

## Post-Cagean Aesthetics and the Event Score

Liz Kotz

Around 1960, in New York City, a new type of work began to appear that consisted of short, instruction-like texts proposing one or more actions. Frequently referred to under the rubric of “event” scores or “word pieces,” they represent one response to the work of John Cage.

Composition 1960 #10

to Bob Morris

Draw a straight line  
and follow it.

October 1960

—*La Monte Young*

WORD EVENT

• Exit

Spring, 1961

—*George Brecht*

VOICE PIECE FOR SOPRANO

to Simone Morris

Scream.

1. against the wind

2. against the wall

3. against the sky

y.o. 1961 autumn

—*Yoko Ono*

Made by artists active in New York's interdisciplinary neo-avant-garde, these pieces came out of an expanded sense of "music" and an expanded sense of medium. Many of La Monte Young's early compositions were performed live at downtown venues, including the now legendary Chambers Street series he organized at Yoko Ono's downtown loft in December 1960 through June 1961.<sup>1</sup> Several of Young's scores, including *Composition 1960 #10*, were subsequently printed in *An Anthology of Chance Operations* (1961/1963),<sup>2</sup> the influential compendium of new art that Young published with the assistance of the poet Jackson Mac Low and designer George Maciunas—a publication that Maciunas would take as a model when he assembled his own avant-garde movement and publication, to be called Fluxus.

George Brecht, who engaged in perhaps the most systematic work with the short, enigmatic texts he called "event scores," initially wrote them as performance instructions and began mailing them to friends and receptive acquaintances; on a couple of occasions he also displayed handwritten scores in gallery settings.<sup>3</sup> In *Water Yam* (1963), about fifty of the texts were assembled as small printed cards in a box, the first of an envisioned series of Fluxus editions Maciunas had planned, offering artists' "collected works" in a cheap, widely available form. Many of Ono's texts initially took the form of instructions for paintings she exhibited at Maciunas's AG Gallery in July 1961. She subsequently displayed these instructions at the Sogetsu Art Center in Tokyo in May 1962, in the form of hand-lettered sheets—carefully calligraphed in Japanese by her husband Toshi Ichihyanagi, a composer and former student of Cage's.<sup>4</sup> Ono quickly expanded the idea to produce many short instruction-like and meditative texts, which she privately published in 1964 as the book *Grapefruit*, during a two-year stay in Japan. Reissued in 1971 by Simon and Schuster in the wake of Ono's marriage to John Lennon, *Grapefruit* would bring the form to wider, if quizzical, audiences, and into something resembling popular culture.<sup>5</sup>

*What are these texts?* They can be read (have been read) under a number of rubrics: music scores, visual art, poetic texts, performance instructions, or proposals for some kind of action or procedure. Most often, when they are read at all, these "short form" scores are seen as tools for something else, scripts for a performance or project or musical piece which is the "real" art—even as commentators note the extent to which, for both Brecht and Ono, this work frequently shifts away from realizable directions toward an activity that takes place mostly internally,

in the act of reading or observing. This conceptual ambiguity derives from the use of the *text as score, inseparably both writing/printed object and performance/“realization.”* This peculiar type of event notation arguably derives from Cage’s work of the 1950s, appearing in its most condensed form in his landmark composition *4’33”* (1952), which directs the performer to remain silent during three “movements” of chance-determined durations. Replacing conventional musical notation with a condensed set of typewritten numbers and words, *4’33”* (in its first published version) effectively inaugurates the model of the score as an independent graphic/textual object, inseparably *words to be read* and *actions to be performed*. While this model was initiated by Cage, it was left to others to develop in a series of projects from 1959 to 1962.<sup>6</sup>

In their direct invitation to enactment and performed response, these event scores could seem almost absurd literalizations of 1960s critical claims for reading as an “activity of production”—except that the concrete, operational dimension of such “scores” engages an overt *transitivity*, a potential acting on materials, completely counter to the self-enclosed activity of the irreducibly plural “text” proposed by Roland Barthes in his 1967 call for a kind of writing, “intransitive” and “performative,” in which “only language acts, ‘performs,’ and not me.”<sup>7</sup> Taking music as a model for a renovated textuality, Umberto Eco’s poetics of the “open work” explicitly modeled radical literary practices on the experiments with “open form” by Luciano Berio, Henri Pousseur, and other postwar European composers.<sup>8</sup> As Barthes would subsequently propose in “From Work to Text” (1971), “We know today that post-serial music has radically altered the role of the ‘interpreter,’ who is called on to be in some sense the co-author of the score, completing it rather than giving it ‘expression.’ *The Text is very much a score of this new kind: it asks of the reader a practical collaboration.*”<sup>9</sup>

However resonant, these models of newly activated “textuality” risk a certain circularity, since the very postserial compositions they cite as aesthetic precedents were partly historical products of the European reception of Cage’s aleatory and indeterminate strategies, which themselves hinge on a peculiar relation to writing.<sup>10</sup> The theoretical impasse confronting both musicology and theater studies regarding the relative status of the written score or script—long held to be the privileged locus of the “work”—and its various performances, seen as secondary, suggests the enormous difficulty of reading the relays among “author,” “performer,” text, reader, and audience. A more adequate analysis can perhaps

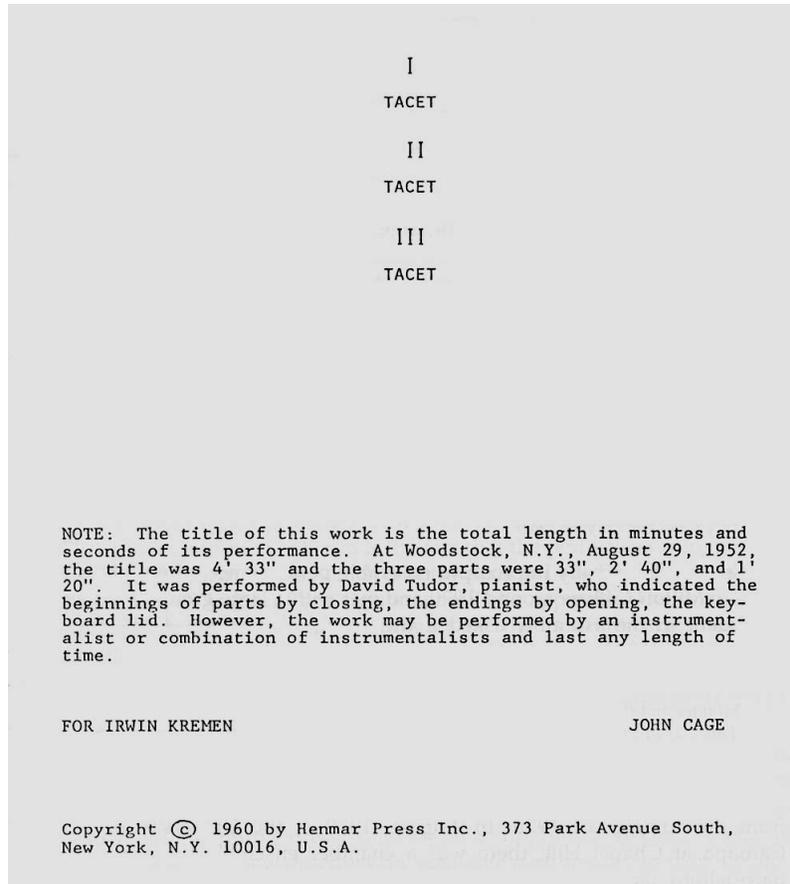


Figure 6.1 John Cage, typewritten score for 4'33", 1952. First published version. © 1960. Used by permission of C. F. Peters Corporation on behalf of Henmar Press Inc.

begin by specifying the particular modes of “performance,” enactment, and realization made possible in different linguistic/literary materials, as these circulate in specific material forms and contexts. As Eco was well aware, the “practical intervention” of the instrumentalist or actor is quite different from that of “an interpreter in the sense of a consumer”—even as he proceeds to assimilate them.<sup>11</sup>

In the case of these event scores, their condensed and enigmatic form may have facilitated their rapid circulation between performance, publication, and exhibition formats: small, strange, and belonging to no definable genre, they could go anywhere. Their reproduction, in the various broadsheets and “little magazines” of the time, had a provocative leveling effect: reproduced in the space of the page, all (typed/typographic) words become simply writing, “print.” Apparent differences between autonomous works of “word art” or poetry, instrumental forms of performance instruction, program note or score, or even critical essays and diagrams, are rendered indistinct. This potential mutability and transposability is intrinsic to language as a material, particularly when dislodged from certain kinds of institutional containers.<sup>12</sup> In its unorthodox design and extreme heterogeneity of format, material, and genre, *An Anthology* provided a key site for this textual indeterminacy and interpenetration—one that structurally replicates, in printed form, the productive collisions between dance, music, sculpture, poetry, lecture, and so forth, that occurred in performance and event-based programs of the time.

To complicate this already ambiguous dual structure—inseparably both language and performance—intrinsic to the notion of the text as “score,” we must factor in a third mode: the relation of these texts to object production. From the manipulation of everyday materials as props and sound-generating devices in Young’s early compositions to the sculptural production undertaken by Brecht, Ono, and others, many of these early word pieces could take object form or produce a material residue: material objects potentially presented for exhibition, just as the scores themselves could be (and were) exhibited. Working with an implicitly tripartite structure that allows them to be “realized” as language, object, and performance, certain of these event scores anticipate subsequent projects, by artists like Robert Morris and Joseph Kosuth, that explicitly investigate the tripartite structure of the sign (and which engage the photographic and overtly reproductive dimensions repressed in the earlier work).<sup>13</sup> By setting up chains of substitutions (but also bifurcations, hesitations, and unravelings) among word, sign, object, action, and so forth—all contained within a single word—a perplexing little text like Brecht’s *Exit* opens onto the enigmatic abyss of the semiotic, opening a door to the entry of linguistic structures and material into visual art of the 1960s.

How might such a sparse, focused practice emerge from or alongside such programmatic cacophony? And why would it occur under the

guise of “music”? Here, the complex renegotiation of Dada and collage legacies that occurs in the late 1950s is perhaps crucial. Among the materials collected in *An Anthology* are all manner of neo-Dadaist concrete poetry, sound poetry, chance compositions, and simultaneities—many of which could be performed live. Event scores, however, were rarely read aloud—the linguistic performativity they propose is closer to that of the iterability of the sign than to that of an overtly oral (and more conventionally literary) performance poetics. Rather than pulverizing language into sonorous fragments, the scores focus on the instructions themselves as poetic material. This alternate poetics, of deeply prosaic everyday statements, comprised of short, simple, vernacular words presented in the quasi-instrumental forms of lists and instructions, emerged in the postwar era as a countermodel to the earlier avant-garde practices of asyntacticality, musicality, and semiotic disruption.<sup>14</sup> Yet this poetics by no means represents a simple departure from or rejection of collage aesthetics, but, as we shall see, a complex transformation of its semiotic engagement, one that pursues the logic of the fragment to unprecedented levels of isolation, focus, and reduction.

Physically modest and de-skilled, these scores represent an artistic practice driven by but also counter to the recording and reproductive technologies that would increasingly restructure sound and language in the postwar era. The very project of semiotics is both an effect and motor of this process, in which language, sound, image, and time become objects of decomposition, quantification, recombination, and analysis (an earlier phase of which is already evident in the breakdown of representation and sign in cubism and Dada). Yet the diverse techniques and technologies generated during the Second World War—from cybernetics and information theory to the perfection of magnetic audiotape—markedly intensified this process, reducing complex information to transmissible series of binary digits, and proliferating indexical signs whose distance from syntax potentially reduces signification to “the mute presence of an uncoded event.”<sup>15</sup> Under the pervasive pressure of (mechanical, electronic, later digital) technologies of recording, reproduction, and transmission, the perceptual conditions of explicitly temporal and repeatable media (phonograph, film, later audiotape and videotape) came increasingly to inflect apparently static materials (objects, images, and printed text) in the postwar era, while also turning the previously ephemeral into a kind of object. Given its structural reliance on continual reenactment and its deep historical implication in systems of inscription, language is

a special case, a kind of model, of which the event score is but one example. To better understand this process, it will help to reconstruct some of the historical context of postwar music which gave rise to this radically reconfigured use of the score.

