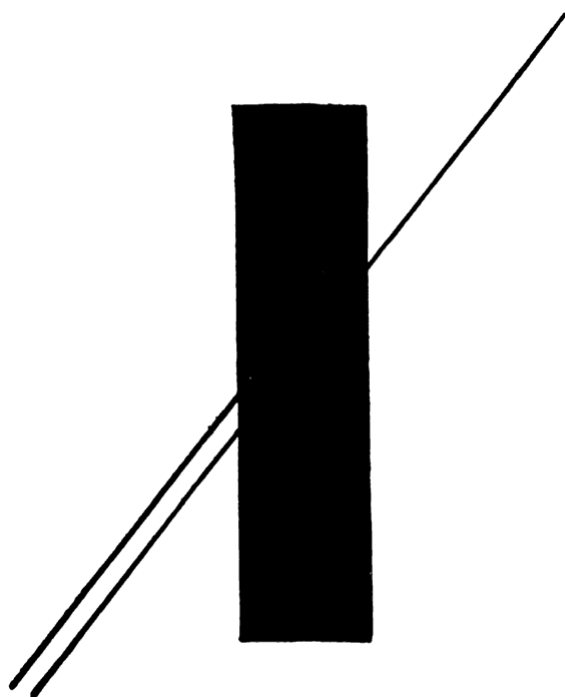


AESTHETICS OF CHANCE



Aesthetics of chance

A STUDY OF CHANCE OPERATIONS IN ART SINCE DADA WITH AND
EMPHASIS ON DUCHAMP, CAGE, BRECHT, SPOERRI and MORRIS

Jonas Ib F. H. Jensen

www.pissinginthewind.no

2011

Aesthetics of chance

A STUDY OF CHANCE OPERATIONS IN ART SINCE DADA WITH AND
EMPHASIS ON DUCHAMP, CAGE, BRECHT, SPOERRI and MORRIS

Chance has been all over the place and it has been there for quite some time. Some 500 years ago, Leonardo Da Vinci writes in his *Treatise on Painting* about "these confused things" that makes "the genius become aware of new inventions".

What he is describing in the text is his discovery of accidental marks and patterns, such as wall stains, clouds, glowing coals, dust, that can be used as arbitrary starting points for art making.

He describes these elements as "things in constant flux and unbound", things from which other images can emerge once "all conscious mental guidance" is eliminated.

These are the very ideas that Dada artist Max Ernst picked up on in the 1920s when he started working on his "frottage" technique. A technique that was based on finding random natural structures that could be assembled into imagery.

Ernst also developed the "decalcomania of chance", wherein, for example, ink was spread between two sheets of paper, which were subsequently pulled apart. The findings and discoveries that Ernst used in these works was encountered by accident and the work was arbitrary motivated.

They were experiments where Ernst the artist maintained a passive role in the creative process, and saw himself merely as an spectator or assistant, watching the development of the work.

Another Dada artist creating compositions using chance was Jean (Hans) Arp. Arp was tearing pieces of paper in different colors into squares, the squares were shuffled and subsequently dropped onto a surface and glued down just as they fell. They became the series of collage work titled *Squares arranged according to the laws of chance*.

"Chance opened up perceptions to me, immediate spiritual insights. Intuition led me to revere the law of chance as the highest and deepest of laws, the law that rises from the fundament. An insignificant word might become a deadly thunderbolt. One little sound might destroy the earth. One little sound might create a new universe."

Jean (Hans) Arp

A similar chance procedure was implemented by fellow dada artist Triztan Tzara who composed poems by drawing words from a hat:

**To make a Dadaist poem/ Take a newspaper/ Take a pair of scissors/
Choose an article as long as you are planning to make your poem/
Cut out the article/ Then cut out each of the words that make up
this article and put them in a bag/ Shake it gently/ Then take out the
scraps one after the other in the order in which they left the bag/
Copy conscientiously/ The poem will be like you/ And here you are
a writer, infinitely original and endowed with a sensibility that is
charming though beyond the understanding of the vulgar.**

In fact it was the same Tzara that allegedly named the dada movement by thrusting a penknife into the pages of a dictionary to choose the name at random. The Dadaists emphasized the unpredictable in artistic creation, and this act in itself displays the significance of chance in Dada art and attitude.

In-fact chance has always been related to an rebellious attitude against conventions and standards. It was an important tool for the Dadaist as means of a break with the rationality of the time and they applied chance as a way to embrace the irrational.

Dada artists experimented with the random, arbitrary and accidental as a way to circumvent the artist's conscious control. They used spontaneous and seemingly irrational methods to achieve unexpected twists in the artistic process. Twists that they could not have foreseen or made completely themselves, but that still carries meaning and purpose on their own.

Creation was not in the control of the artist alone but instead gradually given over to an arbitrary process.

This way of investigating the aleatory and the coincidental with significance seems to be an attempt to disclose something extraordinary, something that is not given lightly or by ordinary means, it gives the notion of an unknown source, and chance as a way to get to it.

It is very much the same aims of the surrealists with they're auto-matism and "objective chance".

"Objective chance" is described by André Breton as having the "ability (disponibilité) to place oneself in a state of grace with chance".

The surrealists added great value to chance as a means of getting to the boarders of the conscious mind. The belief that there are experiences of great significance happening automatically and outside of conscious control is central to the surrealists and to objective chance.

As a way of getting there, to these margins of the conscious mind, the surrealists used several chance procedures such as automatic assemblage, collage, writing and drawing.

The importance of chance in automatism was as a liberating force to avoid conscious self-censorship in creation. The artists hand in automatic writing and drawing was considered no more than a neutral recording device.

A method that was developed by André Breton to invoke chance was the *exquisite corpse*. The method, which is formed as a game play with a set of rules, is a collaborative task. Each participant adds something to a hidden composition of text or image to create a random and unpredictable composition. The surrealists were using the creative potential of game play and rules to generate these unforeseen results and the endless numbers of combinations it could generate.

