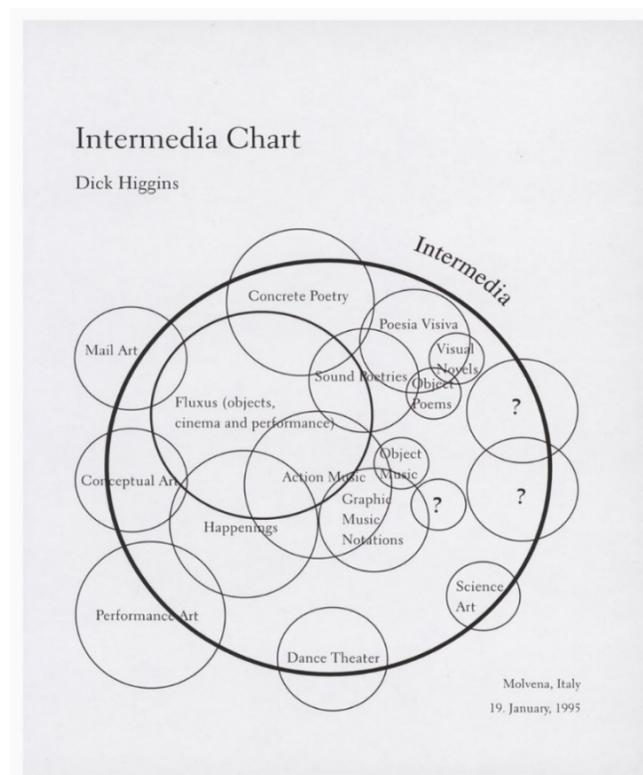


Church of Saints Charles and Agatha
in Reggio Emilia/Italy
from 10 to 26 september 2021

Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Eric Andersen and Nam June Paik

Hannah B Higgins, 2021

In Eric Andersen's "Stories of Fluxus" video, the Danish intermedia artist remarks rightly that Fluxus artists agreed on nothing, except to work in intermedia. My father, the late Fluxus artist Dick Higgins, described *intermedia* in 1966 as ever-evolving. Each intermedium between two or more media would, over time, become established. Several 'intermedia' became established, 'new,' media. These would include video art, for example, or the less experimental forms of professionalized performance art or most digital storytelling. Dick understood that these emerging 'new' media would, over time, suggest other intermedia between, say, life and art. In his Intermedia Chart, these emerging areas are represented by question marks that expand beyond the circle of existing Intermedia in the arts.



Clearly, the many works in this exhibition by Korean-American artist, Nam June Paik and Danish artist, Eric Andersen, have much in common. Both artists are Fluxus-affiliated intermedia artists. Both artists produce work that is sculptural, as well as sound-based, as well as light-filled, as well as installation-based. Both artists combine materials together from many different cultures. Both value global cultural contact.

These superficial similarities are, however, touchstones for differences as much as they are for shared concerns. How the works operate at the level of affect and sensation provide a lens for a deeper understanding of both artists, as well as a networked understanding of Fluxus as a non-homogenous constellation of people working across the arts. Paik's best known piece, *Good Morning Mr. Orwell* (1984) is an instructive tool for understanding what this comparative view of highly differentiated intermedia and Fluxus can teach us about the artworks and the world we live in.

The opening line to *1984*, George Orwell's famous novel about a technology-driven, authoritarian dystopia instills discomfort in the reader; "It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen." Since April is associated with the arrival of spring, with the warming of days, when April showers bring May flowers, April should not, the disoriented reader supposes, be bright or cold. It should be warm and gray. And the clock face, the reader notices, has only twelve numbers which double to make up the 24 hours in a day. The opening line is a set-up for the rest of the book, where lies are truths and surveillance and state-generated propaganda are depicted as ever rewiring the human self in service to the needs of the state. The last page depicts the main character's tragic capitulation to the system that surrounds him: "But it was alright, everything was alright, the struggle was finished. He had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother."

