

# George Maciunas and the *Flux-Labyrinth* (1974/1976):

## Staging a SoHo Way of Life

### Anton Pereira Rodriguez and Wouter Davidts

#### Frieze New York 2015

Ever since the first edition of Frieze New York in 2012, the art fair pays tribute each year to “alternative spaces and artist-run initiatives that have defined and transformed the cultural life of contemporary cities.”<sup>1</sup> In 2013 Frieze New York celebrated FOOD, the artist-run restaurant initiated in 1971 by Gordon Matta-Clark in the neighborhood of SoHo, the old textile industry district South of Houston Street in Downtown Manhattan, New York. For the 2015 edition, Frieze commemorated the *Flux-Labyrinth*, a room-filling installation conceived by the artist George Maciunas in 1974. Not unlike Matta-Clark’s FOOD, Maciunas’s *Flux-Labyrinth* was a project that was firmly rooted in the artists’ colony of SoHo. Whereas the 2015 recreation of the original *Flux-Labyrinth* included many of the original sections, it also included sections designed by contemporary artists.<sup>2</sup> “Hidden among the grid of galleries,” the reconstruction of the labyrinth was promoted as “a space in which to play and discover a new awareness of our bodies.”<sup>3</sup> Any additional information about the historical genesis and meaning of the project by Maciunas, however, was not provided, preventing visitors to the fair from discovering the interrelatedness with the Fluxus movement in general, and with the urban realm of SoHo in the late 1960s and early 1970s in particular.<sup>4</sup>

By returning to the first built iteration of the labyrinth during *New York – Downtown Manhattan – SoHo*, a 1976 exhibition dedicated to the artistic hotbed of SoHo at the Akademie der Künste in Berlin, curated by the German art dealer René Block, this essay aims to disclose that the labyrinth functioned as more than a mere funhouse.<sup>5</sup> Teeming with all kinds of obstacles that visitors had to overcome, the *Flux-Labyrinth* was invariably devised as an intricate experience of the SoHo way of life.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the genesis of the project, we will argue, was firmly grounded in Maciunas's pioneering activities in the transformation of "Hell's Hundred Acres" into the "Artists' Colony" known as SoHo. Whereas Maciunas's efforts for the *Fluxhouse Cooperatives* are generally understood as separate from his artistic practice, this essay aims to demonstrate that the role and position of the *Flux-Labyrinth* within the Berlin exhibition establishes a direct parallel between this groundbreaking installation and Maciunas's Fluxhouse projects.<sup>7</sup>

## Fluxus Community in SoHo

Historically the Fluxus movement is intimately connected with New York. Many of the artists that would later become involved in Fluxus—George Brecht, Dick Higgins, and Jackson Mac Low, among others—met for the first time at John Cage's class at the New School for Social Research in New York City in late 1959 and 1960.<sup>8</sup> The performances by La Monte Young at Yoko Ono's loft on Chambers Street in Downtown Manhattan between December 1960 and May 1961, as well as the exhibitions at the A/G Gallery of George Maciunas on Madison Avenue in Uptown New York in 1961, are generally considered to have laid the foundations for the Fluxus movement.<sup>9</sup> The free and loose group of individuals that would constitute Fluxus, however, was primarily formed in Europe, following Maciunas's departure from New York after the bankruptcy of his A/G Gallery in the fall of 1961. Soon joined by Alison Knowles and Dick Higgins, Maciunas started to organize festivals with like-minded artists such as Emmett Williams, Ben Patterson, Nam June Paik, and Ben Vautier, the most famous being the *Fluxus Internationale Festspiele Neuester Musik* in September 1962 in the auditorium of the Städtischen Museum in Wiesbaden, Germany.<sup>10</sup> Upon Maciunas's return to New York City in 1963, the activities of such artists as George Brecht, La Monte Young, and Yoko Ono, who remained in New York City, also came to be identified as "Fluxus."<sup>11</sup>

Whereas the A/G Gallery had been located in Uptown New York, Maciunas opted for SoHo as the prime locus of Fluxus after his homecoming in the fall of 1963. Upon the suggestion of his artist friend Jonas Mekas, he renovated a space at 359 Canal Street.<sup>12</sup> Maciunas converted the second floor into a center dedicated solely to Fluxus activities, which he called the *Fluxhall* and the *Fluxshop*, and where the first American *Fluxfestival* was held in April 1964.<sup>13</sup> The basement, so his mother recalled, was somewhat unsuccessfully turned into a living space for her and Maciunas himself:

*He covered the floor of his basement with a series of wide plastic strips, but all this was impractical and not genuine and he promised to make a floor and a ceiling. Dust and sand fell off the girders onto the floor. Mice darted about.*<sup>14</sup>

Since Maciunas is mostly remembered as the leading artist in Fluxus, it is often overlooked that he was trained as an architect, social planner, and interior designer at the Cooper Union School of Arts.<sup>15</sup> Maciunas's architectural background was mostly manifested in his constant striving for functionalism. In a chart, relying on his brief experience at the highly renowned office of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, he accused Gordon Bunshaft and other modernist architects of "inefficient use of materials under an illusion of efficiency."<sup>16</sup> His concern for the pervasive waste of valuable resources undoubtedly informed his persistent engagement with the living and working conditions of artists in SoHo in the mid-1960s. When Maciunas returned to New York in 1963, he came back to a city that was not exactly artist-friendly. Until 1964 a zoning law prohibited living and working in the many warehouses and factories that remained vacant after small industries had left the city. Few artists were earning enough money to comply with the requirement to rent a studio in addition to a living place.<sup>17</sup> For those who did illegally reside in lofts, many endured harsh living conditions, as very few of these spaces had hot water or heating, given their original industrial purpose. At the same time they also risked prosecution. To regulate the situation, the United States Government drafted an Experimental Housing Bill in 1964 that allowed artists to purchase their studios and workshops in the SoHo district, and even provided opportunities to acquire federal funding to turn these workspaces into living spaces.