The idea of using psychoanalytically procedures, to activate the projection of the subjects unconscious desires onto a material field, encouraged experiences that occurred outside of the usual limits of causality and conscious motivation. Experiences that embraced the idea of chance occurrences and that resulted in images characterized by a lack of conscious design.

The surrealist practice turned away from conscious invention and insisted on that which occur on the margins of subjective attention, automatically and outside of

conscious control, similarly to the Dadaists they were using chance operations as a way to get to it.

Another artist that cannot be neglected when talking chance in art is Jackson Pollock. Pollock's *modus operandi* in painting was certainly not a random one but there were important elements of chance to it as an arbitrary process. The way Pollock worked on the canvas makes one think of the automatic methods of the surrealists as well as the way Arp and others were using gravity as a method.

Like Arp, Pollock used the release of gravity and the fall of materials onto flat horizontal surfaces to arrive at compositions, and like the surrealists this was a process outside of conscious control.

"When I am in my painting, I'm not aware of what I'm doing. It is only after a sort of 'get acquainted' period that I see what I have been about"

Jackson Pollock

Pollock was an individual creator with an emphasis on the subjective in expression, on the other hand he somehow became an incarnation of chance. Pollock was deeply influenced by the works and thinkings of the European avant-garde that brought their ideas to the US during the second world war. It is not difficult to find the influence of the automatic and unpremeditated methods of Dada and Surrealism in his action paintings.

Pollock managed to create his own style as a synthesis of the principles which had preceded him in the European avant-garde, principles that embraced chance and accident in creation.

Being influenced by these ideas Pollock served as a link between the ideas coming from Europe, to the development of these ideas in other forms in the US. The major impact of Pollock was impossible to avoid, and became a stepping stone for the simultaneous development of the Fluxus movement and Process art. It was of importance to artists such as George Brecht, Richard Serra and Robert Morris.

John Cage, on his hand, was also working with a similar practice, that besides being influenced by eastern philosophy and the I Ching, also was a response to the ideas of chance that was being developed in Europe.

There is a certain line of development, a heritage you might say, in chance operations in art going on simultaneously in Europe and US. It is a line that you can find today in the contemporary field, moreover it is a line that starts with Marcel Duchamp.

If there ever was a pioneer of chance operations in art, that pioneer was Marcel Duchamp. From his first experiments with gravity as a method, the use of chance in musical composition, to the introduction of the ready-made.

Already in 1913 Duchamp introduced chance as a primary principle in his work when he was developing the *three standard stoppages*.

As in the work of Both Arp and Pollock, Duchamp's early work with chance is also

depending on the force of gravity to have material falling on a horizontal surface. It was similarly a shifting of the canvas from a upright position, to a horizontal one, and a fixing of elements into they're accidental positioning. Similarly, it was the use of chance to avoid artistic determinations. Chance for Arp and Pollock however represented a purely artistic and aesthetic problem, while for Duchamp it went beyond that to become a issue of cognition.

THE DUCHAMP EFFECT

(or)

Chance as a selection from possibilities

According to Duchamp himself, he turned to chance as an amusement. He later became increasingly interested in the concept, as an opportunity of escaping the control and figuration of his own hand, and avoiding his own judgment and taste. On the other hand, it was an escape from traditional methods of perception and expression, as well as an escape from the logical reality of scientific thought.

Duchamp advocated that any force can be a creative force, if specially chosen by the artist to act as such a force.

On several occasions Duchamp made use of gravity as such a "readymade" force of indeterminacy, as well as doing random selections in composition, both visually and musically.

A musical piece that Duchamp made using random methods was the "Erratum Musical" of 1913. *Erratum Musical* is a score for three voices derived from a chance procedure.

Duchamp composed this vocal piece with his two sisters by randomly picking up twenty-five notes from a hat, the notes were recorded in the score according to the sequence of the drawing.

The words that accompanied the music were from a dictionary's definition of "imprimer", also picked at random from the dictionary:

To make an imprint; mark with lines; a figure on a surface;
impress a seal in wax.

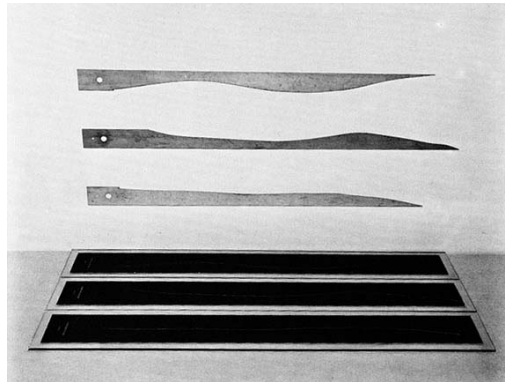
The musical score was set up for three voices, but without any instructions on how it should be performed. That choice was left to the performer, rendering a variety of possibilities in performance.

At the same time Duchamp was working on the *Three standard stoppages* (1913-14), it was the first work that Duchamp made as an experiment with gravity as a method of implementing chance. The experiment was performed as follows:

From a height of one meter, three white threads, each one meter long and held straight and horizontal. Were each dropped onto three canvases.

The threads were then fixed in position by means of varnish. Thus three lines,

each following a different course, appeared on the canvases, lines that were not drawn by hand but rather created purely by chance. After fixing the threads to canvas, Duchamp made three rulers formed according to the shape of the threads. These rulers were later used to generate the network of lines that make up parts of the lower section of the large glass.



"My three standard stoppages" is produced by three separate experiments, and the form of each one is slightly different. I keep the line, and I have a deformed meter. It is a "canned meter", so to speak, canned chance"

By his pseudo-scientific experiment Duchamp changed the meter, a standard unit of measurement, into a random variable. The one meter thread was transformed from a straight line to a curved line, but without actually losing its length, or its identity as the meter. The shape is altered but the length remains the same.

