

# Stealing Fluxus Ruckus by Joseph Nechvatal

*Is it so a noise to be is it a least remain to rest, is it a so old say to be, is it a leading are been. Is it so,  
is it so, is it so, is it so is it so is it so.*

~ Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons*

*To create is to lighten, to unburden life, to invent new possibilities of life.*

~ Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence: Essays on A Life*

## Manifesto:

2. To affect, or bring to a certain state, by subjecting to, or treating with, a flux. "Fluxed into another world."  
3. Med. To cause a discharge from, as in purging. flux (flüks), *n.* [OF., fr. L. *fluxus*, fr. *fluere*, *fluxum*, to flow. See FLUENT; cf. FLUSH, *n.* (of cards).]  
1. Med. a A flowing or fluid discharge from the bowels or other part; esp., an excessive and morbid discharge: as, the bloody *flux*, or dysentery.  
b The matter thus discharged.

Purge the world of bourgeois sickness,  
"intellectual"; professional & commercialized  
culture, PURGE the world of dead  
art, imitation, artificial art, abstract art,  
illusionistic art, mathematical art, —  
PURGE THE WORLD OF "EUROPANISM" !

2. Act of flowing; a continuous moving on or passing by, as of a flowing stream; a continuing succession of changes.  
3. A stream; copious flow; flood; outflow.  
4. The setting in of the tide toward the shore. Cf REFLUX.  
5. State of being liquid through heat; fusion. *Rare.*

PROMOTE A REVOLUTIONARY FLOOD  
AND TIDE IN ART,  
Promote living art, anti-art, promote  
NON ART REALITY to be  
fully grasped by all peoples, not only  
critics, dilettantes and professionals.

7. Chem & Metal. a Any substance or mixture used to promote fusion, esp. the fusion of metals or minerals. Common metallurgical fluxes are silica and silicates (acidic), lime and limestone (basic), and fluorite (neutral). b Any substance applied to surfaces to be joined by soldering or welding, just prior to or during the operation, to clean and free them from oxide, thus promoting their union.

FUSE the cadres of cultural,  
social & political revolutionaries  
into united front & action.

George Maciunas, *Fluxus Manifesto* (1963)

*Stolen Symphony / Keep Together (fluxus & neofluxus)* is a superb exploration of Fluxus art music transported into today's magnificent but mannerist digital sound milieu. Listening to its non-pop, non-rock, experimental sounds today; a reinvention of the multitudinous ear occurs through a curious alliance between the cool impersonality of historical art, super clean digital technology, and the flames of free idiosyncratic impulses.

But some might ask: why would weird Fluxus music be of interest in these dark viral digital days? I have the answer: If you cannot enjoy listening to it—then you cannot easily live. During these confining days we can look back and hear the analog world of Fluxus (founded in 1960 by George Maciunas) in interesting new ways. Certainly we are over-mediated today, but Maciunas and the Fluxus artists were pretty well mediated too—the difference being that they handled media glut with an existential wry wit that gave it a nonsensical quality. And that they did not give up on love and truth. In our often humorless times, where a cold shadow is cast over every artistic joy and joke, Fluxus’ playful humor is salvation for our Generation Z zeitgeist zombies.

Patience with dull emptiness and grinding repetition and immersive fields of insistent noise is an essential coping mechanism today. Fluxus helps with that—for Fluxus is a combination of opposites: there is a transcendent quality embodied in the intimate particular. For example, listen to Yoko Ono’s three *Voice Piece for Soprano* sound pieces, performed amazingly by Anna Clementi. They are tinged with a painful eroticism that ranges from subtle insinuation to salaciousness while surpassing tonal expectations. Clementi sings Ono’s pained yelps and glossolalia-guttural Kabuki-style shrieks and murmurs and tremulous wailings in a way that makes them hauntingly beautifully—if one just concentrates on sticking with her and open-mindedly listens to something you were told was awful and broke up The Beatles. (It didn’t). Some other of the ageless Fluxus tracks here—like Miroslav Beinhauer’s performance of the relentlessly plodding piano of *Opus 196*, by Eric Andersen—climax-punctuated with aggressive tonal clusters—and *Composition 1960 #7* by La Monte Young—can be musically accommodating to an altered state of emotional scale and time. Their time counteractions afford the benefits of defiance-as-difficulty when aimed against the controlling world’s banal blandness.

