

## David Tudor - Alive, Free, and Without Need of Culture

*Kristine Stiles*

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### ABSTRACT

In his dual roles as composer and performer/interpreter of scores, David Tudor expressed confluent aims. As a composer, he sought to find "a point where a piece seems to be alive, that is...it doesn't need any more...culture." As an interpreter, Tudor admitted a particular interest in the moment when "all of a sudden you are giving yourself a freedom of interpretation which you didn't have before." These two views represent key aesthetic values belonging to Tudor and his artistic milieu, which this paper will explore within the context of the intellectual history of his period. Tudor's attitudes may be understood as values, regarding the production of art and the cultural conditions that shape notions of originality; the social conventions that require performers to be responsible for virtuoso realizations of other artists' works; the putative philosophical possibility of autonomous ("alive") works of art; and the political efficacy ("freedom") of artists.

### FULL PAPER

All of a sudden you are giving yourself a freedom of interpretation which you didn't have before.

—*David Tudor on the experience he sought as interpreter/performer*

I've always felt that there's a point where a piece seems to be alive, that is, living. And that's the point where I know the composition is finished, even though I might have designed the procedures so that it could change, you know. But there's a point where the composition is alive, and it doesn't need any more...culture.

—*David Tudor on the experience he sought as a composer.*

David Tudor expressed similar aims for his dual roles as a composer and as an interpreter-performer of other composers' scores. Clearly, he trusted in and aspired to the moment when, in following or writing a score, he could unexpectedly depart from it, reaching a point of independence and of sovereignty in the creative act. Drawing on interviews with and statements by Tudor and other artists, this paper triangulates Tudor's artistic aims with those of John Cage and Henry Flynt in order to reappraise Tudor's aesthetics as a performer and composer. Although Tudor was the consummate interpreter of Cage's work, his own aesthetic interests diverged considerably from Cage's rejection of self-expression, his pursuit of anonymity in the work, and his notions of freedom. I will suggest that Tudor's expressed wish for his work to no longer "need culture" parallels similar aesthetic theories articulated by Flynt, an artist-composer who, like Tudor, was associated loosely with the circle of Fluxus. This essay proposes that Tudor might be viewed through different standards of representation both as a person and an artist, a proposition that I hope will open a lively debate regarding his aesthetic attitudes, processes, and aims, and that will lead us to a more expansive view of his art both as a composer and as an interpreter of other composers' works.

### I

In the quotations that began this essay, Tudor stated his aesthetic intentions to arrive at an instant of recognition that would emerge, unexpected, from both his own conditions of being and from the conditions of being creative. He sought to discover rather than to orchestrate such a point, and he wanted to set himself free from other composers' compositions *while simultaneously* being immersed in and connected to them. Such aims differ widely from the ways in which his fellow artists perceived him, and from the now canonical value of anti-expressionism, putatively attributed to both new music and Fluxus-type performance. Representations of Tudor by his colleagues invariably

follow this canonical view. A good example is Alison Knowles' discussion of his performative style and personality, which is worth quoting at length in this regard:

David Tudor had a neutral personality. He looked not extraordinary in any way. He was medium build, a nice looking guy, and he understood how to go right to the work and just do it with no self-presentation, just to do it like the score says...The attitude in performing art or music that is non-descriptive in the notation, by that I mean the author doesn't specify dynamics or emotive stance, that attitude is all important. In this David was a master. It is understood [in Cage-influenced and Fluxus works] that emotive material in the producer-performer is not needed, feelings like anger, ecstasy, etc., are not written-in because they are undesirable. In so far as they exist naturally in the performer, they are felt anyway in the gait, the hand, the hair!, in the natural attitudes that pervade our bodies as we approach the piece. Nothing is desired that is not naturally inherent. No attitude or interpretive mode is expected or hoped for. For this reason remarks from the spectators such as 'But nothing is going on,' or 'How am I supposed to feel?' are heard. We are naturally programmed to expect theatre and performer interpretation in all the arts. When Fluxus and new music by-passed theatre it picked up such magicians as David Tudor. No one could do 4 minutes 33 seconds like he could. He could stand naturally, sit as if he was in a railroad station waiting for a train, and turn the pages as if he himself was quietly waiting for something like the rest of us. Whether it was one's own art or someone else's doesn't matter. This neutral stance which is so desirable is hard to achieve, and he was the master.