Inspired by the new bill, Maciunas developed an interest in buying large industrial buildings in the area between Houston and Canal Street in order to convert them into cooperative housing and studios for artists, so-called artist co-ops, in late 1966.<sup>18</sup> In the *Fluxnewsletter* of March 8, 1967, the artist announces the *Fluxhouse Cooperatives*. Fully in line with the Fluxus concept of collectivity as well as social and political engagement, this initiative had to "bridge the gap between the artist community and the surrounding society."<sup>19</sup> To that end, *Fluxhouse Cooperatives* would rent out spaces to artists at an affordable price, as well as offer an array of collective facilities:

*Fluxshop will be located in one of these buildings, we will have a permanent hall for performances. Most Fluxuspeople from New York will be housed in these buildings... and we will have much better workshop facilities there.*<sup>20</sup>

The first building Maciunas acquired, located at 16-18 Greene Street, was meant to become a big "Flux Amusement Center" called "16 Greene St. Precinct" and housing, among other things, a discotheque, "Fluxshop," game machines, and a play area with seesaw, swings, and a trampoline.<sup>21</sup> Due to objections from other cooperative members, this project was never realized.<sup>22</sup> In August 1967, however, Maciunas succeeded in opening *Fluxhouse*

*Cooperative II* at 80 Wooster Street. Robert Watts was one of the first residents, and Jonas Mekas opened his Filmmakers' Cinematheque on the ground floor of this building.<sup>23</sup>

Both Maciunas and Mekas are widely considered responsible for turning SoHo into a prime locus for art activity in the late 1960s and early '70s.<sup>24</sup> Because the installation of the cinematheque as well as the cooperative met with fierce resistance from the City of New York, Mekas called a meeting of artists from the neighborhood, eventually leading to the formation of the SoHo Artists Association.<sup>25</sup> *Fluxhouse Cooperatives* thus not only played a major role in legalizing loft living, it also acted as a platform for the development of the 1960s avant-garde art in New York City.

By June 1968 Maciunas had established no less than a total of eleven cooperative units involving seventeen buildings.<sup>26</sup> His efforts to establish the artist co-ops did not occur without struggles, however, both internal and external. To gather funds for acquiring new buildings, Maciunas deployed his principle of "collectivism," using members' deposits to buy new buildings. This system, which was initially unknown to the co-op members, was soon rejected by many residents, who eventually even rose up against Maciunas. In a newsletter dated December 21, 1967, the artist declares:

*I did not mind doing all this [managerial work] free of charge if it was going to advance the selfless spirit of collectivism. Unfortunately, it did nothing of the sort. As soon as opportunity presented itself, the collective spirit fell apart—members selfishly promoting their own interests at the expense of the cooperative and separate cooperatives promoting their interests at the expense of the entire collective. [...] THUS: ... I will stop giving free time and advice on all matters relating to architecture, electrical engineering, management, accounting, carpentry, building code, contractors, supplies, etc...<sup>27</sup>*

But of greater importance were Maciunas's battles with the authorities. Because the artist did not always comply with building renovation regulations, he eventually faced an investigation by the New York State Attorney General in 1974. To defend himself against harassment by the Attorney General, Maciunas fortified his living spaces in the basement of 80 Wooster Street. In the *Fluxnewsletter* of May 3, 1975, Maciunas describes his stronghold:

*Flux-fortress (for keeping away the marshals & police: various unbreakable doors with giant cutting blades facing out, reinforced with steel pipe, braces, camouflaged doors, dummy and trick doors and ceiling hatches, filled or backed with white powder, liquids, smelly extracts. Funny messages behind each door, real escape hatches and tunnels leading to other floors, vaults etc., various precautions in entering and departing flux-fortress [sic].<sup>28</sup>*

In addition to shoring up his living quarters, Maciunas also sent picture postcards to Fluxus friends in countries all over



Fig. 1. Entrance to Jonas Mekas' Anthology Film Archives at 80 Wooster Street, where it was located between 1974 and 1979. © Jonas Mekas.

the world, asking them to mail these back to the Attorney General in order to confuse and make it look like he was continuously someplace else. All artifacts stemming from this combat were to be gathered in *Flux Combat between G. Maciunas & Attorney General of New York 1975–76*, an unpublished but well-documented project in the Fluxus Codex.<sup>29</sup> An equally important yet less direct mediation of Maciunas's battle against the authorities to create appropriate living and working quarters for artists in SoHo, we would like to argue here, is the collective *Flux-Labyrinth* project that the artist conceived in the very same year of the investigation.

FURTHER PROPOSAL FOR FLUX-MAZE, AT RENÉ BLOCK GALLERY, JANUARY 1975  
Any proposal from participants should fit the maze format, 3 feet wide x 8 ft high walls, 11 ft high ceiling, 35 ft long passage.  
How should maze be created through doors, steps, obstacles, etc.  
Proposals from participants should be submitted to George Maciunas, POB 100, New York 10013, before November 1975, 1975

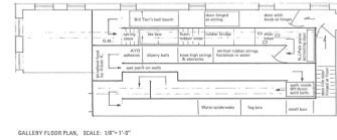


Fig. 2. Maciunas's proposal for the *Flux-Maze*. © George Maciunas, courtesy Archiv Block, Berlin.

