

SWFL Art & Theater News for July 1-7, 2016

Remembering performance artist Ben Patterson (07-02-16)



Artist Ben Patterson died on June 25 in Wiesbaden, Germany. Southwest Florida art lovers will remember Ben from his participation in *ELEVEN: The John Erickson Museum of Art (JEMA) 10-Year Retrospective* that was exhibited in the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery on the Lee campus of Florida SouthWestern State College between May 6 and July 27, 2014.

Patterson is commonly grouped with seminal Fluxus artists Dick Higgins, Yoko Ono, Nam June Paik, George Maciunas and George Brecht. He was not only one of the original core members of Fluxus, but the movement's sole African American member. But unlike many African American modern artists, Patterson was considered a Fluxus artist first and a black artist second.

Of course, Patterson himself resisted classification as a Fluxus artist. While his work clearly conformed with many accepted Fluxus ideologies and practices, it also differed from them in important ways. Like many other Fluxus artists, Patterson engaged in different types of work which at their core were experimental and performance-based, but he was uniquely multidisciplinary, choosing to operate in the uncharted seam or vacuum that exists between art, music and literature.

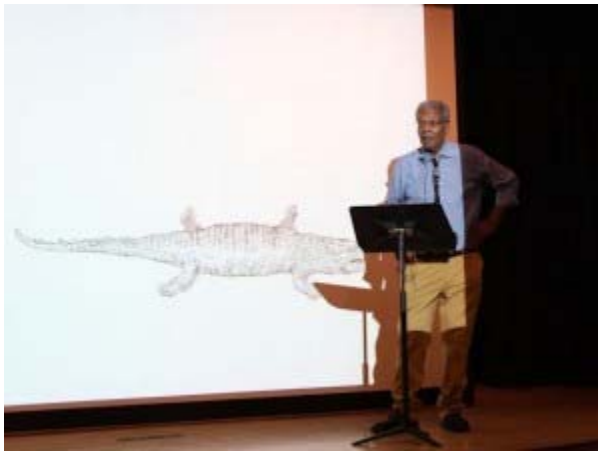


Patterson's most famous and enduring work was *Paper Piece*. A performance score, *Paper Piece* was an apt illustration of Patterson's overlapping, overarching multidisciplinary approach, which reflected his education as a musician at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, from which he matriculated with a Bachelor of Music degree in 1956. After working as a musician with various orchestras in the United States and Canada, Patterson moved to Cologne, Germany in 1960, where he instantly became active in the radical contemporary music scene.

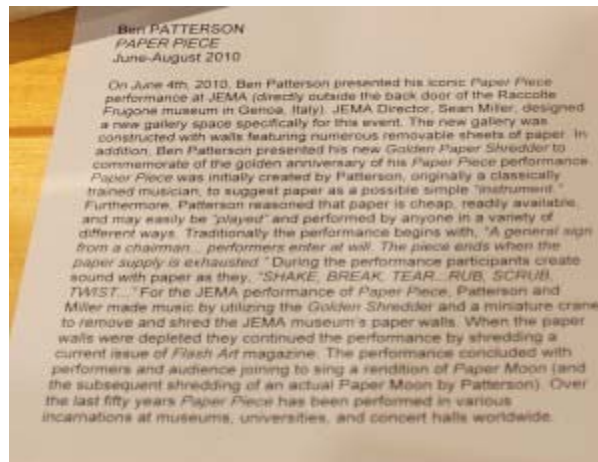
At that time, composer Karlheinz Stockhausen was a leader in avant-garde music and performance. Patterson enrolled in classes with Stockhausen and began creating compositions that he would perform later on at Fluxus festivals. But it was a chance encounter John Cage that led to the creation of *Paper Piece*.

"This work cut the umbilical cord to all of my previous classical and contemporary musical training and experience," Patterson stated. "The process had begun during my first encounter with John Cage at Mary Bauermeister's 'contre festival' in Cologne in May of 1960. Three months later, my reaction to the first performance of Stockhausen's *Kontakte* made the completion of this process an urgent necessary."

