

"In the beginning, there was an enormous amount of confusion. Not the kind of confusion that there is today about what is or was, or who is or was Fluxus. But, at that time, there was a lot of flux in Fluxus. This confused beginning came to pass in Europe in 1962, when George Maciunas said, "Let there be Fluxus", and Fluxus there was forever after, Amen. I know that most of the Fluxus stuff started shortly before 1962, for the very good reason that without John Cage, Marcel Duchamp and Dada, there wouldn't have been any Fluxus". Alfred Earl Hansen was born in 1927 in Queens, the suburb of a New York City which, in the years following the second world war, was growing fast and attracting a great number of artists, poets, writers, rebels from Europe as well as from all over the United States. Even at the age of 20, Alfred was already a never-ending source of tales and legends, or rather, of dreams. He had honed a great talent for storytelling, and his stories were always seasoned with generous pinches of irony. Thus, this Fluxus-man possessed a somewhat out of the ordinary gift. His life was one long series of extraordinary situations and encounters which he took in his stride as moments of day to day life. Al Hansen was a simple, humble, amusing person: forever caught up in apparently meaningless matters, yet ones which were to evolve into an infinite number of complex, meaningful and inspiring situations. Through his happenings, his performances (often based on aspects of his own life), Al Hansen was the real creator of that which Maciunas had defined *Fluxus-Art-Amusement*: " ... which searches out the mono-structural though non-vulgar qualities in moments of everyday life through the use of a game or a joke. It's a mixture of Spike Jones, Vaudeville, children's games and pranks, and Marcel Duchamp". During the second world war, Hansen was a proud paratrooper, and he would fill piles of notebooks with stories and drawings, descriptions of the sensation of freedom given by flying, of floating through the air like a bird. On his return to New York in 1948, he moved into a loft in the Bohemian neighborhood of Bowery. He married Audrey, and in 1951, their daughter Bibbe Anne was born. He then developed a great passion for travel: even though he would dream of living on a desert island, his life was in fact truly nomadic, with all the poetic repercussions that this entails. His artistic education started in the fifties, after coming home from the war, at the *Arts Student League* in NYC's Greenwich Village, *the Cooper Union Art School* and *the Pratt Institute*, where he studied graphic art. His meeting John Cage at this time (on the experimental music course he followed at the *New School For Social Research*) was to prove of utmost importance. Here, Al Hansen got to know and love the avant-garde cinema of Eisenstein³. He also started experimenting with the sounds of various instruments and got interested in esotericism through his reading Ching. Culturally, this was the crossover period between the spread of Beat culture and that of Zen Buddhism. The manipulation of normal musical instruments, the visualisation and theatricalisation of music as proposed by Cage, and the spread of new ideas on Futurist Theatre and the Art of No se all drew in the young Hansen. In the wake of the influence of this experimentation, a new art form was developed: the happening,