## *Flux-Labyrinth*

The first design for the *Flux-Labyrinth* dates from 1974, when German art dealer René Block, who had met Maciunas for the first time around 1972 at Nam June Paik's loft in New York, invited the artist for a show at the gallery space he had opened on the second floor of 409 West Broadway, also in 1974. An early admirer of Fluxus, Block had already organized many performances by Paik, George Brecht, Bob Watts, and others at his gallery space in West Berlin since its opening in 1964.<sup>30</sup> Maciunas, in true Fluxus spirit, proposed a collective work.<sup>31</sup> The gallery would be turned into a labyrinth, then still entitled *Flux-Maze*, to which several artists were invited to contribute. Departing from a detailed floor plan drawn by Maciunas, the artists were asked to devise a specific section:

*Any proposal from participants should fit the maze format, 3 foot wide x 8 ft high walls, 11 ft high ceiling, 35 ft long passage. Ideas should relate to passage through doors, steps, floor, obstacles, booths.*<sup>32</sup>

Proposals were made by Larry Miller, Nam June Paik, Ay-O, Alison Knowles, Bob Watts, Joe Jones, and Geoff Hendricks. Due to various reasons, including Maciunas's urban activism and ensuing trouble with the Attorney General, as well as with Mafia-affiliated real estate organizations, the *Flux-Maze* was never realized.<sup>33</sup>

Upon Block's initiative the *Flux-Maze*, now called *Flux-Labyrinth*, was effectively built in September 1976 for the exhibition *New York – Downtown Manhattan – SoHo* at the Akademie der Künste in Berlin. Within the framework of the Berliner Festspielen, then centered on the United States Bicentennial in 1976, René Block curated an exhibition that focused specifically on the neighborhood of SoHo. In an unpublished letter to Ulrich Eckhardt (the director of the Berliner Festspielen) dated April 19, 1975, René Block justified the focus on SoHo as the subject of his exhibition:

*Probably, nowadays SoHo is the centre of avant-garde western oriented visual arts, par excellence; At least, however, that is what all the arising problems from the underground, unofficial, official or managed avant-garde of contemporary art practice point out.*<sup>34</sup>

Yet, by the time of the exhibition's conception, the SoHo artistic community was already in decline. Following the legalization of loft living, the beautification of SoHo, and the resultant media attention, the area was undergoing rapid transformations in the mid-1970s. With rents skyrocketing and increasing real estate speculation, artists were forced out of the area, causing Block to justifiably worry whether his exhibition would amount to a requiem for a former artists' colony.<sup>35</sup>

Block's criterion for selecting artists for *New York – Downtown Manhattan – SoHo* was strictly geographic. All artists had to live and work within SoHo, no exceptions would be allowed. In his own words, Block resolved "to do something which no Berliner should ever do, namely to act as if SoHo had a wall around it."<sup>36</sup> The aim of the exhibition, however, was not to give a purely aesthetic overview of this neighborhood, but rather to "cover the whole spectrum of life and of human activities as well as the problems of living together."<sup>37</sup> The visitor's guide announced the exhibition as follows:

*This exhibition is not an exhibition of American avant-garde art*

*This exhibition is the portrait of a phenomenon*

*SoHo is a phenomenon*<sup>38</sup>

Some critics pointed out that the Akademie der Künste, located in Berlin's Tiergarten Park, failed to transmit the spirit of SoHo.<sup>39</sup> According to Block himself, the industrial exhibition hall proved perfectly suitable for representing SoHo, because it resembled the area's loft spaces.<sup>40</sup> Block's opinion was shared by a *New York Times* critic, who stated that the exhibition "transformed [Berlin's] modern Academy of the Arts, which has sky-light loft spaces just like lower Manhattan's, into a sort of ersatz SoHo."<sup>41</sup>

Fluxus was given a prime place in the exhibition *New York - Downtown Manhattan - SoHo*, especially since Fluxus, as Peter Frank noted in the exhibition catalogue, was "the earliest conceptual and performance activity to occur between Houston and Canal Streets."<sup>42</sup> Given the additional importance of Maciunas's transformations of abandoned buildings into artist co-ops for the neighborhood's development into an artistic hub, Block wanted to grant Fluxus a commensurate presence in the exhibition.<sup>43</sup> Within the exhibition, the *Flux-Labyrinth* was situated at the right side of the epicenter of the exhibition, in an open space with access to both the inner courtyard of the building, which was devoted to performances and concerts, and a self-service video screening room, as well as a bar with free coffee for visitors.<sup>44</sup> Block mapped out the exhibition *New York - Downtown Manhattan - SoHo* in three sections around the central courtyard, each of which had to present a specific aspect of SoHo. Next to the epicenter, to the left side of the courtyard, Block invited Paula Cooper, SoHo's very first gallerist in 1968, to create a typical SoHo group show.<sup>45</sup> In order to make it look like an authentic SoHo gallery space, the walls of the Akademie der Künste were painted white.<sup>46</sup>

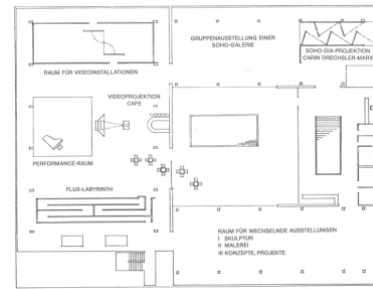


Fig. 3. Exhibition floor plan. © René Block, courtesy Archiv Block, Berlin.

In the same section a slideshow projected images of SoHo's daily life.<sup>47</sup> A final section, at the opposite side of the courtyard, hosted a different exhibition every two weeks. The first of these was devoted to sculpture, the second to painting, and the third to conceptual art. The reason for this alternating exhibition was twofold. Firstly, by changing every two weeks, Block was able to cover almost all art production in SoHo, and secondly, he could give the visitors the impression of the rapid changes in SoHo and its liveliness—a decision that received positive reactions in the local press.<sup>48</sup> Within the overall exhibition, as indicated by a report of a meeting between Block and Eberhard Roters (the director of the Akademie der Künste) in March 1976, the *Flux-Labyrinth* had to constitute a “depiction of the artistic forms of expression specific to the early and classical phase of the evolutions in SoHo, which are summarized in the terms Fluxus and Happening.”<sup>49</sup> Indeed, both materially and spatially, the *Flux-Labyrinth* was deemed crucial for providing visitors with an experience that matched the true spirit of SoHo, all the while demonstrating the very impact of Fluxus on the development of artistic life in SoHo.<sup>50</sup> “Don't think Fluxus is all frivolity,” Grace Glueck noted in 1968 in the *New York Times*, “It is also moving into the neglected field of artists' housing.”<sup>51</sup>

The version of the *Flux-Labyrinth* designed for the exhibition in Berlin adopted the exact same dimensions of René Block's gallery space in New York.<sup>52</sup> Yet, whereas the original design completely filled the available floor space of the gallery, in Berlin it came to occupy the exhibition space as a freestanding volume. To provide the installation with an exterior shell, the exterior walls were covered with life-size pictures of typical SoHo cast-iron architecture. After a first encounter with an image of SoHo, as it were, visitors were then invited to take look behind the facades and enter a labyrinthine *parcours* replete with physical obstacles as well as puzzles.