Within the self-imposed constraints of Fluxus, the arbitrary becomes canonical and Platonic. Indeed, Fluxus aesthetic philosophy—that partly grew from Zen and John Cage and the Beat generation—provides a fundamental antithesis to the authoritarian, mechanical, simulated rigidities of today’s controlling technical world. As a fluctuating phenomenon, Fluxus changed over time: to begin with, the focus was on scores and events. From the standard—popular taste—point of view, Fluxus music is often considered pretentious and/or abysmally vapid. One could stupidly say that of Kurt

Schwitters' transcendent *Ursonate* vocalizations too, I guess—but from a noise music appreciation point of view, Fluxus music can be viscerally compelling and majestic—as in Opening Performance Orchestra's *Stolen Symphony* (2021). And even gorgeous—as in Dick Higgins's *Emmett Williams's Ear* (1977) as performed on piano by Agnese Toniutti. That is true too of Henning Christiansen's *Mond-Glass-Fiber-Rohr* (1986), as performed by Werner Durand.

But I am thinking also now about the often funny and silly and anthologizing aspects of Fluxus while listening to Milan Knížák's *A Chromatic Scale in Countermovement* and (*Maybe*) *Sonata* as performed by Beinhauer on a broken piano. It has an earnest but playful and non-nihilistic jabberwocky joy about it—very much in need these dire days. There is something special about these Fluxus people and their sense of humor within a mixed community that was both intimate and global in scope. We need that now, even more than they did. As such, *Stolen Symphony / Keep Together (fluxus & neofluxus)* is a meditation on current media consciousness when there is precious little of it. For Fluxus played with the fun Dada-Surrealist cannon in a self-conscious way and this allowed it to achieve enchantment.

Fluxus music (or anti-music, if you like) is an invocation of a counter Dionysian spirit in face of the exuberant energy of free jazz and the frenzy of Bacchic rock and roll. It embraced an enduring legacy of inferiority within the media-overload landscape. That is also why a lot of it still resonates—we can still spark off it. There is an enormous breath and scope to what Fluxus did—reaching far back into the past. Indeed, with Fluxus there is a consciousness of being embedded in the long scope of time. Also, its borders are fuzzy—for Fluxus mapped methods of composing music onto various aspects of visual life—and by so doing made it possible to consider everything as material for sound composition. What a wonderful gift to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

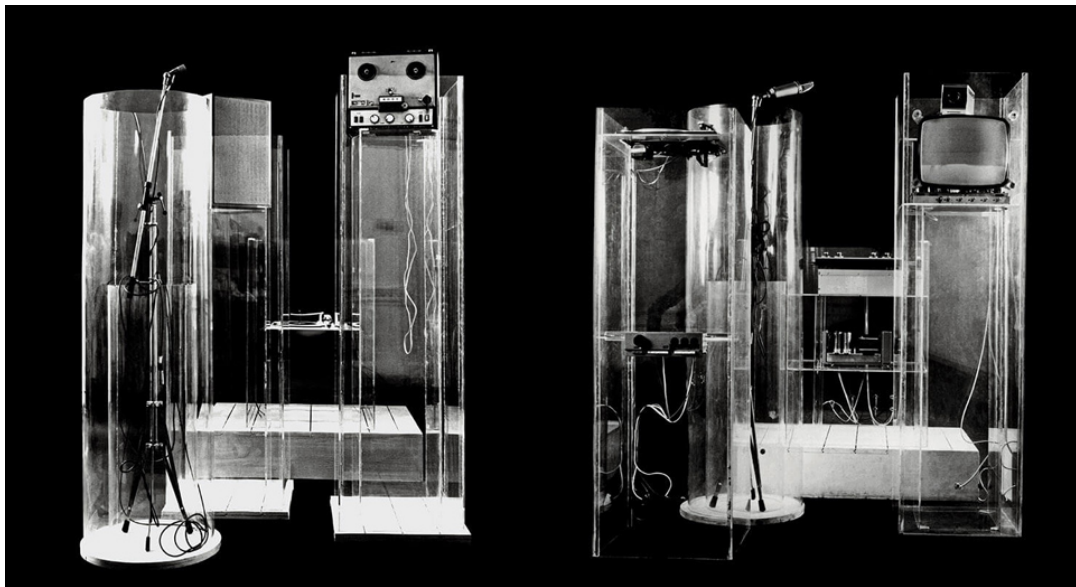
Fluxus also created a web-work of revolutionary associations suggestive of unity consciousness while cementing down the banal and the particular. It is corny-funny in a way that slanted against hippy disorganization because it swallowed Cage's a-tonality chance operations whole. In a way it stiffly stylized certain generational trends towards thinking about mediated-verses-immediate experience in the context of the exploded new media world of the 1960s.