### **The Cage Class: Models of Experimental Music in the 1950s**

In a critical essay on the interdisciplinary avant-garde of the early 1960s, Henry Flynt protests that “Fluxus, as it is remembered today, grew out of an art of insignificant and silly gestures mainly due to George Brecht.”<sup>16</sup> He may be right. Brecht’s event scores were eagerly embraced by Maciunas, who adopted them as a sort of signature form for Fluxus performance.<sup>17</sup> Brecht’s myriad game- or kit-type objects (themselves crucial reinterpretations of Marcel Duchamp’s “readymade” aesthetic) were subsequently adapted, semistandardized, and proliferated in Maciunas’s endless FluxBoxes and early Fluxus editions.<sup>18</sup> Even Brecht’s single-page broadsheet *VTRE* (1963) turned into the Fluxus newspaper *ccVTRE*. It is not surprising then that when Brecht’s role is historically acknowledged, it is almost always within the context of Fluxus—a critical approach, however, which unfortunately tends to homogenize Fluxus production, flatten Brecht’s work into a preconceived notion of performance, and neglect the possible reception or impact of his work outside of Fluxus. Never a commercially successful artist, Brecht left the United States permanently in 1965 to live in Europe. Although he participated in a number of solo and group shows in the 1960s, his last one-person exhibition in the U.S. was a 1973 retrospective at the Onnasch Gallery in New York.

Brecht’s work with language appears to have come directly out of his involvement in Cage’s class on experimental composition at the New School, which he attended from June 1958 to August 1959.<sup>19</sup> Until that time, Brecht’s art production had mostly consisted of paintings and drawings made according to some version of chance procedures—drawings based on charts of random numbers and paintings made through dripping paint onto canvases, all fully pictorial in orientation.<sup>20</sup> In his addendum to *Chance Imagery*, Brecht states that, although he was aware of Cage’s work since 1951, his model for chance operations during the 1950s came primarily from the work of Jackson Pollock.<sup>21</sup> As the title suggests, Brecht’s initial goal was to use chance methods to generate what he termed “affective images.” And, according to fellow New School classmate Dick Higgins, at the time of entering Cage’s class, Brecht still

described himself as “you might say, a painter.”<sup>22</sup> Living in New Jersey, where he worked as a research chemist, Brecht often attended the class with Allan Kaprow, whom he knew through Robert Watts.

According to Higgins’s accounts of the class in *Jefferson’s Birthday/Postface* (1964), Brecht and Cage shared certain concerns that largely escaped the rest of the class:

The usual format of our sessions would be that, before the class began, Cage and George Brecht would get into a conversation, usually about “spiritual virtuosity,” instead of the virtuosity of technique, physique, etc. . . . The best thing that happened in Cage’s class was the sense he gave that “anything goes,” at least potentially. Only George Brecht seemed to share Cage’s fascination with the various theories of impersonality, anonymity and the life of processes outside their perceivers, makers or anyone else.<sup>23</sup>

As Higgins’s somewhat mocking tone suggests, Brecht’s miniaturized, highly self-effacing compositions shared Cage’s philosophical interests in strategies of desubjectivization and self-restraint at a time when many of the other class members—especially Kaprow, Higgins, and Al Hansen—were drawn to the more expressionistic “anything goes” aesthetic that often came to characterize happenings. Yet Higgins goes on to state that Cage’s real gift was to allow each member of the class to pursue his own project and sensibility, adding that “In the same way, Brecht picked up from Cage an understanding of his own love of complete anonymity, simplicity and non-involvement with what he does.”<sup>24</sup>

Most accounts of 1950s experimental music note the extreme divergence between the chance-generated and indeterminate work of Cage and his colleagues (Christian Wolff, Morton Feldman, Earle Brown) and the hyperrationalized project of integral serialism characteristic of postwar European composers like Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen. And indeed, despite their shared claim to the legacy of Anton Webern, the compositional strategies and resulting works of the two circles initially appear completely opposed. In a 1959 talk, “Program Notes,” Cage himself outlined these “two divergent directions characterizing advanced contemporary music, both stemming from the works of Anton Webern.” Among European composers, he notes, “Webern’s later music . . . suggested the application of serial methods to other aspects of sound than frequency. Thus concerning himself not only with the

ordering of pitch but with the control, too, of diverse characteristics of amplitude and duration, Stockhausen assumes a responsibility toward the problem of unification of disparate elements.” But, Cage proposes, an opposite, antisystematic reading also lies at the very source of serialist models: “Webern’s music also suggests the autonomy of sound in time-space and the possibility of making a music not dependent upon linear continuity means. The American works, setting out from this essentially non-dualistic point, proceed variously.”<sup>25</sup>

Thus it may come as some surprise, when reading Brecht’s *Notebooks* of his 1958–1959 attendance in Cage’s New School class, that the initial lessons breaking down the properties of sound employ a vocabulary that could have come straight out of *Die Reihe*, the influential German music journal edited by Herbert Eimert and Stockhausen: “Dimensions of Sound: Frequency, Duration, Amplitude, Overtone-structure, Morphology.” In his careful, precise notes, presumably following Cage’s directives, Brecht graphs out each as a quantitatively mapped, continuous *field*—“frequency field” (hi/low), “duration field” (long/short), and so forth. “*Note trend towards continuity,*” he records, “*vs. classical treatment.*” The next page notes, “‘Events in sound-space.’ (J.C.),” and in many of the exercises that follow, Brecht continues to carefully diagram phenomena in precise mathematical notation.<sup>26</sup>

Needless to say, this is not the picture of Cage’s class we have received from the far more free-form, anecdotal accounts of Al Hansen or Dick Higgins. Trained as a chemist, Brecht may have been one of the few participants equipped to engage with the more technical aspects of Cage’s discussion of music. According to Bruce Altshuler, Cage in a late 1980s interview recalled that “the impetus for the New School class was aroused by his recent work at the new music festival in Darmstadt, Germany, and . . . he felt that he should make these ideas available in America.”<sup>27</sup> Thus the models we find elaborated in Brecht’s notebooks are not so much Cage’s own compositional methods as notes for a shared project of the scientific breakdown of sound properties into quantifiable spectra—strategies that date, in one form or another, to the early nineteenth century and that were systematically researched and disseminated by *Die Reihe*. Brecht’s notes record Cage’s mention of it, and many American musicians (and artists, including Dan Graham and Sol Le Witt) read the journal during the 1960s.<sup>28</sup>

*Die Reihe*’s project for a scientifically grounded practice of electronic music is laid out in an early introduction by Eimert, the artistic director

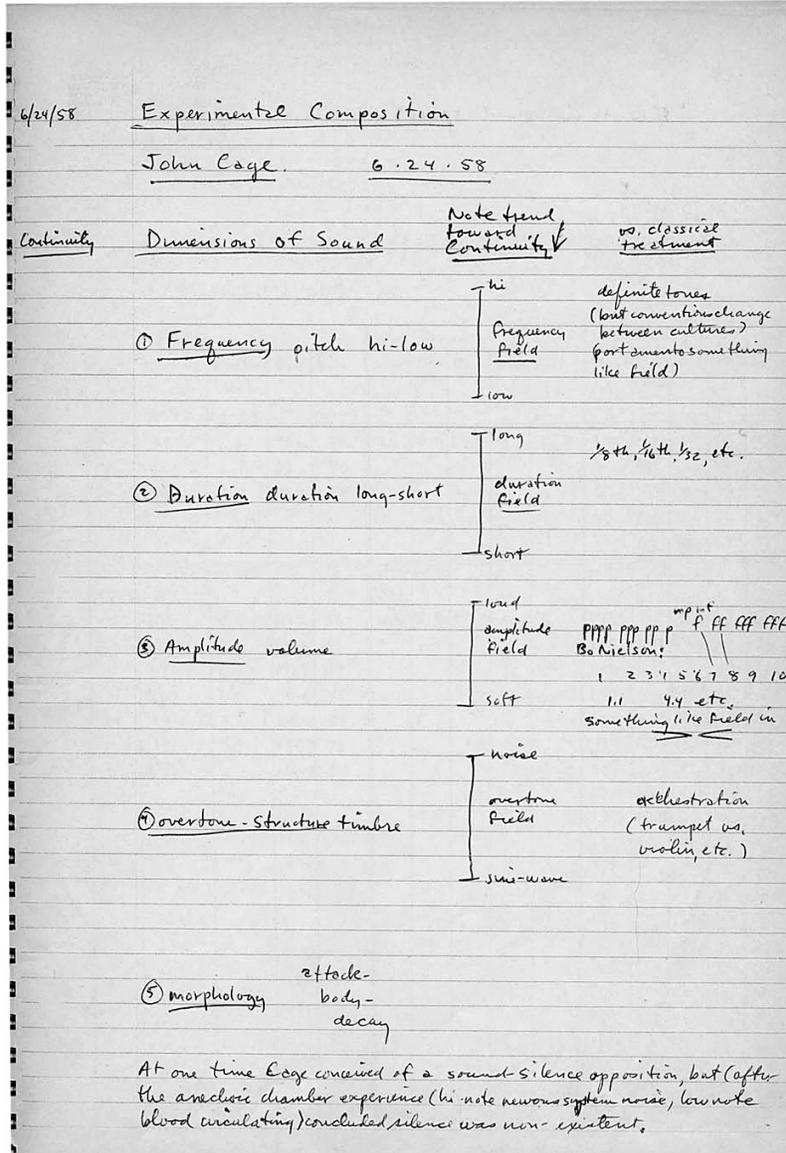


Figure 6.2 George Brecht, Notebooks, vol. 1, "Experimental Composition," June 24, 1958. Gilbert & Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

of Cologne Radio. With Werner Meyer-Eppler and other postwar German academics and artists drawn to new, instrumentalized American models of communications, acoustics, and information theory, Eimert was engaged in research on the psychology of perception and the physics of sound, as well as in the development of new electronic sound technologies for which Cologne Radio was an important sponsor.<sup>29</sup> In the essay “What Is Electronic Music?” published in the inaugural issue of *Die Reihe* (1955), Eimert outlines a program for positivist research into sound as the basis for new musical composition, calling for “the disruption by electronic means, of the sound world as we have known it,” and for the use of the technologies of broadcasting (tape recorder, loudspeaker, etc.) “transformed into a compositional means.”<sup>30</sup>

The analytic capacities made possible by these new technologies, such as the analysis of frequencies and overtone curves, provide not just new material for composition but the model for the very ways of conceiving of sound and its (artistic) organization: “New ways of generating sound stipulate new compositional ideas; these may only be derived from sound itself which in its turn must be derived from the general ‘material.’”<sup>31</sup> Naturally, such fundamentally restructured sound properties also required radically reconfigured notions of the score. “The multiplicity of forms of electronic elements far exceeds the possibilities of graphic notation,” Eimert argues, proposing a new mathematically notated method: “Thus ‘scores’ of electronic compositions resemble precise acoustical diagrams with their coordinates, frequencies (cycles per second), intensity levels (measured in decibels) and time (cm. p.s.)”<sup>32</sup>

Passages from Brecht’s *Notebooks* suggest that he actively read texts and scores by Boulez, Stockhausen, and other composers, adapting them to his own concerns. Perhaps via composer Richard Maxfield (an occasional New School substitute while Cage was away),<sup>33</sup> Brecht notes perceptual phenomena like the “relationality of pitch and amplitude” and their proportional relation to the experiential time of duration—concerns previously articulated by Stockhausen in essays in *Die Reihe*. While preparing an early version of *The Cabinet* (July 1958), an assemblage featuring lights and sounds, Brecht’s notes read “minimal perceptible levels for duration, pitch, amplitude.” For *Confetti Music* (July 1958), in which card colors determine source (gong, prepared guitar, gamelan, etc.), Brecht notes that “each sound [has] natural duration depending on source and amplitude,” and proposes an indexical model of sound production: “Each sound becomes a *projection of the record of a state* (like an

abstract expressionist painting). The cards represent a *record of a more or less momentary state*.<sup>34</sup> In a notebook draft for an unpublished essay, Brecht compares Stockhausen's *Piano Piece no. 11* with Earle Brown's "4 Systems" on the basis of what he terms "a scale of *situation participation*": "the extent to which the sound structure of the piece . . . partakes of the situation in which it occurs, as opposed to its arising from some pre-existent structure (score notation/symbolism/ arrangement)."<sup>35</sup>