At the core of the *Three standard stoppages* lies a doubt of such scientific absolutes or standards as the meter, and a proposal that such definitions are only conventions.

By his act of personalizing the standard meter, Duchamp concludes that such a personal unit of measure is just as valid as any other standard of measure. Duchamp is making his standard by means of chance and is ending up with three different standards, the one just as valid as the next.

On the question of which of his works Duchamp considers to be the most important he has replied:

"As far as date is concerned I'd say the three standard stoppages of 1913. That was really when I tapped the mainspring of my future. In itself it was not an important work of art, but for me it opened the way – the way to escape from those traditional methods of expression long associated with art"

The *Three standard stoppages* have many implications that were central in Duchamp's artistic work to follow. It was a critique of scientific principles such as the principle of induction, a provocative demonstration of the scientific standard as an arbitrary construct, and an rejection of science as a valid model for explaining the world.

More importantly, the stoppages was Duchamp's first use of chance as a medium and subject in his work.

With the stoppages Duchamp did not only reject the rules put forward by science. There was also the notion that art should not be based on any conventions of what is aesthetic or artistic, no more rules of form, trend, movements or style, but just works, as individuals in the world. It should moreover be an activity that encourages the possibilities of the incomparable, rare and unique.

Art should be an activity of a mental and visual experiment, where the objective is the irrational exploration and discovery, and the result is the possibility of opening up the perception and horizon of thought.

Art should be the act of invention, the act of thinking and visualizing that which have never been thought before, the act of reaching with thought what is possibly conceivable and unperceivable.

In his way of thinking chance Duchamp juxtaposed the laws of chance to the laws of exception. In the way that the laws of exception apply only for one case and one occasion, in the same way as chance is exceptional.

Opposing the idea of identifying any two things as being like each other, and as an opposition to the concepts of universality, likeness and truth.

Many of these ideas run parallel to the ideas introduced by Alfred Jarry and his science of 'Pataphysics around the same time. Ideas that embraces the exception as a basis of understanding the world.

When The College of 'Pataphysics was founded in 1948, Duchamp was to be one of its first members.

Duchamp's work with the stoppages, and later the large glass, is a satire over rational scientific thinking and determinist views.

By inventing new, fictional and quasi scientific systems, Duchamp mocks and cast doubt on this thinking.

His fictional science is a strong tendency in the direction of Jarry's 'Pataphysics.

On several occasions Duchamp mentions this reference by encouraging a pataphysical doubt. A doubt that is equal to the desire to reinvent any standardizing of science and thought, and to advocate "a reality which would be possible by slightly distending the laws of physics and chemistry".

The stoppages acts as a fundamental unit for such the distention. Together with the large glass, it is really a gesture in the Pataphysical spirit of thinking, with an aim to critique determinist causality.

Duchamp established an aesthetic of the possible; an aesthetic that ignored any boundaries between science, art, artwork and experiment, truth and the possible, and that brought forth the idea that all things can be perceived and conceived of differently.

In Duchamp's meaning of the possible, it is not meant as something that is the opposite of the impossible, or relating to probability or something that is likely

to happen. It rather implies something which is possible to grasp by perception, and to conceive of by thought.

The aesthetic of the possible is a key concept in the *Three standard stoppages*, and to the following introduction of the readymade. A concept that relates to Duchamp's way of thinking about chance.

Duchamp saw chance as that of a lucky rendezvous, a rendezvous that takes place at a certain time and place specified by the artist. This rendezvous is a selection made by the artist out of a number of possibilities.

The readymade, which was first introduced by *Bicycle wheel* of 1913, was a direct development from Duchamp's engagements with chance.

Through the idea that any object, through selection by the artist, could become a work of art, the readymade is transformed into a work of art through the selection and intervention of the artist.

According to Duchamp, in his specifications for ready-mades, the selection of a readymade should be done with no aesthetic emotion whatsoever.

The choice should be made on a visual indifference and an absence of good or bad taste. Duchamp further describes the rendezvous between the artist and the object as a qualified chance procedure, a procedure that is seen as an act of randomness and indifference.

Duchamp talks about this rendezvous as the conceivable moment when a readymade is inscribed. At this moment it is conceived of and thus comes into existence. It can later be looked for with all kinds of delays.

Duchamp also expressed the idea that the physical work might be unnecessary. That it is only the experiment of conceiving it that matters. That the important thing is the matter of timing, as a snapshot of conception.

This enables thoughts on the act of becoming. The idea of change as the "passage of the object from one to the other". A change that is taking place as an exception provoked by chance. Only the isolated case is central in this becoming, and chance is the way in which it becomes.

"In fact, the whole world is based on chance, or at least chance is a definition on what happens in the world we live in and know more than any causality."

Marcel Duchamp

The stoppages, as they are made, are not reproducible using the same system of production. The experiment produces three individual and distinctly different cases, any effort to repeat the procedure will give a unique result.

There can not even be a probability calculus on the experiment, the only thing that can be known for sure, is that the results will always differ.

This emphasizes the uselessness of deriving any laws or prediction from the experiment, and casts further (pataphysical) doubt on both the principle of induction and causality, leaving only chance as the primary condition.

Duchamp had his own understanding of chance as something being far from random. His way of invoking chance was a very rigid approach, that he himself termed "canned chance".

This Duchampian method of canned chance is a process where the parameters are pre-defined by the artist, but where the outcome or realization of the work are out of the artists control.

It is also a very subjective chance, in the way of the lucky rendezvous and the selection of the readymade.

The readymade that on its part was as much as anything else is a break with logic, reason and the conventions of art. A thing that becomes another; through pure thought and re-contextualization.

