

A KIND OF INTRODUCTION

A conversation between George Brecht, Hermann Braun, Dieter Daniels, Kasper König, Cologne, august 22, 1991.

D.D.: Should we start to talk about something related to those books in front of us?

G.B.: Why not.

D.D.: So I would like to say, that I suppose you were already a thinking and even artistically working man before you made the first note in the first notebook.

G.B.: Yes, I think I told you there was a notebook around 1956, that had all manners of ways of using chance in the visual arts.

D.D.: Yes, but this notebook is lost, as you said. It led to your text »Chance-Imagery« from 1957 (book II, note p.68 & Martin 1978, p.130-38) - so if someone reads this text, he would at least know, what would be the main points in the notebooks before the one that we will publish?

G.B.: Yes, the main ideas anyway. There were maybe about 50 or 60 ways of using chance in visual art in this notebook.

D.D.: »Chance-Imagery« is a very comprehensive and almost scholarly text.

G.B.: Yes, I rewrote it a couple of times.

H.B.: »Chance-Imagery« was in fall 1957, and in the beginning of 1957 was this other text »Project in multiple dimensions«. (Martin 1978, p.126-127) Those are as far as I know the two important texts of this early time. These paintings or drawings by chance - you made since 1955 I think?

G.B.: 1955 or 1956...

H.B.: In 1956 you had this famous exhibition in Tinton Falls, New Jersey.

G.B.: Yes, at a theater.

H.B.: On the invitation there are some photos, where you can see the drawings - I think all the drawings are gone. But later, in an interview, you discuss the method how you made these drawings, by chance operations. (Martin 1978, p.114)

G.B.: There is one example described in "Chance-Imagery" - using random numbers, determining the number of dots, which are connected. There is a diagram in "Chance-Imagery" - that is one of the methods.

H.B. (taking out a small notepad): You call them in a text for this exposition in 1956 "Experimental paintings, based on a concept of strict randomness".

G.B.: Oooh ...

D.D.: Well, I think one day we are going to edit the Hermann Braun notebooks, maybe you find more about George Brecht in them than in the George Brecht notebooks.

(Laughter)

D.D.: But this exhibition in 1956 was the first occasion where you showed your work to the public?

G.B.: Yes, I think so.

H.B.: Before this you made these other paintings, these abstract-expressionistic ones. But you never showed them, you destroyed them immediately.

G.B.: Yes, abstract-expressionistic ones. I had them at home, but I never showed them.

(Kasper König, who's train was late, enters the room)

D.D.: We have not gone very far, just from 1955 to 1957 - so you didn't miss very much - you are just in time for the beginning of the notebooks.

H.B.: I counted them, because I expected there might be the question, how many of these notebooks exist.

D.D.: That is certainly an important question for someone who makes a subscription to the notebooks: how much will I have to pay, if I'm going to buy them all?

G.B.: Oh yes! You said there are 27 - isn't it?

H.B.: 28 until 1980. The 7 first ones cover the time from 1958 till 1962. Then there are 16 notebooks from 1963 till 1972 - in different sizes - smaller or bigger than the early ones. And then there are 5 in a bigger size, since the time that you came to Cologne, from 1972 till 1980. And the others since 1980 you still have.

G.B.: Yes, three notebooks, 1980 till 1984 and then 1984 till 1988, and 1988 to the present.

(...)

D.D.: To begin with the beginning - the first line in the first notebook was written the first day you visited the class of John Cage at the "New School for Social Research". So I suppose, visiting the Cage-class had a certain importance for you, as to start with those notebooks.

G.B.: Yes, I had known about Cage's work since 1951, when I was living in Greenwich Village and a musician told me about this guy who used chance to compose music - throwing coffee-beans on music-paper and something like that. And then I did my own work on randomness in the arts in 1955-56. And then I think Allan Kaprow told me that Cage was going to give a class.

H.B.: Kaprow visited Cage's class already a year earlier - the first class was in 1957.

G.B.: But I had already met Cage in 1956 - he came to visit me in New Jersey - because I had written one or two pages on using chance in visual arts, and I had sent it to Cage. And then he wrote me back that he was coming to New Jersey to look for mushrooms, and that he would stop by. He came with David Tudor to my home. And then of course I was excited when I heard that he was going to give a class. So I took an empty notebook with me.

D.D.: So your own research in the field of chance was more or less independent from that of Cage. When your text »Chance-Imagery" was first printed in 1964 as a »Great Bear Pamphlet«, you added an after-note, that only later on you found out, that Cage might be more important in this field than Pollock. (Martin 1978, p.148)

G.B.: Yes, that's right. Because I was interested in the philosophy of science, and so I started studying probability-theory and random numbers and so forth around 1953.