However incongruous they may appear in relation to his rather low-tech rearrangeable assemblages, Brecht's recurrent recourse to quantitative models is not merely a period style. Not unlike some of Cage's quixotic efforts to combine art and technology in the 1930s and 1940s, Brecht repeatedly sought to bring scientific concepts into dialog with artistic practice, referring to his work of the period as "research."<sup>36</sup> Working as a chemist at Johnson & Johnson, Brecht was moderately active as a scientific inventor—a calling reminiscent of Cage's less-than-successful inventor father.<sup>37</sup> In the 1960 report "Innovational Research," which he initially proposed to Johnson & Johnson as "a suggested prototype for an innovational research program," he cites scientific theorist H. G. Barnett's idea of innovation as "an arbitrary range of recombinations at one end of a continuous series," as well as Ernst Cassirer on naming as "process of concentration and condensation."<sup>38</sup>

Like Cagean "indifference," modeled on a recording apparatus it overtly disavows, Brecht's work represses the pivotal role of these more technicist models. Except for occasional references to his pre-Cagean work with probability, random number tables, and statistical models of chance in the 1950s, later statements by Brecht never mention them—in contrast, for instance, to Young's obsessive experiments since the 1960s with just intonation, producing works whose very titles comprise lengthy mathematical calculations of their precise harmonic frequencies. Brecht's own rhetoric instead stresses the liberatory, antitechnological, and anti-instrumental nature of his project—to a sometimes absurd degree. Yet the very conceptual apparatus he adopts, moving from "sound-silence opposition" to "model of field/continuity,"<sup>39</sup> is itself a product of the remapping of sound via recording technologies and quantitative analysis—for example, the musical dissolution of *pitch*, from a series of discrete, articulated notes along a scale, into *frequency*, which operates as a continuity, defined quantitatively. As theorists from Jacques Attali to Friedrich Kittler have argued, this fundamental rupture in the nature of sound is only comprehensible under the pressure of recorded sound.<sup>40</sup>

As Kittler notes, “The phonograph does not hear as do ears that have been trained immediately to filter voices, words, and sounds out of noise. Articulateness becomes a second-order exception in a spectrum of noise.”<sup>41</sup> The perceptual availability of this spectrum (of sound outside the coded domains of “music” or “speech”), Kittler implicitly argues, is a product of modern recording technologies, emphasizing precisely the extent to which sound recording, in bypassing traditional methods of “alphabetic storage” (e.g., the musical score, written notation), permitted new, nonlinearized and nonlinguistic models of sound and, by extension, musical temporality. Prior to this nineteenth-century innovation, Kittler insists, the representation of temporal experience depended on the “symbolic bottleneck” of the letter: “Texts and scores: Europe had no other means of storing time.”<sup>42</sup>

Thus the very conjoining of written text and musical score in Cagean practice—and so important in postwar poetry as well—is paradoxically predicated on the dissolution of what had previously linked them: a shared dependence on the letter. Musical notation, as used in the West, had relied on the (tempered) duodecimal harmonic system, itself a series of discrete notes, arranged in linear sequence by meter. It is against the enormous constraints of this system that radical twentieth-century musicians would turn to the disruptive acoustic potential of “noise,” to the world of sound resting outside the parameters of “music”—from the “liberation of dissonance” in Schoenberg to a host of experiments with microtones, nonmusical instruments, and unconventional, nonmetric time structures by composers from Alois Hába to Edgar Varèse.

Yet for the musical score to become available as a generalized time structure or event score, it would have to be unhinged not only from *sound* as a system of discrete notes but also from *time* as a graphically plotted system of rhythmic measure. In experimental musics of the 1950s, these notational properties would be gradually replaced by the new positivities of quantitative science: pitch as frequency (vibrations per second) and time as mechanical time, clock time. No longer mere supplemental annotation, language enters the space of a musical score voided of its internal linguistic structure. Comprised of verbal performance instructions—“tacet”—organized in predetermined time brackets, *4'33"* employs the score as a kind of *temporal container*, one that can potentially be filled with any material. Such a structural shift necessarily entailed new forms of notation, and indeed Cage was famous throughout the 1950s for his experimentation with unconventional and graphic scores. Yet the

conceptual simplicity of *4'33"*, which made it such a compelling model to other artists, rests on its use of conventional typewritten language and numbers as notation—public, vernacular forms—unlike the graphic esotericism of many of Cage's subsequent works, in which programmatic indeterminacy would generate almost entirely arbitrary relations between score and performance (and whose mannerist anti-conventionality verged on something like a private language).

### What Is an Event?

What are the conditions that make an event possible? Events are produced in a chaos, in a chaotic multiplicity, but only under conditions that a sort of screen intervenes.

—Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*<sup>43</sup>

Brecht's initial performance scores of 1959–1960, referred to as “card events,” consisted of small, printed instructions, outlining detailed procedures for a variety of loosely synchronized actions: raising and lowering the volume of radios, changing the tuning, and so forth, for indeterminate durations based on natural processes such as the burning of a candle (*Candle Piece for Radios*, Summer 1959); or turning on and off various lights and signals; sounding horns, sirens, or bells; opening or closing doors, windows, or engine hoods, and so on (*Motor Vehicle Sundown Event*, Spring/Summer 1960). In their complex orchestration of simultaneous acts and chance interactions, these pieces structurally resemble Dadaist “simultaneities” of the early twentieth century: diffuse, multifocal, and chaotic, they are extensions of collage aesthetics.

By sometime around spring 1961, this has been pared down to small, enigmatic fragments such as *Two Durations* and *Event*.

How do we account for this shift, which represents the emergence of the event out of a wider Cagean practice? “Cage,” Brecht recalls, “was the great liberator for me. . . . But at the same time, he remained a musician, a composer. . . . I wanted to make music that wouldn't only be for the ears. Music isn't just what you hear or what you listen to, but everything that happens. . . . *Events are an extension of music.*<sup>44</sup> Kaprow recalls that “‘events’ was a word that Cage was using—borrowing from science, from physics”<sup>45</sup>—although in Cage's work the individual sonic events, the “sounds in themselves,” remain embedded in a larger musical composition and an acoustic model.

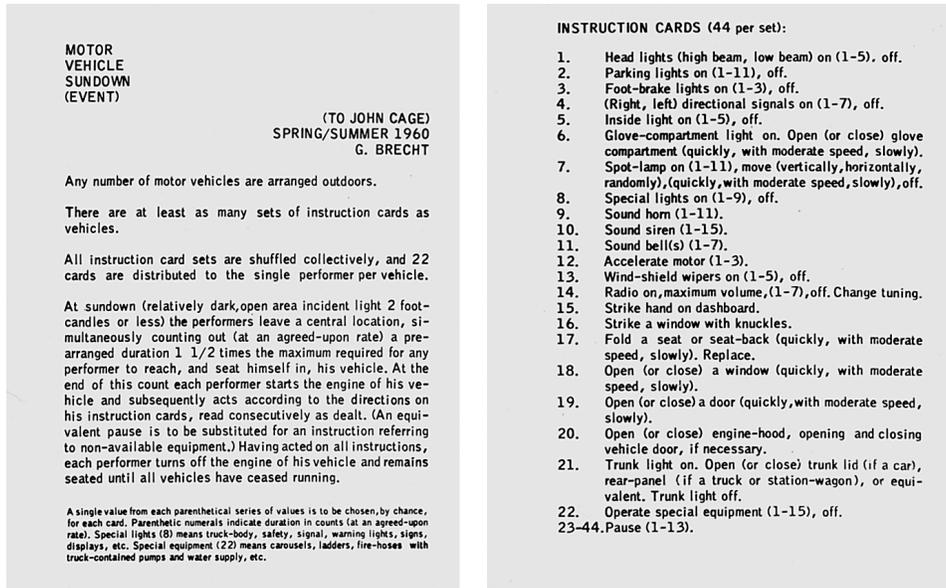


Figure 6.3 George Brecht, *Motor Vehicle Sundown (Event)*, 1960.

Along with its complex vernacular resonances, the term *event* has a number of quite precise meanings in scientific, philosophical, and historical discourses. The problematic often emerges in the wake of structural models and reconfigured temporalities, from the reconceptualization of the event undertaken in Annales School histories of the long duration, to the efforts of philosophers such as Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault to articulate modes of individuation as events rather than essences, as “incorporeal transformations” or “statements” that are both singular and repeatable. Arguing against the commonsense, mass-media idea of an event, Deleuze pinpoints two qualities that are relevant in this context: “Even a short or instantaneous event is something going on,” and “events always involve periods when nothing happens.”<sup>46</sup>

In scientific discourses that Brecht would almost certainly have been familiar with, mundane phenomena such as turning on a light or lighting a match represent almost generic examples of physical “events.” In physics, an event is precisely “a point taken from three-dimensions to four-dimensions.”<sup>47</sup> Because the concept addresses perceptual problems articulated in relativity theory that occur as phenomena move closer to

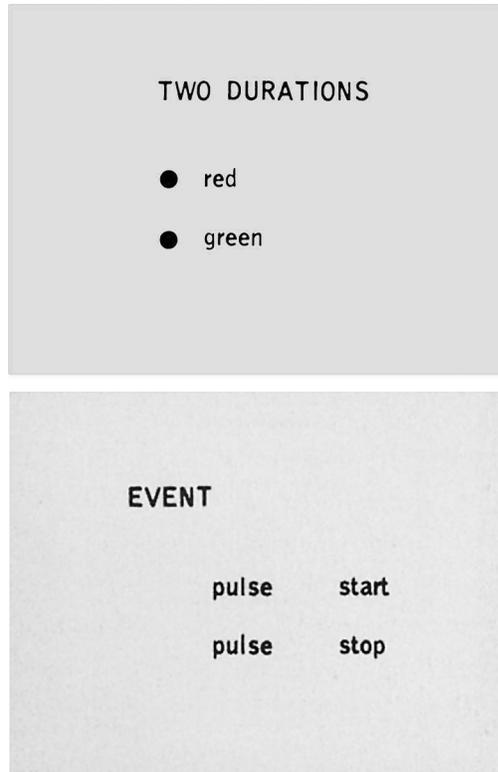


Figure 6.4 George Brecht, *Two Durations and Event*, c. 1961.

the speed of light, in an introductory course on physics, for instance, “a light bulb goes on” would be a typical event. In addition, information theory, statistics, and probability theory all rely on a generalized concept of the event as an unspecified occurrence. In Brecht’s work, the event form works like a little device for cutting into the perceptual flow of this “everything that happens.”

