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The Function of Dysfunction

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The Function of Dysfunction

By Dore Bowen

Can artists refigure the world by altering the way users engage with equipment? Clearly, the functional objects we users engage with on a daily basis have social values imbedded within their design. Cutlery, for instance, presumes a certain distance and civility between a diner and her meal; handkerchiefs rest on the assumption that bodily fluids are unsightly and are best disposed of in a decorative fashion; picnic benches encourage a communal sort of outdoor gathering and privilege the family-unit. Toothpicks, coin-pouches, bucket seats, light switches, mailboxes, all have a social function. . . and the list goes on. It stands to reason that if an artist alters equipment, this also shifts the way users relate with the object, and thus the shared social values that inform its design. What would a picnic bench that affords a certain amount of control on the part of each individual-allowing each participant to isolate and convene as desired-do to the nuclear family and its dynamics, or to family law? Unfortunately, this proposition is more complicated than it seems. For to design such equipment already presumes the social values that inform conception, design, and production to be otherwise. In other words, unless the notion of the family unit as a self-organizing entity already exists, and unless social convention-and by extension the economic and political structures within which the bourgeois family is an essential element-shifts, the picnic table I described would not be designed, produced, sold, or used.

Certain works produced by Fluxus artists working in the 1960s and 1970s get around this design paradox by uncoupling and reorganizing equipmental structures. This uncoupling produces a "missing link" which, in turn, makes the equipment open-ended or, in certain cases, dysfunctional. The user must therefore imagine the larger system, which the object is a part of in order to complete the work. Employing twentieth-century philosopher Martin Heidegger's theory of equipment in *Being and Time*, I find that in visualizing the missing link the viewer must also consider the practice of equipment, its functional assignment, the encounters it makes possible, and the social activities it participates in.

What is equipment? Equipment consists of two major components, one of which has two faces. The form of an object and its material constitute one component, while the function to which the object is put is the second and follows closely upon the first; together these components add up to what we

generally call "equipment." This relationship can be expressed in a simple equation: Form/Matter + Function = Equipment. For instance, to use Heidegger's favorite example, a hammer is made of materials (usually wood and lead) and has a form (an arm-like shape weighted at one end) that lends itself to a hammering-action. These elements are not dissociable. To change either of these will change the function, shape, or material of the hammer. To use another material (such as foam rubber), or to alter the form (to the shape of a doorknob, or instance), will most likely end unsuccessfully and will certainly change the function of the hammer as it is conventionally conceived. The opposite is true as well. To alter the function of the hammer-to use it clean the windows, for instance-will suggest alternate configurations of form and matter. A good example is George Maciunas Flux Ping-Pong (1976), which alters the function of ping-pong paddles by attaching objects to the flat surface of the paddle. One paddle, for instance, has a can attached to its surface while another boasts foam baubles; other paddles are less visibly altered, such as one that is weighted with lead. The table is itself split at the center with one side bent in a V-shape. Less about strategy and strength, and more about wit and invention, Flux Ping-Pong brings about a new relationship to the paddles and table and thus shifts the game into the register of a carnival event. Another example, Yoko Ono's Chess Set (All White Chess Set) (1966), is, as the title suggests, an all-white chess set that removes the color-coding defining oppositional teams. Since each player's pieces are identical the chess pieces and positions must be memorized; in the resulting game confusion over "us" and "them" is guaranteed. A 1997 version of the work was titled Play It By Trust, implying that this game of war might, through innovative equipmental alteration, become a process of cooperation and collaboration.

Such works, notes Maciunas, fulfill an assignment and this approach he calls "functionalism."^[1] Since many Fluxus works are functional, and yet exist at one-remove from a purely equipmental context by remaining within the interpretative framework of art, they have the ability to comment upon the biases that inform function. However, as Flux Ping-Pong demonstrates, functionalist works do not merely replicate, but inventively alter, conventional tools. The Fluxus event score, Maciunas notes, is an exemplary form of functionalist art, since it "consists in creating a concept or a method by which form can be created independently of [the artist]."^[2] Given this definition, the event score can be understood as a kind of meta-equipment; the work acts as equipment to think equipment. Yet, despite this metaphysical bias, the event score does indeed operate as equipment: it has a function, it suggests an activity, and the reader engages with it in order to realize its assignment. What characteristics distinguish a Fluxus event score from other sorts of instruction-based work? As opposed to similar forms of instruction art-such as the wall drawings by Sol LeWitt-it is rarely evident what precisely the event score is intended to realize. Usually just a few lines of text, the event score requires an interpretation. Liz Kotz describes the internal aspect of these works when she writes:

