6. George Brecht: *Drip Music (Drip Event)* (1959–62), from *Water Yam* (1963)

Natilee Harren

In 1959, in the wake of nearly a decade of postwar experimentation with new forms of musical notation, the American visual artist George Brecht began to develop a genre of text-based performance instruction he called the "event score." Having turned his creative energies away from abstract expressionist painting and, correspondingly, his intellectual focus away from the work of Jackson Pollock and toward that of John Cage, Brecht joined Cage's experimental composition course at the New School for Social Research in the summers of 1958 and 1959 (fig. 6.1). His notebooks from the time, selections of which are included in the Archive section of this chapter, provide an illuminating chronicle of this period.

In the first pages of Brecht's notebook from the summer 1958 class, he records Cage's description of "events in sound-space," which proposed that the practice of experimental composition entailed an expanded notion of music including all manner of multisensorial phenomena.[1] With this definition in place, Cage's class became an important crucible for emerging intermedia practices. There, new musical thinking was further developed by a younger generation of composers, poets, and visual artists including Brecht, Allan Kaprow, Jackson Mac Low, Al Hansen, Dick Higgins, Toshi Ichiyanagi, Richard Maxfield, and Yoko Ono. Honed under Cage's influence, Brecht's event score became a major genre within Fluxus, the international artist collective founded in 1962 by George Maciunas. Brecht's scores were frequently performed at Fluxus concerts, and hundreds of Fluxus scores were written following his model.

Fig. 6.1 Students in John Cage's experimental composition class, New School for Social Research, New York, NY, summer 1958. From Al Hansen, *A Primer of Happenings & Time-Space Art* (New York: Something Else Press, 1965), 101.

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While Brecht's event scores were particularly influential and broadly circulated, they were not singular; La Monte Young and Ono also composed text scores beginning in the early 1960s.[2] Due to the event score's incredible flexibility and potential for transmission across disciplines and practices, the format has remained a useful tool for myriad conceptual, performative, and process-oriented practices from the 1960s to the present.

Among the dozens of event scores Brecht composed between 1959 and 1963, his *Drip Music (Drip Event)* (1959–62) remains among the best known and is therefore highlighted in this chapter as paradigmatic of the genre (fig. 6.2). *Drip Music* was performed regularly during the first Fluxus concert tour in Europe in 1962 and 1963 and became known mainly through the interpretations of others, since Brecht did not travel to participate in any of those concerts. Beginning with realizations of the piece by Dick Higgins in Copenhagen (fig. 6.3) and George Maciunas in Düsseldorf (fig. 6.4), a performance convention developed wherein a single performer climbs a ladder and pours water from a pitcher into a vessel (the sound sometimes amplified by a contact microphone) placed on the floor below. This version of the piece continues to be performed today, as this chapter's Playback section shows.

Yet there have been many other versions too, including several offered by Brecht, which suggests that the artist wanted to keep the work perpetually open for rethinking. At Rutgers University in spring 1963, Brecht himself stood at floor level and performed his drip in a modest, undramatic way (fig. 6.5), and in the 1970s he created a dripping faucet sculpture for the garden of the German collector and multiples publisher Wolfgang Feelisch. In contrast with Cage, who preferred his scores to be performed by approved collaborators such as David Tudor and who notoriously clashed with uncooperative performers, Brecht said of his scores, "It's implicit in the scores that any realisation is feasible . . . . Any and every. I

