

Heike Roms, Drama, University of Exeter

### When Fluxus Came to West Wales: A re-search in 12 actions—or, does a network have a margin?

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2007. Leafing through *Imaging Wales*, a book on contemporary Welsh art, I come across the following lines: 'Visual performance has always been very strong in Wales. It is not generally known that Fluxus events occurred and that there was a Fluxus Festival in Aberystwyth...' (Adams 2003: 27).

#### **What's Welsh for performance art?**

For more than a decade I have been charting the emergence and early development in the 1960s and 1970s of those art practices we have come to call—with a catch-all term—performance art: Happenings, Fluxus events, destruction art, action art, body art and others like them. I have done so in the context of Wales, a small, bilingual country of about three million people situated on the western edge of the British Isles. My interest lies in the early history of 'performance art in Wales', and not principally in 'Welsh performance art'. The difference is subtle but important: it is not my primary aim to unearth a specific Welsh manifestation of performance work that was somehow aesthetically distinct from developments elsewhere. Rather, the research seeks to explore how 'even' beyond the established centres of the avant-garde in what is assumed to have been marginal cultural contexts—such as that of Wales in the 1960s and 1970s—art making profoundly changed under the influence of the performance-based approaches to artistic experimentation that emerged during the latter half of the twentieth century. It is the negotiations that took place between transnational artistic influences

and their channels and networks of circulation and exchange on the one hand and the local conditions of making on the other that interest me (Roms 2011).

To learn that Wales had a historical connection with Fluxus, arguably the most important artistic network of the 1960s, was therefore of great interest to me.

### ***Fluxbritannica***

Britain has occupied an odd place in the history of Fluxus. No British artist was ever a member of the Fluxus core group. And while throughout the 1960s and early 1970s Fluxus events were staged in many European cities on both sides of the Iron Curtain, only three of note happened in the UK that have been acknowledged in the literature, and each one of these was somewhat uncharacteristic. Britain had its first experience of Fluxus in the autumn of 1962, when London became one of the stops in that remarkable first wave of Fluxus events that criss-crossed Northern and Western Europe over the span of a mere few months. In October of that year London's Gallery One opened the *Festival of Misfits*, and its title proved to be apt, as the event was indeed a bit of a misfit. While it included many of the artists affiliated with Fluxus (Robert Filliou, Dick Higgins, Arthur K pcke, Alison Knowles, Ben Vautier and Emmett Williams; alongside Gustav Metzger, Robin Page and Daniel Spoerri), its principal form was not that of a concert, the Fluxus format of choice at the time (although there was an evening of 'action music' at the Institute of Contemporary Arts that accompanied it). Instead, *Festival of Misfits* was a two-week long, gallery-based exhibition that featured mainly participatory, object-centred environments and installations. It had also not been organized by Fluxus's central coordinator, George Maciunas, but by Nouveau R alists Spoerri. And while the *Festival of Misfits's* influence on the young generation of British artists at the time is well documented (Glew and Hendricks 1994), it would take exactly ten years before another large-scale Fluxus event was mounted in Britain. The *Fluxshoe* exhibition of 1972–3, which toured several British cities, showed the work of more than 100 artists, the majority of whom, however, even if sympathetic to its spirit, were not closely allied to the Fluxus network. In the decade between these two key exhibitions, only one other British event that used Fluxus scores has been widely known: the *Little Festival of New Music* was staged in 1964 at London's Goldsmiths' College by John Cale—later of the Velvet Underground—who was then a student at the college.

To learn that another historical Fluxus event may have taken place in Britain was therefore of great interest to me.<sup>1</sup>

### **Aberystwyth in flux**

At the time of learning of its Fluxus past, I had only recently moved to Aberystwyth to take up a post as a lecturer in performance studies at the university there. A modest town of about 13,000 inhabitants, perched on the western coast of Britain at the end of the railway line, Aberystwyth is reached by a dozen trains a day that make the three-hour journey from Birmingham, except when the water-level in the nearby Dyfi Estuary rises and floods the single track. It is a pretty cosmopolitan place nowadays, connected to the wider world through many research and communication networks. Yet—being a two-hour drive away from the next large city—it can still feel remote.

To learn that Aberystwyth's connections to the world once delivered it a festival of Fluxus was therefore of great interest to me.

### **When Fluxus came to West Wales: A re-search in 12 actions**

Here follows a brief account of the various efforts I undertook to find out about Aberystwyth's Fluxus past. I have laid these out—Fluxus-style—in the form of twelve actions.

#### **Action 1: Send an email**

May 2007

Heike Roms to Hugh Adams, author of *Imaging Wales*:

'I read in your book of a Fluxus festival in Aberystwyth but have found as yet no trace of it... I'd be grateful for any lead, trace or memory, however small and insignificant.'