What are these texts? They can be read (have been read) under a number of rubrics: music event 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" event 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 [George] Brecht and [Yoko] Ono, this work frequently shifts away from realizable directions toward an activity that takes place mostly internally, in the act of reading or observing.^[3]

An event score, like a musical score, instructs the reader who interprets it either through performance, object production, or, as Kotz suggests, through the act of reading and observation itself: any of these resulting forms might constitute the "event." In addition, Maciunas's description suggests that the event score is a self-generative machine in which the artist and reader are merely collaborators while "nature" creates the work, a conception, which seems to depart only slightly from Walter Benjamin's notion of the "author as producer."^[4] The event score is "a kind of framework," writes Maciunas, "an 'automatic machine' within which or by which, nature (either in the form of an

independent performer or indeterminate-chance compositional methods) can complete the art-form, effectively and independently of the artist-composer."^[5] Given this description, the event score cannot be conceived of as an expression of the artist, nor is it linked to any particular site, form, or performance of it. It is the machine rather than the object produced.

What is the event score's form and matter? It is a text, usually typed-though at times hand-written and in one case calligraphically scripted-on a simple white card. And its function? As mentioned above, the function of the event score is to interrogate the notion of function. In one variety a function is suggested while the actual form/matter component is left open to interpretation, thus suggesting that multiple form/matter combinations are available to fulfill a specified function (and hence that one form does not necessarily follow function). For instance, in George Brecht's 1959 event score *Drip Music* (Second Version) only an activity is suggested.

Drip Music

Dripping.^[6]

Typically, Brecht's event scores operate in this manner, dispatching instructions regarding an activity. *Drip Music*, for instance, gives a verb in order to indicate a function. If the event score is a type of equipment (and not merely a reference to equipment) what is produced here? Since the equipment by which the reader might "drip" is unspecified in the score, what is produced is a shift in the reader's understanding of equipment. The event score, notes Kotz, involves "reading as an 'activity of production'" and "a potential acting on materials"; this event score also demands that the reader interpret the meaning of this activity as music. ^[7]

In other instances, such as in Brecht's 1962 *Saxophone Solo*, this strategy is reversed and an instrument is named but not its function. The event score simply reads, "trumpet." There is no verb and thus what the reader does or imagines doing with this trumpet or saxophone will determine the nature of the solo. Here, the indeterminacy of the Fluxus event score-the confusion between the score's title and content, and well as the two instruments-clearly begs the question of interpretation. A third event score structure gives form, matter, and function, yet the expected relationship between these elements is scrambled. For instance, a 1963 event score by Ken Friedman reads:

Fruit Sonata

Play Baseball with a fruit.^[8]

The text cites a number of objects-"baseball," "fruit," and "sonata"-that the reader is encouraged to imagine as part of a meaningful whole. This event score, unlike the two by Brecht cited above, gives both the form/matter (fruit shape and substance) and function (to play baseball), but the sort of game to which this score refers remains wittily elusive. In what context would one play fruit with baseball? Why?

As Friedman notes of the event score, it offers "a useful framework for many divergent ways of making art."^[9] However certain commonalities bind these divergent practices. For instance, event scores borrow from music the idea of notation, the emphasis on duration, as well as the performance style (both the "solo," "ensemble," and "audience") of the classic concert hall. Furthermore, the event score bridges these musical elements with the spatial concerns of visual art. By crossing these disciplinary barriers, the event score is able to merge codes of perception that are separated and supported by art world convention (for example, the notion that visual art is hung on a gallery wall, music take place in a concert hall, etc.) in order to more directly address the nature perception while