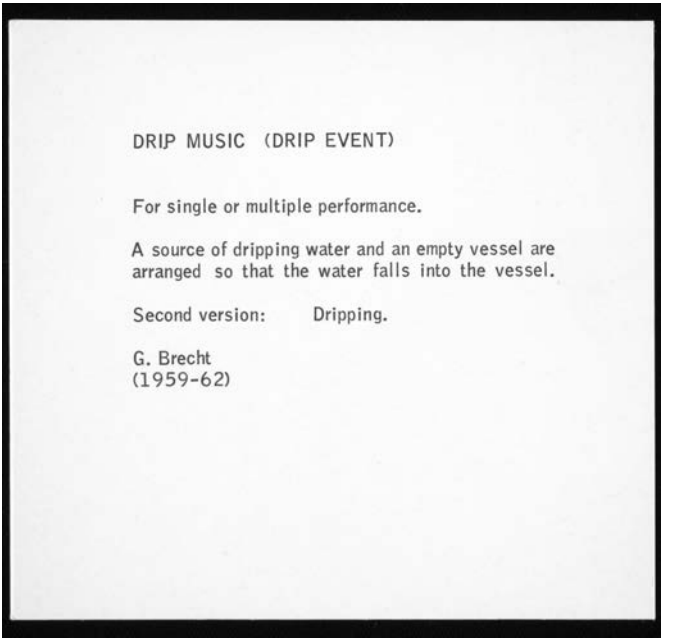

Fig. 6.2 George Brecht (American, 1926–2008). *Drip Music (Drip Event)*, 1959–62, offset print. Getty Research Institute, Jean Brown Papers, 890164, box 127 (contained within the compendium *Water Yam*). © 2022 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.
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Fig. 6.3 Dick Higgins performing George Brecht's *Drip Music (Drip Event)* at Fluxus–Musik og Anti Musik det Instrumentale Teater, Nikolai Kirke, Copenhagen, 25 November 1962, gelatin silver print. Getty Research Institute, The Kitchen Videos and Records, item K2001845. Photographed by Poul Hansen for Dagbladat AKTUELT newspaper. The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Gift, 2008. © 2023 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Germany. Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY.

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Fig. 6.4 George Maciunas performing George Brecht's *Drip Music (Drip Event)* at Festum Fluxorum, Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, Düsseldorf, 2 February 1963. Photograph by Manfred Leve.

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wouldn't refuse any realisations."[3] Brecht's own interpretations of *Drip Music* are not to be taken as master examples to copy, and they do not exhaust the score's possibilities for interpretation. Rather, the primary text that is *Drip Music* instigates the endless deferral of the work's meaning, in an aesthetic gesture that anticipates postmodern critiques of the author and of the metaphysics of presence articulated by cultural theorists including Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, and Umberto Eco. Individual performances of an event score participate in an ongoing revelation of the score's proposed form—actions and objects joined in a certain spatiotemporal arrangement—that remains always partially latent or potential.

As seen in *Drip Music*, Brecht's event scores are typically brief texts written in generic, open-ended language that facilitates vast possibilities for performance and experience through its precise *im*precision and careful attention to material relations and processes. The Brechtian event score describes a flexible structure that can accommodate an extraordinary range of content while maintaining the sparest continuity of identity. It forms the basis of a work that is, as Brecht described, "left as open as it could be and still have some shape."[4] Individual performances of an event score may look or sound very different from one to the next, yet one can observe a morphological continuity of activity across realizations, pointing to Fluxus's radical rethinking of aesthetic form in terms of a mobile structure that exceeds the apparently visual and exists at the level of performed relations and processes.

Remarkably, the language of Brecht's event scores can suggest a performative response that is quite internal or passive and at times merely observational. Maciunas called the scores "temporal readymades," with the understanding that they often simply reframe preexisting phenomena as worthy of aesthetic appreciation.[5] Accordingly, the art historian Julia Robinson has argued that Brecht's scores

Fig. 6.5 George Brecht performing *Three Aqueous Events / Drip Music (Drip Event)* at *Happenings, Events, and Advanced Musics*, at Douglass College, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, 6 April 1963. Photograph by Peter Moore; © Northwestern University.

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provide an indexical "interpretive matrix" that mediates our relationship to quotidian phenomena, whether performed or found, thus radically transforming our experience of the everyday.[6] For example, *Drip Music* inverts ordinary associations in that, as Brecht noted, "the score calls attention to the fact that water dripping can be very beautiful—many people find a dripping faucet very annoying, they get very nervous. It's nice to hear it in an appreciative way."[7] Recurring references across his scores to common objects (such as suitcases, tables, and combs) and activities (such as moving objects from one place to another and turning things on and off, all of which you can explore in the full edition of *Water Yam* included in this chapter) amplify the possibility for artistic events to be discovered coincidentally in one's immediate surroundings.

Of note, Brecht was professionally trained as a research chemist and developed several patents for women's tampons while working in the personal-products division of Johnson & Johnson. Deeply interested in quantum mechanics, he carried into his creative practice the viewpoint from physics that our environment is always in a state of flux. It should come as no surprise, then, that Brecht's event scores are invested in the extraordinary effects of close attention paid to ordinary objects and actions. As his self-referential composition *Event Score* (1965) (fig. 6.6) suggests, such acts of careful observation can even extend into the realm of dreams or the unconscious.

Historically, Brecht's *Drip Music* marks a hinge moment within the longer twentieth-century narrative presented in *The Scores Project*. *Drip Music* is emblematic of the 1960s aesthetic paradigm shift from modernism to postmodernism in its recoding of the strategies of Marcel Duchamp, Jackson Pollock, and John Cage—three major sources for Brecht and his peers as they began to develop new, experimental practices. Following Duchamp, the event score expands the notion of the readymade to include

