

'Brecht for beginners'

George Brecht Events: A Heterospective, Cologne, Ludwig Museum, 17 September 2005 – 8 January 2006; Barcelona, MACBA Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 25 May – 3 September 2006

In 1965, John Cage is said to have spent a whole evening trying to convince George Brecht not to leave the United States. As it turned out, Brecht did not heed Cage's arguments, and his move to Europe would turn out to be permanent: after Rome, he went to the South of France, London and Düsseldorf, before settling in Cologne where he has lived since 1971. Whatever Brecht's reasons, his move very probably contributed to his progressive marginalisation. A prominent figure in early-1960s New York, where he was associated with Neo-dada, happenings, Fluxus and Pop, Brecht would take some distance from the artworld, becoming increasingly reclusive – so much so, that the Ludwig Museum in Cologne has had to beg the artist for a long-awaited retrospective for years. The very thorough *George Brecht Events: A Heterospective* is finally providing a welcome opportunity for his work to be reappraised. The significance of Brecht's work is also celebrated in the catalogue which, in addition to two excellent essays by the curators and some of Brecht's key writings, includes a 'reflections from artists and friends' who include Richard Hamilton, Robert Morris, Lawrence Weiner, Allan Kaprow and Claes Oldenburg. This section echoes the 'Collective Portrait of Marcel Duchamp' by artists (including some of those just cited) and critics included in the catalogue for Duchamp's 1973 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York – Brecht himself was invited to contribute a text, which has in turn been included in his own retrospective catalogue. If the 1973 exhibition served to consolidate what has since been termed the 'Duchamp effect,'¹ a 'Brecht effect' still remains to be explored. Austrian artist Erwin Wurm recently listed Brecht, alongside Duchamp, as artists whose 'secret art' he loves, and there are, undoubtedly, plenty more out there who would readily agree.² What is it, then, that makes Brecht's 'secret art' so significant?

From Chance to Choice

Cage was Brecht's teacher at the New School for Social Research in New York in 1958. Like many of his classmates, who included Al Hansen, Allan Kaprow and Dick Higgins, Brecht was no professional musician – he was in fact, at the time, working full-time as a research chemist for Johnson & Johnson's. The relations between art and science would naturally emerge as an early concern of Brecht's, as his 1957 text *Chance Imagery* demonstrated: there, he brought together his interests in Zen, probability theories and quantum physics, to explore the significance of chance processes in art (his discussion includes an analysis of the way chance is mobilised by dada, surrealism and Jackson Pollock). At that time, Brecht was creating paintings using chance effects. Included in the exhibition are two beautiful 1957 *Chance Paintings* made from ink-stained bed sheets that seem to have been folded and unfolded to create random patterns (a technique that Paris-based painter Simon Hantaï would



independently develop from 1960, and expand to great effect throughout his career). If Brecht would gradually become more critical of science, his vision of art as 'research' (best embodied by the notebooks filled with ideas and sketches that he has kept since 1958) betrays his early training. Brecht's patents for menstrual tampons, filed during his time at Johnson and Johnson's, have been included in the show at the artist's request – all the artworks in the exhibition, they seem to suggest, are simply other kinds of inventions.

In *Chance Imagery*, Brecht was particularly interested in the 'chance event' as 'a selection from a limited universe' of possible results.³ It is not surprising in this context that Brecht would have been instantly attracted, during Cage's classes, to the composer's definition of sounds as 'events in sound-space.' Brecht operated a twofold transformation of Cage's definition: on the one hand he focused on the single 'event' rather than the (sometimes simultaneous) combination of 'events' in Cage's compositions, and on the other hand, he expanded Cage's definition to encompass any activity, whether it produces sound or not. For Brecht, the main characteristic of an event was that it occur in time, and such an event could only be isolated from the field of experience through notation. Since sound was deemed incidental to the event, musical notation was no longer appropriate. This is why Brecht developed his 'event scores,' verbal instructions which anyone is invited to perform. As the title of the retrospective exhibition suggests, this notion of the 'event' would be the basis for his most interesting work, and constitutes Brecht's most important contribution to contemporary art. What the event scores allowed, Brecht would remark in the 1965 postface to *Chance Imagery*, was 'the resolution of the distinction between chance and choice' which he had been preoccupied with in his early work. Leaving behind chance techniques such as die and random number charts, Brecht discovered that simply leaving performers to make the decisions usually controlled by the artist was an equally, if not more, effective way of introducing chance into an artwork.