Typical of Cold War fiction, the authoritarian empire in question would presumably have been a stylized version of the Soviet Union. On January 1, 1984, Paik broadcast his video collage, *Good Morning Mr. Orwell* (1984). In contrast to Orwell's image of Soviet-inspired, gray conformity, the viewer of *Good Morning Mr. Orwell* is treated to a hyper-individuated cast of colorful characters that fill a crowded screen. Pop music icons Laurie Anderson, Peter Gabriel, the Thompson Twins, and Oingo Boingo mingle visually with avant-garde musicians like John Cage, Charlotte Moorman, Philip Glass and the dancer, Merce Cunningham. The technophilic melodrama is made up of overlapping, neon-colored shadow forms, black halos, ultra-cool synthesizer and musical technology, and television sets. Sound, light, movement, and video form an ecstatic vision of technological intermedia. At the same time, this audio visual, video mix blasted national and continental boundaries by travelling effortlessly through the airwaves over live satellite link broadcast to 25 million viewers in the US, France, Germany, and South Korea.

Good Morning Mr. Orwell was followed two years later by *Bye Bye Kipling* (1986). This time, the graffiti artist-become-art-star, Keith Haring and the Japanese star-architect, Arata Isozaki, were overlaid with sound by art stars, Philip Glass, Lou Reed (of the Velvet Underground), the 'topless cellist' Charlotte Moorman and Japanese Kodo drummers and Kabuki dancers. Here, too, the piece was a formal, coloristic, and individuating rebuttal of Orwell, but it also took aim at the xenophobia of the poet, Rudyard Kipling. Kipling's famous statement "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet," is culturally isolationist. Via its stance on Kipling, this later piece stepped further in the direction of modelling a globally intermingled digital

culture, where 'East might be West or West become East, and forever the two shall meet.' Paik's increasingly globalized, networked vision reached its apotheosis in 1988, with *Wrap Around the World*, which (optimistically) signified a collapse of Cold War political polarization by using the now ubiquitous) satellite links to connect all world cultures and regions for the Seoul Olympics.

Paik's utopian re-imagining of technology society as a democratic, transnational culture of hyper-individuated, intermediated creativity might strike the contemporary viewer as naive. But a politically functionalist reading of Paik's vision misses his actual contribution to the world of art. Paik's video installations did what the best art of any time does by exposing the viewer to an artist's sense of what matters and where the world might be headed. Utopian and dystopian interpretations are essentially the same in this regard; both are provisional imaginings that educate the human sensorium to experience the world a little differently. As an educator of the sensorium, Paik's colliding imagery from multiple video and sonic sources, his colorful framing, and his mash-up aesthetic anticipated the cross-sensory effect of much of what the internet feels and looks like today. As all three works, in other words, streamed the intermediated imagery and sound of the video synthesizer, they also framed the effect as dizzyingly captivating, hypnotizing, and spectacular. He perfectly captured what that world would feel like and why people might choose to live in it two decades in the future.

By the end of Orwell's *1984*, the main character loves Big Brother, who seems (from today's perspective) to have successfully swallowed up the artist's utopian stepchild and turned it toward his own, neo-liberal ends. To be sure, I love (with some discomfort) the ease of access, smooth functioning, and information bubble of my Apple-centric device, my social media feed, and my carefully curated, multi-culturally rich, worldview. If today's internet functions as a colorized, all-seeing, but decentralized evolution on Orwell's dark projection, the blame certainly belongs with the corporations and nation states that harnessed and bastardized the democratizing potential in which Paik placed so much faith. Either as a casualty of the corporate misuse of his insights or by way of the optimism and naiveté of the time, Paik's work can be seen today as a harbinger of the most dehumanizing (but nevertheless intermediated) potential of international corporate capitalism. Perhaps it comes as no surprise that Apple launched the 1984-inspired, entirely optimistic advertisement for its new Macintosh computer just one day before Paik offered his "Good Morning Mr. Orwell" in essentially the same terms. Paik could as well have said what Apple did in its ad: "1984 will be nothing like '1984.'"

Whereas Paik rebuffed Orwell by offering a gleeful-feeling, utopian mediated spectacle, Andersen intermediates in the direction of sympathy, of a sense of place, embodied forms of knowing, and an emergent intermediated human interior.

Whereas Paik's cultural collage has the effect of de-localizing its dancers, musicians, composers and poets, Andersen uses the same intermedia art forms to investigate the nature of mediated empathy in a globalized world.

Whereas Paik animated the spectacle in liberal terms, Andersen navigates the complicating eddies, backwaters, shallows, and rocks of arts mingling as an Intermedia stream between life and art, new media and old, and (most crucially for his *Crying Spaces*) an emerging, intermediated form of human affect.