D.D.: So it was at first a merely theoretical interest, even before you used chance for your visual art production?

G.B.: Yes. But then the notebooks were really a kind of energy-saving-device. Because Cage would suggest making a work with radios or making a work using some other chance-methods, the I-Ging maybe, and it was obvious after a couple of Cage-classes, that sometimes a work took days or weeks or months to finish and it was convenient to collect all the things relating to a work in the same notebook. That's why the notebooks got thicker and thicker.

D.Ds: How did you use your notebooks - did you only use them to fix your ideas as they come along - or did you often look back and forth within the notes and continued to work on older notes? Sometimes there are cross-references as »look in earlier notebook«.

G.B.: I don't remember much, but these days I don't look at old notebooks.

D.D.: Except when I ask you something for our edition...

G.B.: (Laughs) Yes. But normally it's very seldom that I go back and look at an earlier notebook that I still have, the one since 1980.

H.B.: At his apartment in the Wildenburgstrasse (where George Brecht lived from 1972 until 1987) all the old notebooks were in a kind of alcove, in his livingroom, back, very far back, where all the more important books and documents were stored. And some other, later notebooks were a little bit closer, and the newest one was always beside his chair. So - the newer the notebook, the nearer.

G.B.: Yes, sure.

D.D.: Approximately 1 meter in 10 years, like a very slow glacier.

G.B.: (Laughs) Yes.

D.D.: Another question that imposes itself upon me, as I am working on the first three notebooks: sometimes you marked pieces with an asterisk, and you told me, that those were the pieces you considered worth doing. But even out of the maybe 50 asterisks in the first three notebooks there are only four or five surviving works.

G.B.: They didn't all get realized.

D.D.: If you would have realized them all, you could have filled the whole Museum of Modern Art on every floor. What could you say about the relation between concept and realisation of a work?

G.B.: Hmm ... that it is very useful to forget ... that out of maybe twenty ideas fifteen or sixteen would be forgotten. The only ones that get into long-term memory are the ones

that are interesting enough.

D.D.: So it was a question of how strong the idea remained in your mind if it came to realization or not.

G.B.: Yes, right.

D.D.: But sometimes it seems to me, that for example in the time before your show »Toward Events« in 1959 at the Reuben Gallery you prepared some pieces specially for the occasion.

G.B.: Hmm ... not that I remember.

D.D.: Because in the months before the exhibition there is a certain activity to be noted - there are addresses of stores for special materials that you needed and so on.

H.B.: On one page you make the difference between the maybe 20 works that you showed in the Reuben Gallery: first the paintings until 1957, then the constructions, and then the newest ones which you called »events«. (see book III, p.90) And I think you certainly made the »Cabinet« especially for the exhibition.

G.B.: But don't forget some works were just made because I picked up the cabinet somewhere - or the »Suitcase« because I found a suitcase in a fleamarket. So they wouldn't be mentioned in the notebooks. Because they were an object waiting to be realized. They wouldn't be mentioned until I had to make a list of the works.

H.B.: Yes, that is right for the »Suitcase«. But for the »Dome« you made a lot of different designs - but you only made one for the exhibition. (see book III, p.31-37, 40, 78, 148)

D.D.: That's an interesting point, because that is exactly one of the questions I have on the list for our next meeting for the footnotes of the notebook: why are there so many notes for the »Dome« and no notes for the »Suitcase«.

G.B.: Yes, because the object was already there, and it developed as an object, so it was not necessary to make any notes.

D.D.: And the many pages for the »Dome«?

G.B.: Because I had the empty glass-dome - and what I could fill it with, was kind of an infinite number of possibilities.

K.K.: Were there many things you didn't do, even though you intended to do them, because somebody else did them, or you lost interest in them?

G.B.: Lost interest maybe. I don't remember coming across something that I eliminated because someone else did it. But if that had happened, I would have dropped the idea ... (Laughs)

K.K.: Even that range of »somebody else doing it« is very wide, going from science to philosophy to music to visual art. It's probably very difficult to understand for somebody looking at this material today, to see the scope, the universal scope of interest at the time.

G.B.: You mean to be interested in the philosophy of science at the same time as these pieces developed in the notebooks?

K.K.: That is very different than in the context of the 1920s ...

G.B.: Where there was more interest in dreams ...

K.K.: I guess the general climate was very different in your time. Not so much an artistic climate but with a much wider range. Even the Reuben Gallery, is basically a kind of neo-expressionist gallery - wasn't it?