JOHN CAGE

(or)

The passage from open composition to open-end realization

For Cage, the use of chance was crucial as a method of opening up his musical compositions, opening them up in the way that they would include unforeseen an unintended sounds. It was important to eliminate any subjective or conscious arrangement of sound in the composition. Cage wanted the way sounds follow each other in the composition to not be defined in relation to the other sounds in the sequence.

To accomplish these objectives, Cage made use of a variety of chance procedures in his way of composing scores, and was often consulting The I Ching - book of changes, an ancient Chinese philosophical text on changing events.

Cage also invented rule based chance systems to render unfixed compositional techniques, a sort of programmed indeterminacy.

The aim of these methods was to eliminate the subjective point of view of the author in order to "let the sounds be themselves, rather than vehicles for manmade theories, or expressions of human sentiments".

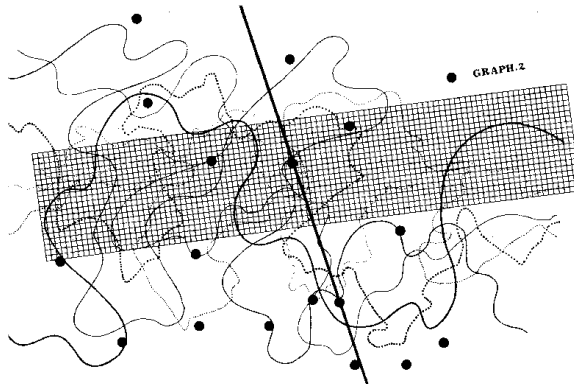
Cages introduction of random process in composition was done to organize sound events in a way that was not deliberate, and as open as possible.

In *Music of chances* Cage was tossing coins to make up his composition from pre-selected material. The head or tail of the coin toss was used to make decisions of pace, tone, pitch and continuity of the musical score.

Cage himself found this way of working to be too strict in the way that it did not open up for enough possibilities.

He was dissatisfied by the fact that the score he ended up with was fixed and leaving the performer in a defined role. There was a presence of indeterminacy in the creating of the score, but there was not the same quality in the performance and realization of it.

Cage sought an open-endedness that was not fixed, but that would leave the work open to always be performed differently, to yield different realizations every time.



Tools used for random composition in the Fontana mix

He developed a new and more elaborate system of random composition in his *Fontana mix*. It consists of a selection of tools and rules for how to make the composition. This leaves it possible for the performer to both render and perform the musical score, a musical score that would render differently every time.

This development comes to a culmination in Cage's composition, *4:33*, known as the silence piece, where Cage arrives at an important conclusion.

The composition consists of three passages amounting to 4 minutes and 33 seconds, each passage's duration is determined by a chance operation.

During the performance the performer is supposed to not use any instrument to generate music. In the original realization of the score it was being played on piano, the three passages were marked by the performer opening or closing the lid on his piano. Later the piece has been performed on a variety of instruments and versions, including that of a symphonic orchestra.

The rather important point is that there are sounds in Cage's silent piece. There are the ambient sounds generated by the presence of the performer(s) and the audience. These sounds make up the piece, and they do it differently every time. This is how Cage arrived at his objective of open-endedness in the realization of a score.

In the orchestral version of the silence piece, the sounds contained in the performance are the sounds that appear in a room filled with hundreds of people. The sound of the musicians moving on their chairs, adjusting the instrument, or the coughing of the audience.

Cage was implementing chance in his compositional scores as a way of breaking them up and to arrive at a form of discontinuity. As Cage puts it himself, he was doing it to allow "that continuity that happens, rather than that continuity that excludes all others".

For Cage, as with Duchamp, the critical choices are often made prior to the implementation of the procedure, or as Cage says it: "my choices consist in choosing what questions to ask."

It is not difficult to see the influence of Duchamp in Cage's compositional work

if one thinks of Duchamps "Erratum Musical". More importantly, Cages silence piece resonates strongly with the idea of the readymade and the found object. In 4:33 it is the ever changing circumstances of sounds that makes up the work, the score becomes the framework, a time structure for sound events to take place in, events that are unforeseen and different every time.

The work is defined by its context, but its content is renewed every time it is experienced, thus leaving the work to never really being able to become finalized or set.

4:33 brings something new to the scenery, something that was important to Cage, it is the open-endedness of the realization, the score as a notation constantly awaiting a new and different realization. In this way the silent piece becomes an extension of Duchamps readymade. It stand to represent the gap between intention and realization, the gap that Duchamp talks about as the art-coefficient in his lecture on the creative act.

Like Duchamp, Cage had a rigid and controlled way of working with chance. He always insisted on the instructional frame.

In all of his work with chance, it seems that Cage sought a balance between the rational and the irrational. He did so by using random events within the context of a very controlled system.

The amount and type of control varied from piece to piece, but the ideas of a dialectic between control and chance remain constant throughout Cage's artistic work.

*"Life without structure is unseen, pure life
expresses itself within and through a structure."*

John Cage

It seems that Cages work with chance was not so much about embracing chaos and the irrational. It had more to do with the possible change of the work.

The fundamental point was to allow and encourage changes, and in that way opening up for the vastest amount of possibilities.

In this aim there is an attitude of opening up the work for an awareness that is outside of itself, an awareness of the world and any circumstance it may contain.

When starting out Cage was employing chance through his strict and complex systems. Later these systems was replaced by a will to leave works open to interpretation and circumstance.

There was still a fixed system, in the role of the score, that maintained Cages deliberation, but the score as a partially random product also opened up for an infinite number of possible variations in the realization of it.

By his development of chance procedures Cage took the principle of using chance in composition to a logical conclusion, a conclusion that was strongly in the direction towards indeterminacy in realization.

These ideas was picked up by the Fluxus movement and in particular by George Brecht. It is in this way that, although the fluxus artists was very well aware of Duchamps work, Cage serves as a link between the experiments of Duchamp and the later works of many of the Fluxus artists.

