

Ken Friedman: Event, Idea and Inquiry

by Carolyn Barnes

Event, Idea and Inquiry

Opportunity and chance led Ken Friedman to become an artist. The nature of his art challenges the sense of art as a fixed and single vocation. Friedman never had formal art training. Rather, George Maciunas gave him the title of artist in 1966, stating that the creative activities Friedman had pursued since childhood could be categorized as art. Friedman's youthful experiments with objects and situations intersected with a key impulse of European and American vanguard art since the early twentieth century. This was the will to reduce art to provocative ideas and gestures. Material form often came into play, but for radical artists the ideas behind the image, object, text, or activity were increasingly the most important issue, particularly in their capacity to interrogate the world.

Ideas inspired Friedman before he engaged in art in any recognized sense. Original, interdisciplinary thinking is a consistent thread in his activities and occupations more than the specific form in which ideas are realized. It is not surprising that Friedman paid attention on hearing that an art of ideas was an important development in contemporary art, at least in Fluxus circles. Since 1966, Friedman has regularly returned to the simple, text-based form of the event score as an economical way of capturing an idea and sending it out into the world in a form that anyone can replicate in different contexts without affecting the underlying premise.

The Event Score

The 'event score' or 'word piece' emerged in New York in the late 1950s as one of several new art practices developed to test the limits of art and renegotiate the nature of audience engagement. George Brecht conceived the term 'event' in 1959 to refer to simple acts and situations realized in the world by artists or others; a practice that other future Fluxus artists also explored in their work, including Yoko Ono, La Monte Young, Dick Higgins and Ben Vautier. The event score was a short descriptive text outlining an action or situation. The new musical notation of composer John Cage inspired the idea of 'scoring' interventions in everyday life, as did his classes in experimental composition at the New School for Social Research in New York. Cage's practice questioned the parameters of music, musical performance and audience reception by focusing on the principles of sound and silence. His works often drew attention to the richness of ambient auditory sensation, creating a need for new approaches to musical notation. In his composition classes at the New School between 1957 and 1959, he encouraged participants—most of whom were artists—to conceive and take part in diverse performance activities.

Both the event score and Fluxus occupy an important place in the genealogy of twentieth century art and anti-art, building on the efforts of the historical avant-garde to contest modernist ideals of artistic independence and purity. In merging text-based instructions with the deferred performance of simple acts, the event score rejected established art values of craftsmanship, individual skill and talent, single authorship and self-expression. From the early 1960s, a fluid network of Fluxus artists with backgrounds ranging from new music, concrete poetry, and visual art to dance and experimental theatre involved themselves in scripting such activities. Some used the event score to escape the institutional

context of art, seeking to embed the work of art in the 'everydayness' of non-art situations and locations. Some aimed to produce a more democratic, participatory form of art. Some sought to elevate immediate engagement with art over the aesthetic and commodity value of the enduring art object. Others endeavored to eliminate the barriers between established art forms to arrive at innovative, interdisciplinary practices. Yet beyond the shared proposition of some repeatable action or situation and a deadpan prose style, the form of the event score freed artists to pursue almost infinite paths of investigation.

Despite the reductive form and structure of their scores, this scope is evident in the work of those who pioneered the form, George Brecht, Yoko Ono and La Monte Young:

Composition 1960 #10

*To Bob Morris
Draw a straight line
And follow it.*

— La Monte Young, October 1960

WORD EVENT

Exit

— George Brecht, Spring 1961

VOICE PIECE FOR SOPRANO

*To Simone Morris
Scream.*
1. *against the wind*
2. *against the wall*
3. *against the sky*

— Yoko Ono, Autumn 1961¹

These three works also demonstrate what Liz Kotz describes as the categorical ambiguity of the event score. Individual 'event' scores, she argues, can be variously attributed to the fields of music, visual art, poetry, or performance.² Kotz contends that the 'real' art resides in the realization of the action or situation, not in the text itself, although she accepts that Brecht and Ono, for example, were often more interested in the conceptual impact of the things they proposed, achieved through the process of reading rather than doing. Some event scores are certainly scripts for intervention in everyday life, prompting the reader to become an active producer. Other scores encourage a psychological response, blurring the boundaries of inner and outer, something seen by comparing La Monte Young's text with Yoko Ono's.