G.B.: Well, Claes Oldenburg showed there for the first time, and George Segal had his first white figure there.

K.K.: But it was a kind of cooperative?

G.B.: Yes, it was a cooperative. Anita Reuben and her husband had proposed this gallery - and I think Allan was one of the first, maybe George Segal also, but Allan came to me and said that the gallery was being organized, and would I be interested in showing work there.

H.B.: But you knew each other already from the Rutgers University in New Jersey.

G.B.: Oh yes, and Bob Watts was also at the Douglass College at Rutgers.

H.B.: There is a statement by Allan Kaprow in the catalogue of your group-show »10 from Rutgers« about how you all met. (Bianchini Gallery, New York 1963)

G.B.: Yes we all lived around the same area.

H.B.: You worked for Johnson & Johnson as a chemist, George Segal had his chicken-farm very nearby, Allan Kaprow was teaching art history and Bob Watts was teaching engineering at Rutgers...

D.D.: Allan Kaprow told me, you often went from New Jersey to the city of New York in the same car - you just joined a ride.

G.B.: Yes, that's right.

D.D.: I met Allan Kaprow two weeks ago and had a look at some pages of your notebooks with him, to ask him a couple of questions - and he mentioned an interesting thing: during these years you changed completely the interior of your apartment. At first you had a quite typical American house, with normal furniture - and then you had only black cushions on the floor, when he came to your house a couple of months later. But he was not quite sure about when that was.

G.B.: That would be around the same time I met Cage, around 1956.

D.D.: That is an interesting background for me - because, there is almost no biographical information in your notebooks. I think in the first notebooks, it is about three or four times, that the word »I« appears.

G.B.: Oh...

H.B.: For George it is already something, that he wrote his address on front of the notebook.

G.B.: But that's to save the notebook in case it got lost.

H.B.: All the notebooks were some very well-kept secrets. I am not sure if your co-students with Cage - Al Hansen, Dick Higgins and so on - who published later something about the Cage-class did know, that you had these notebooks?

G.B.: I don't know.

D.D.: They must have known it, because there is at least one drawing by Al Hansen in one of the notebooks. (book VII)

G.B.: Yes, the hanging man. But we were sitting in a cafe, that didn't happen in the class.

D.D.: I asked Kaprow, who is an academically trained man, but he said he didn't keep any notebooks at the time of the Cage-class. But Al Hansen told me, that he had very comprehensive notebooks, where he noted »every word« that Cage said. Unfortunately they all got lost when several boxes from his belongings were thrown away, because the house where he stored them was sold. And when I wrote to Cage and asked him, if he ever saw you making any notes at his class, he just answered »yes«.

H.B.: Nearly all the interviewers and writers on George Brecht did not know about the notebooks. The only one is Michael Nyman, he mentions a notebook in his interview. But I have the impression that you just showed him the first notebook. (see: Martin 1978, p.115, p.121) He was wondering very much about this concrete text about this class, compared with this general information from Dick Higgins or Al Hansen, who told more personal jokes and anecdotes.

D.D.: Dick Higgins says, that you usually were the one, who started a very deep theoretical discussion with Cage at the beginning of each class, until the rest didn't know what it was all about... (see book III, p.111)

G.B.: Oh yes, very boring for Dick Higgins...

H.B.: I think you didn't show Michael Nyman any other notebooks at the time of your interview.

G.B.: No, I didn't.

H.B.: Because otherwise he wouldn't have asked you such questions as what was first - the event-scores or the objects. If he had known the notebooks, he would have known, that in most of the cases you first made the score - and later maybe the realisation as an object.

G.B.: Yes, or as an event.

D.D.: I find just this contrast very interesting: sometimes an object appears, like the »Suitcase«, and I was wondering why there are no notes on the »Suitcase«, which is one of your important works of that time - and other concepts, like the big switchboard for light-sound-events, are planned in detail on more than forty pages and were never realized. (book II, p.3-51) So there is a funny relation between concepts that lead to nothing and things that just come into being without any concept.

G.B.: (Laughs) Yes, and there are also a couple of articles started, that never got finished. On Cage and the modern world-view and so on. (see book 2, p.66)

D.D.: Some are already finished manuscripts, they could have been printed the way they are ... but that is what finally happens now with the publication of these notebooks.

K.K.: But maybe we have to be very careful not to say, that something leads to something and something else didn't lead to anything. None of these criteria makes sense - just because there is evidence in terms of an object of one sort - and in others it is not. I think that is maybe too much a point of view of what seems to be of immediate interest today. I think, even your interest in publishing a notebook as a source is already indication enough, that maybe the actual object, the actual residue of thinking, might not be that important as it was and is to many of your contemporaries of that time, who have had another priority in looking at their own work.