FLUXUS and THE EVENT SCORE OF GEORGE BRECHT

(or)

Towards open form

The Fluxus movement that emerged in the 60s advocated a rejection of prefixed notions or forms in art, and spoke for a conceptually open-ended practice based on reception and indeterminacy.

The artist's role was to develop conceptual methods for creation, methods that could be used independently of the artist. The aim was a deemphasizing of artistic authorship and a wish of giving agency of the creative process to the spectator or participant.

This represented a regression of agency from the artists side. The artist was to stipulate certain parameters in advance, but leave the result or execution of the work open to circumstances involving viewer participation.

Chance methods was appropriated and implemented in various ways in order to reach these objectives. The use of chance operations in Fluxus was, like with the dada movement, a method for creating experimental works of art. Likewise it was a break with the logics and ways of the modern society, and an attempt to open up the perception of everyday life.

In the Fluxus manifest George Maciunas specified two main strategies of chance that was corresponding to these aims of the movement:

1. Chance as a compositional principle; using chance procedures in the making of both visual and audible composition.
2. Indeterminacy in reception; that a works realization relies on the choices and actions of the viewer, leaving elements open to the interpretation, performance and realization of a work.

George Brecht was one of the artists working with these strategies. In Brechts work there is an evident development towards the 2nd strategy. This strategy served as a resolution in Brechts efforts to explore the possibilities of chance operations in art, possibilities that for Brecht was about finding the balance between chance and choice.

Starting out as an artist, Brecht was interested in the possibilities of chance as a method, and as so many other artists at the time he admired and had to relate to Jackson Pollock's way of working on his canvases.

Pollock was at the time becoming almost an personified incarnation of chance, moreover he was doing so in a very individual, expressive and subjective way. That was exactly what the objectives of Fluxus later on was to reject.

Early on in 1957 Brecht was also experimenting with chance paintings. Contrary to Pollock he was doing so in a very systemized way; by using marbles dipped in paint and crumbled in bed sheets, he made arbitrary paintings in a similar style to those of Pollock.

By this system Brecht managed to deconstruct action painting, by putting emphasize on the conceptual process over the end-product, and his way to systematize and intellectualize it.

Around this time Brecht wrote an essay, *Chance imagery*, on the use of chance in art. Brecht sent his essay to John Cage, with the result that the two later on became friends. Brecht soon joined the program of Cages classes at the New school for social research.

After attending the school Brecht had altered his view of working with chance in art, now favoring the Cageian programmed chance methods to the expressive and arbitrary methods of Pollock.

It was at this time that Brecht came up with his way of working with event scores, a form realized as language, object and performance. Brecht was using Cages techniques for musical composition to produce these hybrid scores.

Brecht's event scores require the spectator to be actively present in the realization of the work, and to manage certain choices over which the artist has no control. The event therefore becomes a variable action depending on the decisions of the performer(s), until performed the work only exists as a written piece of paper.

One of the first event scores from 1959, *Time-table music*, was written for performance in a railway station. It was first time performed when Cage's class accompanied Brecht to Grand Central Station, Manhattan, where they used train timetables to create a composition:

The performers enter the railway station and obtain time-tables.
They stand or seat themselves so as to be visible to each other, and, when ready, start they're stopwatches simultaneously.
Each performer interprets the tabled time indications in terms of minutes and seconds (e.g. 7:16 = 7 minutes and 16 seconds). He selects one time by chance to determine the total duration of his performing. This done, he selects one row or column, and makes a sound at all points where tabled times within that row or column fall within the total duration of his performance.

From Motor vehicle sundown (event) to EXIT

In *Motor vehicle sundown (event)* of 1960 Brecht uses a repertoire of written instructions for activities, these are to be performed for any number of vehicles set outdoors at sundown.

The actions include: opening and closing windows, operating windscreen wipers, turning on and off radio, headlights on and off, parking lights on and off, sound horn, sound siren, sound bell(s), strike window with knuckles, accelerate motor, open or close door (quickly, with moderate speed, slowly), open or close engine hood, and pause.

All together 22 auditory and visual events and 22 pauses are written onto instruction cards in various sequences, the instruction cards are to be shuffled and dealt between the performers.

The performers follow these instructions strictly, and realize the actions according to specific cues and durations that are specific to each individual performer. When they have gone through the entire instructions they are to shut off the engine and leave the vehicle.

When performed the event results in a cacophony of sounds and movements, a random symphony of audible and visual actions stemming from various cars.

The performance can never be performed any two times the same way because of all the variables and random elements incorporated in the instructions. However the event is a very strict procedure, and it does not leave many choices to the performers as they are supposed to follow the instructions exactly. The elements of chance is present as an immanent part of the conceptual frame, and is incorporated in the two page long instruction for how it should be performed.

By comparison, another event score, *two vehicle event*, from the year after, had only two words in the instruction: Start / Stop.

In both events the same instrument, the vehicle, is used to perform, but in the *two vehicle event*, the instruction to the performer has taken on a radical openness in terms of the realization.

There is a more narrow focus on only two actions, rather than as in *Motor vehicle sundown*, where performers are going through a great range of actions simultaneously.

The score for "two vehicle event" is reduced to only these two words, without any further instructions about duration or sequence.

This abstraction of Brechts event scores is obvious also in another event score, *Drip music (drip event)*, that instructs the performer: "A source of dripping water and an empty vessel are arranged so that the water falls into the vessel". Later on the score was reduced to only contain the word "dripping", thus leaving it drastically more open for interpretation.

This simplification of the event score is part of the evolution that Brecht goes through in his work. By removing information from the score, Brecht opens up the realization to the choice of the performer.

