

# Transfiguration of the Commonplace

## Anna Dezeuze

### The Old ‘Art and Life’ Chestnut

‘Art is what makes life more interesting than art.’ Such was the apt definition provided by Robert Filliou, a French artist who was affiliated to the Fluxus group in the 1960s.<sup>1</sup> The relation between art and life has long been a recurrent trope of aesthetics and artistic practice of various kinds, and the 1960s was a period when artists seemed particularly concerned with this issue. Robert Rauschenberg, for example, famously said: ‘Painting relates to both art and life. ... (I try to work in that gap between the two).’<sup>2</sup> Allan Kaprow, the inventor of ‘happenings,’ stated on his part that ‘the line between art and life should be kept as fluid, and perhaps indistinct, as possible.’<sup>3</sup>

If it is by now widely acknowledged that the opening of art to life in the 1960s radically changed the definition of art, then these three statements alone point to important differences between the forms that this relation (between art and life) can take. Acting in the gap *between* art and life like Rauschenberg does not imply the same kind of activity as creating works which, according to Filliou, serve somehow as marginal tools to make life more interesting than art. And surely there is quite a substantial distinction between keeping a line fluid, and blurring boundaries altogether, even if Kaprow tentatively aligns one with another.

My contention is that the reasons why these differences are, more often than not, neglected by art historians and philosophers alike is that discussions tend to forget the other term of the relationship. Instead of asking ‘what is art?,’ shouldn’t we be asking: what is life? This question is obviously much too general to be answered by any one single person, and could indeed be considered as the main question of philosophy and other forms of enquiry. When it is posed in a specific context, however, a more precise focus can be singled out for discussion. In the cases of Rauschenberg, Kaprow and Filliou, for example, it is clear that their concerns lay specifically in the realm of everyday life, and in particular the everyday life that had been excluded so forcefully by the Abstract Expressionist generation of painters and Clement Greenberg’s formalist criticism.

In order to explore the relations between art and what has variously been called the everyday, the commonplace, the ordinary, the banal, I will be referring in particular to two texts: Arthur Danto’s landmark work, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, and a more recent book by the French curator and critic Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*. While sketching out the ways in which these two authors responded to the

emergence of the everyday in artistic practices ranging from Andy Warhol and Fluxus to 1990s contemporary art, I will also examine their ideas in the light of theories of everyday life, in particular Michel de Certeau’s 1980 *Practice of Everyday Life*. Specific artistic practices will be the guiding thread in this discussion, for it is artists who pose the questions that aesthetics struggle to answer.

### The Conditions of Transfiguration

Between art and everyday life, there

is no difference... The difference between a chair by Duchamp and one of my chairs could be that Duchamp’s chair is on a pedestal and mine can still be used.

#### George Brecht<sup>4</sup>

One of Danto’s greatest achievements lies in his analysis of the sudden visibility of the everyday in 1960s art. Danto has often recounted how seeing Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes* at the Stable Gallery in 1964 was the trigger for his reflections on the differences between artworks and everyday objects. The Warhol *Boxes*, he explains in the introduction to *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, ‘so totally resemble what by common consent are *not* art works’ that they ‘make the question of definition urgent.’<sup>5</sup> Analysing key notions of illusionism, mimesis, belief, interpretation, style and expression, Danto develops the argument that one of the differences between a Brillo box and the new ‘Brillo-box-as-work-of-art’ is the fact that the artwork takes the non-artwork as its subject-matter and simultaneously makes a point about how this subject-matter is presented. The mode of representation thus creates a surplus meaning which does not allow the two objects to be equated one with another.

‘Make a salad.’ This 1963 *Proposition* by Alison Knowles is cited by Arthur Danto in a recent essay on Fluxus as one of many examples of the group’s engagement with everyday life. In this discussion, Danto also quotes Brecht’s statement (cited above) about the difference between his chairs and Duchamp’s readymades. Brecht’s contribution to the 1961 exhibition *Environment, Situations, Spaces (Six Artists)*, at the Martha Jackson Gallery in New York, was the placement of three different chairs in various parts of the gallery. Since viewers had no indication that these chairs were part of an artwork, some visitors sat on them without a second thought, much to Brecht’s satisfaction.

