

52 Events. A Participatory Art Work

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ABSTRACT

This presentation describes a participatory art project initiated in the 1960s for publication by the international laboratory for intermedia art known as Fluxus. The project has been realized again in the 1990s using the World Wide Web.

Keywords

Events, scores, intermedia, Fluxus, participatory art

INTRODUCTION

This report presents a participatory art project that began in the 1960s. The project was participatory from the start. The element of participation grew over the years as the artist effectively transferred artistic control and realization of the works to the audience. In most cases, works that were once shared by artist and audience now depend completely on audience participation for their realization.

The call for papers to this session asked two questions, "To what extent can art be participatory? Where is the border between art and design?"

The first question is an artistic question. The second is scientific. Because this session is effectively a poster session with a short supporting paper, I will answer the first question and demonstrate a specific project to illustrate the answer.

The project is titled *52 Events* (Friedman 2001). The project began when publisher Paul Robertson of Heart Fine Arts in Edinburgh, Scotland, contacted me. He asked me to create an art work in calendar form for the year 2002. I agreed to

create a calendar edition of selected event scores selected from the 1950s through the 1990s.

A dialogue between publisher and artist led to a plan to realize a calendar in diary form. In addition to a signed, limited edition of 250 copies, we agreed that Heart Fine Art would create an open edition in .pdf format available for download from the World Wide Web.

The earliest works in this edition were originally gathered in 1966 for publication in the spring of 1967 as a Fluxus edition titled *Events by Ken Friedman*. Edited and designed by George Maciunas, the 1967 Fluxus edition waited on a large-scale printing order that never materialized (Hendricks 1989: 251-258, Maciunas 1967). While waiting for the Fluxus edition, I began exhibiting event scores and circulating them in small editions of various kinds.

In 1973, the University of California at Davis organized an exhibition exclusively composed of my event scores. This exhibition marked the first time that an artist presented an exhibition comprised solely of text-based event scores. The exhibition toured the world in the 1970s, with editions of scores appearing in English and in translation.

When the premature death of George Maciunas ended the Fluxus publishing program, I continued to work with the event structure, adding to the corpus of events in a continuing series.

The call for this session asked several questions that can be answered by direct empirical evidence. One involves practice-based research and participatory art. I will not address the scientific questions regarding research, but I will address the question in relation to participatory art.

The question is, "Can participatory systems create artistic work whose aesthetics and originality place it in the same league as pieces produced primarily to demonstrate creative talent, qualifications and skill . . . or work intended purely for

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Monday
June
3rd

Tuesday
June
4th

Wednesday
June
5th

Holy Bird of Finland

July 1991, Helsinki

An installation or book presenting images, objects, stories, riddles, puzzles, and jokes having to do with cuckoos and cuckoo lore. Contents of either a book or installation can include: pictures of cuckoos, legends about cuckoos, recipes for cooking cuckoos (roast cuckoo, baked cuckoo, cuckoo soup, cuckoo salad sandwich, etc.), encyclopedia entries, ethological descriptions of cuckoo behaviour, descriptions of how people can emulate cuckoo mating rites, dictionary definitions, the word cuckoo translated into different languages, etc.

An installation can also present: cuckoo clocks, stuffed cuckoos, cuckoo toys, a diorama showing nesting cuckoos in the natural environment, videotapes or films of live cuckoos, a recording of the sound of the cuckoo in the forest.

exhibition or cultural production?"

The history of this project demonstrates that this is possible. Various editions of the events scores in this project have been exhibited in solo exhibitions in over 50 museums and galleries. These have notably included the University of Colorado, Centro de Arte y Comunicacion, Immediate Gallery, Ecart, Galeria Akumulatory, Fialal Muveszek Klubja, Gallery S:t Petri, The Everson Museum, Washington Project for the Arts and P.S.1 in New York, now a division of the Museum of Modern Art.

The call for papers specifically addresses two issues in artistic development. One is the theme of art as process, collaborative authorship, and interactivity. The second involves technology.

While the current version of the project is indeed enhanced and transmitted by computer and Internet, this is secondary to the conceptual and participatory issues. In a white paper supporting an EU research project on multimedia (Friedman 1998b), I have discussed my view on what can sometimes become a form of technological intoxication. Instead of focusing on technology, I advocate using information technology in ways that may be as ancient as they are modern (Friedman 1998a, 1999).

THE IDEA OF THE SCORE

This project draws on the idea of musicality in visual art and intermedia. This idea has several implications.