D.D.: You mean that there is kind of virtuality in his work - which is a very fashionable word today.

K.K.: But at the same time trying not to make this into a bogus momentum. For example there are certain philosophers who have only left incomplete works which might be much more relevant than complete treatises.

H.B.: This period, the late 50s and early 60s, was very experimental in art and in the border area between art and science.

D.D.: And if we take Cages definition of what is »experimental« we are already very close to the question which we discussed, because he said »experimental« is, when beginning with a work, I don't know what is coming out in the end.

G.B.: That is right, you try something without knowing what the end result will be. Maybe that has to do with what you were talking about too, Kasper?

K.K.: ...and probably also a certain independence of making a living on other grounds - not expecting to live from your art, not being forced to make objects for the art-market.

G.B.: Yes, that's right.

K.K.: And at the same time not to make it so heroic, that this virtuality, which as you said is now very fashionable, doesn't become a false sense of aesthetics.

G.B.: No, I don't think aesthetics was ever a main concern.

K.K.: Because the only role I could possibly play in this conversation, is to take the piss out of the seriousness.

(general Laughter)

George has been maintaining this attitude for such a long period of time. And if you now assess it, and look upon it and compress it, certain aspects will disappear because you focus too much and try too hard.

D.D.: On the other hand, you could also say the contrary. In going through the notebooks, I was astonished how serious they are. They are really documents of work, at least the early ones, maybe the later ones are more playfully. But the basis is an astonishing amount of work: reading Cassirers book on »The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms«, reading and writing articles on the New Music of Cage and others. And this seriousness is for me the necessary basis of the later playfulness.

K.K.: But when you say serious, you imply a kind of academic, scientific trained method.

D.D. Naturally that is related to my role concerning the edition of these notebooks - I have to fulfill the academic task of making it readable for a reader, by explaining in the footnotes

all the different aspects, that are touched upon, sources that are quoted and strange names that are mentioned. That means I follow in my work and reading the work and reading of George step by step, and that is why it might seem so serious to me.

G.B.: Maybe »practical« is a better word than »serious«. It is not academic, they were notes only to be used in connection with work.

H.B.: What about »professional«? You don't like this.

G.B.: No...

D.D.: When I showed the notebooks to a couple of friends, some of them interested in art, some of them not, most of them said, that they don't look at all like the notebooks of an artist - maybe of someone interested in bricolage, reading difficult books at the same time, or maybe of a musician - but not an artist.

G.B.: Oh, really?

D.D.: They expected some drawings or some sketchy pages, but your notebooks are so line-by-line.

G.B.: That is an interesting comment.

D.D.: Because the first reaction is always a true reaction - if you just show someone something...

G.B.: Yes, and say: what do you think that is?

H.B.: Dick Higgins said, in those days, when somebody asked you, »what is your profession?« - you said »I am a sculptor from New Jersey« or »A painter from New Jersey« - but you never said »I am a musician«.

G.B.: Oh, really?

H.B.: I find, in those early days, more than fifty percent of your work has something to do with musical composition.

G.B.: Yes...

D.D.: It was also a new experience for me - Hermann Braun sometimes emphasized the importance of music in our preliminary meetings - and I only realized that in working through the notebooks page by page. For example the concept of »event« takes a very interesting development. It is mentioned the first time in a quotation of John Cage »Events in sound-space« (book I, p.4) and you use the word »event« according to its sense in the dictionary, and then slowly and almost unremarked the word »event« gets more and more specific - until it is finally the word »Event« with a big E.

G.B.: Yes, like in »Toward Events«, the title for the show at the Reuben Gallery.

D.D.: And this development seems to be quite unspectacular, like in natural language, where, as Wittgenstein says, the sense of a word is determined by using it. In your case, the word shifts from a more musical connotation of »event« to the light-sound-event as in the »Three Lights« piece (book I, p.29-34), until the »Events« collected in »Water Yam«.

K.K.: But it always implies time - even the regular word »event«.

G.B.: Yes that is true, it implies time, and the accent on »event« came from music.

H.B.: And the poster for your show »Toward Events« looks like a music-score.

G.B.: Yes, with the time-scale on one side.

D.D.: Like on the cover of the catalogue for your »Heterospektive« in Bern 1978.

G.B.: Yes, that is still the same idea.

D.D.: But did you at that time also consider making a career as a musician, or as a composer, parallel to your work in the visual arts?

G.B.: No ... not as composer. I ended up composing events rather than musical pieces.