So the digital recordings of the *Stolen Symphony / Keep Together (fluxus & neofluxus)* performances take me across time, and are thus both melancholy and marvelous. They are a kind of cultural extraction where both the differences and the similarities between our hyper-digital present and the analog explosion that was the Fluxus context are highlighted and brought forward. The whole history of music is in there; including the cultural retro-mania so prevalent among us: a sign of our own cultural-political exhaustion and of us being pathetically stuck in the past. But Fluxus was already a self-devouring circularity of culture. That is why the bowler hat style gives a bitter-sweet quality to these radical recordings.

Though sometimes willfully clichéd, I think that Fluxus prophesized a lot of things we are still going through while also featuring big differences worthy of our respect and even nostalgic longing. Remembering archiving La Monte's Fluxus collection for Dia Art Foundation in the late-1970s, it becomes obvious to me just how immersed these artists were in the circulation of analog media. Within the postpunk No Wave context of downtown Manhattan, I had short-handed their stiff Fluxus performative pantomiming style as a sign of inauthenticity. But its extraordinary what Fluxus did in the mid-60s—partly intentionally and partly situationally—within the context of post-war media-technological culture: expanded radio, television broadcast, cybernetics, offset color printing, the reach into outer space, multitrack recording, casual sex, transcendental meditation, mind-expanding recreational drugs. Their technological-meets-countercultural hip-but-square style has an externality and an interiority to it that was quite unique—and far from possible today. Now it represents a lost golden age, I might even say, as it carved out for itself a space of separation from mass/pop culture. That countercultural carve-out translated, or mimicked, or ported into the increasingly phantasmagoric energy of the countercultural 1960s—a push back against the emerging environment of fluid distribution. Though Fluxus music is rarely considered within the context of the psychedelic sixties, in a way it should be. It is psychedelic to me because it is mind manifesting. And that is another reason why Fluxus music still works for us—its square-but-hip carve-out within media culture has never really gone away. It is the global cultures' golden jewels. We won't let it fade into golden slumber—but insist on continually transforming it.

This we can hear with *Stolen Symphony*—we are still surfing that Fluxus micro-wave of consciousness. We have interiorized the freedom of technological media through Cage’s chance operations and through Dada’s nonsense. Particularly, Cage’s *Radio Music* (1956) comes to mind here, composed using chance operations. The *Radio Music* score indicates 56 different frequencies between 55 and 156 kHz, notated with numbers, not on conventional staves (as in *Imaginary Landscape No. 4*). Cage indicates that the work is in 4 sections, to be programmed by the player(s), with or without intervening silences.

Such a *with or without* Fluxus aesthetic non-knowledge is certainly the most erudite, aware and conscious area of current cultural activities and practically our only hope for improving our precarious but glittering subjective existence. For as Félix Guattari said in his book *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*, “The work of art, for those who use it, is an activity of un-framing, of rupturing sense, of baroque proliferation, or extreme impoverishment, which leads to a recreation and a reinvention of the subject itself.”<sup>1</sup>



John Lennon and Yoko Ono, *Plastic Ono Band* (1968) mixed media sculpture of Perspex columns constructed by Charles Melling with electronic equipment fitted by ‘Magic’ Alex Mardas and David Goodwin at Apple Electronics, photographed by Iain Macmillan, London 1968

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<sup>1</sup> Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*, Indiana University Press, p. 131



*Plastic Ono Band* maquette (1968) with Yoko Ono and John Lennon, photo by Ethan Russell



John Lennon and Yoko Ono, *Plastic Ono Band* (1968) mixed media sculpture onstage at The Plastic Ono Band's launch party for *Give Peace A Chance* at Chelsea Town Hall, London, July 3<sup>rd</sup> 1969 with a camera pointing at the audience that showed the viewer as part of the band ('You are the Plastic Ono Band') on the television screen in the sculpture. Behind *Plastic Ono Band* is a large photo collage by designer Christine Marsh.