As they took shape in 1960–1961, Brecht’s events represented both an extension and a focusing of the Cagean project—an extension because not only sound and hearing but “everything that happens” provides potential materials, and a focusing because singularity, rather than multiplicity or simultaneity, was the result. The programmatic chaos Cage provided was tremendously generative for Brecht and other artists who

would take the “discrete” or “individual” unit as the goal, rather than the overall, dispersed field of chance encounters that, in Cage’s work, is still the transparent “screen” through which to see.<sup>48</sup>

What did this chaos consist of? Tasklike exercises employing mundane objects found at home or bought at the dime store—playing cards, whistles, toys—formed an ongoing part of Cage’s class, where students were expected to present new pieces each week for (low cost, low preparation, generally unrehearsed) classroom enactment. Many of these non-musical materials also entered Cage’s more theatrical compositions, such as *Water Music* (1952), which includes the sounds of water being poured from one vessel to another. As Jan van der Marck argues in a 1974 article on Brecht’s work, “Instead of being preparations for increasingly complex compositions, as undoubtedly Cage meant for them to be, such exercises became for Brecht ends in themselves,” in effect “isolating event-structures from Cage’s programmed performances.”<sup>49</sup>

More improvisatory activities, using props, obstacles, sound, and speech to generate movement, were also used in Bay Area choreographer Ann Halprin’s *Dancer’s Workshop*, which Trisha Brown, Simone Forti, Robert Morris, Yvonne Rainer, Terry Riley, and La Monte Young all participated in during the summer of 1960.<sup>50</sup> In a manner parallel to Brecht’s relationship with Cage, Forti’s early use of task structures was adapted from her work with Halprin. Rainer recounts that “Halprin had a tremendous flair for the dramatic. Her emphasis was on using tasks to generate movement, which were then transformed into dance. *Simone simply kept the exercises themselves, as complete pieces.*”<sup>51</sup> Several of Forti’s accounts of everyday movement in her “dance reports,” “dance constructions,” and “instructions” were published in *An Anthology*, including the following:

INSTRUCTIONS FOR A DANCE:

One man is told that he must lie on the floor during the entire piece.

The other man is told that during the piece he must tie the first man to the wall.

Although undated, the Forti piece was included in her May 1961 program at Young’s Chambers Street series.<sup>52</sup> Dance historian Sally Banes reports that Forti’s early rule pieces emerged from Robert Dunn’s 1960–1961 composition class, where she worked with Cage’s scores.<sup>53</sup> Both

Forti and Brecht knew Young's early text scores and may have known of each other's work, possibly through Young or the dancer Jimmy Waring (for whom Brecht had done sets).<sup>54</sup> More important than trying to disentangle instances of historical "influence," however, is the larger sense that, at the same moment, a number of very different figures were drawing similar clues from certain environments and then taking them to very different ends:

### THREE TELEPHONE EVENTS

- When the telephone rings, it is allowed to continue ringing, until it stops.
- When the telephone rings, the receiver is lifted, then replaced.
- When the telephone rings, it is answered.

George Brecht, Spring, 1961

While Brecht's lengthy "performance note," "Each event comprises all occurrences within its duration," inscribes his practice in an explicitly Cagean frame, Forti's visceral, potentially violent piece is structured by a level of conflict systematically excluded from Cage's project. This aggressive, bodily dimension also surfaces in Young's use of sustained tones played at intense volumes, which would allow listeners, in Young's words, "to get inside of a sound"—to develop a visceral, bodily relationship to sound through immersion over extended periods of time. In Henry Flynt's analysis, the goal of this immersion in "constant sound" was "the production of an altered state through narrowed attention and perceptual fatigue or saturation,"<sup>55</sup> drawing the listener into the work through the sheer force of structured sensation. In a role reminiscent of Cage's early work as a percussionist for dance groups, Young and the composer Terry Riley worked as musical codirectors for Halprin in 1959–1960. At this time, Young began to compose influential pieces such as his *Poem for Chairs, Tables, Benches, etc. (or Other Sound Sources)* (January 1960), which featured irregular, harsh, screeching noises created by dragging heavy pieces of furniture across the floor. In his "Lecture 1960," Young recounted: "When the sounds are very long, as many of those we made at Ann Halprin's were, it can be easier to get inside of them. . . . I began to see how each sound was its own world and that this world was similar to our world in that we experienced it through our own bodies, that is, in our own terms."<sup>56</sup> By 1962 Young turned to the systematic exploration of drone music, with minimally varied tones played at sometimes extreme

volumes for extended durations, a project that he has pursued since the 1960s.<sup>57</sup>

Young began his work with Halprin after his return from the 1959 Darmstadt summer session, where he participated in Stockhausen's Advanced Composition seminar and had his first sustained encounter with Cage's aleatory and indeterminate work—in part through the presence of the pianist David Tudor, who subsequently performed several of Young's compositions.<sup>58</sup> Only twenty-four, Young's musical preparation had been quite compressed. With a background in jazz and an attachment to the "static" structures of medieval chant and Indian classical music, he had studied Webern's work with Leonard Stein (Schoenberg's former assistant and later director of the Schoenberg Institute), and composed serial pieces as an undergraduate in Los Angeles; before starting graduate study in music at UC Berkeley, Young composed *Trio for Strings* (1958), which employed long tones and concurrent harmonies to an almost total suppression of melody. Thus even before moving to New York City in October of 1960 to attend Richard Maxfield's class at the New School, Young had encountered a complex of models quite similar to those documented in Brecht's notebooks.

In May 1960 Young began to compose the short "word pieces" published in *An Anthology*. Although these texts were circulated informally, Flynt suggests that they "crystallized a new genre" of quickly proliferating language works.<sup>59</sup> In their near inaudibility, dispersion, and apparent whimsy, Young's earliest text pieces most clearly reflect Cage's impact: *Composition 1960 #2* begins "Build a fire in front of the audience"; *Composition 1960 #5* proposes "Turn a butterfly (or any number of butterflies) loose in the performance area." In a 1966 interview, however, Young is at pains to differentiate his project from Cage's practice:

Although there is no question that my exposure to John Cage's work had an immediate impact on aspects of my Fall, 1959, and 1960 work, such as the use of random digits as a method for determining the inception and termination of the sounds in *Vision* [1959] and *Poem for Chairs, Tables, and Benches, Etc., or Other Sound Sources* [1960] and my presentation of what traditionally would have been considered a non or semi-musical event in a classical concert setting, I felt that I was taking these ideas a step further. Since most of his pieces up to that time, like the early Futurist and Dadaist concerts and events . . . were generally realized as a complex of programmed

sounds and activities over a prolonged period of time with events coming and going, I was perhaps the first to concentrate on and delimit the work to be a single event or object in these less traditionally musical areas.<sup>60</sup>

Young's insistence on the *singularity of the event*—the idea that it is “one thing”—is crucial. It isolates certain structural qualities that re-emerge in durational film and video and suggests how Ono's more varied and provocative scores often diverge from this proto-minimal event project. Like Deleuze's analysis of the event as including both “something going on” and “periods when nothing happens,” Young's programmatic monotony reduces a structure to a single basic element, which is extended or repeated, potentially endlessly—strategies which return in the viscerally compelling “nothing happens” of films by Andy Warhol, Michael Snow, and Chantal Akerman. In Flynt's analysis, minimalism works precisely through such saturation of uniformity: Young “stripped the form to a core element and saturated the field with that element.”<sup>61</sup>

If for Brecht the event takes paradigmatic form in single-word scores like *Exit*, for Young the model is the line. Encapsulating a long-term involvement with sustained tones, Young's *Composition 1960 #7* (July 1960) instructs the performer to hold an open fifth “for a long time.” He soon supplemented it with another piece, *Composition 1960 #9* (October 1960), published in *An Anthology* as a straight horizontal line on a 3-by-5-inch card. The two scores elegantly diagram the analogous structures: the temporal extension of the sustained tone, the graphic inscription of the drawn line. Young's subsequent piece, *Composition 1960 #10* (October 1960), transfers this structure into its linguistic analog: “Draw a straight line and follow it.” As Young described the project in 1966, “I have been interested in the study of a singular event, in terms of both pitch and other kinds of sensory situations. I felt that a line was one of the more sparse, singular expressions of oneness, although it is certainly not the final expression. Somebody might choose a point. However, the line was interesting because it was continuous—it existed in time.”<sup>62</sup>

*The singularity of the event does not preclude its repeatability but in fact permits it.* Drawing out the conceptual ramifications of “the idea of this sort of singular event,” in 1961 Young decided to repeat *Composition 1960 #10* twenty-nine times, with individual “works” evenly distributed to comprise a full year's work. The resulting *Compositions 1961 #s 1–29* premiered in March 1961, at a Harvard concert organized by Flynt, in

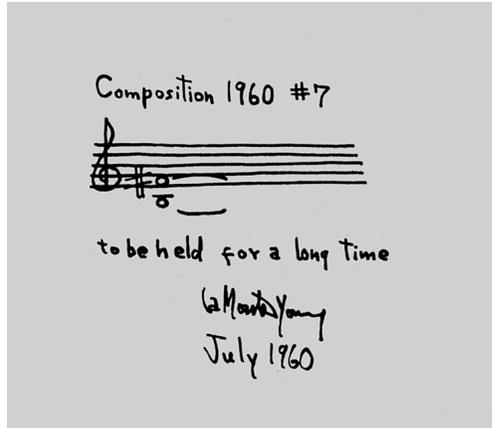


Figure 6.5 La Monte Young,  
*Composition 1960 #7*, July 1960.  
Reproduced with permission from *An  
Anthology* (1963). © La Monte Young  
1963, 1970.

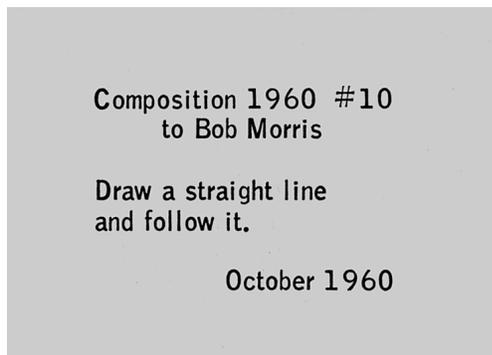


Figure 6.6 La Monte Young,  
*Composition 1960 #10*, October 1960.  
Reproduced with permission from *An  
Anthology* (1963). © La Monte Young  
1963, 1970.

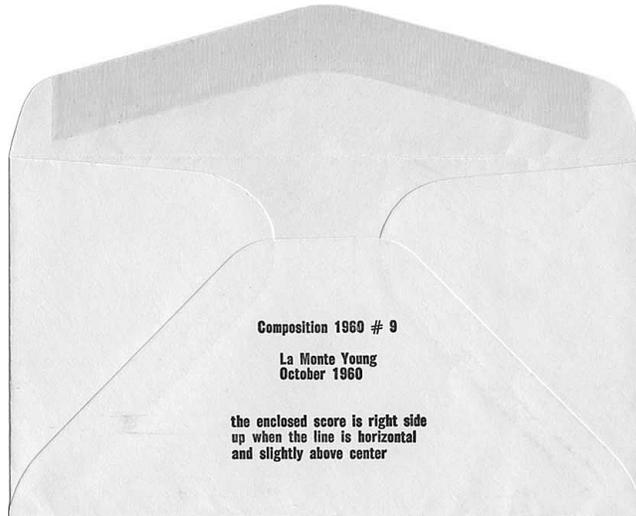


Figure 6.7 La Monte Young,  
*Composition 1960 #9*, October 1960.  
Reproduced with permission from *An  
Anthology* (1963). © La Monte Young  
1963, 1970.

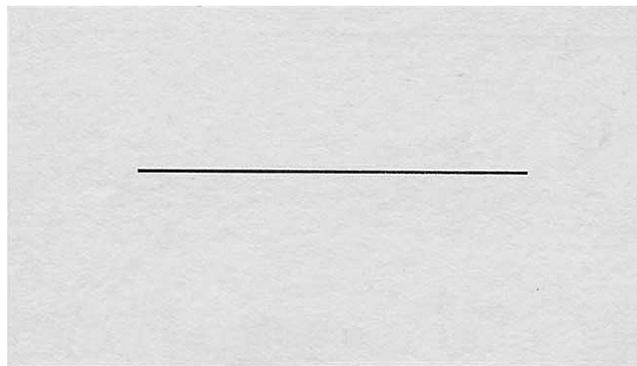


Figure 6.8 La Monte Young,  
*Composition 1960 #9*, October 1960.  
Reproduced with permission from *An  
Anthology* (1963). © La Monte Young  
1963, 1970.

which Young and his friend and collaborator Robert Morris arduously traced a line twenty-nine times using a plumb line. The piece was restaged in May at the Chamber Street series, and was eventually published by Maciunas as the book *LY 1961* in 1963. Young recalls: “It can be performed in many ways. At that time, I employed a style in which we used plumb lines. I sighted with them, and then drew along the floor with chalk . . . I drew over the same line each time, and each time it invariably came out differently. The technique I was using at the time was not good enough.” Like most task-structured works, the duration was not fixed prior to performance, but simply entailed the time it took to complete the job—“a whole performance must have taken a few hours”—with the audience coming and going.<sup>63</sup>

Like Young’s ongoing efforts “to get inside a sound,” the repetition of a simple, durational action over an extended period of time creates a very specific mode of attention. Laboriously performing the line piece as a repeated, real-time task structure, Young would not only concretely link certain spatial models—transferring the line from the graphic space of the card to the three-dimensional architectural container—but bring into focus an altered perceptual/spectatorial position in the process. When critics of minimalism use the awkward metaphor of “theatricality” to describe a certain focused perceptual and bodily relation to objects in real time and space, it is Young’s 1961 work (first performed with Morris) that is perhaps the template.