Hugh Adams to Heike Roms:

'I'm not going to be of much help I'm afraid as I was away from Wales for so many years. I can only suggest a trawl through the local press...'

Various such trawls, physical and online, turn up nothing, and with no known date or any other specific detail for the event I have to abandon the search for the time being.

## **Action 2: Visit an archive**

From my research diary:

7 January 2008. London. Check into the Tate Archive. Early signs of flu setting in—beginning to feel rather sick. No sign of the Breakwell poster I had pre-ordered. I go for a late lunch. When I return, the archivist tells me that they couldn't find the poster and that it must have been misplaced. We joke about this being the item for which I had travelled all the way from Wales to London. Maybe he feels sorry for me, but he asks me what my project is. When I tell him, he suggests that the archive holds some material about Fluxus performances at Aberystwyth. Apparently, it is as yet uncatalogued, but he kindly offers to look it up for me tomorrow. When I get back to my desk, I realize that the Breakwell poster had been there waiting all along... must be the flu.

8 January 2008. I am so sick today that my nose won't stop running—big drops keep falling off it and on to the table. I am trying my hardest to disguise it, so I don't get thrown out for contaminating the records. The archivist from yesterday has kept his promise and appears with a box of ephemera left by an artist called Brian Lane. I am so excited, I am actually trembling... or maybe it is my physical fever mixing with my archive fever.

## **The Archive Box**

*TGA 20003 Lane—Rainbow Day, Brian Lane and the First Dream Machine, Aberystwyth Arts Festival 1968 (73 pieces)*

The archive box handed to me that day by Adrian Glew, head of Tate Archive and an expert on British Fluxus, contained notes, publicity materials and extensive correspondence between Brian Lane, a little-known London-based artist, and the organizers of the Aberystwyth Arts Festival of 1968. From these ephemera emerged the following story:

In November of 1968, Brian Lane came to Aberystwyth with his group of collaborators, announced as 'Rainbow Day, Brian Lane and the First Dream Machine', to stage a three-day programme of experimental art in the town. Lane, who ran a gallery and small printing press in London, apparently maintained extensive contacts with the international artistic community, especially with artists working in experimental music, concrete poetry and Fluxus. He had been invited to the Aberystwyth Arts Festival by its organizing committee, made up of students from the university. They stated in their invitation to Lane that they were looking to 'revitalise the Festival by pushing the idea of Art as Fun, Art as something to be enjoyed'. In response, Lane devised an ambitious programme for the Welsh town: a twelve-hour concert of electronic music (including works by composers Karlheinz Stockhausen and Pierre Henry), an international graphic poetry exhibition, a session of performance events advertised as 'Total Theatre' and an evening of experimental film.

Lane's archived papers reveal the many difficulties he encountered in his efforts to take avant-garde art practice from swinging London to a small Welsh town, albeit one with a vibrant activist political scene. A 'fire event' that was to illuminate Aberystwyth's beach had to be cancelled due to prohibitively high insurance premiums—allegedly inflated because rumours had spread that local landlords would use the opportunity for committing an insurance fraud and burn down their unwanted seaside properties. The university authorities withdrew at short notice their consent to a planned evening of experimental films as it was to include art movies that had not been passed by the censor. In place of the cancelled film night, Lane hastily put together an alternative event: the *Fluxconcert by and for Fluxus*, staged on 28 November in Aberystwyth's Parish Hall. According to a programme kept among Lane's papers, the concert featured the First Dream Machine's interpretations of now classic Fluxus scores by artists including George Maciunas, George Brecht, Ben Vautier, Robert Watts and Mieko Shiomi. Lane had most likely acquired these directly from the artists themselves: he boasts in a note that 'as a result of our forming a London "branch" of the FLUXUS group we have had made available to us many of the scripts and scores' (Lane 1968).

I had found my Aberystwyth Fluxus festival.

But while such a comprehensive archival find may seem like it should be the end of a search, it is often in fact just the beginning. The more evidence there is of an event, the more evident become the gaps within this evidence. Lane's letters, plans and leaflets were beautifully designed promises of events to

come, but there was only scant information about which of his intentions were actually realized. There was also little information on how they were realized: How long was the concert? Was there an intermission? How many performers were involved? How were the scores interpreted? Were objects being used? Sounds? Projections? No photos, slides, film or audio recordings were included in the box.