In a letter to Brecht reproduced in the catalogue, critic and friend Jill Johnston suggests that the artist's preoccupation with music can be read as an indirect challenge to, and identification with, his father, who was a professional flautist but died when Brecht was a child. Brecht has himself suggested that the 1962 event score for *Flute Solo*, which invites performers to 'assemble' and 'disassemble' the instrument, was inspired by a reported incident during which his father took his flute entirely apart in protest against an exhaustingly demanding prima donna whom he was supposed to accompany in an opera duet. While some of Brecht's scores involve such traditional instruments and poke fun at the rituals of classical music, many invite less theatrical performances, drawing on everyday objects and activities. The 1961 *Three Lamp Events*, for example, reads:

- on.
- off.



- lamp

- off. on.

These are of course ‘events’ that we all perform a great number of times a day. The act of turning a light on, as Liz Kotz has pointed out, also happens to be one of the ‘generic examples of physical “events”’ given by scientific discourses such as physics.⁴

It is however absolutely unnecessary to know anything about Brecht’s biography to perform his scores. Indeed, Brecht is not only very reluctant to give any information about himself, but some of his scores embody the most open, and at times enigmatic, instructions ever to be given by either a composer or a visual artist. For the concert of his scores for the exhibition’s opening (staged by Brecht’s Fluxus colleagues Larry Miller and Alison Knowles), the audience was provided with the scores instead of a programme, and it was often a delightful challenge to match the performances to the instructions, as when Larry Miller performed the instruction ‘table’ (from the score *Table*) by reading out the periodic table. The interpretations are endless, and can encompass everything from poetry to slapstick, from theatrical entertainment to boring routine. Unlike a traditional musical composition, there is no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ way to perform a Brecht score. In this context, it is not surprising that during his stay in England Brecht felt close to composer Cornelius Cardew and musician John Tilbury, whose compositions and involvement with the amateur Scratch Orchestra represent one of the most radical attempts to develop a democratic type of experimental music at the time (I participated a few years ago in a London performance of Cornelius Cardew’s 1968-71 *The Great Learning* with a friend who was not only unable to read music but also sang off-key).

It is difficult to find other works that come closer to both Umberto Eco’s theory of the ‘open work’ and Roland Barthes’s celebration of the ‘death of the author’: Brecht combined Eco’s interest in experimental music with Barthes’s acknowledgement of surrealist automatism as an initial blow to the authorial voice, and simultaneously extended the groundbreaking lessons of both Duchamp and Cage. And all of this, Brecht achieved with an economy and humour that makes any theorisation (including this one) inevitably sound too wordy, too clumsy, too controlling.

Between Object and Event

At the same time as the scores, Brecht developed the implications of the event in the visual arts in his first solo exhibition, in 1959, which was appropriately titled *Toward Events*. Visitors to this groundbreaking show were invited to handle objects included in various works displayed on the wall or on tables. One of them, *The Case* was meant to be ‘approached by one to several people and opened,’ its contents ‘removed, and used in ways appropriate to their nature,’ before closing it again [Fig. 1]. Spelling out the connection between scores and



objects, the invitation explains that '(t)he event (which lasts possibly 10-30 minutes) comprises all occurrences between approach and abandonment of the case.'



Figure 1: George Brecht, *The Case*, 1959. Case with objects. 23 x 47 x 33 cm. Private Collection, Courtesy Gagolian Gallery, London. Photo: Lothar Schnepf, Cologne © George Brecht

Brecht's belief that 'every object is an event and every event has an object-like quality,' '(s)o they're pretty much interchangeable' was derived both from his musical background and the lesson from quantum physics that 'there's no great difference between energy and matter.'¹⁵ This conception allowed Brecht to shift from scores to objects and back again. After conceiving the works in *Toward Events* as a new kind of object-based events, Brecht started



making objects based on existing scores. In the 1961 group exhibition *Environment, Situations, Spaces (Six Artists)* at the Martha Jackson Gallery in New York, Brecht exhibited a realisation of his *Three Chair Events*. Three chairs were shown in different places in the exhibition: a white wicker chair under a spotlight in the gallery, a black one in the toilet and a yellow one just outside the entrance of the gallery. In the score for *Three Chair Events*, Brecht uses the term 'occurrence' again, suggesting this time that 'sitting on a black chair' and finding a 'yellow chair' are two such occurrences: the events are thus framed above all by perception. As he explained, '[t]he score is an event; so is finding an incident of it.' In the exhibition, the chairs indeed existed as artworks only when they were noticed as such by a visitor (in the Cologne retrospective, the chairs are similarly casually placed around the galleries). The score and realisation point to an extremely significant shift in Brecht's conception of the event: if finding or noticing 'an incident' of the event is an event in itself, then a score need not involve any action at all, it can be performed simply by *perceiving* something in our environment.