#### “Readymade Aesthetics” and the Return of the Reader

Now, Duchamp thought mainly about readymade objects. John Cage extended it to readymade sounds. George Brecht extended it furthermore . . . into readymade actions, everyday actions, so for instance a piece of George Brecht where he turned a light on and off, okay? That’s the piece. Turn the light on and then off. Now you do that every day, right?

—George Maciunas (1978)<sup>64</sup>

*If the event can be repeated, it can be repeated by anyone, not just its “author.”* In both Young’s and Brecht’s scores, a condition of “maximal availability” is most effectively created through the most minimal means. The simplest structure could produce the most varied results while still retaining a

certain conceptual unity and structural integrity. An extraordinarily compressed verbal inscription, like *Exit* or *Draw a Straight Line*, provides a kind of structure that other artists could use to produce diverse interpretations or realizations—thereby creating new pieces, and effectively blurring the boundary between composer and interpreter far more decisively than, for example, musical scores that simply allow performers to select among or rearrange existing sections. In perhaps the best-known instance of this reauthoring, Nam June Paik made an unorthodox realization of Young's *Composition 1960 #10* at one of the early Fluxus festivals by dipping his head in a bowl of ink and tomato juice and using it to draw a straight line on an unrolled sheet of paper in his *Zen for Head* (1962).

Brecht's realizations of his own and others' scores were characteristically spare, disciplined and antimemorial, often permitting such events to remain unseen or barely perceived. He performed Young's *Composition*

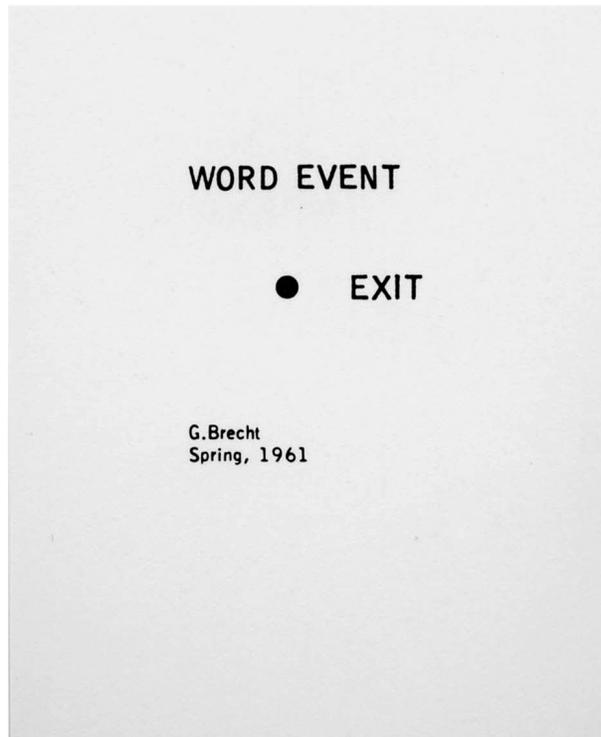


Figure 6.9 George Brecht, *Word Event*, 1961.

1960 #2 (“Build a fire in front of the audience . . .) by simply lighting a book of matches placed on an upturned glass on a stool, at an evening at Maciunas’s Canal Street Fluxshop in 1964. In a 1964 radio discussion with Kaprow, Brecht claimed that “the occurrence that would be of most interest to me would be the little occurrences on the street,”<sup>65</sup> and while Kaprow, Claes Oldenburg, and others might seek to recreate chaotic urban experiences in elaborately staged interactive environments or happenings, Brecht’s event structure would isolate simple, unified everyday occurrences as something analogous to perceptual readymades. As Michael Nyman argues, “Brecht isolated the single, observed occurrence and projects it . . . into a performance activity, which he calls an ‘event.’”<sup>66</sup>

What does it mean to see such events as “readymade actions,” as extensions of the readymade? A host of ambiguities emerge. While a score like *Drip Music* was performed by Brecht and others as a public act before an audience, it is of course also an event that occurs everywhere, all the time. Certain consequences of the event as a linguistically framed readymade perhaps emerge most clearly in Fluxus activities, as these were staged and interpreted by Maciunas. Quite tellingly, Maciunas would later compare Brecht’s increasingly compressed language-based events to the structure of the joke, when he contrasts the “monomorphism” of Fluxus performance to the more “baroque” Happenings in a 1978 interview conducted shortly before his death:

Now monomorphism . . . that’s where it differs from Happenings. See, Happenings are polymorphic, which means many things . . . happening at the same time. That’s fine, that’s like baroque theater. You know, there would be everything going on: horses jumping and fireworks and waterplay and somebody reciting poems and Louis XIV eating a dinner at the same time. So, that’s polymorphism. Means many, many forms. Monomorphism, that means one form. Now, reason for that is, you see, lot of Fluxus is gag-like. That’s part of the humor, it’s like a gag. . . . Now, you can’t tell a joke in multi-forms. In other words, you can’t have six jokers telling you six jokes simultaneously. It wouldn’t work. Has to be *one joke at a time*.<sup>67</sup>

While Maciunas’s retrospective comments do not differentiate the frequently language-based (and Cage-inspired) American Fluxus works from the more improvisatory, expressionistic European performances, the structuring role of text was a distinction he was well aware of at the

time—writing to Brecht, in the fall of 1962, that European performers like Wolf Vostell and Daniel Spoerri “do not write down their happenings but improvise them on the spot.”<sup>68</sup> Like his often contradictory manifestos and statements, Maciunas’s aesthetic was far from consistent, embracing both the more spectacular, even vaudevillian aspects of performance as “visual comedy” and the near-imperceptibility of works such as Brecht’s, where the “gag” is more internal. Yet his reference to the structure of joke, and to the readymade model, suggests an intrinsic tension between Brecht’s stated understanding of his events as “an extension of music” opening onto a kind of total, multisensorial perceptual experience, and the experience of the scores as tightly focused, extremely compressed linguistic structures that produce a more cognitive, even conceptual response.

In the 1964 letter to Tomas Schmidt that includes Maciunas’s oft-cited comparisons of Fluxus objectives to those of the Soviet LEF group as “*social* (not aesthetic),” Maciunas argues,

The best Fluxus “composition” is a most nonpersonal, “ready-made” one like Brecht’s “Exit”—it does not require any of us to perform it since it happens daily without any “special” performance of it. Thus our festivals will eliminate themselves (and our need to participate) when they become total readymades (like Brecht’s exit).<sup>69</sup>

And in correspondence with Brecht, Maciunas approvingly recalls events like *Piano Piece* (a “vase of flowers on(to) a piano”) as occurring virtually unnoticed, unperceived as a separate work. Maciunas describes this falling back into the continuum of everyday existence in terms of a “readymade” or “non-art event”:

By non-art I mean anything not created by artist with intend to provide “art” experience. So your events are non-art since you did not create the events—they exist all the time. You call attention to them. I did not mind at all that some of your events were “lost” in our festivals. The more lost or unnoticeable the more truly non-artificial they were. Very few ever thought the vase of flowers over piano was meant to be a piece & they all waited for a “piece” to follow.<sup>70</sup>

Maciunas proceeds to distinguish perceptual pieces such as Brecht’s from “art,” which “may use readymade sign, exit, etc.,” but which

transforms them, since the “situation is *not* readymade (or event is not readymade).” The Fluxus politicization of the readymade as a strategy leading to an eventual elimination of the author function was at least partially shared by Brecht, who later insisted, “All I do is bring things into evidence. But they’re already there.”<sup>71</sup> If Young’s events intensify a single sensation to the point of total environmental control, Brecht’s scores tend toward the unseen, toward things that can pass unnoticed or disappear back into the quotidian.<sup>72</sup> This procedure of “bringing things into evidence” by means of language extends the performative and linguistic potential of the readymade, as an act of framing that need not be limited to the types of physical objects that characterized Duchamp’s production. The ambivalently performative potential of the Duchampian readymade, read as a nominating linguistic gesture, an act of naming or categorizing, has been extensively discussed in the Duchamp literature, most notably by Thierry de Duve.<sup>73</sup> Yet this nominalist model alone doesn’t account for the intrinsic doubleness of the readymade structure, its dual existence as both manufactured object and linguistic act, as Benjamin Buchloh has argued.<sup>74</sup>

In the historical recovery of Duchampian legacies in the late 1950s, of which Brecht was intimately aware, the readymade provided a model to move from the aesthetics of dispersion and chance juxtaposition of Brecht’s earlier scores toward a simple linguistic structure focusing attention on existing things. Brecht’s transfer of this strategy from the manufactured object to the temporal perception occurred, as Maciunas suggests, via Cage: as Brecht would cryptically comment in a 1967 interview, “Duchamp is alone is one thing, but Duchamp plus Cage is something else.”<sup>75</sup> Brecht was also drawn to Duchamp’s writings, newly available in the 1959 Robert Lebel monograph, and in Richard Hamilton’s 1960 typographic rendition of Duchamp’s *Notes for the Large Glass*. Alongside Japanese poetic models such as haiku, Duchamp’s brief, cryptic notes, with their spare, attenuated use of language and attention to paradox, perhaps provided an impetus for the increasingly compressed event scores.<sup>76</sup> More critically, however, the transfer of the readymade structure to perceptual phenomena propels the gradual interiorization of performance in the event scores.

Brecht’s distance from conceptual art can be seen in his retrospective description of *Six Exhibits* (1961) as a kind of music: “If we perform it right now, for example, we can look at the ceiling, the walls, and the floor and at the same time we’ll hear sounds: our voices, the birds outside, and

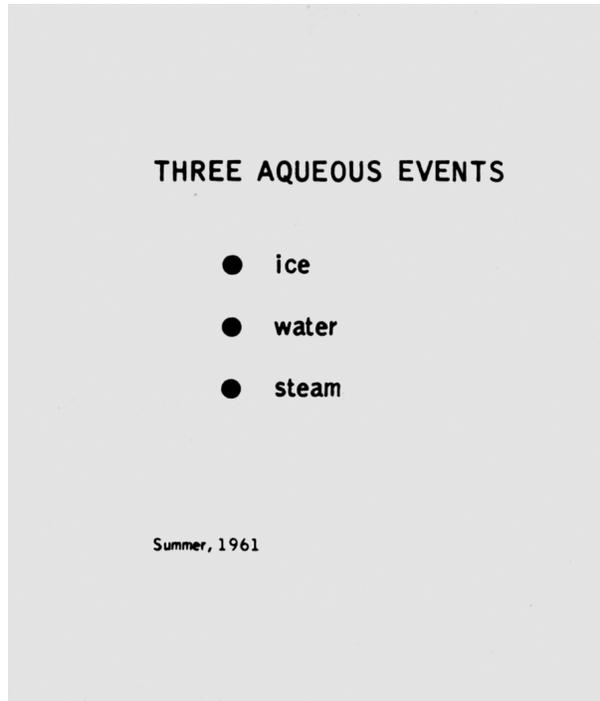


Figure 6.10 George Brecht, *Three Aqueous Events*, 1961.

so forth. All of that belongs to the same whole, and that's the event."<sup>77</sup> In this account, we are invited to actively perform the piece as if listening to Cage's *4'33"*—inadvertently demonstrating the conservatism of this perceptual model, grounded in the express intentions of a centered subjectivity. Yet Brecht's events implicitly use language as a kind of *naming* that singles out and isolates perceptual phenomena in ways that exceed subjective intention.<sup>78</sup> By focusing on things that are happening all the time whether noticed or not—signs posted, faucets dripping, phones ringing, substances existing in states whose change is too slow to perceive—Brecht aligns the temporality of language with the temporality of the event: continual, recurring, agentless. In scores such as *Exit* and *Two Signs* (“• Silence / • No Vacancy”) the event is internal to the score and to the reading of the score, so that actual performance, although possible, is no longer necessary to enact or complete the piece. As Brecht remarks,

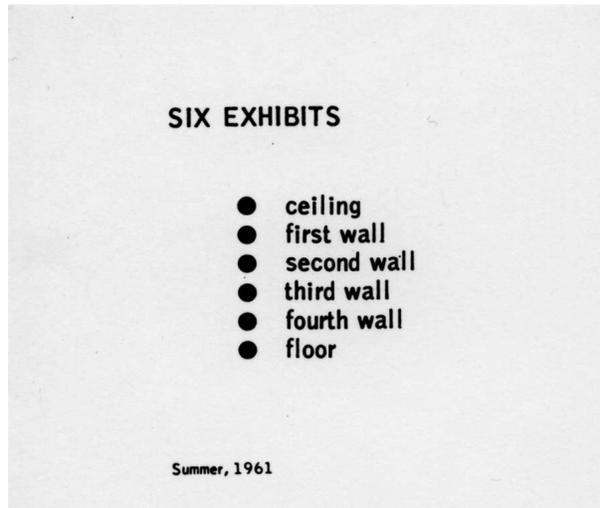


Figure 6.11 George Brecht, *Six Exhibits*, 1961.