In the same essay, Danto extends to Fluxus his earlier discussion of Pop art, revisiting specific ideas from *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* which, indeed, seem to fit Fluxus like a glove. In particular, Danto points to the fact that in the 1960s he shared with Fluxus an interest in Zen, and he reproduces a quote by Zen Buddhist Ching Yuan which he had included in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*:

Before I had studied Zen for thirty years, I saw mountains as mountains and waters as waters. When I arrived at a more intimate knowledge, I came to the point where I saw that mountains are not mountains and waters are not waters. But now I have got to the very substance I am at rest. For it is just that I saw mountains again as mountains and waters once again as waters.<sup>6</sup>

The idea that there is nothing internal to these three experiences which distinguishes them obviously from one another was in tune with Danto’s preoccupations with the absence of differences between artworks and mere things. What, indeed, is the difference between performing Knowles’ instruction and the act of making a salad that many of us regularly perform? As in the case of Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes*, Danto concludes:

What Fluxus helped us see is that no theory of art could help us pick out which were the artworks, since art can resemble reality to any chosen degree. Fluxus was right that the question is not which are the art works, but how we view anything if we see it as art.<sup>7</sup>

In their critical study of Danto’s aesthetics, Greg Horowitz and Tom Huhn have discussed the

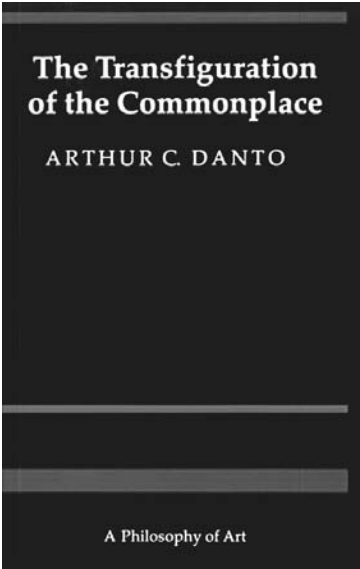


conditions required for this ‘transfiguration’ of the everyday into art.<sup>8</sup> The question they ask is the following: does Pop according to Danto allow the everyday to take over art (‘a return of the everyday *in* art’) or is it rather a moment in which art seizes the everyday for its purposes (‘a return *to* the everyday *by* art’)? If, as in the former, Pop marks a return *of* the everyday *in* art, then it means that there is no possibility of its redemption, since transfiguration can only occur when there is a distance that allows the everyday to be presented as art. Pop, Horowitz and Huhn conclude, therefore needs to be a return *to* the everyday *by* art in order to remain art. If Pop artists did embrace the everyday, then, in contrast with Abstract Expressionists before them, they nevertheless kept a critical distance from it by using it for other purposes than presenting the raw everydayness of their material—in order, for example, to comment simultaneously about the state of art, the accelerating production and increasing sophistication of packaging and advertising.<sup>9</sup> When Danto claims that Warhol and Fluxus question ‘how we view anything if we see it as art,’ he is thus implicitly positing this distance from the everyday. As Horowitz and Huhn suggest, the experience which allows the viewer to bind art and the everyday according to Danto can only function if this distance is introduced even *before* any artistic process takes place: in order to make the everyday available for aesthetic experience, the artist, and the viewer, need to have detached one specific aspect of the commonplace (its novelty, its aesthetic qualities, its strangeness...) from its original ‘rawness’.

While I agree that this ‘pre-aestheticising’ process operates in Pop, I would like to argue that Fluxus works such as Brecht’s *Three Chair Events* or Knowles’ *Proposition* shrink the distance presumed by Danto, in order to explore the rawness which aesthetics seeks to exclude for the sake of transfiguration. This aesthetic distance was preserved by Danto, and the Pop artists, by eliminating one particular aspect of the everyday’s rawness: use and habit. Brecht has recounted how once he tried to sit down on the chair included in Rauschenberg’s 1960 combine, *Pilgrim*, only to be stopped and told that he could not. Recalling his frustration, Brecht explained: ‘After all, if it’s a chair why shouldn’t you sit in it?’<sup>10</sup> Unlike Brecht’s, Rauschenberg’s chair can no more revert to its initial function than Warhol’s painted wood Brillo boxes. By shifting the emphasis from object to performance, Fluxus works emphasise use and habit, and thus establish a radically different relation to the commonplace. Fluxus picked up another aspect of Zen: the full embrace of everyday activities such as eating, drinking and sleeping. For, whether Ching Yuan saw mountains as mountains or whether he saw mountains as *not* mountains would never have prevented him from climbing one of them when he wanted to go for a walk. In doing so, he may have been performing a Fluxus score by Takehisa Kosugi (*Theatre Music*, c. 1963) which simply reads: ‘Keep walking intently.’