Ken Friedman and the Event Score

Since 1966, Friedman has produced many short, text-based propositions in addition to object-based works, activities in organizing Fluxus projects, and scholarly work in the fields of art history, sociology of art, design and organization. Like Fluxus practices in general, Friedman's event scores disrupt established ideas of artistic production and reception, seeking to extend the experiential dimension of art. Friedman's scores are more typically scripts for producing artifacts and situations or for reflecting on them than for performances. Since Friedman was thrown into art practice before he had a developed understanding of the cultural and social frameworks of the art world, his event scores build on his most formative intellectual experiences.

The prodigious nature of Friedman's involvement with Fluxus is central to the discussion of his work. It is well known that Friedman became part of Fluxus as a 16 year old.³ As a student at Shimer College in Mt Carroll, Illinois, he produced programs for the college radio station. Searching for program material, Friedman followed up an advertisement for Dick Higgins's Something Else Press in the *East Village Other*, a New York underground newspaper founded by breakaway writers from the already independent *Village Voice*. Friedman began to correspond with Dick Higgins at the press, developing radio programs around press publications by various artists working in the Fluxus ambit, including Robert Filliou, Al Hansen, Dick Higgins, Ray Johnson, Alison Knowles, Nam June Paik,

Daniel Spoerri and Emmett Williams. Friedman used the books as the basis for radio shows. He also started corresponding with Higgins, beginning what would become a lifelong friendship.

Higgins invited Friedman to stay at his home when he visited New York in 1966. During his stay, Friedman reproduced one of the objects he had been making.⁴ It was a box with the words “Open me” written on the outside and “Shut me quick” inscribed inside, unconsciously inhabiting the territory of the Duchampian readymade with its emphasis on the verbal/visual conundrum. Higgins arranged for Friedman to take the box to George Maciunas, an artist and graphic designer, who in 1961 gave the name Fluxus to a community of experimental artists working in the United States, Europe and Japan. From 1961 until his death in 1978, Maciunas was the main coordinator, promoter, and supporter of Fluxus activities.⁵ He organized exhibitions, performance events, concerts and festivals and designed and published a diverse range of publications by the group, arranging for the production of small, multiple art objects by Fluxus artists. Maciunas’s response to talking with Friedman about the things he did was to invite Friedman to join Fluxus. Maciunas also issued the box as a Fluxus multiple in autumn 1966 under the title *Open and Shut Case*.⁶

Although Fluxus generated a significant level of art activity, its network of visual artists, musicians, performers and writers operated to the side of the mainstream cultural sphere, developing alternative works for independent distribution channels. Moreover, many members of the Fluxus community were interested in the sphere of the everyday, frowning on the established art world and its strict disciplinary boundaries. They supported an open concept of artistry, making it plausible for Friedman to operate as an artist while he continued his studies, now at San Francisco State University. Nevertheless, receiving the designation ‘artist’ from Higgins and Maciunas validated Friedman’s relationship to the things he did. Maciunas proposed that he notate his ideas for objects and activities so that others could engage with them, explaining the nature of the event score.⁷ Friedman began conceiving new scores, the form presenting itself as an ideal medium for exploring the vast expanse of possibility lying between the human mind and the world. He also scripted scores for the earlier actions he had undertaken and objects he had made.

Open and Shut Case, for example, readily translated into a set of simple written instructions for others to carry out, retaining the conceptual impact of the actual object even though a measure of productive control was removed from the artist. Friedman’s project of knocking on doors in his college dormitory to present instruction cards became *Mandatory Happening* (1966), which stated, ‘You will decide to read this score or not to read it. When you have made your decision, the happening is over.’

The event scores developed from activities Friedman carried out before meeting Higgins and Maciunas already reflect the productive tension in the Fluxus event score between critical engagement with the world and the reduction of art to idea. For example, *Fast Food Event* (1964) transforms a mundane daily activity into an intervention that reflects on American cultural reality and the routines of everyday experience in mass industrial society:

Fast Food Event

Go into a fast food restaurant. Order one example of every item on the menu. Line everything up in a row on the table. Starting at one end of the row, begin eating the items one at a time. Eat each item before moving on to the next. Eat rapidly and methodically until all the food is finished. Eat as quickly as possible without eating too fast. Eat neatly. Do not make a mess.