Fluxus made its first official appearance in Wiesbaden in 1962, after which a number of festivals took place within different European cities. It may have peaked with the widely distributed Beatles' track *Revolution 9* in 1968, credited to Lennon–McCartney but created by John Lennon and Yoko Ono with George Harrison's assistance. Certainly that much loved/hated *musique concrète* composition was heavily influenced by Pierre Schaeffer as filtered through the funny Fluxus fancy of Ono. So I wish to consider now Ono's The Plastic Ono Band project, conceived of in 1967 albeit unnamed, as the zénith of Fluxus musical history—with its emphasis on open contingency, chance, and uncertainty. Because it pushed the door wide open to the *deep now*, where things have stayed. This historical (but continuously mutating) openness is what remains vibrant to us from the Fluxus legacy.

The Plastic Ono Band, whose name derived from a small assemblage sculpture composed primarily of transparent plastic objects that Lennon made in response to Ono's original idea, must be considered within the context of intermedia: the mid-1960s term coined by Dick Higgins to describe inter-disciplinary art activities. Her and Lennon's interactive *Plastic Ono Band* social media sculpture—with its unfixed approach to participation—encapsulated and extended Fluxus-influenced ambitions. It expanded into global society Fluxus attitudes—shot through with contingency capable of interpreting chance as meaningful and apparent—between 1968 and 1971. Certainly a period where the art intelligencia was drenched in drugs, but also focused on sincere searches for love, truthful meaning and peace.

Joe Jones had an important input into The Plastic Ono Band during the New York City Plastic Ono Band period, not only co-producing the album *Fly* but presenting a two-month long Plastic Ono Band Fluxus festival in his Joe Jones Music Store (aka Tone Deaf Music Store) at 18 North Moore Street, where I lived (after he left it) in the late-1970s while I was working as La Monte Young's Fluxus archivist. From April 18<sup>th</sup> to June 12<sup>th</sup> in 1970, Plastic Ono Band enjoyed *carte blanc* there, presenting a series of

Fluxus art events and concerts called *Grapefruit Flux-Banquet*, promoted with a poster designed by George Maciunas.<sup>2</sup>

Fluxus began as a small but international network of artists and composers who challenged accepted ideas about what art is. For a consideration of the success of Fluxus musical ideas within the exploding media headspace of the late 60s, The Plastic Ono Band project, for me, is a capstone to the sixties, even though the Plastic Ono Band media sculpture was presented only once in London on July 3<sup>rd</sup> in 1969 onstage at the modestly attended Apple Records launch party for The Plastic Ono Band record single *Give Peace a Chance* held at the Chelsea Town Hall. Judging by photos, the sculpture was rather overwhelmed by a huge photo collage display by designer Christine Marsh of well-known faces hung behind it—though the live camera feed showed images of members of the audience incorporated into *The Plastic Ono Band* sculpture on stage. Just as some Fluxus collaborations had encouraged interactions with the audience or spectators.

Seeing themselves as an alternative to academic art and music, Fluxus was a democratic form of creativity open to anyone. The Plastic Ono Band project's original aim tried incorporating the Fluxus values of *welcome all* interactivity by promoting a “You Are The Plastic Ono Band” statement. I think this very Fluxus attitude was a central part of Lennon's attraction (and contribution) to The Plastic Ono Band idea: that his insufferably bloated (if well-earned) reputation—so often the result of the excesses of celebrity culture and its attendant cult of personality—could be combated by evoking a sense of collective impersonality dowsed in chaos and caprice. Basically what was the hippie free-share free-love revolution. Though it would prove highly impractical for famous wealthy artists like Lennon, The Plastic Ono Band placed emphasis on encouraging an impersonal social realm for open counter-cultural culture.

