this year responded to each of these concerns and grew out of the work and statements of Cage and Young. “Whatever one thinks of this agenda, it was decisive for me at the time,” he later wrote. “One has to get one's mind around these positions established by Young: otherwise, what came concurrently—such as concept art and its exchanges—cannot possibly be understood.”<sup>66</sup> Always a reactive thinker, Flynt's aesthetic projects were responses to the concerns of the community. Flynt put it even more strongly when he avowed, “I thought I was explaining to them what their own professed goals meant. That was my purpose. If you want to talk about [being] ‘infinitely and unsurpassably modern and radical’ . . . then let me tell you what you have to do. It does not involve *ballet!* It does not involve composing an *opera!*”

That his works and ideas were met with indifference and (at times) ridicule led Flynt to suspect that other experimentalists were not truly committed to discovering a new, unsentimental aesthetic practice for which there was no mold. His loss of confidence in the avant-garde continued into 1962, when he turned more explicitly toward an anti-art position.

Flynt's musical activities prior to 1962 were governed as well by his interest in jazz and love of black popular music, and this trajectory, too, continued into 1962. On January 8, at a benefit concert for *AN ANTHOLOGY*, the collection of scores, poems, and writings that Young was compiling, Flynt sat in playing the song flute at the Living Theatre with Young, Jennings, and Billy Higgins.<sup>67</sup> The following day, Young and Flynt recorded three duets, with Young on piano and Flynt on violin, alto sax, and song flute. The recording of this event reveals that Flynt's contributions consisted almost solely of nonpitched scrapes, screeches, and squawks. The session could be considered a fourth attempt at producing his own version of Ornette Coleman's innovations, following the February 1961 piano transcription at Ono's loft, the duet of April 1961, and the August violin recordings. Young stuck relatively close to a repeating twelve-bar blues pattern, but Flynt had directed him to alter his usual swinging triplet subdivision to a faster duple subdivision characteristic of such early rock 'n' roll players as Little Richard.<sup>68</sup> This direction represented a change from Young's predilection for jazz to Flynt's interest in more popular commercial styles, a transition in musical vocabulary that itself symbolized emerging social and cultural differences between the two friends.

Although Flynt had only once attended a live jazz performance and had never experienced live R&B or rock 'n' roll, he was eager to take his and Young's act into the clubs. Young was not a populist, however, and refused. A California beat, Young was in some ways a true free spirit—into drugs, jazz, and world music. Notwithstanding, he was also a scion of the elite musical establishment who had studied with Stockhausen in Darmstadt in 1959 and come to New York on a travel grant from the University of California, Berkeley. Though jazz may have held transgressive allure for Flynt because of the escape it offered from traditional European elite culture, Beats like Young valued jazz for almost the opposite reason, as an alternative elite culture separating them from the middle-brow masses. As Wakoski, Young's partner at the time, put it many years later, jazz was "really wonderful, innovative, better than popular . . . entertainment music. And I liked it because it was played in dark nightclubs, by people who seemed to have intellectual ideas about why they were playing music, as opposed to the pop music culture of the time." After 1962, Young began

his work with the Theatre of Eternal Music, perhaps the closest he ever came to the sociomusical arrangement of a rock band, but the group only performed at private concerts and in art galleries.

Clearly, Flynt and Young were headed in opposite directions: Flynt toward the commercial practices of popular music and the populist ideology of folk music, and Young toward the rarefied settings of institutional patronage and traditional cultural establishments. In a 1968 interview, Young stated, “The reason I discontinued my work in jazz was to progress into more serious composition.”<sup>69</sup> Such a statement would have been unthinkable from Flynt. The ideological gulf between the two men never closed, and with the exception of one encounter in 1969 or 1970, the 1962 recording session was their final collaboration.<sup>70</sup> In my interview with him about forty-five years later, Young recalled, “I remember when Henry came to my apartment at Bank Street . . . it would be in 1963, I think. Could have been earlier. But he was saying that his type of people were just going to come and machine gun people like me down, because I was just a dirty capitalist [laughs]! . . . When Henry was demonstrating against Stockhausen, I wasn’t convinced that it was the accurate move.”