While his 1962-63 objects involving chairs, stools, ladders, tables and clothes trees can also be matched with a series of object-based event scores written between March and November 1962, in some cases works were produced *before* being scored, rather than being based on existing instructions. The objects in this series are much more minimalist than the ones in *Toward Events*: instead of aiming to provide viewers with a variety of sensory experiences, they are carefully staged encounters of a spare selection of visually attractive elements – wooden furniture is painted white, decorative patterns are kept to a minimum, and objects placed on the chairs or tables clearly contrast in colour or material with the monochrome backgrounds against which they sit [Fig. 2]. This style – which ties with Brecht's preferred design for his event scores, which allowed the bullet-pointed words to stand out clearly from the empty white space of the card – became a staple of Brecht's subsequent score-realizations.

When in 1963, Brecht turned to canvas as the support for other score realisations, he maintained a strictly monochromatic palette. This time, Brecht literally transformed the canvas into scores by applying words on the canvas –the humorously titled *Action Paintings* bear words (plastic letters pasted and painted the same colour as the canvas) from his event scores such as the 1966 *No Smoking*, or *Starting/Stopping*. In addition to these score realisations, Brecht became interested in the canvas as an object and planned to create a monochrome painting inscribed with the year in which it was made – this was 1963, two years before the first of conceptual artist On Kawara's well-known *Date Paintings*. In later score realisations, Brecht freely combined both words and objects, to create rebus-like juxtapositions.





Figure 2: George Brecht, *Clothes Tree*, 1962-63 (1973 realisation). Clothes rack with caps, umbrellas and coat, 193 x 70 x 70 cm. Private Collection, Courtesy Gagolian Gallery, London. Photo: Lothar Schnepf, Cologne © George Brecht.



Fluxus and Co.

Brecht's collaborations with Dick Higgins on performances, with Robert Watts on the *Yam Festival*, and with Watts and Alison Knowles on a collective project entitled *The Scissor Bros. Warehouse*, constitute a kind of prehistory of the network of artists that George Maciunas would gather shortly under the umbrella of Fluxus in 1962. Indeed, the periodical *V Tre*, started by Brecht in 1963, would be taken over one year later by Maciunas as the official Fluxus journal (renamed *CC V Tre*). Moreover, Brecht's scores and his objects would be crucial references for Maciunas. Developed in parallel by other artists such as La Monte Young and Yoko Ono, Fluxus scores would become the basis of Fluxus concerts around Europe from 1962 onwards, and consolidate the Fluxus aesthetic of minimal 'neo-haiku' performances, opposed to the more painterly 'neo-baroque' happenings.⁶ In addition, Maciunas was no doubt inspired by works such as *The Case* as he started to package Fluxus scores and other objects in the numerous Fluxboxes and Fluxkits which would become the staple of Fluxus publications. Brecht also anticipated Fluxus's interest in the distribution and dissemination of art through alternative circuits. 'Shouldn't scores be simply published in the newspaper, or available on printed cards or sheets of paper, to be sent to anyone?' he asked as early as 1960.⁷ *The Village Voice*, to whom he proposed this, unfortunately declined, but display cases in the retrospective are packed with mailings of scores and other 'events' by Brecht to his friends. Maciunas's Fluxus publications, advertised and sold through mail order, were thus expanding Brecht's project on a larger, international scale.

Brecht's involvement in Fluxus is relatively downplayed by the exhibition, which only dedicates a small room to Brecht's Fluxus objects. Another collaborative relation only glimpsed at in the show is the one Brecht had with Robert Filliou, as they created together the 'Centre for Permanent Creation' in Villefranche-sur-Mer in the South of France in 1966. This joint project, and the cross-pollination between the two artists' works are interesting topics in themselves.⁸ Particularly Filliou-ian in my eyes are Brecht's *Land Mass Translocation* projects, developed after he had moved to England in 1968 and become, one can easily guess, so depressed about the weather as to conceive 'the idea of moving England closer to the Equator.' Brecht's maps chart other imaginary translocations such as the 1969 *Wedding of Miami and Havana*.

