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IN CONVERSATION  
WITH  
JEFFREY PERKINS

ART AND USE, WITHOUT INSTRUCTIONS

By Chiara Vecchiarelli

The following interview took place on a day in December 2007 in Jeffrey Perkins' loft, in New York. We had just seen his last documentary film *The Painter Sam Francis*. The catalogue of the Venice Biennial historic exhibition *Ubi Fluxus Ibi Motus*, of which he took part, was among his books, together with a program of the experimental *Cinematheque Theater 16* that he directed in Hollywood, and his personal copy of the *Fluxfax Portfolio*. On the floor, two suitcases fostering hours of interviews with passengers Perkins used to record in his cab, following Nam June Paik's advice.

Jeffrey Perkins is the author of original performances, the discreet story teller of Sam Francis' work, the friendly camera operator of Yoko Ono's Film #4. Above all he is witness of the fact that art is the place where the singularity of one's own practice coexists with the sharing of ideas. Concepts that animate his practice are the source of his artistic and personal charm and one of the most interesting issues I really would like to deal with, in thinking and organizing art.

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Chiara Vecchiarelli (VC): Once, you told me a story concerning an exhibition you did. You got the money for this exhibition from the painter Sam Francis, a friend of yours, in order to buy the wood necessary to realize the work. After the exhibition you met some people needing some wood and you sold them the wood you used for your art work. You sold it exactly for the price you bought it. Then you gave the money back to Sam Francis. In your own words, it was: "Perfect".

Jeffrey Perkins (JP): Yes!

CV: Well I think that here, in the way you acted, lies a concept which is important to understand your work and to recognize its spirit of your everyday life, your every day practice, so to speak. You weren't particularly interested in having an object that could be kept in a museum as a "rest", so you let the materiality of your work become that of something else. Once the life of the work naturally ended you let it disappear. It was an ephemeral work somehow, a work of art that did not have any remainder.

JP: That was good for me as well, because you are right that it had an ephemeral quality and when the consequence of it presented itself, i.e. that somebody else needed that wood to build a deck and they wanted to pay me exactly what I paid for it myself, it was just... perfect! It was a perfect consequence for me because, really, I didn't make it to sell it. It was to be used for something, exactly, useful. Let's say, practically useful. It could have been used for a work of art if somebody wanted to create the room to keep the piece of work in. However, no one set for that.

CV: I like the idea that the material was nothing but the medium for your practice, as well as for the different practice of somebody else. Yours, of course, was that of an artist.

JP: You mentioned that, I thought I'd read a book on utopia years before by a French man, named Charles Fourier. His idea was that of an utopian practice, an utopian system; a system of trade that was balanced and fair for everybody involved. The only thing impeding this system was the brokering of material. Fourier felt that the direct channel from the producer to the consumer was the most ideal thing, because when the broker gets involved the broker doubles the price. Today what is popular is farmer's market. You are expecting they will be cheap but they are not, they are actually more expensive because, basically, they are referring to the brokering model as well; they are shaping their price system on the broker price system

CV: They are selling to you not only the product itself but together with it the very fact, the special fact that they are selling without a broker. This last element becomes a value.

JP: Yes, what ever happened to cheap restaurants and places, to the good burger, the fairy deal? It doesn't seem to exist. When I lived in Santa Monica in the Seventies, rents were cheap. Now I look back I and I see that the prices for the same real estate, the same material, are now multiplied by a hundred; they are out of control. The real estate market is wildly over priced but it is the only system existing and you have to pay; or you don't get it. Why was that properly cheaper in the past? What explains that? A normal and historic and democratic economic theory... probably. In '81 I discovered those lofts in New York, and I didn't know that, but New York had gone through a depression; the city almost declared bankruptcy, that meant they were out of money, there was no money to pay employees. The garbage collectors who are employees of the city, could not be paid, so the garbage piled up on the street twenty eight feet. We heard about that in Los Angeles. So New York had a financial depression and this place became very reasonably priced. Now it's the worst: This loft is priced so much, people would kill me to have this place. Why did that happened? Why was there such a kind of a depression?

CV: You mentioned another story once. You were driving your cab one time, the one you were realizing your interviews project in, and, instead of receiving money, you received a gift from a passenger. It was a big one, a gift with a bigger value than the work you actually had done as a cab driver. You decided not to be paid by the

next passengers until you reached the point where the value of your work and the value of the gift you received were equal. You were searching for an equal trade that did not depend on the physicality of people. Were you realizing something like a diffused equal trade?