In a letter to René Block, Maciunas includes a full description and a sketch of the labyrinth's construction. “Enclosed,” Maciunas writes, “is the final plan of labyrinth with a few details which I will describe here starting from entry.”<sup>53</sup> Key to Maciunas's design of the labyrinth was the unidirectional sense of passage.<sup>54</sup> To this end, the artist developed several types of doors, which prevented visitors from retracing their steps. “All doors should be openable from entry side only. the [sic] reverse of them should have no knobs so as not to allow some of the people to return. Anyone entering MUST go through the whole labyrinth.”<sup>55</sup> Many of the different door designs devised by Maciunas for the *Flux-Labyrinth*, such as “door openable through a small trap door, with knob on other side,” “door hinged at center of horizontal axis,” and “door hinged at center of vertical axis,” stemmed from the artist's design for a gathering on May 23–29, 1970, at 80 Wooster Street called *Portrait of John Lennon as a young cloud by Yoko Ono & every participant*, which consisted of a maze of eight doors, each opening in a different manner.<sup>56</sup> Another striking feature of the labyrinth was undoubtedly the so-called “270-degree door,” a door

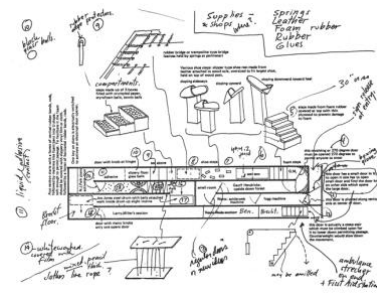


Fig. 4. Drawing of the *Flux-Labyrinth* sent to René Block in July 1976. © George Maciunas, courtesy Archiv Block, Berlin

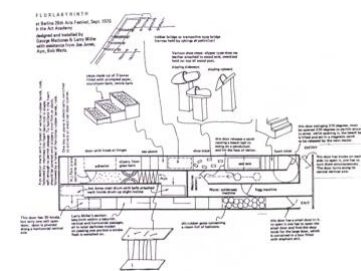


Fig. 5. The final plan of the *Flux-Labyrinth* differs slightly from the initial proposal. © George Maciunas, courtesy Archiv Block, Berlin.

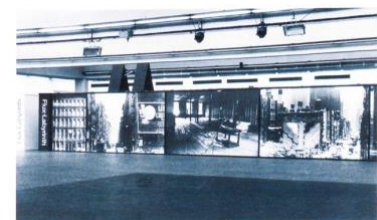


Fig. 6. Outer wall of the *Flux-Labyrinth*. Photo: Hanns Sohm. © Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, Archiv Sohm.



which had to be turned 270 degrees in order to provide passage, openly referencing the pivoting door Marcel Duchamp devised to regulate passage between three rooms in his studio in Paris between 1927 and 1942.<sup>57</sup>

The first difficulty visitors had to overcome was to open the entrance door to the labyrinth. "First door at entry," Maciunas writes to Block, "is one with a small (about 10 cm square) door with its own knob. one [sic] has to open it and pass the hand through, looking for the knob of the big door on other side that will open door." This initial idea of a "door-in-a-door," however, was replaced in the built labyrinth by a single door, co-designed with Miller, pivoting around a central axis, with knobs on each side that people had to turn simultaneously (an action which required some "intelligence"). Instead of providing entry to the labyrinth, the door-in-a-door was placed at the very end. Visitors had to once again reach through a small door in order to find a knob positioned in a box, yet the latter now contained elephant dung. While the decision to use animal excrement can be understood as a token of both typical Fluxus humor and the personal fascination of Maciunas for excrements, it also corresponded to the increasing number of residents in SoHo and the ensuing annoyance of the early occupants with the doubling of "dogshit" on the area's pavements.<sup>58</sup> The presence of the elephant dung apparently was so key to Maciunas's idea about the egress of the *Flux-Labyrinth* that when the excrement was removed without his knowledge, he personally blocked the entrance until a new portion had been procured.<sup>59</sup>

Moreover, this solution for the finale of the labyrinth differed significantly from the initial instructions by Maciunas in his letter to Block. Rather than the terminal door-in-a-door, the artist had first envisaged that "the last door would be a sort of step like fire-escape used in New York. At first it would look like a steep stair leading into the ceiling, but would slowly lower itself when person starts stepping [sic] up on it."<sup>60</sup> In contrast to the more humorous ending of the actual labyrinth, the descending steps brought to mind Maciunas's repeated experiences as an artist and urban activist in fleeing from city authorities or the Mafia.<sup>61</sup>

In general the passage through the labyrinth was made difficult for visitors. In the part designed by Maciunas, situated right after the "270-degree door," visitors had to proceed by putting their feet into slippers that were mounted on wooden elements of various heights:

*These slippers should be mounted on wood posts continuously rising to 50 cm height at the end of the run. They should be placed in various contorted positions, toes sloping down or up, sideways, so as to make the "walk" awkward and difficult but not impossible. There should be something like either water, or upward facing nails or some other dangerous material on the ground below to prevent the walker from just walking on the ground.<sup>62</sup>*