The difference between the two was no doubt exacerbated by Flynt’s explicit anti-art position, which he began to make public in the late spring of 1962.<sup>71</sup> A May 15 lecture at Harvard considered “the acognitive”—that is, art and anti-art. It marked the debut of his theory of “acognitive culture,” which he would later term “Veramusement,” before finally, in spring 1963, settling on “brend.” Christian Wolff and Conrad attended the May 15 event, as did Young, who had driven up from New York with two friends from the Warhol circle.<sup>72</sup> In a letter to Jackson Mac Low shortly afterward, Flynt wrote, “A major difficulty in getting this group to understand the essay was that they were just a group of serial + indeterminate composers: they just weren’t interested in thinking about anything outside serial + indeterminate music (when I stopped talking, the conversation immediately reverted to Earl [*sic*] Brown, Bussotti, and the like).”<sup>73</sup> This lecture seems to have been unsuccessful; a second lecture on June 5 in Flynt’s temporary apartment in the East Village, was advertised in a flyer as an event that “hopefully will clear up the widespread misunderstanding of the earlier version.”<sup>74</sup> Mac Low, Cage, and Virgil Thomson were in attendance, and a spirited argument followed Flynt’s presentation, with Mac Low leading the charge. Flynt later recalled that the three composers looked at a copy of Flynt’s four-page anthology of text pieces. “And they were saying, ‘Well, if what you’re talking about is these little pieces, then that’s alright.’ That was acceptable. There was confusion about whether

brend was these little instructions, or whether it was no art at all. Of course, it was no art at all.”<sup>75</sup>

The theory of acognitive culture, a theory of recreation distinct from the twin areas of art and entertainment, proceeded from Flynt’s belief that mathematics and “serious culture” are “discredited activities.” Flynt believed that he had proved mathematics, logic, and language to be self-contradictory systems, and his training in logical positivism led him to regard high cultural and avant-garde art making—both examples of “acognitive” culture, because they do not carry knowledge—as governed by pretensions to scientific knowledge and art’s status as a marker of prestige and refinement. The institutionalized activities of serious culture, such as composing a fugue or some other accepted form, are not recreation, according to Flynt, because they fulfill social expectations.

His idea of acognitive culture, on the other hand, is purely inward directed and no longer governed by a sense of social obligation; the activities that could be called acognitive culture are the ones that are done only because they are liked by the individual. Flynt does not give examples of such activities, but I suspect that he must be thinking of small, nontheatrical, or prosaic events, not unlike the Fluxus word pieces of Brecht (“Turn on a radio. At the first sound, turn it off”) or Knowles (“Make a salad”). The crucial difference between Flynt and those two artists, however, is that Flynt formulated his concept as an extension of the avant-garde project and as a dialectical sublation of what came before. He wrote, “My proposal can now be seen to be plausible, that one give up the discredited activities, all established real right activities which would otherwise be retained as quasi-recreation; and have in their place ‘nothing,’ except one’s acognitive culture, or rather recognition of it.”<sup>76</sup> He understood his theory not only to open up new spaces for aesthetic or recreational experience but also to replace prior trappings of art making and entertainment such as scores, recordings, performances, and so on. In the race to create art that was new, inventive, and strange, acognitive culture would always place ahead of the “discredited activities” of serious culture, because acognitive culture took as axiomatic that an individual’s personal likings could not take any pre-existing form. Whatever the merits of Brecht’s or Knowles’s activities, the nature of those activities as performances kept them from being examples of acognitive culture.

Acognitive culture was also a response to the crisis of the new that followed Young’s celebration of the concept of the new in his “Lecture 1960.” Young observed that if we define “good” as what we like, which is the only definition he uses, and if we are only interested in “good” art, then we will