1964, San Diego, California

Another early Friedman event score shows recognition of fundamental problems in art, addressing the issue of aesthetic competence. *The Judgment of Paris* (1964) instructs the reader to pin up three images of choice, selected from popular or art sources, construct a shelf beneath them and place a golden apple under the preferred image. This contemporary re-enactment of a mythic story of the judgment of taste tackles the issue of aesthetic categories and hierarchies, while serving to erode the division between amateur and expert taste in this respect. *The Judgment of Paris* thus indicates something of the order of intellectual resources Friedman brought to the proposition of scripting actions and situations. By the age of sixteen, he already had a

developed interest in political and religious processes and the scientific enlightenment as a result of his wide reading and life experiences, enabling him to make a rapid transition into active art practice.

An Interdisciplinary Upbringing

Friedman was born in 1949 in New London, Connecticut, one of the first towns settled in the British North American colonies. The American War of Independence was still an important presence in Friedman's childhood town. Friedman passed by the mill of Governor John Winthrop the Younger on an almost-daily basis. He lived close to the schoolhouse where American revolutionary patriot Nathan Hale taught, feeling a personal connection to the history of colonial America. New London was a whaling port, which exposed him to the influence of East Asian cultures. For a period of his childhood, Friedman made weekly visits to the Yale University Art Museum in New Haven, its collections of classical art, New England antiques, and some modern works consolidating his interest in the unfolding of history. The museum also hosted a temporary exhibition of Leonardo da Vinci's engineering drawings and modern reconstructions of Leonardo's inventions. These inspired Friedman's interest in making experimental objects and questioning how things worked.

Before Maciunas and Higgins showed Friedman the possibility of active involvement in art, he had intended to become a Unitarian minister, a plan he kept until the early 1970s. Since childhood he had read about the history of religious reformation, inspired by accounts of groups and individuals willing to undertake great risks to seek their own truth, opposing established religion in the process. This extended to an interest in the customs of America's various groups of 'plain people', who worshiped simply and adopted basic ways of living counter to developments in the modern world, while demonstrating a capacity for invention and what we now describe as sustainability.

Some of Friedman's early events address interests he held in common with John Cage and the artists of the Fluxus network, notably Zen Buddhism, sound and silence. These references are consistent with Friedman's existing interests in history, science and spirituality, interests that continued to drive his ideas for producing objects and situations after he joined Fluxus. For

example, *Edison's Lighthouse* (1965) invites the reader to place candles between two mirrors and note the effects produced by changing the number and location of candles. The score echoes Friedman's experiments with light and reflection in his room at Shimer College; activities inspired by a scene in the popular film *Young Tom Edison* (1940), which shows the inventor using mirrors and lanterns to enable a surgeon to perform an emergency operation. *Scrub Piece* (1956) recalls the time in 1956 when Friedman went to the Nathan Hale Monument in New London to give it a thorough cleaning.⁸ Other early Friedman events have a clear connection to Friedman's religious interests. *Light Table* (1965) calls a community of readers to place white candles on a wooden table and light them. Friedman sees this score as merging his twin interests in the scientific investigation of light and the role of light in architectural space in shaping religious experience.⁹

The Validation of an Art Context

In their collective activities, Fluxus artists saw the codes and disciplines of established art as closing artists and audiences to possibility and to the world. They offered artistic experimentation as an alternative pathway to new ideas and understanding, creating an intense, interdisciplinary setting for the exploration of radical art practices. They were interested in ways of thinking that they perceived as challenging the modern Western aspiration for an ordered, rational and predictable world. These included Eastern wisdom traditions and critical writings in philosophy, psychology and the social sciences. For Friedman, encountering artists with diverse intellectual interests and a radical approach to art validated and extended his interest in the history of paradigms and knowledge systems. Friedman has written that when Higgins and Maciunas introduced him to the proposition of contemporary art practice and the idea of the event score it provided him with both 'a reasonable frame within which to conceive and carry out' future projects and a basis for understanding the kinds of activities he had done for most of his life.¹⁰

Aside from reading, the majority of Friedman's youthful activities focused on conceiving, doing and making. As an example, he describes his childhood practice of using sturdy, simple tables – from the school his parents ran on the first floor of the family home – to make towers and multi-level cities in the evenings and at weekends.¹¹

This activity is recorded in the event score *Table Stack* (1956). Tables also feature in various other scores by Friedman, as do other useful objects such as bottles, bowls, glasses and hand tools. In fact, from the later 1960s, Friedman's event scores reveal an increasing interest in design-like activities or they describe actions and situations involving everyday design objects, advancing a sense of design as constituting the world.