Between 'Junk' and 'Conceptual' Art

Over his career, Brecht's work was included in two major exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art in New York: the 1961 *The Art of Assemblage*, which celebrated the trend for junk collages and assemblages, and, nine years later, the well-known exhibition of conceptual art, *Information*. In fact, Brecht's work occupies a unique position within both of these two historical moments. On the one hand, Brecht's were, I would argue, the most radically 'conceptual' of all Neo-dada objects, environments and happenings: instead of *suggesting* the flow of everyday life, like Rauschenberg's combines, for example, Brecht's works of the time



literally capture the temporal dimension of the perception and experience of the material world. The key to this difference lies in Brecht's letter to William Seitz on the occasion of *The Art of Assemblage*: his works, Brecht suggests, are less assemblages than 'arrangements' – a term which emphasises the musical, temporal dimension of the event rather than the 'clusters in space' by artists in the exhibition. This conception of the arrangement is what allowed Brecht to take the glue out of the assemblage and make objects more fluid and more open than anything Rauschenberg succeeded in achieving.

On the other hand, even Brecht's most 'conceptual' works maintain a strong link to a dada, collage-like aesthetic. A painting bearing the words 'No Smoking' (the 1966 *No Smoking*) may resemble the word paintings of conceptual artists like John Baldessari or On Kawara, but, unlike them, Brecht avoids falling into the self-referential by emphasising the relation to the event score and the vernacular language of everyday signs found in so many public spaces. Brecht became increasingly interested in language and shared with Bruce Nauman an interest in the humour and puns contained in idiomatic expressions. Where Nauman relied on the abstract relation between caption and photograph (of someone polishing the word HOT to act out the expression 'waxing hot' in his 1966-67/70 *Eleven Colour Photographs*), the performativity of Brecht's 1975 *Pinning Down the Meaning*, is enacted in a collage where the word 'meaning,' written on paper, is pinned in a glass case, and the whole expression is spelled out in a handwritten label below. If Brecht was included in Lucy Lippard's well-known survey of conceptual art, he remains very much of a generation that did not embrace the photographic medium that would 'dematerialise' conceptual and performance art taking it further away from sculpture and painting.⁹

Brecht's oeuvre as a whole oscillates between these poles of the conceptual object, and the object-based concept. Walking through the exhibition, however, one is struck by a distinctly material turn in his work: in the *Book of the Tumbler on Fire*, started in 1964, objects are frozen in cotton and in framed compositions behind a glass window; a delicate glass tumbler, so dear to Joseph Cornell, betrays Brecht's relation to the older American artist, which he had tried to downplay in his earlier works.¹⁰ Despite the mobility suggested by the conception of these objects as pages in a book, the event-aspect of Brecht's work seems to be stifled: in *Venus Paradise, Exhibit 25*, coloured pencils are suspended in a cotton field, tips converging towards the blank outline of an eagle doomed never to be coloured in [Fig. 3]. This stilling of the event seems to have been prefigured by a group of works in which objects including a tennis ball were suddenly halted in plaster. The most Cornelian boxes in the exhibition, however, are surely the 1976-79 *Crystal Boxes*, which contain precious-looking crystals surrounded by die, amulets and other symbolic or metaphoric objects, and in some cases, texts in a variety of languages. At the time, Brecht started learning Chinese in order to read Buddhist texts in the original.



Shortly before the *Crystal Boxes*, Brecht had created two series of works addressing most directly the fetishisation of objects of museum displays. Both the absurd 1975 *San-Antonio-Installation*, which displays real and invented objects inspired by the eccentric French detective novels by San Antonio, and the more melancholy 1976 *Brunch Museum*, which celebrates the imaginary figure of a scientist called 'Brunch,' humorously explore the fluid boundaries between fiction, history and biography.



Figure 3: George Brecht, *Venus Paradise, Exhibit 25*, Städtisches Museum Abteiberg Mönchengladbach. Photo: Ruth Kaiser. © George Brecht

'Borderline' Art

If Brunch, as Alfred Fischer suggests in the catalogue, acts as a stand-in for Brecht, then the *Brunch Museum* cannot but conjure the retrospective show that the artist shunned for so long. Beyond the problem of fixing the authorial voice of one of the most self-effacing artists around, the difficulty faced by Robinson and Fischer lay in conveying the musicality, or 'event-ness' of Brecht's work in a fixed, static display. With the exception of *Solitaire*, none of the objects from the *Toward Events* show can now be handled by the viewer (the owners did not wish it), and the chairs, tables, and clothes trees scattered throughout the show inevitably stand out as works, rather than merging almost seamlessly with their domestic environments.