experience that which we like again and again. For this reason, he stated, he was more interested in the new than in the good. But Flynt countered that if we truly explore what we like, we must throw out the possibility of using art or music by other people, because one individual's just-likings can never be borrowed from those of another. In fact, he argued, concentrating on the private world of one's just-likings was the *only* way to ensure that the product would be new. In his account of this period, Flynt later wrote, "To prevent serious misconceptions, I must say that my anti-art theory was a philosophical argument that if taste is subjective, then nobody is more able than me to create an experience to my taste. . . . I was serious enough about this to have destroyed my early artworks in 1962; and thereafter I did not produce art."<sup>77</sup> The subjective nature of aesthetic taste, Flynt argued in his 1968 pamphlet "Art or Brend?" creates a situation where an individual values the art object because he or she "likes" it. "It supposedly has a value which is entirely subjective and entirely within you, is a part of you."<sup>78</sup> A contradiction arises because the object is also outside of the individual and therefore "is not you or your valuing, and has no inherent connection with you or your valuing. The product is not personal to you." Flynt eventually settled on the term "brend" to describe the experiences that escape this contradiction of interiority/exteriority. "Consider all of your doings, what you already do," he instructs. "Exclude the gratifying of physiological needs, physically harmful activities, and competitive activities. Concentrate on spontaneous self-amusement or play. That is, concentrate on everything you do just because you like it, because you just like it as you do it. . . . These just-likings are your 'brend.'"<sup>79</sup>

By the end of 1962 and into 1963, Flynt was concentrating on brend, coupling it with an increasingly fierce anti-art attack. Flynt perceived the persistence of the traditional components of art or performance, such as an audience, conventional media or forms, and the ritual of a public concert, to be a harmful residual expression of social obligations, intellectual snobbery, and plain corniness. Flynt believed that the possibility of art's being liquidated in favor of more avant-garde or useful activities was very real. "I felt challenged by a can-you-top-this competitiveness which focused on ideas," he wrote. "The ante was raised further when 'anti-art' was spoken of."<sup>80</sup>

Anti-art sentiment was also encouraged by Maciunas, who was an ardent admirer of the Soviet Union and in 1962 began to promote himself as the leader of a new movement called Fluxus.<sup>81</sup> Though initially planned as a magazine, Fluxus soon developed into a loose aggregate of artists and musicians whose work was situated between conventional media. The friendship between Flynt and Maciunas was important because, as Flynt



wrote many years later, “Only one person echoed my ideas approvingly in 1963: George Maciunas.”<sup>82</sup> Oren explains the sympathy shared by Flynt and Maciunas during these years: “Perhaps because both partly issued from the same milieu, breed shared with Maciunas’s notions of this period an anti-authoritarian impulse, a prizing of authenticity of experience, and a certain purist scorn both of art as an institution and for the Bohemian pretensions of artists’ lives.”<sup>83</sup> Whereas Flynt had arrived at his anti-art position after a considerable amount of thinking and writing, Maciunas was a showman, who gleefully attacked high art through neo-dada spectacles. As Goodman perceptively noted in her *Village Voice* profile of Flynt and Maciunas, the two men “find common ground [only] in their hatred of Western serious art.”<sup>84</sup> Moreover, Dick Higgins’s description of Flynt in a letter from the spring of 1963—“[H]e’s ostensibly a Maoist but really an ultra, he counts the West as including the Urals and wants the whole thing swamped”—points to Flynt’s remarkably early identification with (Maoist) Third-World anti-imperialism, a marked contrast to Maciunas’s lingering dedication to mid-century Soviet centralization.<sup>85</sup>

In the fall of 1962, Flynt worked on a manuscript summarizing his attack on art and substitution of “veramusement” for traditional aesthetic experience.<sup>86</sup> Flynt presented the ideas in the manuscript, titled *From Culture to Veramusement*, in a pair of events on February 27 and 28, 1963. The first was a series of three anti-art demonstrations at the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Philharmonic Hall at Lincoln Center (these demonstrations preceded his anti-Stockhausen pickets by more than a year). Flynt enlisted his friend Tony Conrad and Conrad’s roommate, the filmmaker Jack Smith, to picket outside each institution with signs bearing the slogans “Demolish Serious Culture!” “Destroy Art!” “Demolish Art Museums!” “No More Art!” “Demolish Concert Halls!” and “Demolish Lincoln Center!” The Fluxus artist and composer Benjamin Patterson was on hand to offer support and encouragement, and the demonstrators handed out announcements of the second event, a lecture to be delivered by Flynt the next evening.<sup>87</sup>