D.D.: But the first pieces were still published in the context of New Music.

G.B.: Yes, that is right, »Candle Piece for Radios« for example. (book III, p.60-61)

D.D.: But you never wanted to enter the field of New Music more deeply?

G.B.: No, it's too disgusting.

D.D.: In which way?

G.B.: Oh, in almost every way.

K.K.: But you could say that also of the visual art scene - the object-orientation and all that...

G.B.: Yes ... now that you mention it ... (laughs).

K.K.: I think it has all become so entrenched, that it is probably very difficult to imagine your kind of limbo between the different fields at that time.

(...)

D.D.: I would like to come back to your biographical background again. As I said, it is only three or four times, that the word »I« appears in the first three notebooks - so it might be interesting for the reader to know, what else you did, except writing in your notebook. You had been working as a chemist for Johnson & Johnson all the time, that is covered by the first notebooks?

G.B.: Yes, from 1959 till 1962.

D.D.: So your time-schedule was somewhat restricted, I suppose?

G.B.: Hm, to a certain extent.

D.D.: How much did you have to work - 40 hours a week?

G.B.: Yes.

D.D.: That is a lot - enough for other people to do nothing for the rest of the day. So you

have been busy on your ideas even after a couple of hours of work?

G.B.: Oh sure.

D.D.: And you had a family, a wife and a son I think?

G.B.: Yes, also.

H.B.: Was it later, that you worked as a consultant, only a few hours a week?

G.B.: Yes, that was later, 1963 or 1964 - because I had proposed a system for inventing inventions: »Innovational Research«. So the company agreed, that I could work three days a week on that and two days on the rest of the research.

D.D.: »Innovational Research« is the title of your manuscript from that time - and even in the notebooks there are several lists of literature and reflections under this title. [book IV] So this is one case, where your professional work interferes with visiting the Cage-class and developing concepts on your own?

G.B.: The Cage-class was in the evening in any case, it was always after work, or I would leave little earlier.

D.D.: No, I only wanted to say, that the »Innovational Research« is also in the notebook, so here we have something you did ...

G.B.: ... in the framework of the professional scientific work - yes, that is right.

D.D.: And the concept of »invention« also appears in notes referring to your artistic ideas. That might be one of the interferences between different fields that Kasper was talking about.

K.K.: But you kept them very much separate, the work for Johnson & Johnson and your work as an artist, hm?

G.B.: I'm not so sure - the »Innovational Research« was an overlap, because a lot of invention is here in the notebooks. The »Innovational Research« was a way to engender invention in the industrial context. But then the industrial context turned out to be so discouraging.

K.K.: But you never thought about that research-work for Johnson & Johnson in an egoistical sense of having certain kinds of patents on your own so that you would make a lot of money out of it?

G.B.: No - I have patents, I have six patents in my own name, and one co-patent with another guy in the company. But I got a dollar for each patent and for a British patent a pound. It was never a question of making money.

D.D.: But there is a funny rumor, that I heard a couple of times - that you would still make money on your patents.

G.B.: No it's not true. I never got more than a dollar. The company made the money from the patents.

H.B.: This is really a rumor, because many people asked me: from what does George Brecht live? And I said: Maybe from his patents.

D.D.: Ah - you are the source of that rumor - so we have a real close-circuit-gossip!

(general Laughter)

D.D.: How do you feel that now we are going to print those notebooks - is it a strange feeling for you, that the things that were privately noted now become visible to the public?

G.B.: Well - if Hermann Braun hadn't had the notebooks and if you hadn't discovered them and become interested in them, then they never would have been published. It was both your initiatives that keeps the ball rolling.

D.D.: But isn't it a strange feeling anyway - that those notebooks that you carried around in your youth are now for sale in a bookstore?

G.B.: Yes, it is a strange feeling.

D.D.: What do you suppose will come out of this publication? What could you imagine as a reaction?

G.B.: Well, you said, and Walther König said also that there are lots of worthwhile things in the notebooks - and so I take your word for it.

K.K.: Since George in the beginning outlined, that he has a kind of method, a handreaching distance to presence and past, he isn't so much concerned with those notebooks.

G.B.: Yes, the most useful one is the one next to my chair.

(....)

H.B.: One thing can happen with all the ideas and sketches not realized by you: that students or other people will make them, after the notebooks. So maybe an inflation of George Brecht pieces after the publication is waiting for us. How do you feel about this?

G.B.: I have often felt, that by waiting long enough, somebody will do the work.

Q.E.D.

Dieter Daniels (ed.)

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(facsimile edition of George Brechts notebooks, with annotations and an interview)