the performance manifestation of Fluxus. In that fertile period, Hansen had a great number of travelling companions": Kaprow, MacLow, Maxfield, Feldman, Higgings, Brecht. Together with these last two, Hansen founded the "New York Audiovisual Group" in 1958, creating "events" which took place in downtown Manhattan at "coffee-shops" like the "Epitome" or the legendary "Café au Go Go", or in alternative galleries like the "Third Rail Gallery", or even in the famous deconsecrated "Judson Church". Between 1961-62, opened his first studio in Brooklyn, not far from the Pratt Institute. This was to become one of the gathering points for the earliest performances of the Fluxus group, and in general for the New York happenings scene. Things going on one after another, almost without any plot, often borne out of improvisations, all have a certain Dadaist flavour to them. Dada was also the key to Hansen 's collages 4, a technique which the artist adopted from the beginning of the sixties, with his famous Hershey-bar wrapper collages, as well as in his renown Venus collages made using a wide range of materials (cigarette butts, cardboard. rope, film, tin cans, various leftovers from his performances). He produced these collage from the seventies right up until his untimely decease. Being a great admirer of the works of Kurt Schwitters, Hansen created a real "art-merz": art created by putting together a number of entirely dissimilar objects. Unlike the order/disorder motif of the great Schwitters, Hansen follows a single, relentless obsession: the composition of various objects in search of universal beauty in the form of the female body. His collages represent holy, divine Venuses. "In Search of the Goddess" is the title of one of the longest cycles of works dedicated to this female icon; unchanging, immobile idols of passion and Pagan prayers. They are worshipped by a number of friends and collectors such as Warhol, Oldenburg, Lichtenstein, Jim Dine, Jasper Johns, Peter Hutchinson, Allen Ginsberg and Allan Kaprow. "There's my whole world, a whole world to be found in those works", Hansen would explain, in reference to the quantity of "ready-made" objects uses in the Venuses. Even more original is the use (in the famous silver and gold collages) of Hershey-bar chocolate wrappers. Here the scraps of foil serve as the vehicle used by the artist to endlessly reproduce his ongoing obsession. The word "SHE", cut out from the centre of the word, is repeated hundreds of times as it makes up the characteristic female symbol. Al Hansen's approach thus anticipated how words and images were to be used in Concrete Poetry. The use of images and words, organised in line with a logic of space juxtaposed to the normal text structure and the entailing fixed order in a new exploratory dimension. From the mid-seventies, the Fluxus scene was to operate prevalently between the UnitedStates and Europe, where Body Art, Viennese Aktionism, the "O. M. Theatre" founded by Hermann Nitsch and the experimentation of Nam June Paik were to revolutionise the meaning of art and the way in which it was created. Hansen took part in the second important Fluxus meeting in Dusseldorf in 1963 (the first was in Wiesbaden in 1962), together with Robert Watts and Joseph Beuys. On this occasion, flyers containing the "Fluxus Manifesto" written by George Maciunas were thrown to the audience ⁶• In 1965, together with Wolf Vostell, Hansen experiments with the "Free-Form Happening": free interpretations and deconstructions of music scores. In the same period, he published advertisements in the New York daily papers offering "Happenings in Your Home". In the mid- 1 970s, he succumbed to the

fascination of the home of cinema par excellence, Los Angeles, and moved to Hollywood with his daughter Bibbe, looking for a chance to make it as a film director. Given his military experience in Germany and the completion of an "ideal family", Hansen moved to Cologne. There he organised a number of "Fluxus Family Festivals" and several years later in 1987, together with his partner Lisa Cieslik, he founded the "Ultimate Academy": a free, non-conventional interdisciplinary arts academy, run partly by the students themselves. But constant financial problems and a sort of "hyperkinetic anxiety" forced the artist to move several times. From Cologne, he first moved back to the United States, before returning to Germany. In the latter period of his life, his "hobo" spirit and a longing for sunlight led him to spend a lot of time in Italy, especially in Naples (he had already lived in Asolo near Verona in the seventies with Francesco Conz). There he became friends with Giuseppe Desiato, who had based his whole life on the notion of performance. He then met Peppe Morra, a meeting which marked the start of an intense period of work in the last years of his life. He produced works combining his own collage techniques with a strong sense of irony and humour, giving way to a series of cartoon-strip style icons, portraits dedicated to his closest friends and companions of the time. He also made a visit to the *Studio Lattuada* in Milan (a year before his death) to set up one of his legendary happenings. "Vota Arte" was to remain a classic event in which Al (together with friend and artist Hans Hermann) "created art 'on the road', like he did his own life". Hansen had Hermann push him around the streets of the center of Milan right up to the *Duomo* on a hospital stretcher while he read extracts from Machiavelli's "The Prince" out loud. Al Hansen loved real life to contaminate his works; he was always looking for that total overlapping of art and life. It was only fitting, then, that he should leave his friends giving one last performance entitled *FLUXUSREQUIEM* in June 1995 which he himself had written. But Al Hansen is still Fluxus-Flux; his geniality, his intuition are still today reference points for generations of artists who see art not only as an aesthetic medium, but as a social, political and philosophical one. Happenings, Situationism, Performance Art, right up to the so-called Relational Art have evolved not far from the Fluxus movement. Al Hansen himself back in 1968 declared, "In order to get in contact with the people, you need to make "food art", a notion which has been widely considered and put into action at recent art Biennials-Manifesta-Documenta, thus clearly showing the continuity and reactivity of contemporary Performance Art with respect to these great past masters.