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<sup>2</sup> Performances included *Come Impersonating John Lennon & Yoko Ono*, Grapefruit Banquet (April 11-17) by George Maciunas, Yoshimasa Wada, Bici Hendricks (aka Bici Forbes), Geoffrey Hendricks, and Robert Watts (masks of John or Yoko were worn by the attendees of the Grapefruit Flux-Banquet, such as Jon Hendricks; *Do It Yourself* (also April 11-17) by Yoko Ono; *Tickets* by John Lennon + Fluxagents (April 18-24) with Wada, Ben Vautier and Maciunas; *Clinic* by Yoko Ono + Hi Red Center (April 25-May 1); *Blue Room* by Yoko + Fluxmasterliars (May 2-8); *Weight & Water* by Yoko + Fluxfiremen (May 9-15); *Capsule* by Yoko + Flux Space Center (May 16-22) with Maciunas, Paul Sharits, George Brecht, Ay-O, Ono, Watts, John Cavanaugh; *Portrait of John Lennon as a Young Cloud* by Yoko + Everybody (May 23-29); *The Store* by Yoko + Fluxfactory (May 30-June 5), with Ono, Maciunas, Wada, Ay-O; and finally *Examination* by Yoko + Fluxschool (June 6-12) with Ono, Geoffrey Hendricks, Watts, Mieko Shiomi and Robert Filliou.



Going further back into the free impersonal, there is also the precedent set by Cage's *Williams Mix* (1952)—a piece of electronic music composed using chance operations derived from the *I-Ching*. It was Cage's first composition for tape recorder. *Williams Mix* was first performed from only quarter-inch magnetic tape in Urbana, Illinois in 1953, where its *musique concrète* sounds were played on four stereo tape machines connected to eight speakers. No human performers were required. With it, Cage demonstrated artistic uses for electronic media's impersonal presentation—thereby actively influencing the technological, philosophical and social development of the new media art of video and computers. Certainly Nam June Paik's idea of an anti-technological technology set the stage for coming anti-pop stances. Also when I think of visceral Fluxus-related precedents for Plastic Ono Band-type musical presentations constructed without the necessity of musicians, La Monte Young's continuous and autonomous electronic drones come to mind; typical of his *Dream House*. Beginning in 1962, Young had begun formulating the concept of a continuous sound environment requiring no human performance, but facilitating it if desired. In a 1964 program note for his Theatre of Eternal Music project, Young describes the *Dream House* as that which will allow music to propel itself by its own momentum.

But I think that the impersonal Zen Buddhism of Ono's Fluxus did not really hook-up with the ecstatic nature of the cultural year 1968—the lofty peek of LSD cultural-technological expression—the high water mark for cultural experimentation and free love. Fluxus boxes and conceptual plans typified the minimal art movement—where art works often aimed at escaping ecstatic narrative in favor of anti-subjective formalist explorations. In that sense, Fluxus was within the conceptual-minimal movement of the mid-60s, where autobiographical symbolism was generally regarded as corny by artists like Robert Morris—who rejected the presence of a singular and particular hand in favor of impersonal formal qualities that were perceived as new and mesmerizing. Ono's Zen-Fluxus conceptual-minimalist films did that too. Like *Fluxfilm no. 14: One* (a.k.a. *Match*) (1966): a silent 4:30 minute piece shot on high speed film by Fluxus photographer *par excellence* Peter Moore in which in super slow-motion a wooden match is struck. Also consider the cold formal abstraction of an ostensibly biographical piece called *Self-Portrait* (1969)—Ono's rarely seen 42minute film that unflinchingly frames the semi-erect penis of Lennon in its states of tumescence and de-tumescence. This brio but *sang froid* approach to only framing the naughty bit of her lover (though the title *Self-*

*Portrait* suggests this is more of a Lennon-Ono Plastic Ono Band galvanized project than a film by Ono) is the opposite of mawkish sentimentality. Reintroducing formalism to a warmer autobiographical intent is the short Apple Film *Two Virgins*—the second John and Yoko film collaboration. Again using Ono’s typical slow-motion approach, it beautifully merges John and Yoko’s heads together, before the couple face each other. John and Yoko’s LSD-influenced intimate noise album *Unfinished Music No. 1: Two Virgins*, created the night before they first made love, provides the ambient abstract soundtrack—and lends the film a mobile and marvelous mood. Indeed, *Two Virgins* may be Plastic Ono Band’s most successful collaboration in terms of balanced equity. It certainly set the standard of precedent for their choice to merge their creativity together (for better or worse).