### **Action 3: Trawl through newspapers**

Now equipped with a date, I manage to locate an extensive review of Lane's three-day mini festival published in *The Guardian*. It suggests that its largely student audience had very different ideas of what constituted 'Art as Fun'. Responses ranged reportedly from bemused to outwardly hostile, culminating in someone setting fire to Lane's graphic poetry exhibition (not the kind of fire event Lane must have had in mind). But in the end not even arson could hold the students' interest for long, so that the evening of Total Theatre had to be cut short because no one came to see it. It was the Fluxus event that seemed to have been the most successful. *The Guardian* reviewer recounts that the 'Flux Concert was a real success.... We pull crackers, burst bags, howl. Somebody chases his mate around the parish hall to hit him.... Brian throws us another set of instructions: Caution, Art Corrupts' (Hall 1968).

The article, however, is more interested in sketching a portrait of a somewhat heady mixture of avant-garde fervour, drunken students, Welsh language radicalism and conservative town politics than it is in the aesthetic choices made by the artists. And, so, the archived evidence for the Aberystwyth Fluxconcert hovers somewhere between Lane's anticipation of an event-yet-to-occur and the newspaper's coverage of its aftermath. What again is largely absent from it is evidence for the event itself.

### **Action 4: Write to an artist**

Brian Lane died in 1990. I write to Mo Tingey, Lane's former partner and one of the Fluxconcert's performers. We meet up for a delightful conversation about artists' networks in the 1960s. But her only memories of Aberystwyth are of a very long and icy trip from London to West Wales in a rusty van.

### **Action 5: Write to an institution**

I write to Aberystwyth's university library with a request to access the institution's administrative records of 1968. They reply to inform me that no relevant material from that year has been kept.

### **Action 6: Trawl through newspapers 2**

I search through back copies of Aberystwyth's student newspaper for reviews of the Fluxconcert. I find only one mention: a letter to the editor, which complains about the waste of money on 'what must be the largest confidence trick ever put over in Aber'. No further details are supplied.

### **Action 7: Search for a photograph**

I contact *The Guardian* in an attempt to find the photographer who worked on the 1968 review, which featured an image of the empty Parish Hall. But the paper holds no records on his whereabouts, and none of the photos he took at Aberystwyth have survived in the paper's archive. I manage to track down a local photographer who covered many of Aberystwyth's student events of the period, but he has lost all of his negatives in the 1970s, when a hot water tank burst and flooded his loft.

### **Action 8: Search for an eyewitness 1**

Aberystwyth's weekly newspaper, the *Cambrian News*, publishes an article about my research with a request for eyewitnesses to come forward. I humiliate myself by having a terribly cheesy photograph taken of me under the headline 'Back to the wacky sixties', about which my colleagues tease me for weeks. But no eyewitnesses get in touch.

### **Action 9: Search for an eyewitness 2**

I write a letter to Aberystwyth graduates of the late 1960s and circulate it with the help of the university's Alumni Office. Eleven people take the trouble to respond, all of them to tell me that they cannot recall an event such as a Fluxconcert ever happening in Aberystwyth. In October 2008 I finally receive an email from a former student who attended the 1968 festival. His only memory of the

Fluxconcert, though, is of it being a very ‘disorganised’ [sic] event. He continues, ‘I will admit I personally enjoyed it as I was very drunk and in pleasant company so the “art” aspect was rather lost on me.’ No further significant memories of the evening remained.

### **Action 10: Perform**

29 November 2008. Exactly forty years and a day after the *Fluxconcert by and for Fluxus* took place in Aberystwyth’s Parish Hall I stage another Fluxconcert in the same location and using the same scores as were used at the preceding event. This was no attempt at a historical reconstruction: the performers—a group of postgraduate students and local artists—performed their own interpretations of the scores, using technology such as mobile phones and data-projection that would have been unavailable to their counterparts forty years before. And yet, the 2008 Fluxconcert is not merely just a further interpretation of a set of Fluxus scores—it is clearly also some kind of a reiteration of the Fluxconcert of 1968: (almost) the same date, the same location, the same order of the same scores.

What emerges from this re-iteration is not necessarily an insight into how the scores were realized in 1968—but how they might have been realized. It revealed, for example, the precise manner in which Lane orchestrated their sequencing: a couple of performer-focused instructions were always followed by a piece addressing the audience as performers, culminating finally in Lane’s own contribution, the *Fluxus Leaflet Concert*, during which a series of leaflets carrying instructions were thrown into the auditorium, transforming the audience, in Lane’s own words, into ‘controlled actors’. In this final piece of the night, the audience’s participation is figured both as an intervention into the terms and politics of what constitutes a work of art and who gets to make it—‘create FLUXmasterpieces’ says the instruction on one of the leaflets—and (in the ‘revolutionary’ year of 1968) as an enticement to take action—‘Build Something Big’ instructs another leaflet.