### Relational Aesthetics

I started to make things so that people could use them... [My work] is not meant to be put out with other sculpture or like another relic to be looked at, but you



have to use it...

Rirkrit Tiravanija"

Thirty years after the birth of Fluxus in 1962, artist Rirkrit Tiravanija presented *Untitled (Free)* at the 303 gallery in New York, a work in which he decided to put all the things he found in the storeroom and office into the gallery itself, using the storeroom to cook Thai curries for the visitors to the gallery and leaving the leftovers, kitchen utensils and used food packets in the gallery when he was not here. This work is typical of what Nicolas Bourriaud called a new ‘relational art,’ which requires a new kind of ‘relational aesthetics’ in order to account for its emergence and to describe its characteristics. Relational art, according to Bourriaud, is characterised by the

fact that it takes ‘as its starting point human relations and their social context, as opposed to autonomous and exclusive art.’<sup>12</sup> Hence, relational aesthetics must be ‘an aesthetic theory consisting in judging artworks in terms of the inter-human relations which they show, produce, or give rise to.’<sup>13</sup> Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics could be seen as an alternative to Danto’s transfiguration of the commonplace because it seems to focus precisely on the terms which the latter excludes. Bourriaud for example explains that contemporary works such as Tiravanija’s should not be considered as spaces to be walked through but instead as durations to be experienced, where the performative aspect of the work is more important than either objects to be viewed in space or the space of the gallery itself. Focusing on the relations between the artist and the gallery visitors, the interactions between the guests, and the atmosphere created by Tiravanija’s cooking obviously shifts the emphasis away from the finished object towards the process,

the performance, the behaviours which emerge from the artist’s everyday intervention. It is much more difficult to define what the form of the work actually consists in. Whereas Danto systematically tried to define the Fluxus and Pop works as ontological entities, Bourriaud is content with describing ‘form’ as nothing more than a ‘coherent plane’ on which heterogeneous entities can meet; it must be unstable, open to exchange and dialogue.<sup>14</sup>

Instead of an opposition between art and the everyday articulated in the transfiguration of the commonplace, Bourriaud describes art as a ‘social interstice.’ Bourriaud borrows the term ‘interstice’ from Marx, who used it to describe exchange spaces which can escape from the dominant capitalist economy (barter is one of his examples). For Bourriaud, artworks exist in such a space, a space that is part of the global system but nonetheless suggests the possibility of alternative exchanges. Bourriaud singles out in the global capitalist system one particular aspect of everyday

life which art can resist by multiplying new ‘social interstices’: the commercialisation and spectacularisation of inter-personal relations in everyday life.

By emphasising events, performance, and behaviours; alternative modes of exchange over unusable, commodified objects; by privileging flexible notions of form instead of trying to define art, Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics seem to be more able to describe the nature of the everyday in works by Tiravanija and Fluxus alike. Yet, if Danto’s aesthetics may be too restricted to encompass the variety of relations between art and everyday life, Bourriaud’s ideas, for their part, suffer from not being precise enough. There are many obvious reasons for this: Bourriaud is a critic rather than a philosopher, an advocate rather than an analyst of these artists, and he is clearly implicated in the commercial and institutional art world (he is the co-director of the Palais de Tokyo, which was founded a few years ago as an institutional showcase for contemporary art in Paris). Perhaps there is even a deliberate decision on the part of Bourriaud to elude, for the sake of packaging a new generation of artists, the crucial questions of how exactly inter-personal relations have become commercialised and spectacularised, and how getting together to have a curry with Tiravanija somehow resists this state of things. What I would like to underline here is that, despite his apparent embrace of the everyday, Bourriaud, like Danto, seems to take for granted a universal definition of the commonplace. Only by retrieving the specificity of the everyday can the works discussed by Bourriaud and Danto be extracted from the rhetorical uses to which they have been subjected.