also interrogating the suppositions that support such convention. Brecht coined the term "chance-imagery," in a 1966 text of the same name, in order to link visual perception and the musical score by extending the principle of chance, popularized by the composer John Cage, to visual art. In this essay Brecht defines chance in two ways. First, chance includes the "relative" yet "unknown causes" that the artist structures into the work of art through certain mechanical procedures, such as the throw of the die. Yet, Brecht also defines chance as that which resides in the "deeper-than-conscious levels of the mind."^[10] These two definitions bring the Surrealist-inspired notion of the unconscious mind together with the Duchampian and Cagean interest in quasi-scientific procedures. If Brecht's definitions are thought together, chance procedures seem to lie at the intersection of unconscious, conscious, and natural processes: the artist can transcend conscious intent but not unconscious impulses and natural phenomena. The artist wrestles with this contradiction by reframing the visual field through chance procedures in order allow random elements to enter the frame of perception.

Thus, for Brecht, chance-imagery is a conceptual method not merely for producing visual art via random means, but also for perceiving random events as visual art. "The most moving collage I ever experienced," he writes, "was the 4 x 24 foot side of a truck carrying boilers, a piece of canvas patched irregularly with other pieces of canvas of various shades of gray." If the reader follows the theory of chance-imagery to its ultimate conclusion, "the receptacle of forms available to the artist thus becomes open-ended, and eventually embraces all of nature, for the recognition of significant form becomes limited only by the observer's self." In this way, Brecht draws a spectrum from "art" to "chance-imagery." He writes, "[t]his leaves art to mean something constructed, from a starting point of preconceived notions, with the corollary that as art approaches change-imagery, the artist enters a oneness with all nature."^[11]

Is chance-imagery an expansive mode of perception or simply aesthetic (disinterested) perception as art? It is, I contend, both. Although Brecht perceives the truck as an aesthetic object by relating it to collage, he also permits a perceptual passage within this aesthetic frame by allowing for the beauty of natural, unscripted phenomena. In fact, it may be argued that it is this glimpse of the random schema that Brecht finds "moving" and not the moving truck itself. Interestingly, Friedman also introduces the figure of the moving truck in order to visualize the everyday processes that are eclipsed by notions of artistic intent. In "Working from Scores," Friedman tells a story of a work by Carl Andre consisting of eleven industrial bricks. Andre approves one set of bricks while the other set lies in his assistant's warehouse. The two sets of bricks are sitting in adjacent warehouses, seemingly identical except that Andre approved one stack and not the other. Friedman writes: "One warehouse is filled with Andre's art. The other warehouse is filled with the assistant's tools." What distinguishes "Andre's art" from "the assistant's tools"? Later, Friedman imagines that "a collector buys the Andre. The movers, not knowing the difference between experimental art and anything else they might be hired to transport, walk into the wrong warehouse."^[12]

Whereas for Brecht it is the moving truck that is significant, for Friedman the movers are critical in that they reveal the manual labor reified in the artwork while also highlighting the notion of authorship that certifies "the Andre," albeit in contrast. Elsewhere in this essay Friedman notes that authorship is retained in the work, yet his sardonic commentary refuses to place "the Andre" into a preordained category as either labor (a stack of bricks) or art (a signature work). The figure of the mover is introduced to signal that this epistemological question is not answered by the eye of the beholder but by the eye of the user. In other words, Friedman suggests that the significance of the bricks depends upon whom and what the movers believe this stack of bricks (or art) is for. Thus, in contrast to Brecht, Friedman does not posit intention against randomness in order to get at a larger spiritual/random totality. As in his Fruit Sonata-where the sonata form is re-purposed by placing it within the context of a game, and this game complicated by using fruit rather than a baseball- Friedman is concerned with changing the way the reader/user considers equipment by challenging and exposing the rules of the game.

