

± 1961

Founding the Expanded Arts



Henry Flynt delivering his lecture *From Culture to Veramusement*, Walter De Maria's loft, New York, February 28, 1963. Photograph by Diane Wakoski. Courtesy Henry Flynt.

The 1960s may be the 20th century decade that wrote the code for our contemporary moment. Introducing text/information-based strategies, real-time, and the rupture of specific media boundaries into artistic practice, it defined creative criteria, models of authorship mediation, and new distribution networks that are still very much with us. The exhibition ± 1961 posits a deliberately unfamiliar and *anonymous* temporal marker to spark debate about how and when the first new theoretical and artistic ground was broken, positing the point at which the “expanded arts” of the Sixties could first be glimpsed. Choosing a field of radical invention *before* the leading names and terms of the decade were critically and historically defined – considering precursors such as Anna Halprin and John Cage, and breakthrough 1961 work by figures such as La Monte Young, Robert Morris, George Brecht, Henry Flynt, Simone Forti, Jackson Mac Low, Walter De Maria, George Maciunas, Ray Johnson, Emmett Williams, Nam June Paik, Yoko Ono, et al -- the exhibition traces the initial crystallization of certain key ideas. At the center of this is the musical score, subjected to unprecedented experimentation, which became the ur-model for all the arts, rupturing disciplinary and medium specificity, revealing a newly activated creative field that extends from the postmodern to now.

The period surrounding 1961 revealed a new contingency arising between the artist/composer/poet/dancer/choreographer and their media. As an emphasis on *time* and *concept* began to generate shared terms, medium was selected not for innate reasons but simply to serve the task at hand. In this charged moment, John Cage's impact looms large, along with other precursor figures such as choreographer Anna Halprin, and their initiatives subtend the historical matrix of the exhibition. But it is the new generation with which the show is principally concerned. Galvanizing figures, in their different ways, La Monte Young, Jackson Mac Low, and eventually George Maciunas (who founded Fluxus the following year based on his "1961 experience"), will be presented in relation to a spectrum of emerging projects.

The contentious interaction between generations registers in the relationship between the landmark 1961 publication of Cage's writings, *Silence*, and Young's *An Anthology* initiated that same year, which would rewrite the playbook for all that could be conceived as "experimental composition." Ostensibly grounded in music, incorporating the models of Cage's circle, *An Anthology* was dominated by the interdisciplinary work of the new guard: 27 composers, poets, artists, and choreographers all presenting their ideas, for the first time comparably, in textual form. The book's subtitle – *Chance Operations, Concept art, Anti-Art, Indeterminacy, Plans of Action, Diagrams, Music, Dance Constructions, Improvisation, Meaningless Work, Natural Disasters, Compositions, Mathematics, Essays, Poetry*, suggests the new territory they broached. Expanding the *printed framework* of these activities, other "testimonies" deliver the actual constellations of artists whose encounters and collective performances were as ephemeral as the moment itself. The exhibition projects this through multiple means, such as concert programs, which point to unexpected events linking Young, Simone Forti, Henry Flynt, Mac Low, Robert Morris, Toshi Ichiyanagi, George Brecht, Dick Higgins, James Waring, Ray Johnson et al. These documents contextualize real-time performances alongside physical works, focusing the viewer on forgotten New York epicenters of art like Yoko Ono's Chambers St loft, the Living Theatre, and Maciunas' short-lived AG Gallery. Such is the fragile record that the exhibition outlines to provide a new view onto this formative year, reminding us of "premiere" '61 constellations. Rejecting the model of dominant "authors" historically favored in this period, ± 1961 seeks to give agency to each gesture, to allow individual artists to be considered in their own right – with a frame lighter than any that a single name or category of artistic practice would posit. Like an open score this offers the chance for an interpretation that is different in each moment of encounter. Framed by time, ± 1961 draws upon the ephemeral and the contingent – from sound recordings, to live dance, to printed scores awaiting realization – it generates a mosaic of the "first" expanded field that launched the 1960s. The new artistic formats of 1961, its international networks, its fervent commitment to typographical design and layouts that support and even articulate the work, have lost clarity in the present even as they begin to seem more relevant than ever. The exhibition ± 1961 seeks to elucidate a singular field of experimental activity, around that year, as perhaps one of the last convincingly utopian moments of collaboration and uncompromisingly radical invention in the 20th century, for all the revelations in can still bring to the 21st.

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**Exhibition opening
hours**

Monday to Saturday
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from 10:00 a.m.
to 9:00 p.m.
Sundays
from 10:00 a.m.
to 3:00 p.m.

Closed on Tuesdays.

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