Knowles' understanding of Tudor's immaculate execution of the aesthetic values embedded in Fluxus musical performance exemplify how artists perceived his work as an interpreter of new music.

I discussed with Carolee Schneemann how Tudor's own views differed from this general understanding of his work described by Knowles and others. Schneemann explained that no one guessed or observed Tudor's desire to grant himself freedom in his interpretation of someone else's score. Nor had she been aware of his simultaneous interest in making the work come alive so that it would no longer "need any more culture." "How could such a deeply utopian, expressionistic, and earnest investment in the life of art and its performance escape notice?" I asked. She responded:

He was the most reticent person in the world; he wasn't quite alive; he was transparent, like Warhol. You heard him. You almost didn't see him. He was like a small color. He had no charisma, which was his charm. He disappeared into the work. He was really so unique in this way. He was a musician's musician. He had no way of dramatizing his deep merging with the material. The audience was just enveloped with what they heard. There was no way to know it [these intentions and feelings]. There was no gesture; [his performance] merged into the very first notes because there was no gesture. He was always so *within* what he was bringing forward. Really you thought of the music, not of him, to an extent that it was really different than with other performers. You never knew he had drama, or lovers, or anything. He was quiet and incredibly modest.

Similarly, John Cage also referred to Tudor's private life and characteristic reticence when he recounted that once, sitting apart from guests at a party, Tudor was asked to join the group. He responded: "I haven't left it. This is how I keep you entertained." Merce Cunningham repeated Cage's story at Tudor's memorial at the Judson Memorial Church, September 17, 1996. Quite simply, Tudor was understood, categorized, and mythologized by his peers in this way. But Tudor's own statements suggest that the man keeping everyone entertained desired also to astonish himself, and that he granted himself permission for such a moment of amazement. I theorize that *Tudor's ability to be present and attentive to himself enabled him to become unencumbered by, and free of, the score that he both conformed to and interpreted.* In other words, Tudor gave himself permission *to escape himself* in order to become "free," even as *he found himself* in the performance of another composer's work.

Such aims differ considerably from those of Cage and his renowned legacy. For Cage eschewed notions of "freedom" and "self-expression," positions manifestly evident in two stories he recounted in his well-known 1958 lecture "Indeterminacy." In the first narrative, Cage describes how Morton Feldman (in response to artists' discussions of freedom, and the idiom "free as a bird") went to a park to watch birds and returned with the following comment: "You know? They're not free: they're fighting over bits of food." In this story, Cage recasts the simile "free as a bird" into a competitive principle of survival in order to undermine the concept of freedom. On the subject of "self-expression," Cage remembered:

One of Mies van der Rohe's pupils, a girl, came to him and said, "I have difficulty studying with you because you don't leave any room for self-expression." He asked her whether she had a pen with her. She did. He said, "Sign your name," she did. He said, "That's what I call self-expression."

In this brief story, Cage fashions authorial presence as the narcissistic performance of one's signature.

But, for Tudor, freedom and expression were far from being expressionistic gestures of self-interest, as it was possible for Tudor to achieve these goals only in the interpretation of, and interconnection and communion with, another artist's creative act. I think that what Knowles praised in Tudor's "neutral stance" was actually *the freedom he gave himself to empower his individuality in union with the values of his community*. Community in Fluxus, Happening, and the new music circles to which he belonged was everything. Likening this communal experience to a Quaker church, Schneemann explained:

It was simple. It's partly how we made the work and shared the work. Many of his [Tudor's] concerts were in these small out of the way places; you'd hear these amazing experimental works with twenty-people that really mattered. Each art configuration had its own audience context around it... You found your source of study and inspiration and the community.