JP: Yes! However it wasn't based on money, really. In a way it was because the person who proposed this trade, or this deal, had given me something of much greater value than I would have accumulated from the two taxi rides that I gave for free. So I felt the trade was worthy. Basically the motive of that was a moral decision, you know, it was based on moral truth. And in fact that is missing, in economics and politics too, there isn't a moral truth because the truth is always mitigated or brokered by some intervening idea or interest or feel or what-ever. I'm a victim of it. I think Joseph Beuys engaged in this kind of ideal in his time as a professor and an artist. Really, not many artists actually make any views or want to invest their thinking in this kind of question or problem. And yet, along with all other artists they are victims of the problem themselves and they feel isolated. Well, another great example of the hypocrisy is that there are communities where artists take advantage of working in poverty. Taking something base and making something fine of it is an alchemic concept. What I'm thinking of, for example, is what happened in SoHo where artists colonized useless spaces, living the bohemian life in cold flats. This was later observed, enjoyed, and exploited by speculators. SoHo is now one of the more expensive places in the most expensive city in the world.

In fact, one of the greater *charms* and uses of Fluxus was Maciunas' social idea. Of course it was a popular idea at the time to live cheaply in a communal fashion, which I was also doing. In the Sixties we had it so good. Things that happened in certain communities were food co-ops. Basically, food co-ops were made of this utopian idea of having a direct relation between producer and consumer, i.e. of the elimination of the broker. What happened was that communities gathered together and decided to be a dependable coherent value of people and each week the job of a representative from the community would go get the food and bring it back to a place where everybody else could come and get it. Basically, they would pay what it cost from the producer, from the farmer, and so the farmer would bring it to the market, the community would go to the market and get the food and bring it back to the people who were part of a commune.

CV: Were you part of this?

JP: Yes I was part of a food co-op and I think there could even be one in New York somewhere today. So it existed, the idea of a food co-op.

Now there are buildings there are co-ops, where you have to apply to be a member of the building. But prices for these real estates are just as bad as for the other places. Who the actual bosses are we will, maybe, never know. Is it the Queen of England or the Pope? Or maybe they work for...!

In any case, Maciunas started out and eventually owned 28 buildings in SoHo. His idea was to create artist

communes. I was actually present at one of the first meetings where lofts were offered for sale. I could have bought a loft, a 25 M2 loft for twenty five hundred dollars, on Greene Street, Wooster Street, Broadway, or Mercer Street. Emily Harvey Gallery Building. – That was a Maciunas' building. The gallery itself was his loft and the building extended back to Mercer Street which was his building too. So that was the idea. Each building would have its own laundry, it would be a self sustaining community of artists. Maciunas didn't have any money when he started, I mean, *no* money what so ever. He was just a graphic artist, he didn't have a trust fund or anything.

CV: How did he make it?

JP: He got the help of Bob Watts who was a professor and they put together a little block of money to buy the first building. They sold these lofts and with the block of money they bought another one. When I discovered this building it was like a magical thing because in '81-'82 it was already pretty difficult to find a loft in Manhattan. I had five hundred dollars and I wanted this floor, the sixth floor. So I had to negotiate with the net-lease holder of the building, not the owner. I told him I wanted this floor to rent, I put an add in the Village Voice, I found people who wanted these floors and I collected money from them and with this deposit money and my deposit money as well, because I was working as a cabby, I went and got the list. Now, at that point I had an option between finding out which rents to charge. My idea was also to create an artists building. In fact, what I did was that I went to John Hendrix, the archivist of Fluxus, and I bought a Fluxus document which was co-published with Henry Flynt and George Maciunas. This beautiful document was George's design for modular buildings. I traded something for it with John. This was a kind of a magical object, it was something that would bring me good luck...

CV: A talisman?

JP: A talisman! Exactly, a talisman! This Fluxus publication bears the title: "How communists must give revolutionary leadership in culture". I chose my rent. I rented out for very cheap, no profit. I could have made money with this deal if I wanted to approach it as a money making process. I could have exploited it, I decided not to. This also happened with driving a cab, I had opportunities in driving the cab as to move to other kinds of work. I met people in the cab, "Oh, you are interesting, why don't you come to work for our advertising agency?" and I just... this is the kind of stupid idealist that I am... no, I'm an artist! Basically I think that ideas like this can work; however, they are always mitigated by the system in which *they* are working, and where *you* are working.

