

Maciunas's Models: Thought in Three Dimensions

You see, the reason I am so concerned with [functionalism] is that that's an architect's training. I mean, that's the way the architect thinks, he thinks in functionalism otherwise he's not an architect, he's a sculptor or a stage designer.¹



George Maciunas's *Prefabricated Building System* was the most literal expression he ever made of his lifelong devotion to functionalism. His commitment to this ideal, which included an equally unwavering concern for efficiency and economy, was immanent in everything Maciunas made, but the *Prefabricated Building System* put these principles to the test. The serene, even elegant appearance of the realized model belies the intricate, obsessive and rigorously engaged planning process through which its form was derived.

Like most other projects Maciunas touched, the model appears today as a refined design object, whose lucid presence all but transcends the exhaustive calculations guiding its utopian aims.



Maciunas's *Prefabricated Building System* (1965) was in fact a critique of an existing system – a late-1950s prefabricated housing model made in the Soviet Union – it was conceived as an alternative to that “solution” and other less efficient designs developed contemporaneously for the same purposes.

Maciunas's building project followed directly on the heels of his scathing critique of several examples of modern architecture written the year prior. Both led up to his most significant feat of architectural planning, the system of co-operative artists' lofts that shaped the area of lower Manhattan called SoHo (then known to the fire department as “Hell's Hundred Acres”), a project Maciunas initiated in 1966 under the banner of the “Fluxhouse Cooperatives.”

¹ George Maciunas, interview with Larry Miller, 1978. Transcript repr. in Jon Hendricks ed., *Fluxus etc./Addenda I. The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection* (New York: Ink &, 1983), 24.

In 1964 Maciunas wrote “The Grand Frauds of Architecture: M. v. d Rohe, Saarinen, Bunshaft, F. L. Wright,” a diatribe criticizing the preeminent modernist architects for betraying their own principles. Maciunas put the case that in the Chicago Lake Shore Drive apartment project Mies had travestied the glass curtain wall, rendering it mere decoration, when he incorporated a structural wall behind the gridded glass shell. Wright, for his part, had positioned the windows of the Guggenheim museum at eye level, compromising the very purpose of the building – to display art in ideal viewing conditions – and necessitating an unforeseen additional lighting system. The list went on. Maciunas argued that the ideals of functionalism had been undermined in numerous ways by the architects’ moves to privilege the aesthetic aspects of their designs. He condemned these modern architects for having become mere “stage designers.” Cuauhtémoc Medina has argued that Maciunas “was right in sensing that buildings such as the Guggenheim Museum signaled the crisis of the functionalist paradigm of modern architecture, for they implicitly recorded the changes that the Western capitalist economy was undergoing at the end of the 1950s.” Medina calls Maciunas’s critique “an attempt to contain the changes that architectonic and design values were suffering under the pressures of contemporary capitalism,” and, perhaps, “an eccentric reading of the emergence of consumerist society.”²

What we see in the realization of Maciunas’s *Prefabricated Building System* of modular units is the existing evidence of Maciunas’s serious attempt to define an efficient, flexible, adaptable and economical proposition for mass housing. He intended to improve upon the Russian model – of which three million units had been built in the year 1960 – the example he saw as the most efficient in the world at that time. As Medina describes it:

Maciunas designed an ingenious prefabricated building system composed of only nine mass-produced components, most to be produced in modern plastic materials. Except for a “Service Cubicle” that integrated kitchen, bathroom, and heating facilities, the system allowed its user a maximum of flexibility and functional adaptation, from private homes to offices and public buildings, and was always easy to expand, contract, or reshape.³