Such event scores dissolve the productive divisions between artist and audience, advancing what has been referred to since the late 1970s as a 'do-it-yourself' aesthetic. Yet they also highlight processes of inventing, making, and visualizing, which are intrinsic to design. Two notable works in this respect are *Paper Architecture* (1968) and *Precinct* (1991):

Paper Architecture

A large sheet or several large sheets of paper are hung in a room. The sheets are inscribed with full-scale architectural features, such as doors, windows or stairs, or with objects such as furniture, lamps, books, etc. These drawings may be used to imagine, create or map an environment. The drawings may create or map new features in an existing environment. They may mirror, double or reconstruct existing features in situ or elsewhere. If the drawings are to be permanent, they may be applied directly to a wall.

1968

Precinct

Construct a rough slab, cube or table of natural stone or wood. Invite people to place hand-made models or objects made of wood or clay on the table.

August 25, 1991 Minneapolis, Minnesota

Paper Architecture points to the relationship between conception and visualization in design, addressing the role of drawing in the production of architectural space that Henri Lefebvre highlighted. In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre, having established the political nature of space, argues that the 'reduction of three-

dimensional realities to two', through 'any kind of graphic representation or projection' is part of a distancing process whereby the tangible qualities of actual space are rendered abstract and homogenous, priming space for economic and political exploitation.¹² There is no direct link between Friedman's two event scores and Lefebvre's text, but following on from *Paper Architecture*, *Precinct* appears to re-establish the importance of the tactile in the production and experience of things, echoing Lefebvre's opposition to the emphasis on the visual in Western society and its influence in reducing things to image, thus making them 'passive', with no social existence outside their appearance.¹³

A Life In and Outside Art

Friedman's intellectual life since 1966 has taken a winding path between social and cultural fields, reflecting the idea of disciplinary hybridity modeled in Fluxus art. Taking Higgins's early advice not to attempt to make a living from art, Friedman gained formal qualifications in psychology, social science and education.¹⁴ Although not averse to Higgins's and Maciunas's ideas of social regeneration through culture, Friedman's academic studies reveal a wish to be equipped to make a tangible contribution to society and to better understand its workings.

In 1976, Friedman earned a doctorate in leadership and human behavior for a thesis on the North American art world as a social entity, reflecting vanguard artists' concern for the institutional conditions that have framed art since Romanticism while exploring them from a sociological perspective. Friedman's sociological interest in art expanded into a curiosity about the economic structures and organizational dynamics of post-war art worlds, leading to academic posts in organization, leadership, and strategic design at the Norwegian School of Management in Oslo and the Danish Design School in Copenhagen. Design, of course, had a central part to play in the dissemination of Fluxus productions through the influence of George Maciunas. Owen Smith explains that although individual Fluxus artists supplied the ideas, 'it was Maciunas who designed and produced the array of [Fluxus] objects, publications, and multiples'.¹⁵ Fluxus reliance on text as a medium saw various artists, including Friedman, produce a range of printed material that experimented with vernacular forms of graphic design, though mostly from an anti-design perspective.

Friedman's role as manager of Something Else Press (1971) and director of Fluxus West in California (1966-1975) likewise focused his attention on the mediating function of design.

Given the enduring nature of the idea of artistry as an inner force dedicated to self-expression, the reorientation of Friedman's career toward organization and design may seem curious. Yet there are important intellectual underpinnings for the transition, and from the perspective of the present it appears a prescient shift. Certainly, Fluxus art, with its stress on programmatic experimentalism and a strategic approach to the development and use of art works, had a significant role to play in attacking modernist mythologies of the artist. Today, however, the contiguity of art and design is widely recognized. It is now understood that both works of art and design have inherent socio-symbolic value, in addition to functional uses in the case of design. Both works of art and design works are encoded with meaning at the stages of production and distribution while people decode them at the point of reception and ongoing use, often against the intended purposes of the artists and designers who create them. The text-based form of the event score suggests this process.¹⁶ Friedman directly addresses the contiguous condition of all human-made objects in the event score *Flow System* (1972), which invites 'anyone' to send 'an object or a work of any kind' to an exhibition, where 'everything received is displayed' and anyone attending 'may take away an object or work'.