“There isn’t any way in which *Exit* should be performed. There’s only an ‘exit’ sign hanging over the door.”<sup>79</sup>

This shift is accomplished through language. While an earlier score like *Motor Vehicle Sundown Event* used imperative verbs to direct the actions of a subject external to language, its listlike, numbered, vertically arranged form structurally equates these commands with descriptions. Although Young’s and Ono’s scores primarily use imperative verb forms, Brecht, after his early works, eliminates them—instead, a mere gerund (“dripping”), noun (“water”), or preposition (“on,” “off”) is enough to indicate action or process. Others, such as *Exit* or *Silence*, occur endlessly in continuous oscillation of verbal form.<sup>80</sup> By 1961, most of the scores feature extremely condensed, almost telegraphic uses of language: brief phrases and single words, presented vertically, with minimal punctuation. Where punctuation does occur, it functions almost algebraically, as if to reduce language to a set of spatial relations, or more operationally, as if to qualify an action. Everything extraneous is omitted.<sup>81</sup>

As realized in the Maciunas-designed edition *Water Yam*, Brecht’s precise, graphic formats increasingly cross the musical model of the score with the visual space of printed ephemera.<sup>82</sup> In these cards, the implicit

reference is not so much to the linear, sequential structure of the line or sentence but to the gridded two-dimensionality of the ad, poster, or flyer, the printed instruction card, sales ticket, or receipt, in which condensed snippets of text are inserted into a visually defined field. This is not the textual spacing of the book, or the bodily pause of poetic “breath,” but the space of modern graphic design in its complete interpenetration of visual and textual materials—a space that has programmatically invaded poetry since Mallarmé.<sup>83</sup> And, reminiscent of the elaborate Mallarméan protocols for reading, Brecht’s scores would go out into the world in a series of boxes whose idiosyncratic format (and silly name) would claim a ludic domain of esoteric “play” while refusing any reinsertion into instrumental forms of culture.<sup>84</sup>

Despite the esotericism that marks so many subsequent Fluxus projects, we can nonetheless draw a different series of lessons about the focused, relentless, and potentially unlimited capacities of a single word or extended single sound. In their use of language as a device to cut into the evanescent everyday, Brecht’s “insignificant and silly gestures” open an infinite universe of possibilities, just as Young’s precise operations move into the zones of the minimal and the series, of the same but inevitably different because extended virtually interminably—the line or the sound would go on in some sense “forever.” In both, the event is pared down to a minimum: a simple, basic structure that can be endlessly reenacted and reinscribed in new contexts, different in each instance and yet retaining a certain coherence. Inevitably calling to mind Lawrence Weiner’s highly condensed and yet generalizable “statements,” Brecht’s most interesting scores reduce language to a kind of object, and yet also establish it as a kind of repeatable, replaceable structure, open to unlimited, unforeseeable realizations.

My reference to Weiner here is not innocent. While the public memory of Fluxus continues to be of the almost vaudevillian European concerts and peculiarly fetishistic editions, the event scores and related projects offered a very different model which was widely if erratically disseminated.<sup>85</sup> If I am, in effect, reading Brecht through Weiner, it is because I believe that Weiner’s explicit activation of the receiver is itself modeled on the implicitly performative positioning of the viewer/reader/listener in these event projects—just as his repeated statements that “there’s no way to build a piece incorrectly” inevitably echo a wider ethic of indeterminacy.<sup>86</sup>

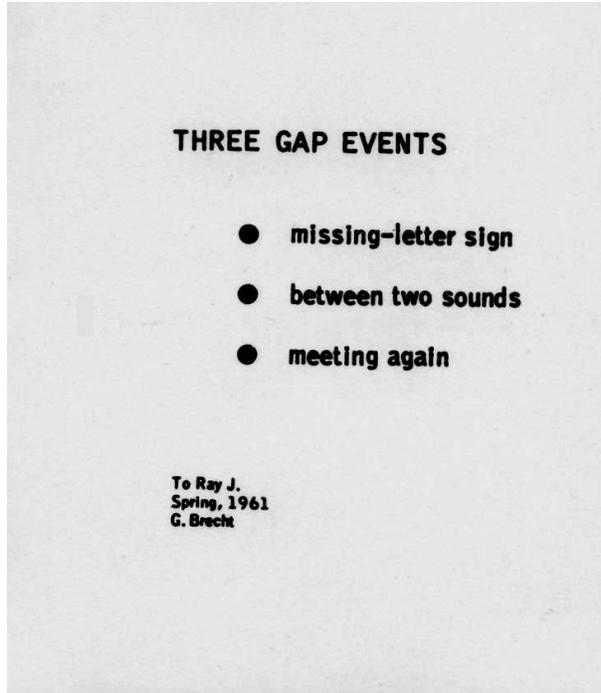


Figure 6.12 George Brecht, *Three Gap Events*, 1961.

When it engages these questions at all (that is, in its most progressive versions), modernist art history emphatically locates this “return of the reader” in the linguistically oriented forms of late 1960s conceptual art by Weiner, Kosuth, Graham, and others. For this model to emerge as a radical rupture within neo-avant-garde visual art, the innovations of the postwar interdisciplinary activities around Cage must be (momentarily) acknowledged and then quickly repressed—just as Lucy Lippard, in her 1973 book *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object*, starts her chronology with Brecht’s pamphlet *Chance Imagery* (1957/1966), citing some of his early events as among those projects that “anticipate a stricter ‘conceptual art’ since around 1960.”<sup>87</sup> While critics continue to argue that the conceptual use of language as an artistic medium propels something like a “withdrawal of visuality” or “dematerialization” of art, and a current generation of artists often seems intent on trawling the 1960s for remnants

of ephemeral practices that can be turned into commercially successful objects, the event scores of Brecht and Young present language as a model for *a different kind of materiality*, one structured from the outset by repetition, temporality, and delay—conditions Jacques Derrida has termed “the iterability of the mark.” That this practice has enormous implications for all visual art in the late twentieth century is suggested by a quote from Vito Acconci—“Language: it seemed like the perfect multiple.”<sup>88</sup>

#### Notes

This essay was drawn from a chapter on the work of George Brecht, La Monte Young, and Yoko Ono in my dissertation, “Language Models in 1960s American Art: From Cage to Warhol.” An earlier version was presented in November 1999, at the Réclame lecture series “Otherwise Photography/Intermedia Otherwise: Prototypes and Practices of the 1960s,” organized by Judith Rodenbeck; and a revised version appeared in my book *Words to Be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007). My thanks to Lutz Bacher, Benjamin Buchloh, Craig Dworkin, Melissa Ragona, and Mark So for their readings and comments.

1. The Chambers Street series, held from December 1960 to June 1961, presented performances of music by composers Terry Jennings, Toshi Ichiyanagi, Joseph Byrd, Richard Maxfield, Henry Flynt, and La Monte Young; poetry and theater by Jackson Mac Low; dance by Simone Forti; and, for the final session, an “environment” by sculptor Robert Morris. Documentation of the series can be found in the set of printed programs available in the Jean Brown Collection at the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (hereafter, GRI), the Hans Sohm Archives at the Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, and elsewhere. Credit for curating the series has been claimed by both Young and Ono. See the rather vitriolic exchange of letters from 1971 held in the Getty collections. The most detailed account of this early 1960s pre-Fluxus moment can be found in Henry Flynt, “La Monte Young in New York, 1960–62,” in *Sound and Light: La Monte Young, Marian Zazeela*, ed. William Duckworth and Richard Fleming, *Bucknell Review* 40, no. 1 (1996): 44–97.

2. La Monte Young, ed., *An Anthology of Chance Operations, Indeterminacy, Concept Art, Anti-Art, Meaningless Work, Natural Disasters, Stories, Poetry, Essays, Diagrams, Music, Dance Constructions, Plans of Action, Mathematics, Compositions*, by George Brecht, Claus Bremer, Earle Brown, Joseph Byrd, John Cage, David Degner, Walter De Maria, Henry Flynt, Yoko Ono, Dick Higgins, Toshi Ichiyanagi, Terry Jennings, George Maciunas, Ray Johnson, Jackson Mac Low, Richard Maxfield, Malka Safto, Simone Forti, Nam June Paik, Terry Riley, Diter Rot, James Waring, Emmett Williams, Christian Wolff, La Monte Young, George Maciunas, Designer. Published by La Monte Young and Jackson Mac Low, 1963; reprinted in 1970 by Heiner Friedrich, New York.

3. For years, the sole monograph on Brecht’s work was Henry Martin’s *An Introduction to George Brecht’s Book of the Tumbler on Fire* (Milan: Multhipla Edizioni, 1978), which, although focused on Brecht’s post-1964 *Book of the Tumbler on Fire* project, reprints some of Brecht’s earlier writings and several important interviews from the 1960s and 1970s.

4. Accounts of these exhibitions are available in the set of catalogs edited by Jon Hendricks, *Paintings & Drawings by Yoko Ono, July 17–30, 1961 / Instructions for Paintings by Yoko*

*Ono, May 24, 1962* (Budapest: Galeria 56, 1993), vols. 1 and 2, and in Alexandra Munroe et al., *Yoko Ono* (New York: Japan Society/Harry N. Abrams, 2000).

5. Yoko Ono, *Grapefruit* (bilingual edition; Tokyo: Wunternaum Press, 1964), and *Grapefruit: A Book of Instructions + Drawings by Yoko Ono* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971), with an introduction by John Lennon.

6. As Ian Pepper notes, *4'33"* established "composition" as "an autonomous process of writing, as graphic production that is not secondary to, and has no determined relation to, sound in performance. . . . By defining 'music' as *writing* on the one hand, and *sound* on the other, and by erecting an absolute barrier between the two spheres, Cage initiated a crisis in music that has barely been articulated, let alone worked through." "From the 'Aesthetics of Indifference' to 'Negative Aesthetics': John Cage and Germany 1957–1972," *October* 82 (Fall 1997): 34. As I elucidated in *Words to Be Looked At* (17–24 and 268–270), exactly when Cage wrote the "text score" of *4'33"* remains unknown, though it clearly was circulated by 1958.

7. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 143.