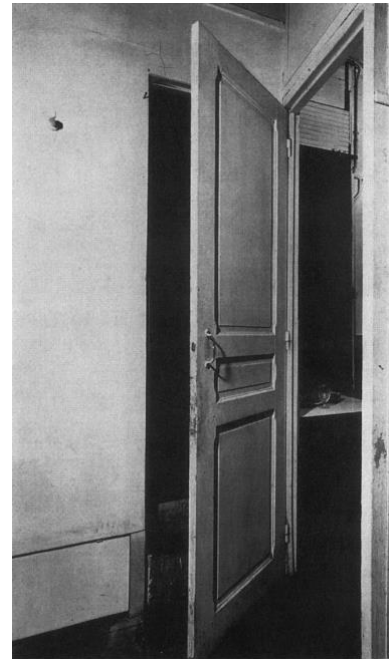


Fig. 7. Marcel Duchamp's studio door. © Marcel Duchamp / Collection Fabio Sargentini, Rome.



Fig. 8. George Maciunas blocking the entrance to the Flux-Labyrinth, Berlin, 1976. The label, produced by Maciunas, reads: "Realized by George Maciunas and Larry Miller. With contributions by Ay- O, George Brecht, Joe Jones, Yoshi Masawada, and (assisted by museum personnel)." © Larry Miller, 1976. Courtesy of Larry Miller.



As German artist and SoHo resident Lil Picard noted in *Kunstforum International*, one could barely come closer to what it meant to be an artist living and working in SoHo. “So the brave clambered over elephant shit and similar obstacles and were thereby supposed to get an idea of how life is in SoHo Manhattan, three thousand miles away.”<sup>63</sup>

Occasionally visitors to the *Flux-Labyrinth* were plagued by a sense of despair and helplessness, caused not in the least by the impossibility of retracing one’s steps. Some distressed visitors did damage to the artwork.<sup>64</sup> A German art critic, out of pure anxiety, even climbed over the walls in order to escape, as he had gotten stuck at some point in the structure.<sup>65</sup> The German Press repeatedly commented on the terrible experience of the labyrinth:

*A particularly notorious piece from the Fluxus movement, an uncanny and frightening labyrinth in which—in complete darkness—one has to balance over marbles, grope through low corridors and explore locked doors, creates panic for many visitors; one feels exposed to a system of terror.*<sup>66</sup>

The interior of the labyrinth staged an experience not unlike what Douglas Davis termed the “smoky and depressive” ambiance of SoHo, superseding by far the literal and explicit representation of SoHo on its exterior through the photographs depicting the typical cast-iron buildings, as well as a replica of the entrance banner to the Anthology Film Archives at 80 Wooster Street.<sup>67</sup> During the 1960s and early ’70s, SoHo, as artist and critic Richard Kostelanetz recently recalled, was a neglected neighborhood. Living in the area was not exactly pleasant, and in fact a rather bothersome affair:

*When I first moved to SoHo, I could convince my mother, living a few blocks north of Houston Street, that my new neighborhood with its trucks and trash-filled streets was too dangerous for her. Thankfully she believed me and never knocked on my door.*<sup>68</sup>

Not unlike the everyday experiences of SoHo dwellers, the labyrinth was meant as a challenge for the visitors to the exhibition.<sup>69</sup> The planned obstacles and constraints approximated the daily difficulties of walking the pavement of any street in SoHo in the early 1970s, as Block recalls:

*In 1972 it was still impossible to move around SoHo on workdays. ... Loading and unloading took place in the much too narrow streets.... Bales of paper, material and leather and barrels of all sizes were being unloaded everywhere all the time, many being dumped on the sidewalk....*<sup>70</sup>

Yet the most direct reference to Maciunas’s personal fates were to be found at the entrance to the labyrinth. While waiting in the line to enter—despite the alarming accounts of some visitors the *Flux-Labyrinth* soon had turned into the main “attraction” of the exhibition—visitors could read a set of instructions about who was allowed entry or not.<sup>71</sup> Among those who were refused, Maciunas listed with a typical sense of Fluxist absurdism, “Representatives of the building supervision or insurance companies” and “People who do

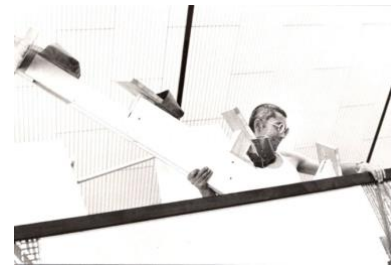


Fig. 9. George Maciunas installing his “Shoe-Steps,” Berlin, 1976. © Larry Miller, 1976. Courtesy of Larry Miller.

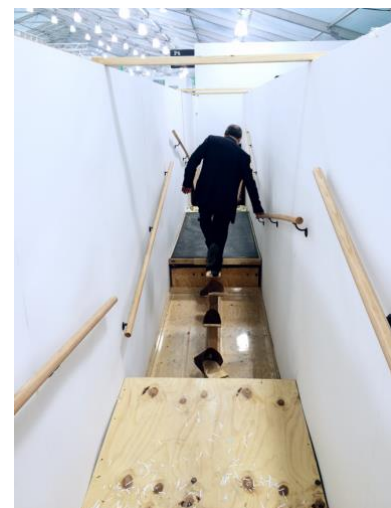
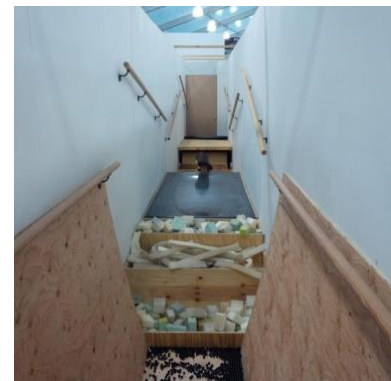


Fig. 10 and 11. The same section featured a slippery floor, an adhesive floor, steps made of foam rubber, and a seesaw. © Frieze New York, 2015. Photographer unknown.