The scores, casually pinned up throughout the show, pointed to the dimension that perhaps only the concert of Brecht's works, which guests of the opening were made to attend *before* seeing the exhibition, could make visible. Watching the concert, I found myself unable to tell when and where one work stopped and the other ended, so discrete and commonplace some of the activities are. This sense of confusion lingered as I attended the more spectacular outdoor performance of one of Brecht's early works – his 1959 *Motor Vehicle Sundown* – enacted on Cologne's central cathedral square by a large number of vehicles, including vintage cars, a jeep, motorcycles and even a fire truck. A crowd gathered, attracted by the unexpected grouping, but wandered rather aimlessly as the drivers of each vehicle performed such mundane activities as blowing horns, opening and closing doors, operating windscreen wipers and switching headlights on and off: there was no apparent order, no climax, no clear beginning or end. This was one of Brecht's most Cagean works, and the simultaneity of the actions and large-scale organisation required to stage the performance are uncharacteristic of Brecht's later, more minimal, work, but the deliberate sense of uncertainty about the difference between the artwork and its surroundings is certainly one of Brecht's most radical achievements. Writing about a work by Brecht involving a table and two chairs, Donald Judd suggested that it belonged to a category of works that 'barely exist';¹¹ Robert Morris, whose work Judd included in this category has unsurprisingly been more enthusiastic about the fact that '(s)itting on Brecht's white chairs one can forget about them.' Maciunas heralded Brecht's works as emblematic of Fluxus's desire to create impersonal works that would eventually lead to a 'time when fine art can be totally eliminated and artists find other employment' as people realise that these events are everywhere around them.¹² Whether or not he shared Maciunas's political agenda to work towards the disappearance of professional art, Brecht undoubtedly strove to achieve what he called a 'borderline' art, 'an art verging on the non-existent,' 'at the point of imperceptibility.' At his best, Brecht has been a virtuoso of such 'borderline' art: this is why he can be seen as a forerunner for the many contemporary artists exploring the limits of what I would like to call the 'almost nothing.'

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Unless otherwise stated, all quotations in the text are from the retrospective exhibition catalogue: Alfred Fischer and Julia Robinson eds., *George Brecht Events: A Heterospective*, exh. cat. (Cologne: Museum Ludwig and the Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2005).

¹ Cf. Martha Buskirk and Mignon Nixon (eds), *The Duchamp Effect*, Cambridge, Mass. and London 1996.

² Erwin Wurm, cited by Paulo Herkenhoff, 'One One Minute Sculpture by Erwin Wurm,' in Peter Weibel (ed.), *Erwin Wurm*, Ostfildern-Ruit 2002, 231.

³ George Brecht, *Chance Imagery*, New York 1966, 2.



⁴ Liz Kotz, 'Post-Cagean Aesthetics and the "Event" Score,' *October*, 95 (Winter 2001), 72.

⁵ Michael Nyman, 'George Brecht: Interview,' *Studio International*, 192:984 (November-December 1976), rep. in Henry Martin (ed.), *An Introduction to George Brecht's Book of the Tumbler on Fire*, Milan 1978, 106; 'An Interview with George Brecht by Gisliind Nabakowski,' *Heute Kunst*, 6, 1974, rep. in Martin, *An Introduction to George Brecht's Book of the Tumbler on Fire*, 95.

⁶ This opposition was made by Maciunas, cf. Ken Friedman, 'Getting into Events,' in *The Fluxus Performance Workbook*, special issue of *El Djarida*, 1990, 6.

⁷ George Brecht, *Notebook III, April 1959 - August 1959*, Cologne 1991, 135.

⁸ For more about this project, cf. Steven Harris, 'The Art of Losing Oneself without Getting Lost: Brecht and Filliou at the Palais Idéal,' *Papers of Surrealism*, 2 (Summer 2004).

⁹ Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: the Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, London 1973.

¹⁰ I have written about Brecht's relation to Cornell in his early work in 'Unpacking Cornell: Consumption and Play in the Work of Rauschenberg, Warhol and George Brecht,' *Papers of Surrealism*, 2 (Summer 2004).

¹¹ Donald Judd, 'Nationwide Reports: Hartford,' *Arts Magazine* (March 1964), rep. in *Complete Writing, 1959-1975*, Halifax 1975, 118.

¹² Maciunas, 'Letter to Thomas Schmit, January 1964,' rep. in Jon Hendricks (ed.), *What's Fluxus? What's Not! Why.*, exh. cat., Rio de Janeiro 2002, 163.