8. Umberto Eco, *Opera aperta* (Milan: Editoriale Fabri, 1962), partially translated in *The Open Work* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

9. Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, 163 (my emphasis). While Barthes's own sources are more frequently in the "modern text" of Balzac, Mallarmé, or the *nouveau roman*, music is also a model for this writing, which must be operated, performed, and written anew—even if Barthes's model, in "Musica Practica" (1968) is, paradoxically, Beethoven (the composer who represented, for Cage as well as Young, the anathema of modern music). In addition, Barthes's speculations in "From Work to Text" are grounded explicitly in the new methodological space of *interdisciplinarity*: the "text," an "interdisciplinary object," is a kind of writing dislodged from the stability of literary containers and functions—author, oeuvre, genre, book, tradition. In this classic essay, the aesthetic upheavals of the 1950s and 1960s in both music and art are posed as reversing or modifying a historical trajectory of bourgeois culture in which the participation of "practicing amateurs" has given way, first to a class of surrogate interpreters, then to the passive consumption of fully professionalized works in technically reproduced forms—as "the gramophone record takes the place of the piano" in the bourgeois home.

10. Even the publication of Barthes's "The Death of the Author" in *Aspen* 5/6 in 1967, often credited with injecting certain poststructural concerns into the context of American conceptual art, could arguably be posed partly as a circuitous reimportation of Cagean models of desubjectivization and indeterminacy—part of a series of conceptual loops and borrowings made no less complicated by the name Brecht, which the critic Jill Johnston has suggested was not the American artist's actual surname.

11. Umberto Eco, "The Poetics of the Open Work," in *The Open Work*, 251 n. 1. Eco proceeds to argue that, "For the purpose of aesthetic analysis, however, both cases can be seen as different manifestations of the same interpretative attitude. Every 'reading,' 'contemplation,' or 'enjoyment' of a work of art represents a tacit or private form of 'performance.'"

12. Despite Cage's growing reputation as a writer and Ono's self-identification at the time as a "poet," these event scores have received little attention as literary or language art. Here it is not only the instability of genre or the relation to live performance but the problem of medium, of unconventional material support, that seems at issue. Yet these idiosyncratic formats, of hand-lettered sheets and small printed cards, seem innocuous, even quaint, and

easily transferred to the format of the page. The obstacles to reading them in relation to literature would seem small compared, for instance, to the videotaped performances of Vito Acconci or the films of Andy Warhol, yet certain vexing questions about the inscription of temporality into language, the positioning of the viewer/reader, and the material structures of new artistic/technical media occur implicitly in event scores in ways that have great relevance to more aggressively technologized works of the later 1960s.

13. In “Language between Performance and Photography,” *October* 111 (Winter 2005): 3–21, I address this tripartite structure, and its relationship to conceptual art, through a comparison of Brecht’s 1961 *Three Chair Events* (with its implicit language/object/performance structure) to Joseph Kosuth’s 1965–1966 *One and Three Chairs* (with its explicit triangulation of text, object, and photograph).

14. This poetics of semiotic disruption, itself deeply conventionalized by the postwar era, would appear to be what is endorsed by Cage himself in his statements on poetry in “Preface to *Indeterminacy*” (1959): “As I see it, poetry is not prose, simply because poetry is one way or another formalized. It is not poetry by virtue of its content or ambiguity, but by reason of allowing musical elements (time, sound) to be introduced into the world or words.” Reprinted in *John Cage, Writer: Previously Uncollected Pieces*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Limelight Editions, 1993), 76.

15. Rosalind Krauss, “Notes on the Index, Part II,” in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), 212.

16. Henry Flynt, “Mutations of the Vanguard: Pre-Fluxus, During Fluxus, Late Fluxus,” in *Ubi Fluxus ibi motus 1990–1962*, ed. Gino Di Maggio (Milan: Nuove edizioni Gabriele Mazzotta, 1990), 99.

17. Owen F. Smith suggests that “the works that would become ‘standard’ Fluxus pieces were mostly of a particular type—concrete, simply structured events, dryly humorous and unabashedly literal—such as George Brecht’s *Word Event* (in which the word *exit* was written or posted in the performance space. . . . Maciunas and the other artists associated with the organization of these concerts increasingly realized that it was important for Fluxus festivals to present a strong focus on a particular performance form—the event” (“Fluxus: A Brief History and Other Fictions,” in Elizabeth Armstrong and Joan Rothfuss, *In the Spirit of Fluxus* [Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1993], 88).

18. For a sense of what is at stake in Brecht’s boxes, cases, and object collection strategies, in the transformation of assemblage and readymade aesthetics, see Benjamin Buchloh’s essays on the work of Robert Watts, Brecht’s close friend and collaborator: “Cryptic Watts,” in *Robert Watts* (New York: Leo Castelli Gallery, 1990); and “Robert Watts: Animate Objects—Inanimate Subjects,” in Benjamin H. D. Buchloh and Judith F. Rodenbeck, *Experiments in the Everyday: Allan Kaprow and Robert Watts—Events, Objects, Documents* (New York: Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University, 1999).

19. George Brecht, *Notebooks*, vols. 1–3 (June 1958–August 1959), ed. Dieter Daniels with Hermann Braun (Cologne: Walther König, 1991), vols. 4–5 (September 1959–November 1960), ed. Hermann Braun (Cologne: Walther König, 1998), and vols. 6–7 (March 1961–September 1962), ed. Hermann Braun (Cologne: Walther König, 2005).

20. Brecht describes this earlier production in *Chance Imagery* (New York: Something Else Press, 1966) and in an undated letter (c. 1962) to critic Jill Johnston, in which he provides sketches of some of the earlier paintings. In a subsequent letter (c. 1963) Brecht tells Johnston, “My attitude toward painting is changing, I believe it is clearer to me now what particular aspects of the present situation in painting are less nutritious for me: the object-like nature of paintings in a world of process, the egocentric attitudes of painters/

dealers, the *distance* imposed by conventional attitudes toward painting in the viewer/painting relationship (the distance between a painting of a soup can and the viewer being much greater than the distance between the painter and the actual can)” (Jean Brown Papers, Getty Research Library [890164]).

21. George Brecht, *Chance Imagery* [1957], published in 1966 by Dick Higgins’s Something Else Press.

22. Dick Higgins, *Jefferson’s Birthday/Postface* (New York: Something Else Press, 1964), 49.

23. *Ibid.*, 50–51.

24. *Ibid.*, 51. Other members of the class included Toshi Ichiyanagi, Jackson Mac Low, and (according to Sally Banes) Robert Dunn.

25. Reprinted in *John Cage, Writer*, 81.

26. Brecht, *Notebooks*, 1: 3–4 (June 24, 1958).

27. Bruce Altschuler, “The Cage Class,” in *Flux Attitudes*, ed. Cornelia Lauf and Susan Hapgood (Gent: Imschoot Uitgevers, 1991), 17.

28. Originally published 1955–1962, *Die Reihe* [The Row], vols. 1–8, was issued in an English-language edition in 1957–1968.

29. However neutralized they appear in postwar accounts, all these projects had certain military entanglements. Just as American research into cybernetics, cryptography, mass communication, and electronic signal transmission were all propelled by government sponsorship during World War II, German technical innovations in electroacoustic recording, audiotape, microphony, and broadcast technology were in part developed for military applications. It is no coincidence that Cologne and Paris (where Pierre Schaeffer’s studio at Radiodiffusion Television France began informally in 1942) became the centers of postwar experimental music. The influential Darmstadt International Summer Course in New Music, first held in 1946, was part of the immediate postwar effort of cultural reconstruction; the area also had a military base where, in 1962, George Maciunas came to work as a designer for the *Stars and Stripes*.

30. Eimert, “What Is Experimental Music?,” *Die Reihe*, no. 1 (1955), cited from the English-language edition (Bryn Mawr: Theodore Presser Company/Universal Edition, 1957), 1, 3.

31. Eimert elaborates: “By the radical technical nature of its technical apparatus, electronic music is compelled to deal with sound phenomena unknown to musicians of earlier times” (1). “Tape recorder and loud-speaker are no longer ‘passive’ transmitters; they become active factors in the preparation of the tape. This is the essential secret of electro-musical technique” (3).

32. Eimert, “What Is Experimental Music?,” 3.

33. After Cage left the New School in 1960, Maxfield began a course in electronic music that included Maciunas, Mac Low, and Young as students.

34. Brecht, *Notebooks*, 1: 22 (my emphasis).

35. *Ibid.*, 65–67.

36. While grounded in his professional training, Brecht’s interests nevertheless echo the endless fascination with scientific methods and discourses on the part of neo-avant-garde practices from Cage, Group Zero, and “systems aesthetics” to the Experiments in Art and Technology and Pierre Boulez’s Institut de Recherche et de Coordination Acoustique/Musique. For a trenchant account of the legitimating (and mystifying) role of scientific

models and discourses in the latter, see Georgina Born, *Rationalizing Culture: IRCAM, Boulez, and the Institutionalization of the Musical Avant-Garde* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

37. Brecht apparently held a number of patents for tampon design; according to several accounts, Brecht's own father had been a concert flutist in New York.

38. George Brecht, "Innovational Research" (Fall 1960, typed/mimeographed document, 16 pages, Artist's File, MoMA library).

39. Cage's repeated claim that this realization came from his Harvard anechoic chamber encounter is itself an indicator of this remapping of sensory and even bodily perception via new, technologically modified experiences, made possible here by the scientific resources of the postwar research university.

40. See Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (1977), trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985). While Attali is markedly more *critical* of this process, seeing the phonograph as the template for a culture of mass-produced repetition, his observation that "it makes the stockpiling of time possible" (101) nonetheless echoes Kittler's.

41. Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (1986), trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Hutz (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 23. Yet Kittler also points out that models for this "anti-musical" understanding of sound itself precede the invention of the phonograph, with scientific experimentation with noise going back at least to the early nineteenth century. In their introduction, Winthrop-Young and Hutz elaborate on this relation between inscription technologies and an aesthetics of "indifference," noting that gramophone and film "both recorded indiscriminately what was within the range of microphones or camera lenses, and both thereby sifted the boundaries that distinguished noise from meaningful sounds, random visual data from meaningful picture sequences, unconscious and unintentional inscriptions from their conscious and intention counterparts" (xxvi).

42. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, 4. This problem is by no means specific to music, since any "continuous" material—sound, light, time, the photograph—has the potential to profoundly disrupt signification. As Roland Barthes notes, semiology "cannot admit a continuous difference" since "meaning is articulation" (*Elements of Semiology* [1964], trans. A. Lavers and C. Smith [New York: Hill and Wang, 1968], 53).

43. Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (1988), trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 76.

44. "An Interview with George Brecht by Irmeline Lebeer" (1973) in Martin, *An Introduction to George Brecht's Book of the Tumbler on Fire*, 84 (my emphasis).

45. "Interview with Allan Kaprow" (1995) in *Off Limits: Rutgers University and the Avant-Garde, 1957–1963*, ed. Joan Marter (Newark: Newark Museum; New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 132.

46. Gilles Deleuze, "On Leibniz" (1988), in *Negotiations*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 159–160.

47. Interview with Donald Backer, Department of Astronomy, University of California, Berkeley, August 2000.

48. Douglas Kahn provocatively reads *Drip Music* in relation to the transition from Pollock to Cage, suggesting, "The laboratory techniques through which *Drip Music* developed provided a means to isolate a single gesture from gesture painting . . . and a *sound-in-itself*

from all the competing sounds in a Cage composition.” See *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 283.

49. Jan Van der Marck, “George Brecht: An Art of Multiple Implications,” *Art in America* (July/August 1974): 56.

50. With Terry Riley, Young taught a class in composition during the 1960 summer intensive session, where he first delivered his “Lecture 1960” over a recording of his 1958 “Trio for Strings” (Young, conversation with the author, October 30, 2000). For more information on Halprin’s Summer 1960 workshop, see Janice Ross, *Anna Halprin: Experience as Dance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

51. Yvonne Rainer, conversation with the author, New York City, January 22, 1999.

52. Simone Forti, *Handbook in Motion* (Halifax: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1974), 56–57.

53. Sally Banes reports that Forti “enjoyed the use of chance techniques gleaned from John Cage’s music scores, seeing aleatory methods not as relinquishing of control but as a means of evoking in performance the original events and structures at the moment of composition.” See *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance* (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), 25. In *Democracy’s Body: Judson Dance Theater, 1962–1964* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), Banes provides an extended account of the workshop Dunn conducted at Merce Cunningham’s studio, noting that it was started at Cage’s suggestion, and that Dunn had attended Cage’s New School class from 1956 to 1960.