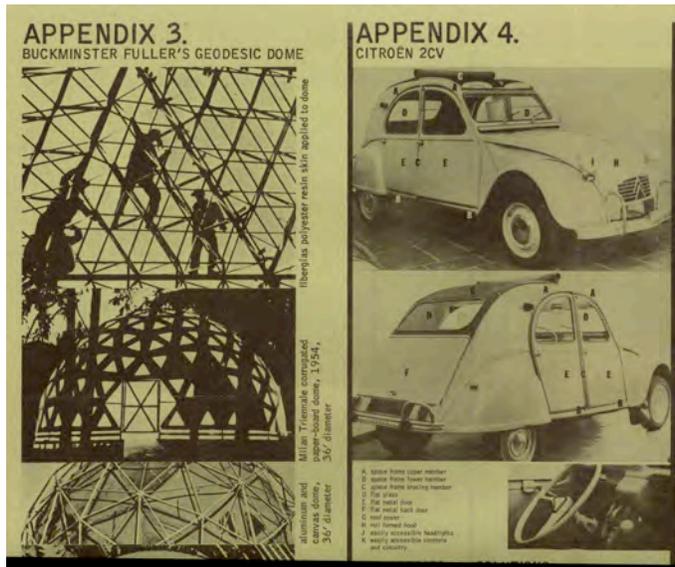
Because of the many non-structural walls, and their pragmatic placement, residents had the choice of translucent or transparent exterior walls, to define their own light and temperature

² Cuauhtémoc Medina, “Architecture and efficiency: George Maciunas and the economy of art,” *Res*, No. 45, Spring 2004, 276.

³ Medina, “Architecture and efficiency: George Maciunas and the economy of art,” 280.

conditions, and the choice to adapt the interior spaces according to usage, by sliding the interior walls to create a range of spatial configurations. The result was the prospect of a home whose form took on the prioritization of its uses. Still created from the most cost-effective means, it could be differentiated by individual dwellers.

The plans for Maciunas's *Prefabricated Building System* were first published in a 1965 pamphlet called "Communists Must Give Revolutionary Leadership in Culture," mostly conceived and written by Henry Flynt, and designed by Maciunas.⁴ Maciunas's utopian goals fit well in this context. The pamphlet conducted a systematic appraisal of the political and social implications of contemporary design within the apparatus of culture spanning an extraordinary spectrum of fields from architecture, to music, and from cars to film. At the height of the burgeoning commodity culture of the mid-1960s this was a rare analysis to conduct. Such a programmatic, politicized working through of the way in which design shapes the life of the individual is unparalleled in that moment and perhaps even unprecedented.⁵



⁴ Henry Flynt, *Communists Must Give Revolutionary Leadership in Culture*, (New York: Worldview Publishers, 1965).

⁵ We are speaking here of the American context. It was, of course, a central feature of Soviet Productivism of the 1920s, of which Maciunas was a devotee.

polemical aims in this context, Maciunas’s graphic expression of the data, his columned, diagrammatic charting of all the critical considerations, the pros and cons of various approaches and design decisions, and the criteria for critique, also formed the very basis by which Maciunas *organized* Fluxus. In the same year Maciunas drafted a “manifesto” or mission statement for Fluxus organized into a column-based chart, with “Art” on one side, and on the other side, as opposed to, say, “Architecture” – the non-function of art versus the functionalism of architecture – Maciunas placed “Fluxus Art-Amusement.” Fluxus was positioned to counter the status of art, to pit unpretentiousness against pretension, inclusiveness against exclusivity, new distribution forms against institutional dependence, mass-production against uniqueness, and so on. Like the chart-based questioning of the *raison d’être* of various building systems, the politics of Fluxus were brought into evidence by the formal juxtaposition and quantification of attributes characterizing the status of the art object.

<p>ART</p> <p>To justify artist’s professional, parasitic and elite status in society, he must demonstrate artist’s indispensability and exclusiveness, he must demonstrate the dependability of audience upon him, he must demonstrate that no one but the artist can do art.</p>	<p>FLUXUS ART-AMUSEMENT</p> <p>To establish artist’s nonprofessional status in society, he must demonstrate artist’s dispensability and inclusiveness, he must demonstrate the selfsufficiency of the audience, he must demonstrate that anything can be art and anyone can do it.</p>
<p>Therefore, art must appear to be complex, pretentious, profound, serious, intellectual, inspired, skillfull, significant, theatrical, it must appear to be valuable as commodity so as to provide the artist with an income. To raise its value (artist’s income and patrons profit), art is made to appear rare, limited in quantity and therefore obtainable and accessible only to the social elite and institutions.</p>	<p>Therefore, art-amusement must be simple, amusing, unpretentious, concerned with insignificances, require no skill or countless rehearsals, have no commodity or institutional value.</p> <p>The value of art-amusement must be lowered by making it unlimited, massproduced, obtainable by all and eventually produced by all.</p> <p>Fluxus art-amusement is the rear-guard without any pretention or urge to participate in the competition of "one-upmanship" with the avant-garde. It strives for the monostructural and nontheatrical qualities of simple natural event, a game or a gag. It is the fusion of Spikes Jones, Vaudeville, gag, children’s games and Duchamp.</p>