Describing the Everyday

If [Michel de Certeau’s] *Practice of Everyday Life* is seen as attempting to register the *poiesis* of everyday life through poetics, then it is a poetics that articulates activities rather than expresses identities—a poetics of *uses* rather than *users*.

Ben Highmore<sup>15</sup>

Knowles’ proposition to ‘make a salad’ relates to an act that we perform in our everyday life, and the form it takes evokes very directly an object of everyday life: the recipe. In her study of cooking as a practice of everyday life, Luce Giard explains that:

In every language, recipes comprise a kind of minimal text, defined by its internal economy, its concision and its low degree of ambiguity.<sup>16</sup>

Knowles’ *Proposition* is certainly presented in a concise and minimal format, but it does not, however, provide any of the information which is considered to be ‘indispensable’ in a recipe: it states neither the ingredients nor the utensils and techniques to be used, and the name of the prepared dish is generic rather than particular, leaving the whole process as ambiguous as possible (Knowles says ‘salad’ rather than ‘Greek salad,’ or ‘salade niçoise,’ for example). Thus, while we can conclude that Knowles’ piece is actually totally useless as a recipe, we can also see how it uses the format of the recipes to explore key characteristics that are relevant both to Fluxus and to cooking. Four of these dimensions can be briefly outlined here. Firstly, authorship for recipes is usually collective, if not anonymous. Similarly, Fluxus as a group explored ways of undermining the highly personalised traditional notions of authorship both through collective production and an increased reliance on reader/spectator participation. Secondly, recipes can be transmitted orally as well as through publications, which is also the case for many Fluxus scores: you do not need Knowles’ book to own *Proposition*. Swedish folklore specialist and Fluxus artist Bengt af Klintberg highlighted the

relations between these two aspects of cooking when he explained that Fluxus ‘reacted against the pompous image of the artist as a genius with a unique, personal style’ by creating ‘simple pieces filled with energy and humour, pieces without any personal stylistic features, pieces that could be transmitted orally just like folklore and performed by everyone who wanted to.’<sup>17</sup>

The third aspect of recipes which Knowles’ *Proposition* brings to the fore is the complex relations which recipes set up between process and result. Any cook knows that sometimes, for practical reasons, you may need to replace one ingredient by another, but of course, if you replace too many ingredients, then it becomes a whole new recipe. In Fluxus pieces, which emerged from the context of experimental music, this relation between the specific and the general is akin to the relation between a musical score and the ways of performing it. How badly does a score by Mozart need to be played before ceasing to be a Mozart piece? This complex question is central to any study of musical performance. The performative dimension of the recipe is closely linked to the fourth, and final, characteristic which I would like to list here. The recipe is one tool among others within a process, and cannot be considered as an isolated object: it is necessarily part of a wider, more complex, network which includes ingredients, implements, spaces, family life, tradition and innovation, to cite only some of the terms analysed by Giard.

Thus, viewed from the perspective of art, Knowles’ work questions traditional notions of authorship and the status of the artwork, but if it were to be encountered in a recipe book, for example, it may be read as liberating for the cook. By reducing the instructions to a generic invitation, Knowles frees cooks from the stringent demands of the recipe, which dictate a type of behaviour and emphasise the finished product, to be judged according to absolute criteria of quality. Everyday life becomes a practice to be explored, rather than a boring routine that needs to be transfigured by art.

The term ‘practice of everyday life’ is a translation of the title of Michel de Certeau’s 1980 *L’Invention du quotidien* (literally the ‘invention’ of the everyday), and it was in the second volume of this book that Luce Giard’s analysis of cooking was included. In *Relational Aesthetics*, Bourriaud actually refers to de Certeau and the ‘*invention du quotidien*’ when he writes about relational practices such as Tiravanija’s. For example, Bourriaud claims that the practice of everyday life is ‘not an object less worthy of attention’ than ‘the messianic utopias’ specific to modern art.<sup>18</sup> In this opposition between everyday practices and ‘messianic utopias,’ Bourriaud follows de Certeau’s distinction between tactics and strategy. Strategy, according to de Certeau, is a means of calculation and manipulation in order to gain power over another, in situations where the distinction between one’s own space and the other’s is clear-cut. In contrast, tactics describe actions which take place solely within the ‘other’s space’ because it is impossible to isolate the two spaces from each other. The ‘interstice’ occupied by relational art according to Bourriaud seems to be the very space of everyday life in which de Certeau places tactics, those everyday ruses with which some members of society ‘tinker’ with the dominant social order for it to work in their favour.<sup>19</sup> The question of whether relational art is politically radical or not is thus closely related to the general issue of whether, as de Certeau claims, certain tactical practice can effectively subvert the everyday life in which they are embedded.