not like elephants,” as well as “Invalids,” “Women or men on high heels,” or “People without casualty insurance.” Moreover, the prohibition against “Runaway gorillas from the zoo” was acutely linked with a particular artist’s entrepreneurial experiences in SoHo. In November 1975, while planning refurbishments for a *Fluxhouse Cooperative*, Maciunas got into a dispute over a bill with one of the subcontractors, Peter Di Stefano. The artist was so severely beaten that he lost an eye:

*Thus on November 8th, 2 hired gorillas lured me out of my fortress (having failed to enter it the previous day)... Immediately upon entering the loft the gorillas commenced to settle the dispute by the “Sportsman’s” method—by using my head for a soccer ball or baseball.<sup>72</sup>*

Despite its popularity as an attraction for the larger audience of *New York - Downtown Manhattan – SoHo*, the *Flux-Labyrinth* arguably responded most directly to the exhibition’s brief to convey “the whole spectrum of life and of human activities as well as the problems of living together” in SoHo. More than the slideshow depicting images of SoHo, or the transplantation of Paula Cooper’s gallery space, the *Flux-Labyrinth* offered the German public a compelling setup to experience a sense of the “true spirit” of SoHo. Maciunas’s initial idea of a door-in-a-door, as formulated in his letter to Block explaining the plans for the *Flux-Labyrinth*, was far more than just a trickster feature. It served as a sort of “intelligence test,” as a device to refuse access by “idiots.” “This way only smart people will be able to enter,” the artist affirmed.<sup>73</sup> Intelligent here is to be understood not as privileged but as smart. To survive as an artist and urban activist in SoHo, the *Flux-Labyrinth* inadvertently conveyed, one required certain intelligence—that is, as was the case for Maciunas, the aptitude to overcome obstacles and find ways to outwit both the city authorities and the Mafia.

Anton Pereira Rodriguez studied architecture at the LUCA School of Arts (KU Leuven, Ghent) before studying art history at Ghent University, where he finished his MA dissertation on the figure of the labyrinth in the work of George Maciunas, Robert Morris, and Brian O’Doherty, under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Wouter Davidts. In 2016–2017 he was enrolled in an exchange program with Freie Universität Berlin, where he was able to conduct research in the archives of the Akademie der Künste, followed by interviews with René Block. In 2017 he did an internship at the curatorial office of Kunst-Werke Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin.

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Fig. 12. Poster designed by George Maciunas after the beating in 1975. © George Maciunas.

(2006) and *Triple Bond* (2017). He is the editor of such volumes as *The Fall of the Studio* (2009) and *Luc Deleu – T.O.P. office: Urban Space* (2012, with Stefaan Vervoort and Guy Châtel). He was the curator of *The Corner Show* (2015, Extra City Antwerp, with Mihnea Mircan and Philip Metten).

1. Cecilia Alemani, "Flux-Labyrinth (1976/2015)," in *2015 Frieze New York Catalogue*, ed. Tasmin Perrett (New York: Frieze, 2015), n.p.
2. Including Amalia Pica, John Bock, and Gelitin.
3. Alemani, "Flux-Labyrinth (1976/2015)," n.p.
4. This recreation goes in the same direction as the interpretation given by Nicole de Armendi. In her phenomenological approach to the Flux-Labyrinth, the SoHo context remains undiscussed. See Nicole de Armendi, "Phenomenological Labyrinths in 1960s and 1970s American Art" (PhD diss., Virginia Commonwealth University, 2009).
5. This interpretation is certainly fueled by Maciunas himself, who described the project in a radio interview in 1977 in these terms: "Last year we were asked to do something... and we always like to do each year something different because to begin with there is so many things that haven't been done yet so we may just... as well you know do something new and not to repeat ourselves all the time... so... we haven't done yet a labyrinth so we thought we'll do a sort of funny labyrinth [...] it's like a fun-house I mean the whole idea was to do it and we have done like you know they have games in arcades with all kind of machines we have done so funny things as well as machines and usually kids like our thing or just people that don't expect art..." See George Maciunas, KRAB Radio Broadcast, Washington, September 1977, accessed March 10, 2018, <http://www.fluxus.org/FLUXLIST/maciunas/maciunas1977clip7.mp3>.
6. According to Owen Smith, the later Fluxus works are characterized by "an attitudinal shift concerning the role of Fluxus, from seeing Fluxus in direct opposition to serious culture to a general celebration of humor, games, and experiences. Put simply, whereas early Fluxus performance works had more to do with traditional culture, late works had more to do with daily life." Owen F. Smith, *Fluxus: The History of an Attitude* (San Diego: San Diego State University Press, 1998), 208.
7. *Ibid.*, 190.
8. *Ibid.*, 26.
9. Hannah Higgins, *Fluxus Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 90. Although it was not in SoHo that the foundations of the Fluxus community were laid, among the first artists to reside permanently in SoHo were Fluxus founding members Alison Knowles (in 1957) and Dick Higgins (in 1959). See Peter Frank, "New York Fluxus," in *New York - Downtown Manhattan - SoHo*, exh. cat., ed. René Block (Berlin: Akademie der Künste, 1976), 151.
10. Tomas Schmit, quoted in Emmett Williams and Ann Noël, eds., *Mr. Fluxus; a Collective Portrait of George Maciunas 1931–1978* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 50.
11. Peter Frank, "Fluxus: a Teleoscopic History," in *Fluxus Virus*, exh. cat., ed. Christel Schüppenhauer (Cologne: Kölnischer Kunstverein, 1992), 26.
12. Thomas Kellein, *The Dream of Fluxus; George Maciunas: An Artist's Biography* (London: Edition Hansjörg Mayer, 2007), 87.
13. Smith, *Fluxus: The History of an Attitude*, 135.
14. Leokadija Maciunas, "My Son," accessed February 10, 2018, <http://georgemaciunas.com/essays-2/my-son-by-leokadija-maciunas>.
15. Ken Friedman, "George Maciunas, Architect," accessed February 8, 2018, <http://georgemaciunas.com/essays-2/george-maciunasarchitect-by-ken-friedman>.