In part, Tudor's sense of self and freedom is firmly embedded in German Romantic traditions, especially in the thinking of theologian and philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder, who believed that the distinguishing feature separating humans from animals and nature is self-awareness and the self-reflective ability to mirror the self within the self. Anticipating Nietzsche and Bergson, Herder argued that the human sense of freedom derived, in no small measure, from being always in a state of "continuous becoming." For in a state of incessant action, one knows oneself to be alive - and vividly. The pursuit of art and life as a vital force, a "continuous becoming," is apparent in Tudor's interest in identifying the instant when "all of a sudden you realize that [the composition] has a life of its own." Paradoxically, in Tudor's anthropomorphic aim to give life to art in the animation of another composers' work, I believe he gained insight into his own creativity, and observed that such recognition made it necessary for him, eventually, to acknowledge the authorship of his own compositions. Indeed, when he acknowledged himself as a composer, he seemed astonished. "It occurs to me," he commented, that "it's I who have done that,....I have given life to this configuration."

Thus, I want to suggest that Tudor's stance represented a deeply human sentience, experienced in the ability to lose one's "self" in the interaction, interconnection, and interdependence with another. Secondly, Tudor's sense of self was gained in combination with the empathic act of entering into, and becoming one with, the creative art of another, such that in this absence of self he was able to find himself. Third, Tudor's great talent was in being able to *appear* to others to be neutral, all the while enabling himself to become "free," precisely because he recognized his profound condition of interrelation with his community of artistic peers. In other words, his community required the *appearance* of neutrality even though, paradoxically, it also required freedom in interpretation. Tudor was able to combine both. "Free," I posit, for Tudor meant something akin to enlightenment, namely insight into the paradoxical isolation and interconnection of all life. This enlightenment, or a way-of-being, is, ironically, very different from the western Enlightenment paradigm of human self-sufficiency that also was foundational in his approach. For Tudor's form of wisdom is also, in part, akin to the Zen-like state of egolessness (freedom) embraced by Cage. Tudor's freedom came from being literally in concert with another and in full acknowledgement of his own personal will-to-originality, such that he could proudly say: "It's I who have done that." In this way, Tudor combined the western tradition of freedom, as manifest in romantic expressionism, with the eastern tradition of freedom, defined by selflessness.

## II

I would now like to turn to Tudor's aims as a composer to have his work arrive at and inhabit a place bereft of what he called "the need for culture." When Tudor referred to culture, he meant "culture" in the sense of high art as the general development of intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic inherited values and qualities sanctioned by a cultural elite. Henry Flynt was well known for commenting on just this subject in his public lectures from the late 1950s to the mid-1960s, during which he often railed against what he dubbed "Serious Culture." Thus, Flynt's theories of art and culture illuminate Tudor's aim to rid himself of the accreted representations and practices of culture.

Compared to Cage and Tudor, Flynt is little known, less understood. He is rarely discussed except for being a fine country and blues musician and for having authored the prescient essay “Concept Art” in 1961, written while fully engaged in the new music and proto-Fluxus environment at the end of the 1950s and early 1960s. The broader scope and impact of Flynt’s unorthodox art practice and critical, aesthetic views have been largely ignored. Yet Flynt’s ideas are relevant to Tudor’s aesthetic aims. Moreover, Flynt’s concepts played a little known but central role in shaping the social and aesthetic identity of Fluxus through their influence on George Maciunas, the self-appointed leader of Fluxus who adapted Flynt’s notions in the early 1960s. Through Maciunas, Flynt’s leftist ideas filtered into Fluxus, contributing directly to its public image as a radical, social movement and to its collective ethos. Flynt, a Southerner, was powerfully effected by the civil rights movement and African-American and regional music, rejected outright inherited European culture - or what he called “Serious Culture” - and struggled against all forms of cultural imperialism. In addition, Flynt’s social position and self-evaluation as a cultural outsider — a “creep,” in the vernacular of the 1950s - may be compared to Tudor’s own negative self-image and cultural position. I will briefly outline the historical circumstance that led to Flynt’s rejection of “Serious Culture” before discussing his “Creep Lecture” and the subsequent development of Flynt’s concept of “brend.” “Brend” was Flynt’s utopian proposal for subjective authenticity, and his philosophical arsenal for defending his “creep” cultural status. Next, I will consider the relationship between the aesthetics of outsider in the construction of Tudor’s views, and propose that Flynt’s concepts run parallel to Tudor’s intention to shed the “need for culture” that may have resulted from Tudor’s own marginal social self-conception and experiences. An examination of their similarities may disclose how Tudor arrived at his notion of freedom in his interpretation and performance of other artists’ works, as well as in how he came to understand himself as a composer: “It’s I who have done that.”