Visitors to the lecture—including Zazeela, Young, Wolff, Mac Low, Wakoski, Robert Morris, and the composer Serge Tcherepnin—entered De Maria’s loft by stepping on the face of Leonardo’s *Mona Lisa*, printed as a doormat for the occasion. Photographs and placards from the previous day’s demonstration were on display, but the main event was Flynt: his performance lasted over three hours. According to the printed announcement, he began at about 8:00 p.m. by laying out preliminary concepts and discussing the phenomenon and price of “serious culture.” After a short

intermission, he then delivered his critiques of newness, mathematics (and structure art), “literary culture,” and the continuing existence of discrete artistic media. Finally, after a second intermission, Flynt read what he considered to be the *pièce de résistance*: “Veramusement,” which included considerations of conventional amusement, free time, boredom, and “liked” work. Flynt provided a definition for the term on the flyer advertising the lecture: “‘VERAMUSEMENT’ is every doing of an individual which is not naturally physiologically necessary (or harmful), is not for the satisfaction of a social demand, is not a means, does not involve competition; is done entirely because he just likes it as he does it, without any consciousness that anything is not-originated-by-himself; and is not special exertion. (And is done and ‘then’ turns out to be in the category of ‘veramusement.’)”

In the spring of 1963, Maciunas circulated the infamous *Fluxus News-Policy Letter No. 6*, which contained suggestions for a range of aggressive propaganda actions, including mailing dozens of bricks—C.O.D.—to art museums, abandoning stalled trucks at major intersections, and blocking the entrances to museums and galleries with deliveries of rented chairs, tables, lumber, and other large goods.<sup>88</sup> The follow-up issue, *Fluxus News Letter No. 7*, was issued in a rush to quell the uproar: “Newsletter 6, seems to have caused considerable misunderstanding among several recipients [*sic*]. This newsletter 6 was *not* intended as a decision, settled plan or dictate, but rather—as a synthetic proposal or rather a signal, stimulus to start a discussion among, and an invitation for proposals from—the recipients (which it did—partly).”<sup>89</sup> The follow-up newsletter included proposals from Tomas Schmit, Nam June Paik, Flynt, and Mac Low for a Fluxus festival that was then being planned. Schmit and Paik offered a variety of pranks and confrontational public performances, and Mac Low explicitly responded to the suggestions of the previous newsletter, pleading that the group should forge “association[s] with positive social action & activities, *never* with antisocial, terroristic activities such as sabotage activities proposed in newsletter 6.” The poet specified that Fluxus should support strikers, locked-out workers, and peace demonstrations. Further, he advocated agitation against the war in Vietnam, U.S. aggression toward Cuba, nuclear testing, racial discrimination, and capital punishment. Mac Low did not offer details about how an art movement could participate in such socially conscious goals, but Flynt’s suggestion directly addressed the place of art in culture: “Last culminating festival event, in largest hall, largest audience—a lecture by Henry Flynt: denouncing [*sic*] all Fluxus festival activities as decadent serious culture aspects & expounding his BREND doctrine and campaign.”<sup>90</sup>

Flynt's musical production had all but ceased during this intense period of anti-art, and he had destroyed his notated compositions, as well as all his early recorded roots music experiments except the previously discussed "Tape 14".<sup>91</sup> But by the end of the summer 1963 he was once again practicing the violin. He was heartened by the publication of Amiri Baraka's *Blues People*, which, like Charters's *The Country Blues*, significantly influenced his thinking. In Baraka's groundbreaking social history of black music in the United States, Flynt found an unlikely source of support for his breed theory of private aesthetics. Baraka observed, "Blues was a music that arose from the needs of a group, although it was assumed that each man had his *own* blues and that he would sing them. As such, the music was private and personal. . . . [I]t was assumed that *anybody* could sing the blues."<sup>92</sup> Baraka described the professional blues musicians of the 1920s as perfectly balanced between the private, personal aesthetics of folk or "primitive" blues and the smoother emotional appeal of professional entertainment.<sup>93</sup> His explanation seemed to open up the possibility of recuperating the practice of public performance that breed had explicitly repudiated over the previous year and a half.<sup>94</sup> As Flynt noted many years later, "African-American music was wry, astringent, spiritually profound. . . . It was exemplary in another way: being an ethnic music, its most vital exponents, I believed, were sometimes amateurs. So perhaps there could be a deep culture which did not depend on professionals and stars."<sup>95</sup> Moreover, the profundity and complexity that he cherished in black music gave the egalitarianism of the amateur an animating urgency that Flynt found lacking in what struck him as the trivial gestures of Fluxus performance.