16. The chart "The Grand Frauds of Architecture" was included in the *Fluxus 1* "yearbox" of 1964 and discusses the shortcomings of different cases by Mies van der Rohe, Eero Saarinen, Bunshaft, and Frank Lloyd Wright. For a brilliant analysis of this chart and Maciunas's broader ideas on efficient architecture, see Cuauhtémoc Medina, "Architecture and Efficiency: George Maciunas and the Economy of Art," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 45 (Spring 2004): 273–284.
17. Roslyn Bernstein and Shael Shapiro, *Illegal Living: 80 Wooster Street and the Evolution of SoHo* (New York: Jonas Mekas Foundation, 2010), 45.
18. In a letter dated August 7, 1966, Maciunas reveals his plans to Ben Vautier: "[...] & our buying a FLUXHOUSE, in which we will have Fluxshop, Fluxtheater and 5 floors for us to occupy for living studios. The reason we can do it (without any money) is due to a recent "Experimental Housing Bill" US Government passed, which loans money to artists who wish to buy loft building & convert them to own use. So we will go ahead.' Maciunas, quoted in Smith, *Fluxus: The History of an Attitude*, 189.
19. Charles R. Simpson, *Soho: The Artist in the City* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 156.
20. George Maciunas, *Fluxnewsletter*, March 8, 1967, quoted in Smith, *Fluxus: The History of an Attitude*, 190.
21. George Maciunas and Robert Watts, "Proposal for the Greene Street, Inc." (ca. December 1967), in *Fluxus Codex*, ed. Jon Hendricks (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1989), 45.
22. *Fluxnewsletter*, December 2, 1968, in Hendricks, ed., *Fluxus Codex*, 48.
23. Frank, "New York Fluxus," 171.
24. *Ibid.*, 173.
25. Craig Saper, "Fluxus as a Laboratory," in *Fluxus Reader*, ed. Ken Friedman (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Academy Editions, 1998), 146.
26. Simpson, *Soho: The Artist in the City*, 157.
27. George Maciunas, "Last Newsletter from George Maciunas, to Fluxhouse II & III, December 21, 1967, Not Applicable to Fluxhouse I," quoted in Simpson, *Soho: The Artist in the City*, 160–161.
28. George Maciunas, *Fluxus Newsletter*, May 3, 1975. Reprinted in Williams and Noël, eds., *Mr. Fluxus*, 185.
29. This event is described by George Maciunas in the *Fluxnewsletter* of May 3, 1975. Maciunas, quoted in Williams and Noël, eds., *Mr. Fluxus*, 185. For documentation on his battle against the authorities, see Hendricks, *Fluxus Codex*, 343.
30. For a complete overview, see Marius Babias, Birgit Eusterschulte, and Stella Rollig, eds., *René Block: Ich Kenne Kein Weekend. Ausstellungsprojekte, Texte und Dokumente seit 1964*, exh. cat. (Berlin: Berlinische Galerie, 2015).
31. Larry Miller, e-mail to the authors, August 8, 2018. As Miller pointed out, the *Flux-Labyrinth* was born out of the collaboration of many artists, as was the case with many Fluxus projects. Miller thus considers the *Flux-Labyrinth* not to be a "work" by George Maciunas alone as an artist, and does not constitute a single work attributable to him. In this article however, we decided to focus solely on the parts of the *Flux-Labyrinth* designed by Maciunas. For a detailed account on Maciunas's role as "producer" and designer of Fluxus works, see Julia Robinson, "Maciunas as Producer: Performative Design in the Art of the 1960s," *Grey Room*, no. 33 (Fall 2008): 56–83.
32. Reprinted in Hendricks, ed., *Fluxus Codex*, 76.
33. René Block, "Square Map SoHo," in Block, ed., *New York - Downtown Manhattan - SoHo*, 11.
34. René Block, *Letter to Ulrich Eckhardt, April 19th 1975*, 1975, AdK-W, 1803 (f17), Berlin: Archiv der Akademie der Künste. My translation.
35. Block, "Square Map SoHo," 7.
36. *Ibid.*, 9.