In these minimal instructions the performers choice is left open to such an degree that the content of any performance of the work will be entirely different from one performance to the other. Not only different as a variation of content, but as a complete shift of it.

It becomes a shift to a perceptual activity as the event score becomes as much a cue to perceive the event rather than to activity set it in motion. Listening to a dripping tap could be an adequate realization of drip music, imaginative or physical.

This extreme generality of the reduced scores makes them open to an interpretation that will be unique in any case of realization. In any realization the specificity of it may only be available to be experienced by the performer performing or imagining it.

The reduced scores becomes a direction for an action, any action. By indicating only the task to be performed or perceived, the score focuses the performer's attention on the process of doing it, rather than the result which becomes merely incidental.

This leaves the status of the score so that it never can be fixed in one form of realization, and thus representing a never ceding continuity, complete open form, where no realization or interpretation is more valid than any other.

The word event *EXIT*, made in 1961, stands as a marker for Brecht's resolution on the concept of chance and choice.

On the card it is only written: "Word Event", followed by the word "Exit" below.

The work calls into question the difference between the artwork and its surroundings. In the case of *EXIT*; finding or noticing an incident of the event is the event itself.

The event does not exist until perceived, when perceived it is realized.

The score however is really not in need of this execution, it can be performed simply by thought.

WORD EVENT

● EXIT

G. Brecht
Spring, 1961

This is how Brecht focuses our attention on existing things, things that in the words of Donald Judd "barely exists".

Because it is as if the works of Brecht does not exists as works, but as Brecht himself says: "All I do is bringing things into evidence, but they are already there".

The works of Brecht is an attentive gesture, they are linguistic pointers that point to that which is already there. As works in themselves they are fleeting, almost non-existent, imperceptible. They activate a process where the insignificant becomes significant, through a minimal written instruction.

Yet again there is a strong link to Duchamp's concept of the readymade. The same way Duchamp focuses attention on certain already existing objects, Brecht does with events and actions.

Brecht transfers the Duchampian readymade model from the manufactured object, to the temporal perceptive event. He uses the same procedure of bringing things into evidence by the use of language.

George Maciunas says it in the following way in a letter to Tomas Schmidt:

The best Fluxus 'Composition' is a most non-personal, 'readymade' one like Brecht's 'Exit'—it does not require of us to perform it since it happens daily without any 'special' performance of it.

And he continues in a letter addressed to Brecht in 1962:

By non-art I mean anything not created by the artist with intend to provide "art" experience. So your events are non-art since you did not create the events—they exists all the time. You call attention to them. I did not mind at all that some of your events were "lost" in our festivals. The more lost and unnoticeable the more truly non artificial they were. Very few ever thought the vase of flowers over piano was meant to be a piece and they all wanted a "piece" to follow.

The influence on Brecht from Cages work is quite obvious. In the beginning this influence was on part of the compositional methods of programmed chance that Cage was using. Similarly to Cage, Brecht also made scores addressing musical sounds in *time table music* and *motor vehicle sundown*.

The later, and extremely minimal task and language based event scores developed into a re-envisioning of Cage's found sounds. Only that in this case what was found was the event, a multi-perceptual event, that was not only based on the sensation but also required an conceptual response.

Brecht was using the Cageian ideas of the open-ended musical score and adopted it for his event scores. But where Cage sought an open-ended realization, Brecht was after the almost complete open form. Brecht's resolution was in the freedom of choice and interpretation that was put forth by the limited directive of the later event scores, a freedom of choice that was given to the reader of the work over which Brecht exercised no control.

Brecht managed to adopt the ideas from Duchamp and Cage and to merge them into his own work. In the process he took these ideas one step further, by generating open work where ultimate form and duration were unfixed in absolute indeterminacy.

"Duchamp is alone is one thing but Duchamp plus Cage is something else."

George Brecht

ROBERT MORRIS and DANIEL SPOERRI

(or)

FIXATION 'N' BECOMINGNESS

Flexible felt Vs. Snare pictures (a comparison)

Swiss artist Daniel Spoerri was a contemporary of the Fluxus movement and was closely linked to it, as well being a part of Nouveau réalisme in Europe.

Spoerri is perhaps most known for his book *Topographie Anécdotée du Hasard* (*An Anecdoted Topography of Chance*). The book consists of a mapping of Spoerri's table in the form of a drawing. It depicts the outlines of 80 objects that Spoerri found lying on his hotel room table at exactly 15:47 pm on October 17 1961.

The map of the objects designates the exact shape and positions of these 80 objects as well as numbering them.

The rest of the book consists of Spoerri's descriptions of his personal memories and associations evoked by the different objects and the possible relations of the various objects to each other, all written down in a spontaneous and subjective manner.



Topographie Anécdotée du Hasard came as a logical conclusion in Spoerri's work, as he had for a long time been working with what he termed "snare pictures". The snare pictures are a type of assemblage where objects are captured out of a passing moment, fixed in position and later displayed on the wall.

The snared objects could be what is left on the table after a meal, or has accumulated in a drawer or at some other location over time. Whatever it is it can be fixed in the position and placement it had when found and hence stay there forever on.

Spoerri explained these works as "objects found in chance positions, in order or disorder (on tables, boxes, or in drawers, etc.) are fixed or rather "snared" as they are found. Only the plane is changed, what was horizontal becomes vertical"

Spoerri did several fixations of remains from meals. The most well known is probably the work made in 1964 that consists of the remains of a meal eaten by Marcel Duchamp. The leftovers of the meal, with plates, knives and forks, were fixed to the table as they lay and the table was hung on the wall.

Another snare picture was *Le tiroir de ma mere*, where Spoerri fixed the objects found in his mother's drawer in the position they were found, then he hung the drawer on the wall.