Patterson debuted *Paper Piece* at Cologne's Galerie Lauhus on May 14, 1961. The "musical" performance began with two performers exiting the wings of the stage and entering the concert hall floor. Holding a long sheet of paper over the very front row, they began shredding and crumpling pieces of paper. Soon after, holes appeared in a large paper screen onstage, after which other performers threw wadded paper balls and confetti into the audience together with printed sheets of letter-sized paper that contained George Maciunas' Fluxus manifesto, which stated, "Purge the world of bourgeois sickness, intellectual, professional and commercialized culture, PURGE the world of dead art, imitation and artificial art, abstract art, illusionistic art, PURGE THE WORLD OF EUROPEANISM ... PROMOTE A REVOLUTIONARY FLOOD AND TIDE IN ART, Promote living art, anti-art, PROMOTE NON-ART REALITY to be grasped by all peoples, not only critics, dilettantes and professionals... FUSE the cadres of cultural, social & political revolutionaries into united front & action."



Paper Piece was originally conceived by Patterson to introduce the notion that paper could serve as a musical instrument. Patterson reasoned that paper is cheap, readily available and may be “played” by anyone in a wide variety of ways, with the performance ending when the supply of paper is exhausted.



But what Patterson didn't anticipate was the way in which *Paper Piece* directly involved and implicated the audience. It turned passive spectators into co-producers of the work, a result the artist never anticipated. This surprising yet welcome participatory component was integrated into subsequent performances and became a prominent aspect of the Fluxus agenda, causing Patterson himself to later quip that “[d]espite my reasonably precise instructions, beginning with the first Fluxus festival concerts in 1962, *Paper Piece* grew a life of its own. It literally began enveloping and involving entire audiences in a wonderfully messy happening.” [The festival he was referring to was the *Fluxus – Internationale Festspiele Neuester Musik (Fluxus – International Festival of the Newest Music)* held at the Städtischen Museum Wiesbaden in September of 1962, which is widely considered the first official Fluxus festival.]

Variations for Double-Bass (1962) followed *Paper Piece* and became one of Patterson's most photogenic works. *Variations* called for a solo performer to “agitate strings” of the instrument with a comb and corrugated cardboard, and balance it upside-down on its scroll while rubbing a rubber object against its strings. A typed version of the score for that work is now in the

collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York as part of the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection.

Patterson participated actively in Fluxus events until the early 1970s, when he decided to retire from art-making. Fortunately for the rest of us, Patterson came out of retirement in 1988 with his exhibition, *Ordinary Life*, at Emily Harvey Gallery. Since then, Patterson actively exhibited internationally individually and in collaboration with various Fluxus artists. He also collaborated with Sean Miller through the latter's John Erikson Museum of Art (JEMA). In fact, it was at an JEMA exhibition in Genoa, Italy that *Paper Piece* celebrated its Golden Anniversary on June 4, 2010.

For the latter event, Miller designed a special JEMA gallery with thick walls made of removable sheets of paper. Patterson provided a small crane to assist in the renovation, along with the "Golden Paper Shredder," a paper moon and a copy of Flash Art Magazine. To assist with this important renovation procedure, the JEMA Annex was open and present thanks to the assistance of Alessandra Gagliano Candela, who organized the student performers (Genoa JEMA Annex) from Accademia Ligustica di Belle Arti. [Click here to watch an 8:31 minute video of the Genoa performance.]



For the 10-year retrospective at the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery in 2014, Patterson exhibited a work called *Bollywood: Object of Desire*, which he originally created for JEMA in 2010. The works in the *Bollywood* installation were inspired by Patterson's long interest (since 1954, more or less) in the music and people of India, and informed in particular by his first visit to India in 2008. Contained within the installation are 12 sequential drawings illustrating how to put on a saree. Beneath each depiction, Patterson has included simple and straightforward instructions, beginning with "Hold inner end of the saree with your left hand. Making sure that the saree [is] at floor level, tuck the top border of the inner end into the petticoat." and ending with "Drape on your left shoulder allowing the end piece to fall casually."