Like the adding of dimensions, which occurs in the trajectory from score to performance, or in architecture, from plan to model to building, the pamphlet likewise took on a materiality that evoked its *projection* of ideals. Through Maciunas’s design it embraced a “concretism,” as the two-dimensional document came to be realized in three dimensions.⁶ Departing from the basis of its graphic layout the document demonstrated its purposes through *taking on object status*, and with this it acquired a dimension of “functionalism.” In Maciunas’s final presentation, the

⁶ Maciunas defines his term “concretism” – inspired perhaps by Experimental Composition and the work of Cage but diverging toward his own ends – in his interview with Larry Miller; repr. in Jon Hendricks, *Fluxus etc./ Addenda I*, op. cit. As Medina explains, Maciunas’s use of the term “concretism” relates to his use of the concept of “functionalism.” See Medina, “Architecture and efficiency,” 275. Both are mobilized to critique the status of art, which Maciunas calls a “non-functional commodity.”

broadsheet page was folded such that its top surface revealed the title section. This was then sandwiched between pieces of expanded polystyrene and plastic layers on the top and bottom – both were elements required to demonstrate the lightweight materials used in Maciunas’ *Prefabricated Building System* – equipping the document with protection and a clear surface and casing that could serve as a mailing container. Like his tireless fabrication of Fluxus objects as “anti-commodities,” the pamphlet’s packaging was no less serious a statement on ethical, efficient production than the grand plan of Maciunas’s *Prefabricated Building System*.

Now coming to be understood to be one of the most significant artistic figures of the 1960s, George Maciunas was rare in integrating design into art in a highly specific manner: using design as his very *medium*. The force of this strategy – propelled by the logic of architecture and its critique of non-function – meant that design both mediated and generated Maciunas’s critique of the accelerating commodity status of the art object. In the astute deployment of “design” in all its complexity, not as merely a referent of art but as an integral *medium*, Maciunas’s only real peer was Andy Warhol. Benjamin Buchloh has described the Brillo boxes as “120 wood simulacra made by Warhol (and/or his assistants),” noting the Pop artist’s matter-of-fact recognition that the new status of the art object would “imply a transformation of the artist’s role.”⁷ Maciunas’s utterly unprecedented function in the *production* of Fluxus – less artist than *designer* – reveals that he also had recognized this development. But if the *Prefabricated Building System* can tell us anything at all about Maciunas’s overall project, it is that the founder of Fluxus – for all his “factory production” and hyper-designed “anti-commodities” – never produced “simulacra.” In a move that may soon appear as having a significance on the level of Duchamp’s initial critique of the art object in the age of mass production (the readymade), Maciunas did not simulate commodities, perhaps more radically, he fused the work of art and the commodity (oppositely to Warhol), and created a counter-model with which we have yet fully to reckon. Still, there is one aspect of this we can now glimpse, as never before, with the realization of the model for the *Prefabricated Building System*: the extent to which Maciunas’s training, his internalization of *the logic of architecture*, with all its uncompromising formal exigencies, provided him with the

⁷ This account of simulacra is in the context of the encounter of James Harvey, the actual designer of the Brillo logo (also an artist, increasing the irony), discovering Warhol’s versions of the box design as art in the Stable Gallery. See Benjamin Buchloh, “Andy Warhol’s One-Dimensional Art,” in Kynaston McShine ed., *Andy Warhol: A Retrospective* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1989), 41.

fundaments of one of the most profoundly original artistic critiques of the postwar period, and the singular critical stance that defined “Fluxus.”

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May, 2008