

Introducing the Event Score and Decolonial Performance Practice

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This event's archival excavations take place through the form of the event score. While the event score has been influential in conceptual and language-based gallery arts, and in experimental poetry, its historical origins are in the musical score. To speak very broadly, the event score emerged historically out of ground prepared by musical production in the first half of the twentieth century. Relevant to the event score are three propositions:

1. Any sound can be interpreted as music
2. Any sound-producing entity can participate in music making
3. A work can have an underlying identity even while its notation can allow significant variability in interpretation.

In the early 1960s, experimental musicians such as George Brecht, Yoko Ono, and contemporaries were responding to these propositions through short, verbally-notated scores, which Brecht called event scores.¹ The propositions opened the door to what has been called "deskilling," or artwork that can be realized without specialized technique. Deskilling can be connected broadly to 1960s arts, but with event scores, it often involves 1) the use of non-specialist sound making processes, and 2) the use of verbal notation to organize music making in ways that requires no specialist training.² Famous publications of 1960s event scores include single-author publications like Ono's *Grapefruit* and Brecht's *Water Yam*, as well as multiple-author publications like *An Anthology of Chance Operations*. *Grapefruit* and *Water Yam* are featured in this event.

The event score's historical emergence could be connected to the three propositions I mentioned. However, many event scores also exceed these propositions, and do so in ways that are important for the present event. First, event scores expand propositions #1 and #2 beyond sound, in order to investigate how scoring intersects with a range of perceptible and imperceptible phenomena. Second, the scores also extrapolate from propositions #1 and #2 in making work outside of arts spaces, for instance in mundane spaces. Third, event scores have been understood not only as catalysts for making performances in a conventional sense, but also as tools for framing aspects of existing reality. George Brecht called this approach the "perceptual readymade," an extension of Marcel Duchamp's sculptural readymade. In the perceptual readymade, an observer focuses on any phenomenon that is congruent with a scored event. A famous example here is Brecht's notation "dripping," which might be realized simply by noticing a dripping tap. In short, the event score's shift to verbal notation maintains earlier musical scores' technique of organizing musical practice through symbols on print documents, while altering the purview of the musical score, to engage circumstances that are not musical in a conventional sense.

¹ For general background on the event score, see Branden Joseph, *Beyond the Dream Syndicate: Tony Conrad and the Arts After Cage*; Liz Kotz, *Words to be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art*; and James Saunders and John Lely, *Word Events: Perspectives on Verbal Notation*

² On deskilling in music, see Adam Tinkle, *The Expanding Universal*

With respect to the field of art music and its afterlives, the event score is an important intervention in unlinking the musical score from the cult of the structurally White, Masculine Composer, and from the related cult of Masterpiece.³ The event score stands alongside a number of mid-20th century efforts to imagine the score outside of the metaphysics of the composer, such as in jazz / creative music.⁴ Performers working with these scores have begun to grapple with how to organize interpretation and performance practice through paradigms other than the fiction of the “Composer’s intentions.” A wide variety of approaches have emerged over the past few decades. In the present event, I will explore ways to orient interpretation around analytics of radical decolonial thought, broadly speaking.⁵ This approach to performance practice is under-investigated: Yoko Ono made a few relevant interpretations during the 1960s, and more recently Clifford Owens, and Stolo artist Dylan Robinson have been working around these questions.⁶

If decoloniality refers to an excavation and dismantling of colonial knowledge and infrastructure, what would this mean in terms of performance practice? Much earlier performance practice in experimental music is problematic from the standpoint of decolonial study: it may break from the cult of the Author, but it still adheres to Colonial Society/Nature binaries. In particular, Brecht’s performance practice largely follows that of John Cage, in which performance is approached as an encounter with Nature, with a capital N. As musicologist Ben Piekut writes, “for Cage, ‘in here’ [Society] included one’s taste, memory, intention, history, and ego, while ‘out there’ [Nature] existed the favored qualities of chance, fluency, change, purposelessness, and disorder. In his aesthetic approach, which...sought to imitate nature in its manner of operation, he wanted to attenuate those ‘in here’ things so that we--composers, performers, listeners--could get further ‘out there.’”⁷ Likewise, for Brecht, performance practice positions dripping water as Nature. Brecht worked by day as a chemist, and it is significant here that he once realized this work using chemistry equipment. This conceals water’s contingency upon social power, for instance in terms of infrastructural politics. In framing ecological relationships and infrastructures as depoliticized Nature, this performance practice not only reproduces colonial constructions of Nature, but also reproduces ignorance about their implicit politics. Performance practices of this sort thus enable a pernicious combination of ignorance and privilege. Charles Mills writes about this as “white ignorance,” while Manu Vimalassery and colleagues frame this unaware re-enacting of colonial relations as “colonial unknowing.”⁸

³ See Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius*; Colin Tucker, “Excavating the Anti-Blackness of Genius” (forthcoming); Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*

⁴ On this point and its racist historiography, see George Lewis, “Improvised Music since 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives,” *Black Music Research Journal*

⁵ Within this text, and this event, I understand the decolonial as being distinct from the colonial. I approach racialization and colonization as complexly intertwined but ultimately nonidentical.