Aside perhaps from the exhibition's title, Patterson did not give any clues about his own views regarding the role of women in Hindi society – although he did say at the time he installed the exhibition that he would learn the Hindi language within three years.

But Patterson made his most memorable impact on Southwest Florida art enthusiasts through his performance piece, *Fluxus in the Swamp*. But for more on that, you will need to read the next article, which first appeared on Art Southwest Florida on June 30, 2014.

Patterson was 82 at the time of his death.

Making sense of Ben Patterson's 'Fluxus in the Swamp' performance (07-02-16)

[*This article was first published on Art Southwest Florida on June 30, 2014.*]

To the Fluxus newbie, what transpired in the Rush Auditorium at Florida Southwestern State College last Tuesday evening may have seemed like unadulterated nonsense masquerading as art. Fluxus pioneer Ben Patterson certainly did everything within his power to foster that belief from the outset of his lecture and performances. But *Fluxus in the Swamp* served as a delectable object lesson in the principles espoused by Patterson and the diverse group of visual artists, musicians, writers and performers who came to be associated with the movement that celebrated its silver anniversary in September of 2011.

It all started with a “simple” opera that contained “no profound messages, no great emotions, no heroes or heroines,” and “intellectually ... very little” of anything else. In fact, the musical instruments consisted of little more than rubber alligators struck against crushed aluminum cans. Then after admitting that if you can define it, it's probably not Fluxus anyway, Patterson shared a number of anecdotes about the points that he and his colleagues were trying to make. But it wasn't long before Patterson cut to the chase, maintaining that “the best way to learn about Fluxus is to experience it.” With that said, led those assembled in the Rush Auditorium through an illustrative action poem.

“Think of the number 6,” he instructed. “Bark like a dog. Think of the number 6 twice. Stand. Don't think of the number 6. Sit down. Think of the number 6. Bark again.” And for all intents and purposes, the audience did as told.

Meanwhile, stage left sat four plastic bottles filled with water reprising Yoko Ono's *Invitation to Participate in a Water Event*, in which she invited people to bring containers to her 1971 exhibition, filled the vessels with water, and displayed them in the show as collaborative works of art.

Patterson then launched into a brand new Fluxus score, one he prepared especially for Fort Myers. “Cover shapely female with whipped cream. Lick. Nuts and cherries optional,” he said

before disappearing behind the movie screen that dominated the center of the stage, leaving the tittering audience to indulge their imaginations about what would happen next.

After several minutes, the house lights dimmed and the screen disappeared, revealing an empty black-bottomed banquet table. Patterson (undoubtedly with tongue planted firmly in cheek) pulled out a bicycle pump, attached it to a plastic alligator and began rhythmically inflating the salamander green blow-up pool toy in tune with excerpts from *Tristan and Isolde* by Wagner with Karajan and Jessye Norman on Deutsche Gramophone playing on the Rush Auditorium sound system. Once the shapely female (“you can tell from the fingernails”) had assumed her full fecundity on the crisp white tablecloth in front of him, Patterson unceremoniously (but with some degree of theatrical flair) covered the gator with three cans of whipped cream, cherries and chopped nuts before inviting the audience on stage to dip a salsa chip into the sumptuous feast he had prepared for the occasion.



Making Sense of It All

Patterson would beam with pride at the allegation that *Fluxus in the Swamp* was not real art. After all, he and his fellow Fluxus artists characterized what they did as anti-art. They flatly rejected the notion that museums and art institutions should serve as fine art’s gatekeepers, with the correlative authority, whether actual or perceived, to determine what constitutes art and who qualifies for recognition as artists. They did not just dismiss the elitist world of “high art.” They mocked it. And in keeping with the social climate of the 1960s, they sought out ways in which to bring art to the masses just as Patterson brought art to the Rush Auditorium crowd last Tuesday night.