"I like the contrast provoked by fixating objects, to extract objects from the flow of constant changes and from their perennial possibilities of movement; and this despite my love for change and movement"

Spoerri

There is a notable difference between these two works as the *Topographie Anécdotée du Hasard* is a mapping, a recording of something that once was, but that now is gone, it has the quality of the memory of that something. The snare pictures on the other hand is that something, a random arrangements of objects systematically glued down where they were found. Objects that may or may not seem to have any relation to each other, but still comes from the same context. A context it becomes radically separated from when removed from its flow in a temporal existence. The snare pictures are a frozen random moment in time and space. The process of fixation of these elements should perhaps better be understood as an event or process, rather than an object.

A rather different emphasize on process is evident in the early work of Robert Morris. During the 60s Morris made several works using felt in a spontaneous and flexible way, a way that allowed the constant becoming of the material. Influenced by Duchamp's and Cages emphasize on process Morris was exploring the work as a record of a performance, and started to explore elements of accident and chance in his work.

Morris made use of what was at the time unconventional materials such as thread-waste, dirt, led and felt which he handled in a spontaneous manner. The materials were handled in an un-emphasized way to adapt to the nature of them, as well as to give temporary and un-deliberate form to them. Materials were randomly scattered or piled on the gallery floor or walls, or mounted to resist deliberate shaping. Morris was allowing the work to be affected by forces of gravity and time, pulling them towards the floor and changing during the display.

In his felt pieces the flexible material allowed him to experiment with the inherent movement of the material. Morris piled, stacked, folded, cut into, and then hung the felt from the gallery walls or dropped it onto the floor to investigate the effects of gravity and unexpected forms. Morris felt pieces challenge the notion of consistency or set composition in the work. The resulting art object becomes the unintended byproduct of a process towards the anti-form, a form that is in a state of becoming rather than a state of being.

Based on a process of the random and arbitrary the felt pieces resist any reproducible form as they could never be set up the same way twice, ensuring that any installation could never be the same.



The way Morris was working with felt was to intentionally give agency to the material, as it would resist deliberate shaping or arrangement by the artist. The flexible felt was taking on its own determinations and shaping itself as it pleased, somehow similar to Duchamp's dropping of the three strings in his stoppages. Although Duchamp's strings became fixed in position, Morris's felt pieces resisted any fixation.

... there's the information, that made the thing. But, every time it's set up, it's different. And I can't quite... that split is no longer a problem because somehow the indeterminacy, the open-endedness, of the thing I find very satisfying.

Robert Morris

The felt and threadwaste works of Morris is about the process of transformation and transition the materials goes through. It was a process that gave Morris the opportunity of discovery of new form in the natural and unpredictable shaping of the material.

Morris felt pieces was form made flexible, or rather it was anti-form in its way of being open to constant change and reinterpretation.

In his writings Morris makes the distinction between two different models of chance operations:

The idealist mode is a model where the artist makes use of an a-priori system that determines or influences the result of the work. In the way that Duchamp, Cage and at times Brecht was doing.

This systematization of process serves to remove taste and personal touch in the process formerly controlled in a dictating way by the artist himself.

The other mode is that of an engagement with materials and process. In the way that the artists have a *modus operandi* towards the material that is casual, un-emphasized or imprecise and seemingly unmotivated. Leaning towards arbitrariness in decision making, or an absence of decision making.

An example of this mode is Pollock but also Morris himself and his engagement with felt.

Contrasting the works of Spoerri and Morris makes it evident how they both were very much working with the same ideas in mind. We can see how both were concerned about the constant flow of things, they were just approaching it in opposite ways.

Spoerri on his hand was working with fixation of a brief moment from the constant flow of changes, and one could say that Spoerri was removing these moments from the flow. The work of Morris on the other hand was appropriating and adapting to this flow; it became the flow.

Despite these differences Spoerri and Morris was approaching the same project, and both taking on a remote authorial position. They both became a, as Spoerri described it, "attendant to the accidental", in the way that they advocated a downplay of the subjective artist, through the casual appropriations of accidental situations.

(A) CODA

Change is an essential concept in most chance operations in art. Whether it is to stop or encourage change, to structure works to be in a ever changing form, open form or anti form. Or to point out that change is an essential element in all things, including truth, reality and perception. Change seems to be the red thread in these ideas.

One can see that often this change is related to the forces of gravity as an unpredictable force, an "x factor" in the change of things.

Gravity is possibly the most basic system that has been applied to chance operations in art. As exemplified, the release of gravity has been used by many artists as a way of arranging, selecting and composing they're works.

The word chance derives from the Latin word for falling. The way we thing about the act of falling is that it is something accidental, something unknown and unwilling about it. A fall includes a risk and its result and consequences are unknown.

Similarly chance procedures involves a risk in the creative act, a risk that implies a certain sacrifice in the act of creation, as the artist give up control of the production and leave certain results to circumstance.

In this sense the artist almost take on a mediumistic role as (s)he becomes a medium of the other, the other being that unknown, the risk, fall or the factor "x" in the work.

In some cases it is as if there is an unknown source and that chance is used as the way to get to it. That the only way to get to it must be accidental and that certain circumstances can only be approached as a chance encounter.

These approaches are as many as they are varied, they can come as the performativity of objects, the indeterminacy of unstructured materials and process, a structure of disorder or the fluidity of experience.

In any case what happens is, that as the artist reject agency, the works grows more independent of its creator. Rather that being purely a expression of the artist, the work takes on a certain life of its own, deriving its meaning from its material context and situation.

The work becomes its own gesture rather than a gesture on behalf of an artistic self-expression. A gesture that relies on change as chance, contingency and indeterminacy, and does so by the actual or potential fall.

The works of Duchamp, Cage, Brecht, Tzara, Arp and all the others are historical and constitutes a legacy in artistic development. What links these practices together is the use of chance as a key principle in creation and composition. What might be the heritage of this early chance work?