It means that a work begins as an idea that is transmitted through a score. It means that the work resides in the idea, in the score and in the realized project. The work is equally present in each form, though present in different ways. It means that a realized project is only one interpretation of the work. It means that any work may have several valid realizations. Each realization represents the creative interpretation of the artist who realizes the work, in addition to the many possible receptive interpretations of those who experience the realized work. It means that a work may be realized by individuals other than the artist who creates the idea and embodies it in a score.

The score uses written notation to communicate instructions for realizing a work of art. The idea and use of the score is originally rooted in music. In visual art and intermedia, the score offered a way to transmit non-musical art forms. It became a method for encoding, recording and transmitting art forms.

From its basis in music in the strict sense, the idea of score in its extended form gave rise to the issue of musicality in an extended sense. This extension has important implications.

The first of these implications is that the work may exist as work in several forms:

-- as idea

-- as score

-- as process

-- as object.

Each of these forms has its own value and meaning.

The idea is pure, simple and inexpensive. It is easy to store, but difficult to preserve. Ideas are subject to change, to memory loss, to message failure and to interference. For the vast majority of human beings not gifted with telepathy, ideas require a physical medium for transmission -- if only a voice, a pen or a telephone.

The score reduces the possibility of change, memory loss, message failure and interference, while retaining many advantages of cost effectiveness. At the same time, storage adds a modest physical task as the price for exact preservation. While preservation records the score, it does not address the challenge of interpretation with the possibility of multiple interpretations or even of misinterpretation.

Process offers yet another way of understanding work. In orchestral music, theatrical or time-based arts, process is the preferred way to experience work, through live or recorded performance. The advantage here is the most complete possible realization of an interpretation. The disadvantage is linked to the time-bound nature of any physical process. Before the age of recordings, no experience could be repeated. Even in the age of recordings, the ability to experience several aspects of a piece at once or in comparison -- as is possible with ideas, scores or objects -- remains difficult, linked to expensive equipment. Creation of live performance is time-consuming and often expensive. Creation and storage of process in recorded form is an expensive, capital-intensive medium. Although individual recording, storage or playback units are no problem in the industrial world, making them demands a certain kind of society to spread the investment and effort over thousands of financiers and industrialists, millions of producers and billions of consumers. Logistics, transportation, storage, presentation and related issues provide their own difficulties for art forms not traditionally seen as time-based. These include the forms of object-making and presentation now summed up under terms such as process art and arte povera.

The object is another form. We all understand objects or we think that we do. We feel that the interpretation frozen in an object is the interpretation chosen by the artist but the object obscures the myriad possibilities that are rejected when the object takes final form. The object suggests an aura of permanence. It hides the process of its own making and it evades the issue of process that it requires to find its

final shape. Storage, transportation and -- even for the object -- physical change remain problems. This is also true of the objects left behind by process, such as recordings.

Many artists now use scores in works that are touched by the spirit of musicality and many of them find these basic implications acceptable. I assert that musicality has richer and deeper implications.

To understand the potential of score-based work, it's useful to consider how music is transmitted and performed. The composer creates the score. Once the score leaves the composer's hand in published form, the composer has little control over how the music is realized or interpreted. During the period covered by copyright, anyone has the right to perform the music with proper notification and on payment of fees and royalties. Not even that much is required after the copyright expires.

The performer determines the interpretation and the composer is obliged to acknowledge authorship even when he or she despises the realization. No matter how good or bad a performance of *Don Giovanni*, it is always Mozart. The thinnest *Ring Cycle* is still Wagner. Everyone within reach of a radio has heard some of the more than 200 versions of Bob Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind," ranging from Dylan's own protest-inflected ballad to the saccharine orchestrations created for Muzak and elevators. There have been disco versions, blues versions and even a pompous, inflated symphonic orchestration. Beethoven done for disco and Beatles gone baroque are still the work of their respective composers. The royalties on Beatles tunes must be paid to the rights-holder -- Michael Jackson. Neither Jackson nor Paul McCartney can forbid Eleanor Rigby from being used as a marching tune for an armored infantry division. McCartney had no luck preventing Jackson from granting permission for an automobile company to use one of McCartney's songs in an advertising campaign.

To compose is to give up certain rights. One right that a composer loses is the right of absolute control over the use and interpretation of the work.