Events, Happenings and Performance Scores Involved Simple Ideas and Objects

Beginning around 1961, Fluxus artists like Patterson, Joseph Beuys, Yoko Ono and Nam June Paik began creating events, happenings and performances in the United States, Europe and Japan. The “scores” for these events, happenings and performances typically involved simple

ideas (like “think of the number 6, bark, stand, don’t think of the number 6”) that could be performed by anyone at any time in any place.

As Patterson noted during the lecture portion of the evening, some scores utilized simple objects you could find anywhere. For example, George Brecht’s *Water Yam* (1972) used printed cards, which were packaged into plastic boxes. For *Fluxus in the Swamp*, Patterson used a blow up pool toy that he found in a Fort Myers Beach gift shop. Anything at all can be art. Fluxus artists pioneered the concept popularized by Warhol, Pollock and Damien Hirst that art is whatever an artist says it is.

Playfulness and Humor Key Component

Playfulness and humor have always been a key component of a Fluxus score, and Patterson has a long tradition of using musical instruments and toys in his pieces. One of his most visually arresting works is *Two for Violins (After One for Violin by Nam June Paik)*. The work is composed of two shattered violins and a wooden backing, and it balances exacting arrangement with chaotic shattering. “The work refers to Fluxus visionary Nam June Paik, whom many consider the first video artist,” writes art critic Joseph Campana in *culturemap Houston*. Paik’s 1962 performance *One for Violin* consisted of a performer smashing a violin on a podium. “Patterson pays homage while sculpting elegance from the violence of Paik’s iconoclasm.”

During the lecture, of course, Patterson referenced the most famous (or perhaps infamous) example of humor and playfulness gone awry, namely the time when he, George Maciunas, Dick Higgins, Wolf Vostell and Emmett Williams dismantled a piano with saws, hammers and sledgehammers while performing Philip Corner’s *Piano Activities* at Fluxus Internationale Festspiele Neuester Musik in Weisbaden in 1962. (Photograph by Hartmut, right.) “We weren’t very popular in Wiesbaden,” Patterson quipped last Tuesday night, although he noted that the town went overboard in commemorating Fluxus’ 50th anniversary “with every museum and art institution doing something Fluxus related.”

Audience Participation

Fluxus events almost always included audience participation like the *Fluxus in the Swamp* chips-and-whipped-cream procession. For example, in the 1970 Fluxfest presentation of *John Lennon and Yoko Ono*, Fluxus father George Maciunas made paper masks of John and Yoko for the audience to wear in order to shift the role of the viewer from observer to performer. The use of the audience as the focus of the piece was a logical extension of his idea that, “anything can substitute for art and anyone can do it...the value of art-amusement must be lowered by making it unlimited, mass-produced, obtainable by all and eventually produced by all.”

Rejection of Commodity Status and Monetization of Art

Fluxus artists reacted against the commodity status of art, its commercialization in the gallery system, and its static presentation in traditional institutions. Nevertheless, sometimes a document or artifact from a Fluxus event became a work of art, a material presence that referred to an absent action or previous performance. For example, Alison Knowles’ *Journal of the Identical Lunch* (1971) documents her ritual noontime performances at a New York diner with various

artists and friends, and Dick Higgins' ongoing series, *The Thousand Symphonies*, consisted of musical scores he composed with bullet holes and paint on sheet music. Both now have value in the secondary art market. It remains to be seen whether Patterson's plastic alligator becomes an artifact that takes on a value far beyond the few dollars he paid for the toy because it now relates back to and therefor represents his seminal Fluxus work, *Licking Piece*.

Intermedia

Just as Patterson performed *Fluxus in the Swamp* to classical music, other Fluxus performers regularly incorporated musical compositions, concrete poetry, visual art, and writing, thereby embodying Higgins' idea of "intermedia"- a dialogue between two or more media to create a third, entirely new art form. Fluxus performances also incorporated actions and objects, artists and non-artists, art and everyday life in an attempt to find something "significant in the insignificant." The influence of this highly experimental, spontaneous, often humorous form of performance art prevailed throughout the 1970s and is being rediscovered by a younger generation of artists working today.