The approach to chance as a tool and medium has been a consistent idea in art. The use of the accidental circumstance in creation is evident in artistic work also today, although it may have transformed into different forms.

It seems to me that as a system or framework, chance does not play a major

part in the sense it did until the fluxus (and later situasjonism) movement. The contemporary works invoking chance tend to be more a subtle way of opening up the perception of things.

I wouldn't say that these works are more refined, but rather that they make use of chance in a way that is less committed to it. It is as the chance element is inherent in the works in a different way, a way that is more subtle and not so determined, it is a more passive stance.

What is still the case though, is that chance still remains as an x in the equation, a deliberate uncertainty, a common denominator for the unknown, a possibility for something to happen.

Without much elaboration on the specific works, a handful of additional artist working with chance methods should be mentioned.

One should certainly mention Sophie Calle's habit of following strangers through the streets of Paris, with the culmination of traveling to Venice as part of one of these following pieces, *Suite Venitienne*, in 1980.

One should mention the video-works of Gabriel Orozco made at the end of the 90s, such as *From green grass to federal express*, *From container to don't walk* and *From dog shit to Irma Vep*. Videos that are made during day long walks throughout the cityscape.

Orozco makes these movies by walking the streets, and filming what he finds interesting at the time, in a fashion where one thing leads to the next.

Anything that happens during these walks are part of determining the final result. A small delay or shift of events will shift the following events radically, shifts that Orozco exercise little control over.

In Orozco's own words these works relate to the "fleeting flow of totality in our perception, the fragmentation of the river of phenomena".

Orozco's videos are not edited, what has been filmed is what is shown, rendering a 20-40 minutes fragmented condensation of a one day adventure of circumstances, encountered in the urban landscape.

Another work by Orozco, *Yielding Stone* from 1992 runs as the perfect parallel to his video works. *The Yielding Stone* is a ball of clay Orozco used to roll through the city making it surface into a receptacle of various debris as it went on. In this way forming a sort of urban fingerprint of these environments, much like Orozco and his camera acts as a receptacle in the making of the videos.

Similarly to Orozco, Francis Alys are also engaged in operations in urban settings, and one should mention such works as *The leak* (1996/2004) and *The collector* (1991-92).

In *the leak* Alys is carrying a paint dripping can through the streets of Sao Paulo leaving behind a blue line intersecting the cityscape.

In *The collector* Alys is dragging a magnetized and wheeled toy dog through the streets of Mexico City, resulting in a layer of metallic scrap attaching itself to the surface of it.

In another work, Alys is placing small metal sculptures in the garbage cans around Mexico City.



Gabriel Orozco - Yielding stone



Walead Beshty - "FedEx sculpture"

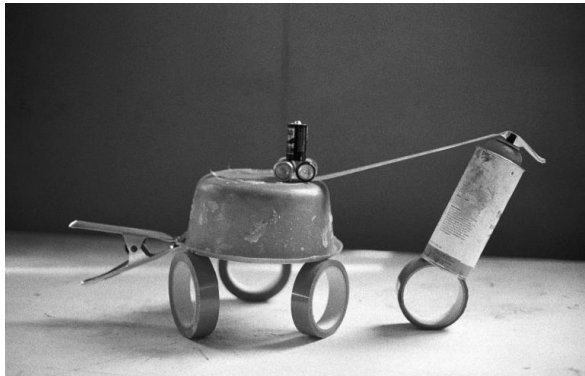
He later searches the city's flea markets in an attempt to find them again, he have found two of them.

One could mention Walead Beshtys *FedEx sculptures* from 2005 and onward; glass vitrines made to fit perfectly in packaging boxes from FedEx. The sculptures are made and packed with the intention of receiving continual damage, and thus being repeatedly transformed, through transportation to its exhibition spaces.

One should mention works by Swedish artist Sofia Hulten, such as *Making it better* (1998-2002) and *Events with unknown outcome* (2000). The former is a series of photographs of broken objects found in the streets of Berlin.



Sofia Hulten - From "Making it better" (1998-2002)



Fischli & Weiss - from "Stiller nachmittag "(equilibrium series)

Objects that Hulten takes home for repair only to bring them back to where she found them.

In the latter Hulten placed various objects (beer crates, a blanket, ball, plastic bag) in the park surrounding the last border watchtower still standing since the GDR in Berlin. Later she secretly videotaped whatever happened to the objects from the vantage point of the tower.

Fischli & Weiss comply with the 6th point in they're 10 point, *How to work better*, listing when saying; "Accept chance as inevitable" in they're photographic sequence *Stiller nachmittag (equilibrium series)*, by precariously arranging various everyday objects in a way that seems vastly unpredictable.

The photograph is a snap of these objects situated in a potential fall and on the verge of imminent collapse.

One should mention Bruce Nauman's *Mapping the studio I (fat chance John Cage)* from 2001/02. The work is a 7 screen video installation displaying altogether 42 hours of video footage from Nauman's New Mexico studio during nighttime.

Nauman was filming his studio for one hour every night for the duration of 42 nights with the objective to reveal what was going on there when he was not in it.

One would think that not much was happening, but as it were a invasion of mice in the summer of 2001, Nauman's studio was quite active during night; the stars of the show being the hordes of mice and the tailless cat Toonsis.

Finally, one should mention Bas Jan Ader's *In search of the miraculous* 2 from 1975. Ader sets out to cross the Atlantic ocean from Cape cod, Massachusetts to Ireland in a 13 feet sailboat called Ocean wave, a risky gesture and a massive potential fall. Ader never returned from his search of the miraculous.



From Bruce Nauman's "Mapping the studio I (fat chance John Cage)"



Documentary of the project by Bas Jan Ader "In Search of the Miraculous", 1975 - Courtesy Bas Jan Ader Estate & Patrick Painter Editions. Philip Aarons and Shelley Fox Aarons Collection, New York.