In addition to perceiving the book to be an independent reinforcement of breed, Flynt also found in *Blues People* support for his attacks on European art and music. In one passage concerning the noisy theatricality of R&B saxophone players, Baraka made a passing reference to the kind of riff-based minimalism that Flynt would soon pursue himself: "The riff itself was the basis for this kind of playing, the saxophonist repeating the riff much past any useful musical context, continuing it until he and the crowd were thoroughly exhausted physically and emotionally. The point, it seemed, was to spend oneself with as much attention as possible, and also to make the instruments sound as unmusical, or as *non-Western*, as possible."<sup>96</sup> After reading *Blues People*, Flynt began to employ the category "non-Western" (or "non-European") more frequently in his attacks on high culture, which became not simply arguments about how to achieve newness but also critiques of European cultural imperialism and ethnocentrism. Following Baraka's example, Flynt now understood his two favorite

genres, R&B and hillbilly music, to be “non-European”; indeed, on the leaflet for his April 1964 demonstration, he lists these two genres alongside the music of Japan, India, and Africa as examples of the cultural traditions ignored or insulted by Stockhausen.

On Christmas Day 1963, Flynt recorded a solo violin performance called “Acoustic Hillbilly Jive,” the first documentation of a new, idiomatic style that he had been practicing. The piece begins with a rather inexpertly plucked riff accompanied by a background foot stomp; it soon transitions into a sort of duet between his left hand, using a hammer-on technique adapted from the guitar to articulate a repeating pattern on the fingerboard, and his right, which uses the bow to scrape out wild counterpoints that occasionally settle into polyrhythm patterns. In this section, Flynt seems to be recreating the duets he played with Young, but now arranged for a single player. The third section consists of country fiddling, several minutes of static repetition that served as a homage to Young. Flynt ends the piece with an “out” exploration of noisy glissandi on all the strings, producing a chorus of shrieking overtones. The work is transitional in Flynt’s oeuvre, containing abstract noise explorations, Young-influenced riff repetitions, and the avant-rural sound that would eventually capture Flynt’s lasting interest. Fittingly, it was the final step before the April 1964 demonstration.

The trajectory of Flynt’s development in the post-Cage downtown avant-garde represents one important path to the 1964 demonstrations. His theories of concept art and *brend* both developed out of the aesthetics of Young’s circle of artists and musicians—indeed, Flynt believed that they were the necessary extensions of this community’s concerns for newness and its anti-art sympathies. For a few years between 1961 and 1964, it seemed that traditional art practices might well dissolve permanently, and Flynt was theorizing a world beyond this breakdown. Concept art and *brend* were attempts to think about aesthetics without the ordainments of high culture or conventional performance expectations, and when composers and artists continued to rely upon these conventions—even composers in the avant-garde such as Stockhausen—Flynt regarded them as philosophically dishonest and politically reactionary.

...

Concurrent with Flynt’s familiarization with jazz and black popular music and his involvement in downtown experimentalism was his growing commitment to the political Left. The music led him there. In an interview, Flynt recalled that although his initial attraction to rural vernacular music was emotional and aesthetic, he realized even then that there was some-

thing “appropriately leftish” about the repertoire. Of course, folk music and the blues had long been linked with progressivism, with performers such as Lead Belly, Woodie Guthrie, and Pete Seeger becoming icons of the socialist movements in the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>97</sup> In 1974 Flynt explained, “There is a social validity for real ethnic music which for me is like socialism; in that both of them are concerned with the welfare of the collective.”<sup>98</sup> By the end of the 1950s, Flynt had also made the association between free jazz and liberation movements, writing many years later, “As for me, I was wildly enthusiastic about Coleman. Indeed, free-form jazz appeared concurrently with a sudden upsurge of the civil rights movement.”<sup>99</sup>