De Certeau’s considerable contribution to the study of everyday life has been not only to highlight the complexity of everyday practices such as cooking, walking or inhabiting living



spaces, but also to reflect on the methods for studying these practices. As Ben Highmore has explained, de Certeau sought to create a general poetics of everyday life which aims at achieving the generality of a science without losing sight of the singularity of the actual—an issue that resonates with Fluxus event scores which oscillate between the extreme generality of the instruction and the inevitable specificity of each individual performance of its terms.<sup>20</sup> De Certeau’s poetics successfully capture the singularity of everyday life, but encounter problems when trying to theorise the political, subversive potential of its practices. This issue, which is one of the central problems of studies of everyday life throughout the twentieth century, plagues Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics as well. To analyse Bourriaud’s text, it would thus be useful to start by unpacking the models of everyday life to which he is referring. In the process, one would find that he seems to be combining de Certeau’s non-oppositional theorisation with references to Situationist thinkers such as Guy Debord and Henri Lefebvre, who came from a Marxist tradition obviously bent on a transformation of capitalist society.

The tension between conflicting models of the ‘critique of everyday life’ is arguably inherent to the very works acclaimed by Bourriaud. Janet Kraynak has aptly criticised discourses such as Bourriaud’s which describe Tiravanija’s work as generous offerings providing an alternative exchange logic to commodity fetishism.<sup>21</sup> Tiravanija’s art, Kraynak argues, occupies an ambiguous position which exceeds such simplistic celebrations of a supposed return of everyday life in art. On the one hand, she explains, Tiravanija’s work embraces the shift in the new globalised economy from the production and exchange of material objects to that of an equally alienating ‘symbolic capital’. On the other hand, however, it simultaneously reveals the increased homogenisation of cultures as they enter the new symbolic order of global capitalism. Where Fluxus could still dream of a de-commodified everyday life based on collaboration, participation and other modes of ‘folkloric’ exchange, ‘relational art’ in the 1990s marked an embrace, rather than a rejection, of the museum, as well as a return to traditional modes of authorship—Tiravanija’s presence, as Kraynak points out, is by now acknowledged to be a necessary aspect of his work.

## Conclusion

Both Danto’s *Transfiguration of the Commonplace* and Bourriaud’s *Relational Aesthetics* are



significant attempts to grapple with the new relation between art and life explored by successive generations of artists. While Danto’s reflections successfully highlight the importance of the everyday in works by Warhol or Fluxus, I have suggested that his ontological enquiry is restricted by the static polarity it sets up between art and a commonplace which remains in essence everything that is not art. Bourriaud’s definition of relational aesthetics introduced post-structuralist, Deleuzian notions of flow and dynamic forms that are more amenable to capture the nature of practices by Fluxus or Tiravanija. Nevertheless, as I have shown, the kind of everyday practices which Bourriaud celebrates remains sketchy, as he refuses to address the ways in which they participate in, or resist, a dominant social order. Studies of everyday life such as de Certeau’s complement enquiries such as Danto’s or Bourriaud’s by disrupting reductive descriptions of a universal everyday and looking at the specificities of the practices with which art practices stand in dialogue. Filliou’s quip about art being what makes life more interesting than art may suggest that art should become less interesting—indeed, works such as Knowles’ *Proposition*, Brecht’s *Three Chair Event* or Tiravanija’s meals, deliberately *ask* to be dismissed as unremarkable occurrences which exist in the same time and space as everyday activities, in a way that neither Rauschenberg’s ‘combines’ nor Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes* could ever dream of. At the same time, the important thing about Filliou’s definition of art is that it exists as a dynamic, reversible movement, in which the artwork can make life more interesting not because it is as boring as life, but because life is at least as complex as art. It may seem paradoxical to conclude that we may need simple, often literal, forms of art to tell us about the complexity of everyday life. And it may seem rather pathetic that we need to be told that everyday life is complex in the first place. Yet the question of whether, and how, the everyday can be studied is in fact a complex topic in itself—a topic that requires a further discussion, over a salad or a Thai curry, it goes without saying.