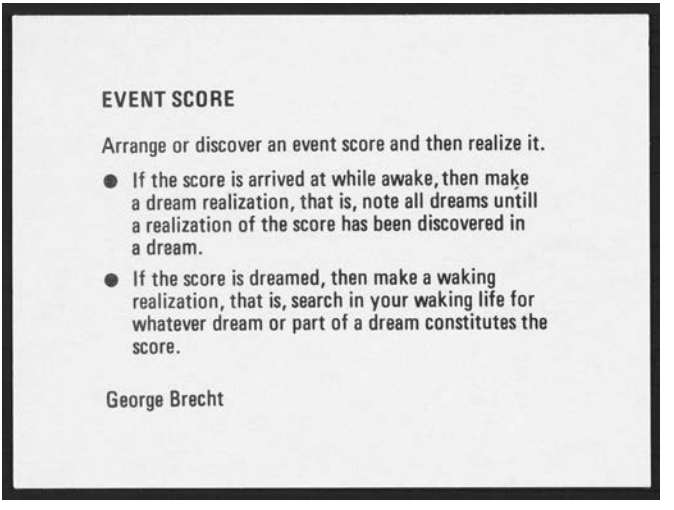

Fig. 6.6 George Brecht (American, 1926–2008). *Event Score*, August 1965, offset print. Getty Research Institute, Jean Brown Papers, 890164, box 3, folder 34. © 2022 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

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multisensorial events that unfold through space and time. From Pollock, the relationship between the painter and his drip is recast from an indexical, autographic signature into an infinitely renewable procedure that can be materialized in any context, by anyone, and which enables form to emerge via automatic processes. (In 1962, Brecht claimed Pollock's drip paintings of 1947–51 as performances of *Drip Music*'s radically simplified "Second version: Dripping," a move that foreshadowed other retroactively designated or readymade Fluxus performances, such as Alison Knowles's *Identical Lunch* [late 1960s–early '70s], a habitual meal reframed as a performance piece that is featured in chapter 9.) In the work of Cage, Brecht found new strategies for deploying chance procedures, which he elaborated in the crucial essay "Chance-Imagery," written in 1957 and published in 1966.[8] In fact, Brecht's gesture of sending an early draft of the essay to Cage facilitated his first meeting with Cage and Tudor in 1956; they stopped by Brecht's home in New Jersey while on a mushroom-hunting trip. Relevant here, Cage had already proposed water as an ideal indeterminate material in his compositions *Water Music* (1952) and *Water Walk* (1959), the former of which was performed by Tudor in Darmstadt in the late 1950s and then again alongside some of Brecht's early scores at Mary Bauermeister's atelier in Cologne in 1960.

In addition to Cagean indeterminacy, Brecht's notebooks of the period reflect his thinking through Earle Brown's plays with notational ambiguity in graphic scores such as *December 1952* (1952). Arguably, Brecht's event scores combined both ideas: they produced an *indeterminate* outcome arising from the *ambiguous*, open-ended qualities of written text. Brecht's quotidian, democratic notational language thus avoided the various technical limitations introduced by both Cage's and Brown's intimidatingly complicated musical graphics. As Brecht argued in 1959:

> The "virtu" of virtuosity must now mean behavior out of one's life-experience; it cannot be delimited toward physical [or readerly] skill. The listener responding to this sound out of his own experience, adds a new element to the system: composer/notation/performer/sound/listener, and, for himself, defines the sound as music. For the virtuoso listener all sound may be music.[9]

In terms of distribution, Brecht's event scores were in many ways a rather private, intimate format. Initially quite diverse in their graphic and material presentation, the artist hand-wrote or typed his scores on pieces of paper and mailed them to other artists, imagining individual works as "little enlightenments I wanted to communicate to my friends who would know what to do with them."[10] As the Archive section of this chapter shows, Brecht's scores circulated within music, poetry, and experimental performance circles well before their association with Fluxus. Moreover, ephemera included here show that Brecht wanted his works published in literary magazines and newspapers such as *Kulchur* and *The Village Voice* at the same time that they appeared on the concert programs of alternative venues like the Living Theatre. At the request of Cage, who had witnessed the development of the Brechtian event score (including a 1959 performance of Brecht's *Time-Table Music* (1959) at Grand Central Station), Brecht sent some of his compositions to Tudor, after which they quickly found an international audience in the avant-garde music world. Tudor performed Brecht's *Candle-Piece for Radios* (1959) and *Card-Piece for Voice* (1959) at Bauermeister's atelier in 1960 (fig. 6.7). The following year, Tudor presented the composer's *Incidental Music* (1961) at the Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik in Darmstadt and at the Sogetsu Art Center in Tokyo. Brecht's correspondence with Tudor, the composer Toshi Ichiyanagi, poet M. C. Richards, theater and dance critic Jill Johnston, and Maciunas—examples of

which are included in this chapter—reveals the scores' rich, multidisciplinary reception.