Mac Low had given Flynt’s name to the Marxist-Leninist Workers World Party (WWP) sometime in early 1962, and soon after Flynt began receiving and reading their newspaper, *Workers World*. A highly secretive and hierarchical organization, WWP split off from the Trotskyite Socialist Workers Party (SWP) some years after the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956; WWP supported the invasion, whereas the SWP viewed the incident as an unsuccessful workers’ rebellion against Soviet control. Although WWP agreed with the Trotskyite commitment to a post-Stalin reconstitution of the global class struggle, the organization also supported the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, arguing that a strong Soviet state could provide crucial support to fledgling Marxist revolutions around the world. As a statement in the first issue of the party’s newspaper put it, “The Russian, Chinese, and East European proletariat . . . have established states of their own, no matter how deformed. And it is our bounded duty to defend them with all our might.”<sup>100</sup> The party favored action over critical discourse and theory. Having organized one of the earliest demonstrations against the Vietnam War, WWP displayed the kind of commitment to anti-imperialism and Third World Marxism that is usually associated with the second half of the 1960s.<sup>101</sup> The Worker’s World Party should not, however, be considered a part of the New Left movement. Though it was constituted only a few years before the Port Huron Statement of 1962 and the founding of Students for a Democratic Society, WWP was much more dogmatic than the students, antiwar protesters, Free Speech advocates, and militant civil rights activists in the New Left. The party’s leadership, particularly its founders Sam Marcy and Vincent Copeland, had emerged from the industrial labor base in Buffalo, even though the party’s membership was no longer drawn from this sector of the working class.

In the pages of *Workers World*, Flynt read articles about anticolonial struggles in Africa, Southeast Asia, South America, Cuba, and the Caribbean. He also would have learned about one Marxist interpretation of

the civil rights struggle, based on the premise that African Americans in the South were an oppressed nation with full rights to self-determination. Robin D. G. Kelley has noted, “If there is one thing all the factions of the twentieth-century American Left share, it is the political idea that black people reside in the eye of the hurricane of class struggle.”<sup>102</sup> Kelley shows that this notion was the hard-won result of a black radical tradition that included individuals such as W. E. B. Du Bois, C. L. R. James, and Richard Wright, as well as organizations such as the African Blood Brotherhood and Marcus Garvey’s United Negro Improvement Association.<sup>103</sup> This tradition also included (but was not limited to) the participation of black intellectuals in the Communist Party. In his influential study *Black Marxism*, Cedric Robinson explains that despite Lenin’s call to recruit U.S. black intellectuals into the workers’ movement throughout the 1920s, the American Communist Party (CPUSA) could only see the racial consciousness of black radical groups as ideological backwardness and an obstacle to true revolutionary class consciousness. They would, however, be overruled by the Comintern, which had been convinced by an international Negro Commission in 1922 that the world movement against colonialism and imperialism had to include the racial struggle of diasporic Africans in general and African Americans in particular.<sup>104</sup> In 1928, when the Comintern officially recognized the “black belt” counties in the American South as an oppressed nation, they cast the civil rights movement as one of nationalist liberation.

Though the Communist leadership withdrew the “nation-within-a-nation” thesis in 1958, that thesis remained a crucial principle for black radicalism outside the CPUSA in the 1960s, when it received new support and theoretical force from Mao Tse-tung.<sup>105</sup> It was also of critical importance to the majority-white membership of Workers World Party, who framed the global class struggle along the axes of imperialism and capitalist European-U.S. colonial expansion. A 1965 *Workers World* headline declared, “In Selma, Bronxville, and Vietnam: The Enemy Is the Same!”<sup>106</sup>

WWP’s commitment to black nationalism as an important component of the international struggle against racist imperialism continued throughout the 1960s and beyond. In a 1972 ideological résumé, leader Deirdre Griswold put it like this: “We support the right of the Black nation to choose whatever form of relationship to the United States will best advance their struggle for liberation from oppression: that is, the right to integrate, separate, federate, or any other political path.”<sup>107</sup> Before the slogan “Black Power” emerged in the summer of 1966, sectarian groups such as Workers World Party consistently supported militant black radicalism, most con-