54. By all accounts, Brecht was aware of Young’s word pieces by the fall of 1960, and they provided a compelling model of isolation and compression.

55. Flynt, “La Monte Young in New York, 1960–62,” 59.

56. La Monte Young, “Lecture 1960,” in *Happenings and Other Acts*, ed. Mariellen Sandford (New York: Routledge, 1995), 79.

57. In the early 1960s, musicians Angus MacLise, Marian Zazeela, Tony Conrad, and John Cale (later of the Velvet Underground) collaborated with Young in these experiments—a collaboration that eventually led to the long-running dispute between Conrad and Young over authorship of this work and control of the audio recordings Young made at the time. For accounts of this dispute, see Mike McGonigal, “Tony Conrad’s High Lonesome Drone,” *New York Press*, December 3–9, 1997, pp. 35–36; Peter Margasak, “Amid the Drone, a Feud over Who Composed It,” *New York Times*, Sunday, August 13, 2000, sec. 2, pp. 27, 31; Tony Conrad, liner notes to *Early Minimalism, Volume 1* (CD, Table of the Elements 1997; Arsenic 74.9216); and Young’s lengthy statement on the MELA Foundation Web pages, “Notes on the Theatre of Eternal Music and *The Tortoise, His Dreams and Journeys*” (2000).

58. Young initially contacted Halprin at Cage’s suggestion, having written to Cage after the Darmstadt session (Young, conversation with the author, October 30, 2000).

59. Flynt, “La Monte Young in New York, 1960–1962,” 52.

60. Young in “La Monte Young,” in Richard Kostelanetz, *Theater of Mixed Means* (New York: Dial Press, 1968), 194–195. Cage’s antipathy to the controlling, hyperfocused nature of Young’s work is also well known. In the same volume, Cage stated his preference for a more dispersed or open mode of attention: “I would like the happenings to be arranged in such a way that I can see through the happening to something that wasn’t in it. We’d be out of the La Monte Young fixation ideal. We’d be in the Duchamp-Fuller-Mies van der Rohe business of seeing through”; in “John Cage,” 55–56.

61. Flynt, "La Monte Young in New York, 1960–1962," 77.
62. Young, "La Monte Young," *Theater of Mixed Means*, 204.
63. *Ibid.*, 205.
64. Larry Miller, "Interview with George Maciunas, March 24, 1978," in *Fluxus etc./Addenda I: The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection*, ed. Jon Hendricks (New York: Ink &, 1983), 21.
65. "Excerpts from a Discussion between George Brecht and Allan Kaprow entitled 'Happenings and Events' broadcast by WBAI sometime during May," *acV TRE*, no. 3 (June 1964): 1.
66. Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1974), 62.
67. Larry Miller, "Interview with George Maciunas," 26 (my emphasis).
68. Maciunas, Letter to George Brecht, c. September/October, 1962; Jean Brown Papers, Getty Research Library (890164). Maciunas discusses European production partly analogous to Brecht's: "I sent large envelope with some scores and instructions of European and Japanese compositions that you may want to use for Yam fest. Generally, there are very few Europeans doing compositions, so few I really can't think of anyone. Maybe [Robert] Filliou and . . . [Wolf] Vostell and [Daniel] Spoerri. The last 2 do not write down their happenings but improvise on the spot so I can't tell you or send their things to you. Of non Europeans best are NJ Paik, Ben Patterson, Emmett Williams, Paik again does not write down his compositions, but a few simple ones I can describe."
69. Partially reproduced in *Fluxus etc./Addenda II*, ed. Jon Hendricks (Pasadena: Baxter Art Gallery, 1983), 166–167.
70. George Maciunas, letter to George Brecht, c. fall 1962; Jean Brown Papers, Getty Research Library (890164). (Spellings as in original.)
71. "A Conversation about Something Else: An Interview with George Brecht by Ben Vautier and Marcel Alocco (1965), reprinted in Martin, *An Introduction to George Brecht's Book of the Tumbler on Fire*, 67. Of course, Brecht's cult of noninvolvement or nondifferentiation at times leads to puerile statements (and intended provocations) such as the following: "Yes. An atomic war and a butterfly are all the same. It's simply a process that surrounds everything and in everyplace and in every moment" (69); and the assertion that all aesthetic and other phenomena are simply 'just different arrangements. . . . For example Le Corbusier builds a new building and I move the newspaper from here to there. The two things are equally new. They're arrangements. Everything that happens is simply reorganization. Everything that exists is simply a process" (70).
72. This capacity for reabsorption into the everyday appears to be structured into Brecht's work; in a note to Dick Higgins, dated January 16, 1977, he writes: "My work has been disappearing since I started to make it. First wife threw out all early drawings and paintings, ladder stolen from Bianchis, other work abandoned by AI [Hansen], etc." Dick Higgins Papers, Getty Research Library (870613).
73. See Thierry De Duve, *Pictorial Nominalism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989) and *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996).
74. Benjamin Buchloh, "Ready Made, Objet Trouvé, Idée Reçue," in *Dissent: The Idea of Modern Art in Boston* (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1985). This implicit model of the performance as a kind of readymade, Buchloh has argued, suggests that early Fluxus

production needs to be seen in terms of the transformation enacted in the “newly discovered readymade aesthetic”; Buchloh, “Cryptic Watts,” 5.

75. “An Interview with George Brecht by Henry Martin,” in Martin, *An Introduction to George Brecht’s Book of the Tumbler on Fire*, 79.

76. Maciunas usually referred to the event score form as “neo-haiku” in his charts and diagrams, and Ono, in particular, may have had access to Japanese avant-garde readings of Duchamp and surrealist poetics that would relate them to enigmatic forms such as puzzles, koans, and haiku. On Ono’s relation to Japanese avant-garde traditions and the Japanese reception of Duchamp, see Alexandra Munroe, “Tokyo Fluxus and Conceptual Art,” in *Japanese Art: Scream Against the Sky* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994).

77. “An Interview with George Brecht by Irmeline Lebeer,” (1973) in Martin, *An Introduction to George Brecht’s Book of the Tumbler on Fire*, 84. Brecht has often been at pains to distinguish his goals from what he perceives to be those of conceptual art: “It depends on where you put the emphasis because concept art has to do, by definition, with the conceptualizing faculty of the mind, whereas to me the events are total experiences. There’s no more emphasis on conceptualizing than there is on perception or memory or thinking in general or unconscious association. There’s no special emphasis, it’s a global experience. I’ve seen conceptual art pieces that look a lot like my scores in *Water Yam*, so it’s possible that these people knew of my event scores and took them as concept pieces, but from my point of view they’re not. Calling them conceptual pieces would be using a very narrow view of them” (“An Interview with George Brecht by Michael Nyman” [1976], 117).

78. In “Innovational Research,” Brecht cites Cassirer from *An Essay on Man* (1944): “The function of the name is always limited to emphasizing a particular aspect of a thing, and it is precisely this restriction and limitation upon which the value of the name depends. It is not the function of a name to refer exhaustively to a concrete situation, but merely to single out and dwell upon a single aspect.”

79. “An Interview with George Brecht by Gisliind Nabakowski” (1974), in Martin, *An Introduction to George Brecht’s Book of the Tumbler on Fire*, 93.

80. Yet this structure by no means precludes one from staging performance- or object-based “realizations”—Brecht himself performed several versions of *Drip Music* in the early 1960s, which range from explicit action (pouring water from a pitcher) to simply setting up a situation (a wet rag hanging over a bucket).

81. This process of paring down is verified by notes from 1961, in which handwritten notebook drafts are edited, and blocks of more explanatory text crossed out; Dick Higgins papers, Getty Research Library (870613).

82. The published form of *Water Yam*, while modeled on Brecht’s cards, was at least partly Maciunas’s design; in the 1978 interview with Larry Miller, Maciunas claims that the piece was produced “well, by me, he [Brecht] just gave me the text” (18). In “George Maciunas: A Finger in Fluxus,” Barbara Moore provides a detailed analysis of some of Maciunas’ graphic production, noting that “Maciunas exercised almost total control in the area of graphic design” (*Artforum* 21, no. 2 [October 1982]: 38). The distinctive look and typeface of these Fluxus publications, including *Water Yam*, resulted from Maciunas’s production: “For nearly eight years every body of text . . . was published straight and unaltered from Maciunas’ IBM Executive model typewriter, which was equipped with a condensed sans serif type” (40). Although Brecht and Maciunas shared a number of design inclinations, including an obsession for printed ephemera, printers’ insignia, and odd diagrams and snippets of text, the difference in their aesthetics can be seen by comparing the

Brecht-produced and edited *V TRE* broadsheet (1963) with the first Maciunas-produced *ccV TRE* no. 1 (1964), which features a more crowded, rectilinear composition, and mostly sans serif font, and largely eliminates hand-drawn or handwritten elements. Both are reproduced in *Fluxus etc.*, ed. Jon Hendricks (Bloomfield Hills, Mich.: Cranbrook Academy of Art Museum, 1981).

83. In postwar experimental music, Mallarmé's work would also provide a crucial model for new permutational and performance procedures, evident in the early texts by Pierre Boulez in the *Nouvelle Revue Française*—"Recherches Maintenant" (November 1954), and "Aléa" (November 1957)—and Hans Rudolf Zeller's much-cited essay in *Die Reihe*, no. 6 (1960/62), "Mallarmé and Serialist Thought"—facilitated by the publication of Mallarmé's notes on the structure of the Book in Jacques Schérer's *Le 'Livre' de Mallarmé* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957).

84. The name "Water Yam" came from the "Yam Festival," a series of events Brecht loosely coorganized with Robert Watts in 1962–1963, culminating in May 1963; so titled "because Yam is May spelled backwards."

85. Alongside Cage's 1961 compilation *Silence, An Anthology* was one of the key books of the early 1960s, and Brecht's *Water Yam* scores—small, cheap, popular, and easily reproducible—were eventually among the better disseminated of the Fluxus editions, despite the enormous limits of Maciunas's commercial efforts. A Maciunas letter to Emmett Williams, dated April 2, 1964, states "At this time we have sold in New York 4 Brecht *Water Yams*, 996 still on our hands, or \$600 loss, so there is a limit to my expenditures, especially when there is no workable distribution of these works," Jean Brown Papers, Getty Research Library [890164].

86. Willoughby Sharp, "Lawrence Weiner at Amsterdam," *Avalanche* 4 (Spring 1972): 69. In the same interview, Weiner comments that "I don't care aesthetically which of the three conditions the work exists in. . . . It would be a fascist gesture on my part if I were to say that you can accept these things only on a verbal information level, which would be type on the page, or you can accept them only on an oral information level. It doesn't matter if it's physically conveyed or whether it's conveyed verbally or orally" (66).

87. Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object* (New York: Praeger, 1973), 11. That this entry is immediately followed by one for Allan Kaprow's 1966 compendium *Assemblages, Environments and Happenings* suggests the extent to which the specificity of early event practices, with their proto-minimal and proto-conceptual elements, would be immediately elided into the more conventionally theatrical and expressive rubric of Happenings. A similar dynamic, I think, is at play in the 1994 *October* roundtable "Conceptual Art and the Reception of Duchamp," in which the role of Cage, Brecht, and others is momentarily introduced, and then eliminated—partly through recourse to homogenizing notions of Fluxus. Buchloh's rhetorical question, "Would it be more historically accurate to say: It is not the Duchamp reception that one has to look at when one wants to study the beginnings of proto- and Conceptual art, but it is the Cage reception one would have to concentrate on?," is never addressed; in *October* 70 (Fall 1994): 138–139.

88. Vito Acconci, interview with the author, Brooklyn, October 25, 1995.