As this comparison illustrates, both artists mobilize the figure of the movers/moving truck for distinct

ends. For Brecht, the truck is perceived as art (and thus outside of its designated function) through a method that acknowledges the randomness of all phenomena that ultimately lie beyond the viewer's intent. Friedman, on the other hand, introduces the movers with a Marxist interest in revealing that "the Andre" is perceived as art only when labor is erased from the art commodity equation. Yet both of these Fluxus artists suggest that function cannot be understood as other than a perceptual problem, since function is not in "the Andre" nor is it in the moving truck. This interrogation of perception's relationship to function is extended from narrative to poetry by the structurally open-ended event score. For example, Brecht's Word Event (1961)-a card that reads simply "Exit"- has been interpreted as an instruction for an exit sign or, in another instance, for the performer to simply leave the stage.[13] While Word Event initiates an unfolding event with manifold, futural acts, it can also be thought of as a "ready-made" perceptual frame that directs the reader's attention to all exits as they occur. As Maciunas notes in a letter written to Tomas Schmit in 1964, this score "does not require any of us to perform it since it happens daily without any 'special' performance of it." [14] This is comparable to photography (both digital and analog, in different ways), which also reveals those details of the phenomenal world unavailable to the human eye. The crucial difference is that, through reductiveness and openendedness, the event score forces the reader to imagine the totality to which the detail belongs, be it instrumental, institutional, or spiritual. Even those event scores that do not directly refer to visual objects or perception encourage the reader to imagine the whole to which the strange and unlikely part belongs. At other times a part and whole are suggested together and the reader must imaginatively couple these together. Fruit belongs to what kind of baseball? In what context would one play fruit with baseball and how does this constitute a sonata? Whimsy is hereby invoked in order to refocus the viewer's perception of equipment, and the notion of perception itself, within a broader context or game.[15]

Notes

[1] George Maciunas, "Transcript of the Videotaped Interview with George Maciunas by Larry Miller, March 24, 1978," Fluxus Etc Addenda I, ed. Jon Hendricks, (Detroit: Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection, 1983), 23.

[2] George Maciunas, "Neo-Dada in Music, Theater, Poetry, Art," In the Spirit of Fluxus, ed. Janet Jenkins (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1992), 157.

[3] Liz Kotz, "Post-Cagean Aesthetics and the 'Event' Score," October 95 (Winter 2001): 54.

[4] See Walter Benjamin "The Author as Producer," in Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken, 1978). Benjamin's description sheds light on the Fluxus event score as a self-generating activity: "What matters . . . is the exemplary character of production, which is able first to induce other producers to produce, and second to put an improved apparatus at their disposal. And this apparatus is better the more consumers it is able to turn into producers-that is, readers or spectators into collaborators." Ibid., 233.

[5] Maciunas, "Neo-Dada in Music, Theater, Poetry, Art," 157.

[6] Ken Friedman, Owen Smith, and Lauren Sawchyn, eds., The Fluxus Performance Workbook (Performance Research Publication, 2002), 16. Available at: http://www.performance-research.net/documents/fluxus_workbook_print.pdf (November 2006).

[7] Kotz, 59. [Emphasis my own.]

[8] Friedman, et al, eds., The Fluxus Performance Workbook, 18.

[9] Ken Friedman, "The Belgrade Text," *Kopernik u Beogradu: Copernicus in Belgrade* (Belgrade: Student Cultural Center Gallery at University of Belgrade, 1990). Available at: www.thecentreofattention.org/exhibitions/workingscores.doc (April 2007).

[10] George Brecht, *Chance-Imagery* (New York: Great Bear Pamphlet, Something Else Press, 1966), 3.

[11] *Ibid.*, 7-14.

[12] Friedman, "The Belgrade Text."

[13] Hannah Higgins, *Fluxus Experience*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 93.

[14] George Maciunas, quoted in Hendricks ed., *Fluxus Codex*, 193. Brecht's Word Event had many forms. The work initially appeared in Brecht's *Water Yam* (1963) (a collection of instructions printed on separate cards) as "Word Event." The instruction reads simply "Exit" and is dated "Spring, 1961." Brecht also made an "exit sign" and a banner to be mounted on a blank wall or doorway. The sign was shown in 1970 at the "Fluxfest Presentation of John Lennon and Yoko Ono" in New York City. *Ibid.*, 193-94.

[15] For more on the relationship between imagination and perception see: Dore Bowen, "This Bridge Called Imagination: On Reading the Arab Image Foundation and its Collection," *CameraWork: A Journal of Photographic Arts* Vol. 34 No. 1 (Spring/Summer): 19-28.

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