## Notes

- 1 Robert Filliou (1970) ‘Interview’, quoted in *Robert Filliou: Génie sans talent*, (2004) exh. cat. (Villeneuve d’Ascq: Musée d’Art Moderne Lille Métropole), back cover.
- 2 Robert Rauschenberg (1959) ‘Untitled Statement,’ in Dorothy C. Miller, ed., *Sixteen Americans* (New York: Museum of Modern Art), p.58.
- 3 Allan Kaprow (1966) *Assemblages, Environments and Happenings* (New York: Harry N. Abrams), p.188.

- 4 George Brecht (1965) ‘A Conversation about Something Else: an Interview with George Brecht by Ben Vautier and Marcel Alocco,’ in *Identités*, nos. 11-12; rep. in Henry Martin, ed. (1978) *An Introduction to George Brecht’s Book of the Tumbler on Fire* (Milan: Multhipla edizioni), p.71.
- 5 Arthur Danto (1981) *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: a Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, MA, & London: Harvard University Press), p.vii.
- 6 Ching Yuan, in D.T. Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of D.T. Suzuki*, quoted by Danto (2002) ‘The World as Warehouse: Fluxus and Philosophy,’ in Jon Hendricks, ed., *What’s Fluxus? What’s Not! Why.*, exh. cat. (Brasília: Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil), p.31. This passage is reproduced in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, p. 133.
- 7 Danto, ‘The World as Warehouse: Fluxus and Philosophy,’ op. cit., 31.
- 8 Greg Horowitz and Tom Huhn (1998) ‘The Wake of Art: Criticism, Philosophy and the ends of Taste,’ in Greg Horowitz and Tom Huhn, eds., *The Wake of Art: Criticism, Philosophy and the ends of Taste* (Amsterdam: G+B Arts International), pp.1-56.
- 9 For such an analysis of these different aspects of Warhol’s works, see Benjamin Buchloh (1989) ‘Andy Warhol’s One-dimensional Art, 1956-1966,’ in Kynaston McShine, ed., *Andy Warhol: a Retrospective*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art), pp.39-61.
- 10 George Brecht (1967) ‘Interview with Henry Martin,’ in *Art International*, vol. XI, no. 9, rep. in Henry Martin, p.80.
- 11 Rirkrit Tiravanija, quoted in Janet Kraynak (1998) ‘Rirkrit Tiravanija’s Liability,’ *Documents*, no. 13, p.36.
- 12 Nicolas Bourriaud (1998) *Esthétique relationnelle* (Dijon: Presses du réel), p.117 (my translation). An English translation by Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods was published in 2002 (*Relational Aesthetics*, Dijon: Presses du réel).
- 13 Bourriaud, p.117.
- 14 Bourriaud, p.115.
- 15 Ben Highmore (2002) *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory: An Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge), p.156.
- 16 ‘Dans chaque langue, les recettes de cuisine composent une sorte de texte minimal, défini par son économie interne, sa concision et son faible degré d’équivocité.’ Luce Giard (1980) ‘Faire-la-cuisine,’ in Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard, Pierre Mayol, *L’Invention du quotidien*, vol. 2: Habiter, Cuisiner (Paris: Gallimard), 1990 ed., p.303 (my translation).
- 17 Jean Sellem (1991) ‘The Fluxus Outpost in Sweden: an Interview with Bengt af Klintberg’, in Jean Sellem, ed., *Fluxus Research*, special issue of *Lund Art Press*, vol. 2, no. 2, p.69.
- 18 Bourriaud, p.14.
- 19 Michel de Certeau (1980) *L’Invention du quotidien*, vol. 1: *Arts de faire* (Paris: Gallimard), 1990 ed., p.xxxix.
- 20 Highmore, ch. 8. For more about the general and the specific in Fluxus scores, see Ina Blom (1992) ‘The Intermedia Dynamic,’ in Ken Friedman, ed., *Fluxus Virus*, 1962-1992, exh. cat. (Cologne: Galerie Schüppenhauer and Kölnischer Kunstverein), p.216.
- 21 Kraynak, pp.26-40.

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