37. Ulrich Eckhardt and Werner Düttmann, "Foreword," in Block, ed., *New York - Downtown Manhattan - SoHo*, n.p.
38. René Block, *Bitten und Informationen an bzw. für die Besucher der Ausstellung Soho*, 1976, FOTO AdK-W, 3644, Berlin: Archiv der Akademie der Künste. My translation.
39. Claus-Henning Bachmann, "Soho und die Metamusik, Berliner Notizen zum Ausklang des USA-Jubiläums in Europa," *Aufbau*, January 14, 1977.
40. René Block, personal communication, Berlin, May 3, 2017.
41. Craig R. Whitney, "Berlin's 26th Fall Arts Festival Gets Stimulating Taste of Soho," *The New York Times*, September 22, 1976.
42. Frank, "New York Fluxus," 151.
43. Block, "Square Map SoHo," 11. Works by individual Fluxus artists were also represented in the exhibition, for example, Nam June Paik, "Moon is the Oldest TV-Set" (video installation, 1976), Alison Knowles, "Identical Lunch: George Maciunas" (1975/76), and Larry Miller, "Knives" (1973). The video screening room featured the FLUXFILMS anthology (1974 version) and on the opening night of the exhibition a Flux-Cembalo-Concert was organized for which René Block rejected the geographical restriction and invited European artists like Ben Vautier and Robert Filliou to join the concert. According to Block, for many artists this was the first and last time they performed together (René Block, personal communication, Berlin, May 3, 2017). Block commissioned a film of the concert; a copy of this film can be found in the archive of Neuer Berliner Kunstverein. For a description of the concert, see Petra Stegmann, ed., *"The Lunatics are on the loose..." European Fluxus Festivals 1962–1977* (Potsdam: Down with art!, 2012), 465–471.
44. For Block, bars embodied the true spirit of SoHo. Commenting on the importance of bars for the artistic development of SoHo, one particular bar, Spring Street Bar, "has probably contributed much to the chapter of SoHo headed 'Success.' It is here that new acquaintances were made, exhibitions arranged, sales effected. It was the accepted rendezvous of the 'illegals' with the international world of art." Block, "Alex – or the Spirit of SoHo," in Block, ed., *New York - Downtown Manhattan - SoHo*, 95.
45. The show included artists such as Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, and Carl Andre.
46. René Block, personal communication, Berlin, June 14, 2017.
47. These pictures, both historical and contemporary, were selected by Block's assistant, Hildegard Lutze.
48. Block, personal communication, Berlin, June 14, 2017. Art critic Heinz Ohff visited the exhibition eight times, and each time the exhibition worked differently. See Heinz Ohff, "Die lebendigen Konzepte, Zu der dritten Phase 'SoHo' und der geplanten Gegenausstellung," *Der Tagesspiegel*, October 12, 1976.
49. Eberhard Roters, *Stellungnahme zum gegenwärtigen Stand der Vorbereitung für die Veranstaltung "Downtown Manhattan,"* March 19, 1976, AdK-W, 1775 (f 34-46), Berlin: Archiv der Akademie der Künste. My translation.
50. Block, "Square Map SoHo," 11.
51. Grace Glueck, "Art Notes," *The New York Times*, June 6, 1968. Quoted in Williams and Noël, eds., *Mr. Fluxus*, 171.
52. Block, personal communication, Berlin, June 14, 2017.
53. For a complete overview of the different obstacles visitors had to overcome, see Stegmann, *European Fluxus Festivals 1962–1977*, 471–477.
54. The unicursal design of the labyrinth also reflects Maciunas's view on humor and his definition of gags. According to Maciunas, a joke or a gag is *monomorphic*—it only evolves in one direction—whereas a Happening is *polymorphic*, meaning that it involves many things happening at the same time. See Larry Miller, "Transcript of the videotaped interview with George Maciunas, 24 March 1978," in Friedman, ed., *Fluxus Reader*, 196.
55. George Maciunas, "Letter to René Block," July 1976. Reprinted in Block, ed., *New York - Downtown Manhattan - SoHo*, 297.

56. See *Fluxnewspaper* 8 (1970), n.p.
57. Arturo Schwarz, *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Delano Greenidge Editions, 1997), 717. In 1961 a replica of the Duchamp door was made by Pontus Hultén and Daniel Spoerri and exhibited in *Bewogen Beweging* at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. The original Duchamp door was displayed in the New York gallery Cordier & Ekstrom in 1965. Although there is no evidence that Maciunas was aware of the existence of this artifact, he undoubtedly was inspired by Marcel Duchamp's work. According to Dick Higgins, the relationship between Fluxus and Duchamp can be defined in terms of "affinity." Rather than progenitor, Duchamp could be seen as an uncle to Fluxus. Dick Higgins, "Theory and Reception," in Friedman, ed., *Fluxus Reader*, 222.
58. Larry Miller, quoted in Williams and Noël, eds., *Mr. Fluxus*, 252; Lucy R. Lippard, "The Geography of Street Time: A Survey of Street Works Downtown," in Block, ed., *New York - Downtown Manhattan - SoHo*, 181. In May 1976 Fluxus started to organize "Free Flux-Tours," most of them starting at 80 Wooster Street. The tours, meant as an ironic critical statement on the increasing tourism in SoHo, included a so-called "Souvenir Hunt" (the souvenirs being dog feces).
59. Believing this was a censorship plot by the Akademie der Künste, Maciunas "stationed himself at the labyrinth entrance, crossed his arms in classic disgust and, with his iron stare, faced off the very long line of people waiting," while Miller took off together with Joe Jones to the nearby zoo searching for a new supply of elephant dung. Larry Miller, quoted in Williams and Noël, eds., *Mr. Fluxus*, 254.
60. Maciunas, "Letter to René Block," 296.
61. Maciunas wired the fire escape of 80 Wooster Street with alarms, which (as Robert Watts recalls) were frequently set off by the many alley cats. See Robert Watts, Manuscript (1980), reprinted in Williams and Noël, eds., *Mr. Fluxus*, 184.
62. Maciunas, "Letter to René Block," 296.
63. Lil Picard, "Soho Berlin," *Kunstforum International* 17 (1976): 219. My translation.
64. René Block, personal communication, Berlin, February 9, 2018.
65. Lothar Schmidt-Mühlisch, "Eine Türn, Die Auf Baßton Hört," *Die Welt, Ausgabe B*, September 14, 1976.
66. Hans Bertram Bock, "Rummelplatz Der Scharlatane; Die Ausstellung 'Downtown Manhattan: Soho' in Der Berliner Akademie Der Künste - Ein Dorado Der Avantgardisten," *Nürnberger Nachrichten*, September 11, 1976. My translation.
67. Employees of the Anthology Film Archives assisted in selecting videos for the exhibition in Berlin (see fig. 1).
68. Richard Kostelanetz, *Artists' Soho, 49 Episodes of Intimate History* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 44.
69. Douglas Davis, "SOHO DU MAL, Film, Video, Culture, Politics," in Block, ed., *New York - Downtown Manhattan - SoHo*, 215.
70. Block, "Alex – or the Spirit of SoHo," 101.
71. Contemporary newspapers report waiting more than one hour to enter the labyrinth. See Heinz Ohff, "Nicht das Beste aus SoHo, jetzt Malerei in der Akademie," *Der Tagesspiegel*, September 28, 1976.
72. George Maciunas, circular letter, November or December 1975. Reprinted in Williams and Noël, eds., *Mr. Fluxus*, 196.
73. Maciunas, "Letter to René Block," 296.