On May 15, 1962, composer Christian Wolff, then a student at Harvard, organized a lecture by Henry Flynt, then a twenty-two year old, Harvard mathematics major, drop-out from North Carolina. The lecture analyzed the social misfit known as the “creep.” A veritable personification of a creep himself, Flynt delivered his talk, “The Important Significance of the Creep Personality,” in the august upper commons room of Harvard’s Adams House while standing before a massive library table situated authoritatively on an oriental rug. Flynt began his lecture by defining “General Acognitive Culture,” a phrase he invented to describe the social conditions and norms that contribute to the traditional definition of “culture” as “knowledge, the fine arts, peripherally amusement and quality of life.” Flynt explained that he sought “to repudiate and discredit... certain (adult) human activities” in order to expose what he considered to be the inauthentic origins of institutionalized culture, organized recreational and entertainment activities. Such activities, he claimed, produce homogenized, conformist behavior, and are the source of frustration and loss of individuality. The second part of Flynt’s talk was entitled the “Creep Lecture,” in which he linked his repudiation of “Serious Culture” to the ways in which cultural norms contribute to the formation of standardized personality types.

Flynt began the “Creep Lecture” by formulating his general principles of a theory of the creep personality. He had begun working on this idea five years after Helen Lefkowitz, a fellow student at the National Music Camp, Interlochen, Michigan, had rejected his teenage advances (Flynt was seventeen) by describing him as “such a creep.” Recoiling from his personal humiliation, Flynt began his systematic investigation of “the creep problem.” Flynt defined creeps as creative and intelligent, although regarded by the public as abnormal because of being generally shy, unstylish, socially unassertive, often lacking in self-confidence, poise, and sophistication, and commonly sexless and awkward especially in habits of courtship. Flynt argued that the social isolation of creeps is a critical part of their evolution and unique behavior, and evolves as such because they are treated with “condescending scorn, amusement, or pity.” However, submission to involuntary seclusion and a solitary existence is precisely what allows creeps to develop “the morale required to (be) differ(ent).” Lack of conformity and concomitant marginality, Flynt claimed, increased the possibility for the formation of authentic desires and the ability to live an extremely rich fantasy life. In other words, the ability to cultivate an authentic personal culture is nurtured in solitude where an exaggerated imaginative sphere compensates for an absence of interpersonal experiences. Because of their involuntary social isolation, creeps reject notions of “maturity” that enforce the childhood/adult dichotomy, that require sexual sophistication as a criteria for maturation, and that lead to the development of a military personality. Flynt argued that this childlike resistance to specialization itself could become a pre-condition necessary for the rejection of social regimentation, the principle component that leads to the negative militarization of adult life.

Flynt’s discussion of the social construction of culture and personality evolved into a philosophical theory of opposition, for which he coined the neologism “brend,” in 1963. “Brend” stood for a utopian aesthetic of pure

subjective enjoyment, unrestrained by convention, objective standards, or intersubjective value. “Brend” required the cultivation of one’s own individual idiosyncrasies and preferences, which he defined as a “contentless model” for arriving at one’s “aesthetic self” by-passing socially inscribed pseudo-culture, or “pseudo-’brend’,” and reaching a point where one’s own individual “just-likings” could be found. “Brend” encompasses the things that one simply does because, in Flynt’s words: “You just like it as you do it... These doings should be referred to as your just-likings. These just-likings are your ‘brend’.” “Brend” was an umbrella term for a simultaneous critique of social conformity and a model for the defense of social misfits like himself.