Alternative View of Music and Musicality

Because of his classical music training and experience, Patterson made his most significant contributions to Fluxus by offering alternative views of music and musicality. After a brief encounter with John Cage in 1960, Patterson began experimenting with new musical compositions and instruments. For example, in his iconic *Paper Piece* (which was barely mentioned during *Fluxus in the Swamp*), Patterson created a symphony of sounds produced by performers waving, shaking, ripping, wadding and crumpling newspaper and magazine pages. At *Fluxus in the Swamp*, by contrast, Patterson's "spectacle of music" was an operetta in which three student volunteer performers created the accompaniment by rhythmically beating and scraping toy rubber alligators on, over and across semi-crushed aluminum cans.

Fluxus and Yoko Ono

During the Q&A, Patterson was asked by Bob Rauschenberg Director Jade Dellinger to discuss Yoko Ono's contribution to Fluxus. Patterson recalled that Fluxus father George Maciunas often asked her to help him launch various projects. One of those was the first International Festival of New Music which debuted in 1961 at the Staatsmuseum in Wiesbaden, Germany. Widely regarded today as the first official Fluxus event, it featured an all-star cast of Fluxus luminaries including John Cage, Philip Corner, Dick Higgins, Alison Knowles, George Maciunas, Nam June Paik, David Tudor, Emmett Williams, among others. Patterson not only co-organized the event, he is one of its last surviving participants.

Although Patterson did not specifically address it, Yoko's *Play It By Trust* has deep Fluxus roots, tracing itself back to Robert Filliou's *Optimistic Box #3*, which featured a fold-up chess board and identically-looking pieces distinguishable only by the sounds they made when shaken. Ono employed *Play It By Trust* to make a political statement, using all-white pieces to illustrate how, in politics and war, absurdity and chance replace strategy and reason thereby echoing the central Fluxus idea that art (or life) is a game in which the artist reconfigures the rules.

Like Patterson's own scores, Yoko's *Play It By Trust*, *Wish Tree*, *Map Piece* and other works belie scores that can be carried out and performed by anyone, any time and any place – like perhaps her most famous pre-Lennon score, *Breath Piece*, in which she printed the word “Breathe” on the wall punctuated with a period to evoke Marcel Duchamp's claim that he had given up art to become a “respirator” because, as he said, “each breath is a work which is inscribed nowhere.”

Fluxus Died with George Maciunas Not

The New York Times maintained on the 50th anniversary of the International Festival of New Music at the Staatsmuseum in Wiesbaden, Germany that “Fluxus arguably came to an end with the death of Maciunas in 1978. A ‘Fluxfuneral’ was held, as had been requested by Maciunas, and put together by Geoffrey Hendricks, where several Fluxus artists performed. Afterwards there was a ‘Fluxfeast and Wake,’ where, in typical Fluxus fashion, all food was black, white or purple. This was the last major Fluxus event, although smaller episodes are occasionally held, even today.”

But as *Fluxus in the Swamp* demonstrates, the Fluxus message is still alive and well. The influence of Fluxus resonates throughout the arts particularly with present-day incarnations of performance art, land art, and Graffiti/Street art, and those artists, like Banksy, who deliberately work outside established museum systems. And *Yoko Ono Imagine Peace* continues to set attendance records in each venue the show visits.



Patterson's *Paper Piece* and *Bollywood: Object of Desire* are part of *ELEVEN: The John Erickson Museum of Art (JEMA) 10-Year Retrospective* on view now inside Bob Rauschenberg Gallery. Chronicling a decade of highly innovative art projects and often unconventional installations by invited artists, *ELEVEN: The John Erickson Museum of Art (JEMA) 10-Year Retrospective* will mark its final day at the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery (and elucidate the enigmatic/numeric exhibition title) by closing to the public on JEMA's ELEVENTH anniversary on July 25, 2014. For more information, please visit <http://www.RauschenbergGallery.com> or telephone 239-489-9313.