Whereas complex emotion is entirely missing from Paik's live streamed video broadcasts of the 1980s, Andersen intermediates the full complexity of human experience. Between the two, it is clear why Paik's piece portends the ease with which joy and rage (the simplest, most

polarizing emotions) would dominate the emotional timbre of popular culture today. Andersen offers an antidote to the toxin of spectacular culture, but using similar technology.

Crying sounds permeate the human body and the ear as each *Crying Space* is traversed on foot. Speech, music, green space, and pink ovals form a single experience that intermediates between art forms, but also between the body, the heart and the mind as necessarily interconnected for affective and effective human being. The long duration of a thoughtful visit to the space invariably leads the visitor to a seat, where they bend over the stone whose tear-wells ask a critical question. Could I use this? Are the tear wells the right distance apart for my eyes? Are all the stones the same? What does their sameness say about our common, embodied humanity? Am I really supposed to cry in here? Shall I remember a tragedy like the death of a parent or a child, or a war? What if, sitting here, I feel embarrassed and cannot cry in public. Or, worse, what if at this moment I feel nothing. Shall I cry for feeling nothing when the world is full of tragedy? Shall I remember a joke that will make me laugh until I cry? There have been many times in my life when crying turned to hilarious laughter. What is the point of any of this thing we call life, anyway? "It isn't Bad" another of Andersen's pieces seems to promise, but it isn't great either. Tears of joy can so easily become the opposite. Instead of Paik's giddy apparitions, the visitor in the *Crying Space* encounters a form of tragicomedy (that may be either tragic or comic or both). Empathy, in its pure form, is untethered from the narrative norms of humanistic story or theater. There are no heroes or villains, just thoughts and sensations that connect the visitor to a *Crying Space* to the imagined experiences of other people whose voices, so rich and granular, animate the space as a network of singularities. Both the possibility of empathy (feeling someone else's pain) and its impossibility (across thresholds of difference too vast to bridge) are in play.

Whereas Paik created a means of acclimating the eye and ear to the rapid-fire simultaneities of digitized sensory inputs, Andersen offers the viewer a form of resistance to the technological kaleidoscope that dominates life on the internet. Andersen's antidote is also, crucially, a form of sensory education, a radical pedagogy designed for the technologically oppressed (to borrow from Paolo Friere's benchmark *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*). Whereas Paik offers the viewer an early form of the accelerated humanism that would necessitate selfies and TikToks, Andersen's vocalizing humans (in recording) are both unique and anonymous, part of their own worlds, while stepping into ours to offer something concrete of their inner lives. Unlike the now-dominant culture of photographic narcissism, the *Crying Space* elicits empathy, or should. But empathy requires attention and focus. To be sure, Paik's bringing together East and West and his use of technology undermined both the hegemony of European humanism and its emphatic, materialist ethos. But it is the pace and staunch materiality and place-based threads of Andersen's intermediation that offers an alternative to the disembodied, giddy glow of his intermedia artist friend and Fluxus-colleague, Paik.

The first *Crying Space* consisted of a simple a circle on the floor (1959/60) and predates the arrival of the video and music intermedia of the later versions by several decades. The stepping into and out of the circle bares a certain formal and experiential relationship to the Intermedia diagram and to the principle of Intermedia linking life and art media. The visitor to an early *Crying Space* would be inside or outside the circle, where they were instructed to cry. They would be stepping into and out of the artwork as a physical line. But the circle would also be,

more broadly speaking, inside the extended moment of being with the work, the line-as-threshold in spacetime. That line in the physical world is different from the temporal line of the visitor using their feet to move their body back and forth while consciously seeking a mechanism (A memory? A sensation? A joke?) that would elicit the desired response – the production of tears. The first permanent *Crying Space* (1994) was built at Nikolaj Kirke, in Copenhagen. Instead of a circle, the entirety of that church repurposed for art constitutes the threshold of the piece. In each *Crying Space*, the space is once again articulated within and without the framework of (first, a line, and later) a street, a building, a room, a corner, a chair.