spicuously in their advocacy for Robert F. Williams, president in the late 1950s of the Monroe, North Carolina, branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).<sup>108</sup> An effective leader and organizer, Williams built the branch into a disciplined organization with a reputation for militancy (owing to the large number of veteran members, who, in Williams's words, "didn't scare easy").<sup>109</sup> In response to escalating threats from the Ku Klux Klan, the Monroe chapter took up arms and, in one dramatic incident, repelled the Klan in an extended firefight. In 1959, after a Monroe jury acquitted a white man of assault and attempted rape of an African American woman, Williams famously responded, "This demonstration today shows that the Negro in the South cannot expect justice in the courts. He must convict his attackers on the spot. He must meet violence with violence, lynching with lynching."<sup>110</sup> The statement was repeated in newspapers across the nation, and Williams was soon suspended by the national office of the NAACP, who insisted that the organization did not advocate violence. After leading a series of desegregation protests and nonviolent demonstrations, Williams was forced to leave North Carolina in 1961 to escape a trumped-up kidnapping charge. He was offered political asylum in Cuba, where he and his family lived until 1965, when they moved to China. The SWP had by 1958 set up a front organization to raise funds and provide legal assistance to Williams (who spearheaded legal aid for Monroe's African American population for years prior to the 1959 incident).<sup>111</sup> Although the details of internal disagreements in the party may never be known, it appears that a faction that would later become WWP was the most vocal on this imperative. As WWP leaders wrote in 1959, "It is our tendency that has taken the initiative to build a revolutionary group *in the South*. And we are the first tendency to have *done it*."<sup>112</sup>

*Workers World* was filled with reports on Williams's activities from 1959 until the late 1960s, in some cases printing his articles and speeches. In the summer of 1962, WBAI Pacifica radio in New York aired several times a four-and-a-half-hour interview with Williams that had been recorded by Marc Schleifer a few months earlier. Like many left-leaning intellectuals in New York at the time, Flynt heard the interview and was deeply affected. Schleifer was a beat poet and journalist who had become radicalized in the early 1960s. (He was also the first husband of Marian Zazeela, who by 1963 had married La Monte Young.) In spring 1960, Schleifer founded the literary journal *Kulchur*, editing it until his political commitments—among them writing for the *Monthly Review* and *Studies on the Left*—drew him away to other projects.<sup>113</sup> It was during a one-year visit to Cuba in 1961

and 1962 that he recorded the interview with Williams. The leftist publisher Carl Marzoni heard the WBAI broadcast and subsequently published an edited version, titled *Negroes with Guns*, which became one of the enduring documents of the civil rights movement.<sup>114</sup> Flynt probably came to know Schleifer personally as the latter was something of a hero in the New Left movements. As the chief organizer of the May 2nd Movement—Progressive Labor’s front organization to recruit beats, hippies, and other underground youth cultures into the party—Schleifer was known for his Third World sympathies, as well as for assembling the May 2nd Movement militia, the first left militia in the United States. Despite his political sympathies, however, Schleifer, when asked to join Flynt’s September 1964 demonstration against Stockhausen, recalls not having been able to understand why the German composer should be targeted.<sup>115</sup> Nonetheless, Schleifer’s presence as one of only six picketers should have been a clue to Fluxus supporters that the issues in play extended beyond mere intertribal feuding.

In the spring of 1963, a few months after the publication of *Negroes with Guns* (which he recalls avidly reading), Flynt visited his parents in Greensboro and witnessed a civil rights demonstration, which profoundly affected him. He sent a letter about the experience to *Workers World*, which was subsequently printed as an article.<sup>116</sup> In the piece he declared, “It was one of the great experiences of my life.” He mentions asking some protesters for their opinion of Williams’s advocacy of self-defense: “They didn’t seem to think it was necessary. . . . But as one youth said cagily—‘Not yet, anyway.’”<sup>117</sup>

His commitment to WWP brought Flynt to New York permanently in May 1963; he soon took a properly proletarian job—as messenger—and began taking part in such party activities as demonstrations, marches, and meetings. The leaflet for the April 29 demonstration described at the opening of this chapter reveals that by 1964 Flynt had assimilated the language and concepts of orthodox Marxism. “Stockhausen is a lackey of the West German bosses and their government, just as Haydn was of the Esterhazys,” he wrote in that leaflet. “Like all court music, Stockhausen’s Music is of course a decoration for the West German bosses.”<sup>118</sup> Although Flynt’s rhetoric is clearly informed by the terms of class struggle, he also makes a subtle point about the modality of Stockhausen’s musical-theoretical domination. The leaflet begins by referring to a lecture that Stockhausen had given at Harvard in 1958 that Flynt and Conrad attended. At this time Flynt was only beginning to be interested in jazz, but by 1964 he had retroactively become enraged by the composer’s patronizing remarks on jazz: “Stockhausen contemptuously dismissed ‘jazz’ as ‘primi-



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