And, so, we build: a tower made from chairs, its construction accompanied by a cacophony of drums and popping balloons as a frenetic energy takes over. There is a shared sense among us, performers and audience, that we are making present again—even if only temporarily—an energy that was present here before. The eyewitness who had written to me has returned to Aberystwyth especially. He wears one of his outfits from the period for the occasion. In an interview carried out straight after



our performance he suddenly recalls further details—recalled not in spite of but because our staging of the Fluxconcert was different to the First Dream Machine's.<sup>2</sup>

### **Action 11: Interview**

The 2008 Fluxconcert creates the kind of momentum that often follows in the wake of a performance: social networks spring into action and within the span of a few months I have managed to track down most of the former student organizers of the Arts Festival of 1968. Several of them return to Aberystwyth in January 2010 for a group interview—festival organizers Steve Mills, John Osborne, W. Marsland and Jonathan Smith and audience member Ian Wallace—all of whom were studying in the town in the late 1960s. Four decades have passed since they have last seen one another. And the four decades have also diminished their recollection of the event. But the group's sense of context is still acute—our conversation circles around the relationship between radical politics and radical art in the late 1960s, around political networks and the manner in which the energies of 1968 percolated from the streets of the capitals of Europe to a small university campus in West Wales. And it becomes evident that each person's memory of that time is not a fixed entity to be retrieved, but that it is contingent on its interaction with the memories of the others, constructed in and through our conversation that day.

### **Postscript: Does a network have margins?**

In December 1968, after returning to London from Aberystwyth, Brian Lane received a letter from George Maciunas. It contained one of Maciunas' *Fluxnewsletters* (2 December 1968) with the handwritten message, 'Brian, Very good concert you did. Read it in *Guardian*. Keep me informed of your activities.' This is the only evidence that directly connects the Fluxus concert in Aberystwyth at the margins of the British Isles with the international Fluxus network—until 2012 that is, when the research materials I had gathered of the Aberystwyth *Fluxconcert by and for Fluxus* (1968) tour Europe as part of an exhibition celebrating fifty years of European Fluxus Festivals, taking pride of place between the festivals of Aachen (1964) and Amsterdam (1963).<sup>3</sup>

## **(Re-)Action 12: Receive an email**

14 December 2010. An email arrives from Jonathan Smith, one of the former students who took part in the interview:

‘Dear Heike. Amazing! I was just looking through my late mum's photo albums and what should I find, but this! It's the genuine article, dated and even spattered with pink wax droplets from the student mantelpiece... where candles and other paraphernalia created the atmosphere of the epoch. It's me, then, and proves that I was there. With best wishes.’

Attached to the email is a scan of the only photograph I know of to date that documents the *Fluxconcert by and for Fluxus* in Aberystwyth 1968. (Figures 9 and 10: Jonathan Smith at Aberystwyth Fluxconcert 1968)

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## Figures and Captions



Figure 1. Aberystwyth Arts Festival 1968 programme cover. Courtesy of the Steve Mills private collection.



Figure 2. Fluxconcert advertising 1968. Courtesy of the Steve Mills private collection.



Figure 3. Aberystwyth Fluxconcert 1968 ephemera. Courtesy of the Steve Mills private collection.

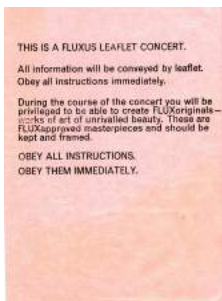


Figure 4. Brian Lane, Fluxus Leaflet Concert 1968. Courtesy of the Steve Mills private collection.



Figure 5. Aberystwyth in Flux (2008). Photo Daniel Ladnar.



Figure 6. Aberystwyth in Flux (2008). Photo Daniel Ladnar.



Figure 7. Aberystwyth in Flux (2008). Photo Daniel Ladnar.



Figure 8. W. Marsland, Jonathan Smith, Steve Mills, John Osborne and Ian Wallace in Aberystwyth 2010. Photo Heike Roms



Figure 9+10. Front and back of photo of Jonathan Smith at Aberystwyth Fluxconcert 1968. Courtesy of the Jonathan Smith private collection.

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed examination of the *Festival of Misfits* see Roms (2012a); for a comprehensive account of Fluxus in Britain see Glew and Hendricks (1994). Glew and Hendricks make reference to the Aberystwyth Fluxconcert, but at the time I was ignorant of Glew's research on it. Glew found further evidence for Fluxus events staged by Lane in London and Essex in 1967 and Liverpool in 1970 (Glew 2001). Additional Fluxus activities in Britain in the late 1960s were, for example, carried out by Yoko Ono and George Brecht, who both at that point resided in the UK.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed examination of the *Fluxconcert by and for Fluxus* see Roms (2012b).

<sup>3</sup> *'The lunatics are on the loose...'*—*European Fluxus Festivals 1962–77*; international touring exhibition 2012–14; curator: Petra Stegman; toured to, for example, Berlin, Copenhagen, Kraków, Paris, Vilnius and Prague.