The Plastic Ono Band’s congregated intimate but impersonal open structure coincided with Lennon’s tumultuous personal and artistic transformations occurring around the breakup of The Beatles and his interests in radical politics, experimental film, and avant-garde *musique concrète* audio art—best demonstrated with the *Unfinished Music No. 1: Two Virgins* and *Unfinished Music No. 2: Life With The Lions* recordings. As these examples of The Plastic Ono Band suggest, late-60s Fluxus was not only transmitted through records and objects and relics of the performances, but also existed as a collective media consciousness that focused of the fluidity of people and material. In this way *everybody just do-it-yourself* Fluxus (and subsequent Neo-Fluxus) music is essentially a multi-mediated phantasmagorical process using receptive collaboration, random (or semi-controlled) chance with a dollop of wry humor. It values anti-commercialism, and so is a collective representation that mutates the ideology of the modern capitalist world. But Ono’s Plastic Ono Band created a band that would never really exist, because it was in flux: it didn’t have a set number of members and accommodated *anyone* and *everyone* who wanted to play with it (in theory). But art and music movements don’t work that way. They are defined by the people associated within the group.

Yet Fluxus attention asserts synchronicities: emphasizing events that seem connected but are not causally related. This primordial but heroic appropriation of the present bares the ontological weight of an important cultural assertion, even as Fluxus art promises multiple fluid alternative conceptions of both the past and the future. The Neo-Fluxus ideal wants to achieve that self-possession in the here and now. Bravo! For

this is consistent with the Dadaist belief that art will always be born from the chaos of time by gazing at an excess of possibilities in the now. Ideally, the current Dada-inspired avant-garde recognizes no past or future, but lives freely within a repetitive *be-here-now* present that overwhelms. It continues to forge art practices that reveal the profound complex ambiguity of the present. Because, for the Dadaists, the future was not to come. It had already arrived.

So by being always present, Neo-Dada Fluxus and Neo-Fluxus artists and musicians obliquely render an applicable technique for making important art today. For example, Agnese Toniutti's sensitive performance of La Monte Young's *Composition 1960 #15 to Richard Huelsenbeck* reminds us of just how Dada-linked Fluxus music is. Starting back with Young's organized series of concert-performances at the top floor loft of Yoko Ono at 112 Chambers Street on a snowy day in December of 1960, the Ono-Young idea was a series of small art events involving visual artists, musicians, dancers and composers—mixing music, visual art and performance together. The audience for these events included Dadaists Max Ernst and Marcel Duchamp.

Young's dedication to Huelsenbeck is telling and informative to the *Stolen Symphony / Keep Together (fluxus & neofluxus)* project—as it offers a validating spin that is quite curious in its internal contradictions. Dada's preoccupation was with the present. Dada was also disrespectful—as it emerged during a period when Europe was being buffeted between regrets for a nasty past and appeals to a revolutionary utopian future. Yet Dada insisted on a *continuous now* that revolted against any commemorative appropriation of coherent history. So I see this Neo-Dada Neo-Fluxus project as a valid passing of the disrespectful avant-garde torch to today (whenever that is you read this). That hot torch is a loving state of free mind based on cross-generational art friendships and sharing actions in which artists of all nationalities may find kindred spirits. Like The Plastic Ono Band, this project takes the improbable Dada proposition of a *continuous now* rather seriously, which is why it is so much more than an elegy to a lost era of rebelliousness. In a sense, it conveys a strange global truth: that even putatively modern, secular, and rationalist cultures need some form of chance-based primordial divination.

Insofar as the deliberate obtuseness of the present is a major point of this project, I was delighted to have uncovered some germane connective material here that is applicable

to our own *eternal now*. I figure that perhaps *Stolen Symphony*'s unconscious intention is to achieve a phantasmal integration with the avant-garde past by dissolving avant-garde history into new artistic energy. Such a dynamic active aesthetic suggests the potential of avant-garde re-configuration then, as it subsumes our previous world of historic representation into a phantasmagorical cluster of over-lapping linked observations of history embedded forever now within precise extractions of current mentality. That free love of art door, that Plastic Ono Band kicked open, remains wide open.

So open ears that encounter this avant-garde-after-avant-garde material might find an opportunity for new transgressive thoughts—ecstatic impulses even that proliferate in proportion to historically determined restrictions. If so, this *continuous now* historic audio project—that embraces artists who drew from and interpreted Dada in the 1960s—will have no end, but always a present, as it contributes to an inventing of a sound art in which what matters is no longer famous names or dated movement identities—but rather dense, phantasmagorical forces developed on the basis of inclusion—where things are heard from the depths of inclusive density—withdrawn, perhaps—adumbrated and darkened by obscurity, perhaps—but bound tightly together and inescapably grouped by the vigor that is fermenting an aural discourse today both capricious and, paradoxically, historically responsible.