

# Play as Research in the Work of George Brecht

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## INTRODUCTION

Departing from typological approaches (Stenros, 2017), how might attending to the ways specific historical and cultural configurations of knowledge and practice uniquely put “play” and “game” to work be generative for game philosophy (Fuchs 2014; Pias 2017)? This paper describes how Fluxus artist and professional chemist, George Brecht, enfold the activity of play into his work. The exposition contextualizes Brecht’s enigmatic approach to game design amid his broader artistic praxis before focusing on his *Deck: A Fluxgame* (1964). In doing so, the paper seeks to exemplify the importance of treating the ludic artifacts of innovative “thought collectives” like Fluxus not only as compelling formal experiments but also as symptomatic of a cultural imaginary providing a unique perspective on the horizons of what play and games can do (Fleck 1979). Precipitating a particularly *paideic* mode of play (Caillois 1961), *Deck*, at first blush, prompts reflection on the conditions for and limits of emergent gameplay. In light of its initial conditions, however, *Deck* takes on another character: a tool for “nomadic” thought (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; McDonald 2018; Mesch 2006).

## **Deck: A Fluxgame**

Consisting of a box containing sixty-four playing cards, *Deck* carries no conventional instructions. Similarly, the cards offer little help in divining an intended structure. The faces depict black-and-white-images – no letters, no numbers – that recall encyclopedic drawings, scientific diagrams, and sporting illustrations. Clearly still “prop[s] for play” (Sicart 2014, 14), the first-time player enacts the protocols we associate with cards – rotating, shuffling and comparing for suits – in a bid to ascertain the *Fluxgame*’s principles. Perhaps it’s like Snap? Solitaire? Some of them look like tarots. House of Cards, anyone?

In this trial and error process, *Deck* never relinquishes a definitive structure. But that’s part of the point. “There are no rules to this game,” Brecht affirms, players make up the rules “as they go along and then unmake them.” (Nabakowski 1978, 94). One time, he says, “[e]veryone had to take three pictures from three cards and turn them into a joke, improvising” (ibid). Along these lines, *Deck*’s lack of fixed rules or goals, overt opacity, and perceived affordances as cards combine to generate an iterative cycle of playful interpretation, reflection, and reinvention without clear end. True to its title, *Deck* engenders a game of becoming and unbecoming game—a *Fluxgame*.

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## **Brecht: An artist and a scientist**

To comprehend *Deck's* significance, it is instructive to detail where Brecht is coming from. Remembered as part of the 1960s to 1970s US-based collective, Fluxus, Brecht's work emerged alongside practitioners blurring the boundary between art and life. Indeed, Fluxus pieces regularly enfolded everyday objects and, importantly for us, play forms like puzzles, games, and toys.

Brecht was fairly unique, however, in his scientific background. Trained as a chemist, he worked with Pfizer and then Johnson & Johnson throughout his early art career from 1951 to 1965. In his studies of philosophy and science, Brecht took a particular interest in probability theory and went on to apply these methods to aleatory painting before sketching his thinking in a 1957 essay, *Chance-Imagery*. Here, in concluding his genealogy of chance in the sciences and the arts, he suggests that aleatory composition methods, in affording an aesthetic sensibility of uncertainty, are proper to the twentieth-century scientific episteme and its recognition of natural events' probabilistic basis.

## **The event score**

With this belief that art is, itself, a kind of scientific experiment, he developed his event scores. Brecht's early scores like "Motor Vehicle Sundown (Event)" (1959) were aleatory in method and actualization but dictated the actions of performers. His later scores, like those compiled in *Water Yam* (1963), enfolded a further dimension of uncertainty: an ambiguity of interpretation. They often focused on smaller scale, sometimes private experiences such as a dripping tap ("Drip Music" 1959) or, as Brecht reflects in an interview, even imagined events (Lebeer 1978).

Interestingly, then, subjectivity did not compromise the objectivity of an experiment for Brecht. This has something to do with how he understood interpretation to, itself, be based on a natural probabilistic "field" of experience from which actual memories are recalled and thoughts synthesized (Nyman 1976). Subjective interpretation for Brecht is, therefore, merely contiguous with the fundamental probabilistic basis of all things – chance interchangeable with choice (Dezeuze 2005).

## **Thought at play**

Just as with Brecht's event scores – where the score is not the artwork but, rather, the event precipitated by the score – the objects and drawings that comprise *Deck* are not, themselves, a game. Where the event scores "create the possibility of an event," *Deck* creates the possibility of a game (Martin, 1978, 77). Special about *Deck*, then, is not that it has no "instructions, goals, or rules for play—which is equally true of toys and puzzles—but [that] Brecht [somehow] [...] embed[s] a sense" that *Deck* is something to be turned into a game (McDonald 2017, np). *Deck* signals that it is "material" with which to make games (Boluk and LeMieux 2017, 25).

What allows *Deck* to become a game is inextricable from what Brecht refers to as the field of experience. Our desire to construct a game from *Deck* is contingent on our capacity to recognize a deck of cards as *things to be played with* (Sharp 2015). Hence, past experiences and shared cultural knowledges similarly become "material" with which to make games.

Along similar lines, this field of experience is not only the condition but the horizon for *Deck's* possible games. Indeed, over time, the player simply runs out of scenarios to invent, recapitulating the same types of game. The limits of *Deck's* particularly open, improvised play end-up being the horizons of the culturally overdetermined imagination itself.

Nevertheless, reading Brecht through Brecht provides another perspective. He uses play “in the same way that he uses chance: for the purpose of establishing an ever-wider field of real and perceived or possible inter-relationships between things” (Martin 1978, 25). Ultimately, Brecht suggests that the joy and power of open, nomadic thinking through play lies less in inventing new forms than in embracing play as a vector for relationality in itself.

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