Flynt’s lectures in the early 1960s become topical enough to attract such composers as Cage and Virgil Thomson, and David Tudor, who all attended at least one of the talks. Flynt’s struggle to articulate an alternative aesthetic represented his response to “tremendous peer pressure [to have] new concepts” that he felt was exerted in the new music circles to which he belonged at Harvard and in the Fluxus avant-garde. Flynt was especially alienated by the aura of celebrity surrounding Karl Heinz Stockhausen, and organized a legendary protest against the German composer on February 27, 1963. Together with his Harvard friend Tony Conrad and the filmmaker Jack Smith, Flynt picketed against Stockhausen’s musical form of “Serious Culture.” They had earlier marched with placards outside of the Museum of Modern Art, the Philharmonic Hall at Lincoln Center, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art (where the Mona Lisa was then being exhibited to record numbers of visitors) on February 22nd, carrying signs bearing the slogans: DEMOLISH SERIOUS CULTURE! DESTROY ART! DEMOLISH ART MUSEUMS! The following evening at Walter De Maria’s loft, Flynt delivered the fifth lecture in his series, titled “From ‘Culture’ to Veramusement,” adapting and inventing the term “veramusement” from the Latin *veritas* and the English “amusement” to signify the truth of enjoyment in personal kinds of pleasure (pure recreation). During the lecture, Flynt railed about the human “suffering caused by serious-cultural snobbery,” while he stood before a large picture of the Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky. The audience was ushered into the room by having first to step on a print of the Mona Lisa that he used as a doormat. Flynt’s lectures were of great interest to numerous artists, some of whom even took the time to write to the artist to discuss their content. Among those epistolary responses were letters from composers Terry Riley and Cornelius Cardew, poet Diane Wakoski, and artists Walter De Maria and Robert Morris. Morris wrote to Flynt at least twice, in August of 1962 and again in March of 1963. His letters are particularly interesting, as it is possible to follow his thought and the impact of Flynt’s concepts into his later celebrated series of articles, “Notes on Sculpture.”

Flynt’s militancy and self-conscious anti-art position reflected his emulation and interpretation of the aims and values of Duchamp and Cage. For example, Flynt believed the myth that Duchamp had ceased making art, and after reading a *Time* Magazine article of March 21<sup>st</sup>, 1960, came to believe that Cage, too, would “move away from art” and cease composing. Flynt remembered that, “The idea that there would be some kind of utopian evolution in which art — in the sense of museum art would disappear, I took that seriously. I thought that was really profound.” Wishing to follow his self-selected mentors (Duchamp and Cage), Flynt naïvely and systematically destroyed much of the work he did in the late 1950s and early 1960s in an attempt to practice the purity of his ideals. “Brend” was part of Flynt’s strategy to move toward the liquidation of art.

George Maciunas spread Flynt’s ideas, sometimes even adapting Flynt’s own language, as the following letter of November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1964, to Wolf Vostell attests:

Fluxus opposes serious art or culture and its institutions, as well as Europeanism. It is also opposed to artistic professionalism and art as a commercial object or means to a personal income; it is opposed to any form of art that promotes the artist’s ego. Fluxus rejects opera and theater (Kaprow, Stockhausen, etc.), which represent the institutionalizing of serious art, and is for instead of opera and theater, vaudeville or the circus, which represent a more popular art form or totally nonartistic amusement (which have been considered false by ‘cultivated’ intellectuals).

Maciunas directly adopts not only Flynt’s oppositional language to European inherited aesthetic conventions and practices, but Flynt’s emphasis on popular culture and his notion of amusement (Flynt would have used his own term, Veramusement) to describe the goals of Fluxus as he, Maciunas, theorized them. Such notion gave way to Flynt’s emphasis on an analysis of the subjective development of the creep personality and the necessity to develop one’s individual “brend.” “Brend” would counter “Serious Culture” and the impact of imperialist European aesthetics, and affirm personal “just-likings,” at the same time as allow for a whole range of difference, namely complementary and conflicting values of individual expressive “just-likings” and practices. Cultural “value” would

be understood in the widest sense, ranging from the worth attributed to all means of exchange, utility, and feeling or emotion. Such a definition represented an early attempt to acknowledge the interchange between the individual and the collective and the inextricable link between “culture” and its commodification as “Art,” with a capital “A.”

### III

Let me now return to Tudor about whose biography we know enough to postulate the conditions that led to his sense of isolation, deep ability to concentrate, and solitary appearance even in the midst of friends. In short, Tudor had all the makings of a “creep.” Tudor was born when his father was fifty. He was traumatized when he was young by his mother’s suicide, a trauma that was exacerbated by his father’s subsequent lack of interest in the boy. In the early 1960s, it seems that Tudor suffered some kind of sexual dysfunction, as letters from his wife, M.C. Richards, to him suggest. All of these experiences imply, Tudor’s traumatic interiorization of feeling, a mode of being that may have resulted in his extraordinary ability to appear to do nothing at the piano, all the while exuding compelling expressivity in the slightest movement or gesture of his body. In short, Tudor’s desire to avoid the “need” for culture in the production of art, and his resistance to the social conditions that shape notions of originality, may have been the environment necessary for the creative growth that Flynt theorized.