From 1962, Brecht's compositions appeared regularly on Fluxus programs and in publications spearheaded by Maciunas, who undertook the design and production of an anthology of Brecht's scores among the other anthologies of Fluxus works he was diligently preparing. The result of Maciunas and Brecht's collaboration was *Water Yam*, a small container in wood or cardboard (depending on the edition or individual copy) that encloses some seventy to one hundred (again, depending on the example) of Brecht's scores, printed on loose cards of varying sizes (fig. 6.8). The publication's portable, unbound design—which you can browse or filter by keyword in an interactive digital edition included in this chapter—accelerates the already active engagement of readers as they order, rearrange, and identify correlations between the scores, perhaps even further distributing the cards as individual works. What's more, the container's materiality, dimensions, and label, as well as its specific contents, varied across individual copies of *Water Yam* as editions were sporadically compiled in batches over the years. The collaborative process whereby Brecht's event scores are interpreted and performed beyond the artist's oversight thus threaded through the process of the production and distribution of the scores themselves, not only as part of the Fluxus publishing program directed by Maciunas but also beyond.

As a notational format positioned between music, poetry, performance, and visual art, the event score proved to be profoundly generative for artists seeking new modes of working beyond established disciplinary or medium specializations from the 1960s onward. Many pathways can be traced through the aftermath of Brecht's event scores and related forms of neo-avant-garde notation: postminimalism's concern with process; conceptual art's engagements with language and the framing of experience;

Fig. 6.7 Manfred Leve, Benjamin Patterson, Hans G. Helms, Ursula Kagel, Khris Helms, David Tudor, and others performing George Brecht's *Card-Piece for Voice* (1959) as part of the "Contre-Festival," organized during the IGNM-Weltmusikfestes, Atelier Mary Bauermeister, Cologne, Germany, 15 June 1960. Getty Research Institute, David Tudor Papers, 980039, box 159. Courtesy of the Manfred Leve Estate.

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Fig. 6.8 George Brecht (American, 1926–2008). *Water Yam*, 1963, wooden box with label containing ninety-one scores printed on various sizes and colors of card stock. Getty Research Institute, Jean Brown Papers, 890164, box 127. © 2022 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

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works made all or in part by delegated production; participatory practices that rely on basic instructions that yield varying results; and the do-it-yourself ethic pervasive within the larger postwar counterculture. The diversity of the event score's legacy should come as no surprise if we take seriously the words of Cornelius Cardew, a friend to Brecht during his time in London in the late 1960s, who once wrote that *Water Yam* is best understood as "a course of study, and following on that, a teaching instrument."[11] Arguably, it still contains many lessons for us today.

Notes

1. George Brecht, notebook of late June 1958, reprinted as *George Brecht—Notebooks*, vol. 1, *June–September 1958*, ed. Dieter Daniels and Hermann Braun (Cologne: Walther König, 1991), 4.
2. Liz Kotz, "Post-Cagean Aesthetics and the Event Score," in *Words to Be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 59–98.
3. Michael Nyman, "An Interview with George Brecht" (1976), in Henry Martin, *An Introduction to George Brecht's Book of the Tumbler on Fire* (Milan: Multhipla Edizioni, 1978), 108. On a notable controversy regarding the performance of Cage's work, see Benjamin Piekut, "When Orchestras Attack! John Cage Meets the New York Philharmonic," in *Experimentalism Otherwise: The New York Avant-Garde and Its Limits* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 20–64.
4. Nyman, "Interview with George Brecht," 110.
5. George Brecht, quoting George Maciunas in a letter to Brecht, early 1963, George Maciunas Correspondence, Hanns Sohm Archive, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, Stuttgart, Germany.
6. Julia Robinson, "From Abstraction to Model: In the Event of George Brecht & the Conceptual Turn in the Art of the 1960s" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2008), 111–13. See also Julia Robinson, "From Abstraction to Model: George Brecht's Events and the Conceptual Turn in Art of the 1960s," *October* 127 (Winter 2009): 77–108; and Julia Robinson, *George Brecht: Events; A Heterospective* (Cologne: Walther König, 2005).
7. Nyman, "Interview with George Brecht," 110.
8. George Brecht, "Chance-Imagery," A Great Bear Pamphlet (New York: Something Else Press, 1966), republished in 2004 on UbuWeb, https://www.ubu.com/historical/gb/brecht_chance.pdf.

9. George Brecht, *George Brecht—Notebooks*, vol. 3, *April–August 1959*, ed. Dieter Daniels and Hermann Braun (Cologne: Walther König, 1991), 123.
10. George Brecht, "The Origin of 'Events'" (August 1970), in *Happening & Fluxus*, ed. Harald Szeemann and Hanns Sohm (Cologne: Kölnischer Kunstverein, 1970), n.p.
11. Cornelius Cardew, concert program notes for *Events by George Brecht: Selections from "Water YAM,"* Royal Court Theatre, London, 22 November 1970.