Upon entry into the built *Crying Space*, recorded voices and sounds superficially resemble the sound collage aspect of Paik; multiple languages and musical styles overlap. Instead of Paik's pop musicians, famous figures of the avant-garde and the virile pulse of Japanese drums, however, Andersen's recording stitches together French and English narration over a skene of tragic classical music and Karelian mourning music. The *Crying Space* recording was originally made for French radio. Andersen's lilting voice explains the cultural anthropology, science and biology of tears. Crying is allowed. It makes us human. It should come out of the shadows. But shadows and light forms require surfaces upon which they can be projected. These are material. The source of the red stones, Verona Rosso, locates the material of the tear-wells at a very specific geological and geographical place, Verona Italy, where the publisher who commissioned the stones, Francesco Conz, lived. They drag with them a sense of place.

Again, a contrast can be made with Paik's denaturalized sensibility that also evokes Orwell. *1984* theorizes a world where the only emotion is love for Big Brother. Tragedy, for example, no longer exists in 1984: "Tragedy, he perceived, belonged to the ancient time, to a time when there were still privacy, love, and friendship, and when the members of a family stood by one another without needing to know the reason." The *Crying Space* portends otherwise. In Andersen's world, song, sounds, technology, collage, and sense of place can be brought together to enable and support emotional connections using technology judiciously. The internal ideational domain of privacy, of interpersonal love and friendship, of unconditional support and (as importantly) the capacity to experience events and art as tragic are all present, or potential, in the *Crying Space*.

To be sure, the greenness of the *Crying Space* is all absorbing. The bright, grassy green of near *greenscreen* that surrounds most of the *Crying Spaces* beckons beyond the humanistic, enclosed self that the emotional timbre of the piece seems to suggest. Anything can appear on *greenscreen*, since it is invisible. Someone capturing an image of someone in a *greenscreen* space can place them anywhere. But the association with that place-destroying color is near, but not absolute. Absorbed in near *greenscreen* feels like standing near the edge of cliff, but noticing that the cliff is a mere illusion. Instead of simply placing a humanistic body in a scene of anywhere (the selfie in greenscreen) the viewer is both internally engaged in contemplation and study of the sounds that permeate the body, but also of the site into which they might have disappear but for a few shades of blue. As the whaling voices penetrate the body of the viewer, the body is adamantly present in the space. Sitting in the space, I am entirely physically aware of my flesh and bones. The chairs are not comfortable. I am not comfortable. In the *Crying Space* it is the threshold (between art and life, between media, between the inside and outside of the body and of the room, and most importantly between a self and an other engaged in empathic exchange) that holds the experience together.

Andersen's *Banner* (2019) also generates a particularly material intermediated experience. Its words collide and connect, converge and diverge, across languages. Superficially, this multi-lingual aspect resembles the utopian optimism for metalinguistic, mass communication that is at the heart of Paik's 1980s streams. But when Andersen talks about the work, he emphasizes the difficulty making it, transporting it, and rolling and unrolling it. This largest ever flag cannot, of course, be flown. It is too heavy. Too physical. Too material. But it is also and always simply a very long page of concrete poetry. The labor of the women in the factory comes to the fore. The text itself is, for the most part, a cypher for the ideal of communication as much as the materials are a cypher for the opposite. Taking a walk along the banner-that-cannot-fly is, like the *Crying Space*, a tragicomic exercise in empathy and sympathy only knowable through information about the difficulty of production and an embrace of the complexity of artistic and emotional intermediation.

Andersen has said on many occasions that Fluxus is a network, not a movement. Art movements agree on an ideology, a motive, and usually a style. Such agreement is the opposite of what keeps Fluxus-affiliated Intermedia art vigorous, alive, dynamic and ever-changing. The point is not that Paik and Andersen do the same thing, as it is that they take very different perspectives on the world using the lens of intermedia. In so doing, they show us the world of the Fluxus network, which is as complex as the world itself. By combining these artists with so much and so little in common, *Flags/No Flags* offers the visitor a world that is more complex than any single mind could imagine or project.

The English phrase, 'between a rock and a hard place' means that we find ourselves caught in a decision with no perfect outcome. The phrase inspired the title of this short reflection as the physical rocks/stones of the *Crying Space* situate the visitor between physical tear wells and the sounds of crying (whether tears of sadness or laughter). Rock, of course, is also the popular form of music that dominated Paik's popular sensibility in his 1980s streams, so the visitor to this exhibition is caught between two rocks and two hard places (between empathy or its opposite). Which 'rock' and which 'hard place' the visitor chooses is what this exhibition asks of the visitor.