In score-based work, I assert that the artist must naturally give up a certain element of control. Certain issues fall under the scope of moral rights in copyright jurisdiction or art law. Barring violation of those rights, score-based work inevitably opens a wide opportunity for variant interpretations. The only right that cannot be stripped away is the right of authorship. While the creator may wish to disavow badly realized work from time to time, the work must be acknowledged even if only to acknowledge a bad realization as a bad realization.

FROM CONTROL TO PARTICIPATION

Before 1966, I wasn't an artist. I built things, made objects, undertook actions. I engaged in processes, and I created

and enacted events in the physical sense of the term. These were simply things I did. I didn't have a specific term for them. I didn't call them art. They were philosophical explorations or spiritual quests.

George Maciunas introduced me to the idea that what I was doing was art and he introduced me to a vocabulary for the kind of art I was doing. He suggested I score and notate the projects, actions, objects and constructions I described to him. This brought about the first large group of my scores.

In the 60s, I lived and worked in places far from the centers of activity where my work was shown and performed. It was an era when few people made this kind of work and very few were interested in realizing it. Often, the people who wanted to realize exhibitions and projects didn't have transportation money or project funds. My work had to be done at a distance, with others realizing and interpreting my pieces. This, too, occasioned many scores.

The introduction to a new medium was one reason I began to work from scores. The need to create work for realization at a distance was another. The opportunity to create work in an experimental way, to take part in the way others might interpret my work, to see what would evolve was a third.

The obvious often hides the significant. In recent years, changing conditions have sharpened my focus on the issue of musicality. There are many reasons:

I am often invited to create projects far from my home in Sweden. People invite me to come these days, but I still do a great deal of work at a distance. Scores allow for work from a distance, enabling projects to be realized as I travel between hotel rooms and borrowed studios. The fact that I go to many of my shows now gives me the chance to experience my own work. There are pieces of mine that I've never seen and now it's possible. The opportunity to examine and to contemplate the scored pieces offers a new opportunity for philosophical exploration.

The issue of musicality has fascinating implications. The mind and intention of the creator are the key element in the work. The issue of the hand is only germane insofar as the skill of rendition affects the work: in some conceptual works, even this is not an issue. Musicality is linked to experimentalism and the scientific method. Experiments must operate in the same manner. Any scientist must be able to reproduce the work of any other scientist for an experiment to remain valid.

As with other issues in Fluxus, this raises interesting problems. Collectors want a work with hand characteristics, so some Fluxus works imply their own invalidity for collectors.

I take a more radical view of musicality than many of my colleagues: I assert that anyone may realize my work from

the score. I will acknowledge it, though there is a difference between acknowledging the work as mine, however, and approving every realization. Some directors work closely with the playwright. Some conductors consult the composer. Someone who wants to realize my work may find it useful to consult me. At the same time, I recognize that someone may develop a wonderful interpretation of my work that I hadn't created in my own interpretation. There is always the possibility that someone may realize a work better than I have done. Musicality implies all these possibilities. My intention is necessary to the work. My interpretation may not be necessary in the same way.

Not all artists involved in Fluxus agree with me on the issue of musicality. Interesting enough, some of the strongest objections come from artists trained as composers. The artists who might particularly be expected apply the criterion of musicality to their work on theoretical grounds reject the concept in practice. There are two main reasons.

One is control. La Monte Young now refuses to publish his scores. He seems to believe that his work should be realized in only one interpretation, his own. Even though that interpretation may change frequently, Young stresses very specific notions of intention that must be brought out in each realization of the work.

The second issue is the market. Many artists feel that if anyone can realize authentic versions of their work, they will have nothing to sell. I have confidence that my interpretations are lively, valid and interesting enough for people to want them. Artists who have pieces fabricated by precise, industrial means may have more to worry about.

While new approaches to the realization of the work may become valid, I retain the copyright on my work primarily for the purpose of credit and moral right. The work is a philosophical contribution. It is freely available for realization and consideration as idea, as spoken word or as realized project.

Musicality in art raises interesting, profound questions. The issues are even more intriguing now than in the 1960s. Global politics and world economies are undergoing transformation, and with them, global culture. The art world

has moved from the rebirth of painting to the birth of a grotesque new materialism at exactly the same moment that a new humanism is blossoming. The boundaries between art and many other fields of endeavor -- music, design, politics, to name just a few -- have dissolved. More and more people have come to understand the useful distinction between the valid concept of experimentalism and the reactionary concept of avant-gardism. In these exciting times, the implications of musicality, the consideration of meaning, intention, realization and interpretation that musicality raises, are among the most lively and interesting.

INFORMATION AND QUESTIONS

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