⁶ Yoko Ono, *Grapefruit*; Clifford Owens, *Anthology*; Dylan Robinson, *Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies*

⁷ Piekut, “Sound’s Modest Witness: Notes on Cage and Modernism,” *Contemporary Music Review*, 13; see also Piekut, “Chance and Certainty: John Cage’s Politics of Nature,” *Cultural Critique*

⁸ Charles Mills, “White Ignorance,” in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*; Manu Vimalassery et al., “On Colonial Unknowing,” *Theory and Event*

In contrast to Brecht, his contemporary and interlocutor Yoko Ono developed approaches to performance practice that are more generative of decolonial possibilities. Ono's score *Cut Piece* consists of only one word: "cut." In a famous realization of the score, Ono sits on stage and places a pair of scissors in front of herself. According to her description of the performance, she asks "the audience to come up on the stage, one by one, and cut a portion of her clothing (anywhere they like) and take it."⁹ This realization thematizes performance's social contingencies, specifically colonial and racial dimensions of spectatorship, which might otherwise be overlooked. In contrast, Brecht's Naturalist performance practice positions scores as thresholds to encounters with new areas of Nature, in a kind of Imperial logic of discovery. Proceeding otherwise, Ono's decolonial performance practice approaches scores as tools for the excavation of socially-contingent principles that are embedded in existing frameworks, musical and non-musical.

What does this distinction mean in relation to other scores, for instance those focused on water, and other materials, that might be read as part of the realm of Nature with a capital N? Let's consider Ono's *Water Piece*, which consists simply of the notation "water." I'll be interpreting the notation not as an encounter with Nature; instead I'll focus on the historical formation implied by the score's writing of water as singular. Water in the singular implies what Jamie Linton calls modern water, which is interchangeable, placeless, and paradigmatically distinct from Society.¹⁰ With a view to historicizing and politicizing modern water, I'll be realizing Ono's score by investigating specific moments at which land is made legible as modern water; I will be attending centrally to the colonizations and racializations upon which that legibility depends. I talk about modern water in more detail in the previous video.

A decolonial performance practice is somewhat straightforward with respect to Ono's shorter scores. However, in relation to more detailed scores, particularly those by Brecht, possibilities for decolonial performance practice are more limited and more complex. Like his performance practice, Brecht's scores are suffused with the principles of physical science and its colonial constructions of Nature. In interpreting these scores, a decolonial performance practice will need to use the scores against themselves: the score must be approached not as a tool of decoloniality, but as an archive of coloniality requiring against-the-grain decolonial interpretation.

Let's explore what this means in terms of Brecht's score *2 Elimination Events*. The score reads: "empty vessel / empty vessel." A colonial, Naturalist performance practice would read the score in accordance with its suggestion of the positivism of physical science: "empty" would be read in terms of matter quantified as volume or weight. Instead, in this event's realizations, I aim to denaturalize and politicize the seeming self-evidence of physical science's paradigm. I do this by attending to the broader suppositions upon which quantitative physical science is built. Specifically, to empty in terms of volume presupposes culturally-specific notions of degodded, inert matter. The latter itself is predicated on racial and colonial ideas of emptying, in which Blackness is written as void, and Indianness is written as pastness. In the realizations, I trace

⁹ Ono, *Grapefruit*, n.p.

¹⁰ Jamie Linton, *What is Water: the History of a Modern Abstraction*, chapters 1 and 4

specific ways in which co-articulations between matter, race, and colonization manifest in particular constellations of archival sources.

From the standpoint of decoloniality, Brecht is a problematic figure, as both a maker of scores and a performer. What I aim to do in this event is neither to cancel nor to rehabilitate this work. Rather, I want to stay with the trouble, in order to investigate ways of reading scores against the grain; I am interested in this as a historically unexplored mode of critical archival practice. If Brecht's scores are approached through analytics of colonial and racial power, their notations may be a telling archive, regarding the everydayness of resource and infrastructure colonialism. As these forms of colonialism are increasingly important in the present, a decolonial approach to their everydayness, through experimental music, may open up ways to imagine otherwise worlds.

To conclude, in this event, I aim to approach everydayness and banality not as ahistorical givens, but as modes of experience that are produced in and through racial and colonial power.¹¹ While denaturalizing the banal is never easy, analytics of recent radical Indigenous and Black thought provide powerful frameworks for approaching this challenge. Additionally, a pandemic and sustained mass protests have weakened the naturalizing force of everydayness. Given these conditions, the everyday and the banal may be strategic sites to engage via a politicized conceptual artistic practice.

¹¹ In particular, I am indebted to Frank Wilderson's politicized contextualizations of banality within anti-Blackness and anti-Indianness in the Settler-Conquistador nation of the US.