For Friedman, design, especially in its connection to the corporate and communal sphere, is constitutive of the world. As such, it is an important site for positive, critical intervention. Critical art practices such as the event score reflect a lineage of oppositional art tracing back to the nineteenth century, when radical artists first challenged the attributes of emergent modern societies – capitalism, materialism and rationalism – in the aim of protecting values of independence and individuality. Eve Chiapello argues that for nearly two hundred years artists' aspirations for authenticity and freedom of expression forged an 'intuitive opposition ... between art worlds and business worlds, between profit imperatives and those of artistic creation'.¹⁷ She notes, however, that since the 1980s, areas of business have increasingly looked to art for alternatives to Fordist models of management in the belief that this will enhance the creativity of organizations, and make them better able to offer

products and services that are singular and unique. The business world also has an increasing need for the skills of artists and designers, especially their capacity for creative autonomy, given the rising economic importance of entertainment, fashion and information industries, which constantly update their offerings and require inventive ways to promote them.¹⁸

Everywhere today, the heterogeneity explored in the new art forms developed by twentieth century vanguard artists is becoming a cultural and social norm, often as a result of economic influences. Traditional distinctions between art, craft, and design, for example, are breaking down to be replaced by the nomenclature and discourse of the creative industries.¹⁹ In a more positive sense, the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi argues that 'creativity is a process that can be observed only at the intersection where individuals, domains, and fields intersect'.²⁰ In many government and university circles, interdisciplinarity is seen as having better potential to tackle the contemporary world's increasingly complex problems than knowledge and expertise developed within single fields.²¹ Encountering the intense, mixed art scene of Fluxus in the 1960s gave Friedman an insight into the creative potential of integrating divergent ideas and practices. His activities since the 1970s have not only ranged across varied fields, many have been developed from divergent intellectual perspectives, combining seemingly unrelated ideas and practices like art history and economics or organization theory and military history. Finding the event score afforded Friedman a pliant vehicle to explore the flow of ideas that fills a human mind, unencumbered by the demand to conform to some transcendent purpose or rationale. Although his main involvement is now in design and organization, he continues to value the event score as an alternative way of exploring experiences and situations and for its potential to forge intuitive connections with the mind of the reader.

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¹ Cited in Liz Kotz, 'Post-Cagean Aesthetics and the "Event Score"', *October 95*, Winter 2001, pp. 55-56.

² *Ibid.*, p. 57.

³ Peter Frank, *Ken Friedman: The Fluxus Years*, Helsinki, Oy Wärtsilä Ab Arabia, 1987, pp. 2-5.

⁴ Ken Friedman, 'Looking Back', in *Events*, Peter Frank (ed.) New York, Jaap Rietman, 1985, p. 230.

⁵ Ken Friedman with James Lewes, 'Fluxus: Global Community, Human Dimensions,' in *Visible Language*, vol. 26, no 1/2, 1993, pp. 154-179.

⁶ Ken Friedman, *52 Events*, Edinburgh Show and Tell Editions, 2002, p. 3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p 118.

⁹ Discussion between Ken Friedman and the author, January 2009.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (1974), trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 1991, pp. 285-291.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 286.

¹⁴ Friedman, *52 Events*, p. 115.

¹⁵ Owen F. Smith, 'Fluxus: A Brief History and Other Fictions', in Elizabeth Armstrong and Joan Rothfuss, *In the Spirit of Fluxus*, Minneapolis, Walker Art Centre, 1993, p. 30.

¹⁶ See, for example, Donald Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things*, New York, Doubleday, 1990; Mika Pantzar, 'Consumption as Work, Play, and Art: Representation of the Consumer in Future Scenarios', *Design Issues*, vol 16, no. 3, Autumn 2000, pp. 13-18; Virginia Postrel, *The Substance of Style: how the rise of aesthetic value is remarking commerce, culture, and consciousness*, New York, Harper Collins, 2003; Pieter Desmet and Paul Hekkert, 'Framework of product experience', *International Journal of Design*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2007, pp. 57-66.

¹⁷ Eve Chiapello, 'Evolution and Co-optation: The "Artist Critique" of Management and Capitalism', *Third Text*, vol. 18, issue 6, 2004, p. 585.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 592.

¹⁹ Toby Miller, 'From Creative to Cultural Industries', *Cultural Studies*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2009, p. 94.

²⁰ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, 'Implications of a Systems Perspective for the Study of Creativity,' in Robert J. Sternberg (ed.), *Handbook of Creativity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 314.

²¹ Tom Horlick-Jones and Jonathan Sime, 'Living on the Border: Knowledge, Risk and Transdisciplinarity,' *Futures* 36, 2004, pp. 441-456.