I want to repeat that while the two artists’ aesthetic objectives bear comparison, my method of accounting for Tudor’s special qualities *should not* be understood to be an argument about direct influence. For according to Flynt, he and Tudor did not “fraternize” even though they belonged to similar new music and Fluxus circles, and Tudor attended Flynt’s first concert at Yoko Ono’s loft, February 25, 1962, which he later described to Christian Wolff in Switzerland. Rather than a study of influence, my method is concerned with the cultural formations that result from traumatic subjectivity. Both artists were outsiders. Both organized their notions of cultural meaning and found other peripheral groups with which they could identify from that position of marginality. Both artists searched for a unique place of “freedom” (or “brend”) unfettered by received culture. Tudor’s artist colleagues described him as “secretive” and “solitary,” precisely the kind of individual able, according to Flynt (and trauma theory), to develop the morale required to be different. Recalling Cage’s anecdote about Tudor, Tudor even understood his capacity to “entertain” his friends by remaining distant - outside of their social interaction. I conclude that Tudor’s particular gift was his capacity to live an extremely rich fantasy life in his own work, unrestrained by “conventions” and “objective standards,” at the same time as he was also able to conform *in appearance* to the Cage and Fluxus-influenced convention of neutrality. Indeed, it could be argued that Tudor performed in his empathic performance of his peers’ works in accordance with Flynt’s directions for arriving at one’s “brend.” Flynt wrote:

Consider the whole of your life, what you already do, all your doings. Now please exclude everything which is naturally physiologically necessary (or harmful) such as breathing and sleeping (or breaking an arm). From what remains, exclude everything which is for the satisfaction of a social demand, a very large area which includes foremost your job, but also care of children, being polite, voting, your haircut, and much else. From what remains, exclude everything, which is an agency, a “means,” another very large area, which overlaps with others to be excluded. From what remains, exclude everything, which involves competition. In what remains *concentrate on everything done entirely because you just like it as you do it* (my emphasis).

I believe that something similar occurred when Tudor disappeared into his interpretive performances of other composer’s work. What many have described as his non-attitudinal, neutral position, I believe was in fact a very distinctive approach and attitude, something akin to his own “brend.” Tudor’s ability to assume such a disposition seems to have represented his “just-likings.” For he was simultaneously immersed in the pursuit of his independence from inherited cultural traditions and conventions, and a process of the discovery, assertion, and empowerment of his individuality as “freedom,” *in union with the values of his community*. I would like to enumerate aspects of what I believe was Tudor’s “brend” so that future scholars, especially musicologists, may think about how these values and “just-likings” may have shaped his own compositional practices as well as his interpretation of other artists’ work.

1. Tudor used interpretation and performance as interstices (between his extreme sense of isolation and sociability, between being a solo performer and a collaborator, and between insisting upon privacy and cultivating community) for opening a space in which he and the music could “come to life.”

2. Tudor employed composition, interpretation, and performance as a means for teaching and learning about both himself and others.
3. Tudor reintroduced personality, subjectivity, originality, and authorship into the emotive material that Cagean aesthetics expunged, by attending (in the extreme) to the interiority of his own imagination and his ability to convey that vision in the most subtle, rigorous, and minimal use of his body and virtuoso musical discipline.
4. Tudor solicited “new material” from his composer friends as a means of constantly *reinventing himself in community with his peers*.
5. Tudor cultivated “freedom” in what appears to have been his will to reconfigure cultural codes and relationships to materials and events. He did so in order to bring them under his control only to release them again into new and surprising configurations that provided listeners and viewers with new modes of art and music.

Such are the aesthetics of the misfit, found in the margins, in work by artists like Flynt and Tudor, themselves at the margins of Fluxus, itself misfit and marginal even among avant-gardes. The techniques that Flynt articulated for the eccentric are guides to the social construction, psychological proclivities, and creative survival of the outsider and his or her proposition for reordering the world through embodied works of art. Tudor achieved this aim, remaking the world moment by moment.