But now, for example, I think there is going to be a recession and prices are going to go down and I hope they go down a lot. I can live in poverty, I can do that. In fact Sam Francis said: "Oh great, now comes out the poverty," it comes out the poverty in your life, your distractions. You have to live with yourself I think, with your own dreams, not other people's dreams.

CV: The question of property and poverty is particularly important.

JP: It's very important.

CV: Do you think that it's possible to use things without owning them, or owning them but reducing the effect of successions of property, that of making money, of inventing an extra value?

JP: . In other words, if the value of the property is not based only upon ownership, on personal greed so to speak, then the value lies in its use, It's not a necessity to own it in order to use it, to be useful, to be of use. What you are saying is value equals use as a formula. So, what you are saying is, I go for this idea of ownership. Now this value is how you use it. A good model of this is a housing program, the theory of it is that apartments are made available to homeless people with problems, alcoholics, or drug addicts or other homeless people living in the streets and have no money. They are beggars, they are out. Well, this organization is giving these people apartments for free, they provide them with new, clean, working apartments, one bedroom apartments with kitchen, a furnished bed, and they ask nothing in return. If the person is getting social security or some kind of pension, yes, they would take a portion of that, some of it, leaving enough for that person to exist, money to buy food etc. They say that it costs more for the government to stay in contact with the needs of these people, then to give them the apartments to make their life better, where the need or responsibility of government would not be needed.

CV: What is interesting is that Fluxus proposed an economic alternative system and that you are still proposing it in your everyday practice, in your small economic world.

JP: It is a practice, yes. I'm also thinking of the artist George Brecht's ideas about objects having an actual use and value rather than depending on objects unbalanced to practical needs. Really, the way the art system exists now is that art is expensive and it's only available for rich people.

Flynt used to say to me when he visited the yard where I was going to get my taxi cab, there's a place where all the cabs are and you go there, you pay your money, they give you the key and then you go, you get the car and go work. There where many cars, like a hundred, so once he went there for me and just looked, and Henry said to me *"this place is more important than any art museum in New York City"*.

CV: Joseph Beuys associated himself with Fluxus in the beginning. I'm thinking of his idea of the social sculpture. Can we speak of a social sculpture in your work, or rather of a social sculpture that presents itself in the collateral effects of your work?

JP: I read an interview with Beuys recently where he said that he encountered a teacher that he was really inspired by and this teacher made him think about extending the understanding of what art could be, what sculpture could be, or, let's say, art in general. After that he probably became aware of the Fluxus avant guard

art, where art could really expand, which happened to me when I met Yoko Ono in Tokyo and I read John Cage's book on silence. We saw the work in Anthology, and suddenly I was exposed to a new universe, a new doorway to what I thought art was. But before that I didn't know much. I knew that paintings looked very interesting. Then my intuition saw something; it was a matter of steps. When I first saw Beuys' work, his pictures and magazines, I immediately understood what he was doing, and it was attractive to me. He worked with images and was very aware of what he looked at. Doing what he did, and his background, brought in with them something meaningful. What the felt meaning was... or, why did he wrap a piano in felt? Why is there a room in the Pompidou with a piano wrapped in felt?

CV: When I was a child I was wondering why that piano needed to be covered or protected with felt, why there was the red cross, a symbol that was to me that of the medical assistance. Something needed to be medicated. Then, later, I knew, it was our European culture.

JP: That's a big question. Do you really believe that, that the European culture needs to be medicated ?

CV: At the time, after the war, it needed. Actually it's still needing it! Not only European culture. There are still differences between European and American culture, but many cultural problems we share.

JP: What's the main common problem?

CV: To me, one problem is related to the property and to the fact that we cannot control the economic value of things any more. Yet another one is related to the distinction between information and communication, to the overlapping, the confusion between information and communication, between the transmission of data and the human exchange. It's a question of glory. The media is the place where people are exposed, it's the exhibition of their image, and of the image of merchandising.

JP: I was thinking of it the other day, in TV they always say "this is the best thing, this is the greatest thing, this moment, this instant is the greatest, this is the most expensive thing and we will sell it cheap, actually free, but it is the greatest moment!". All TV is great, they must be sensational. I guess this is what the French situationist, Guy Debord, wrote about. I think I'm a situational artist, somehow. I combine the dictates of my unconscious or my soul and the possibilities of the situation.