

## SARAH OPPENHEIMER IN CONVERSATION WITH AUDREY WATKINS

Audrey Watkins

Let's get immediately to the point. I'm curious what your exposure to Fluxus has been and the specific reactions you've had to any Fluxus scores.

Sarah Oppenheimer

John Cage's *4'33"* was the first Fluxus score I encountered.<sup>1</sup> That work is so aggressive in a wonderful way—it's an assertion of the present tense. After graduate school, I became an art professor at a public college on the East Coast. I was responsible for the introductory undergraduate art survey, which involved giving the same lecture in the same lecture hall four times each week. I became interested in the limits and possibilities of repetition in pedagogy. While structurally identical, the lecture could be performed differently each time. Cage's *4'33"* shared these freedoms and constraints. I performed *4'33"* in the lecture hall as a pedagogical experiment. Many class discussions grew out of these performances—the piece created anxiety, discomfort, and a new framework through which to discuss temporal form.

Around the same time—2001—I attended a performance by Alison Knowles.<sup>2</sup> I've since studied her projects and been struck by how integral duration is to her event scores. Presence and absence and time. I wasn't familiar with Harvard's Fluxus scores, and I was delighted you brought this specific collection to my attention.

Many of the scores in this collection come after and reflect on *4'33"*, questioning the limits of performance. Some of these scores allow for broad interpretation. In more traditional scoring, like with Bach, for example, the performance is highly prescribed, but there are elements left open, such as articulation patterns. Performers bring interpretive choices to scores, even though they are rigorous in their construction. Your work typically has a very specific method of interaction, where the built work is the score itself. How do you decide how much control you want to give to the audience?

The relationship between control and improvisation often comes up in conversations about my work. A touchstone for me has been early cybernetics theory and its later evolution into network design. I am interested in circulatory systems of feedback and control. Instead of an open field, my work constrains passage and flow along prescribed

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pathways. Critics have remarked that these networks are a form of control imposed on an open field. I would counter that every space we occupy, every situation we enter, is defined by myriad constraints. Sometimes we perceive these constraints but often we do not.

To me, the pertinent questions are: How do we experience agency within constraint? Are the constraints transparent or opaque?

*It occurs to me that 4'33" isn't that mutable either. The audience isn't supposed to understand what's happening, so they don't have agency to react in any way they like, such as with a weird dance. The piece could be interpreted as an attack on the constructs of performance. In your description of cybernetics, a simple dichotomy of control and freedom doesn't seem to apply.*

Indeed. Perhaps an equally important question to ask is how existing material and social systems shape human relations. Our architecture constrains and enables human habitation; our technologies are integrated into biological frameworks. In my work, architectural instruments are grafted onto existing systems to create alternative energetic patterns.

One of the things I emphasize in these projects is that everything must be driven by human energy. The body's metabolism shapes the environment. The system is analog, and its mechanisms must be somewhat legible and visible to those using it.

*When you speak about your work, a lexicon starts to emerge. For example, you refer to some of your pieces as "instruments." This term leads me to read your work in the context of classical scores where the written notes are very prescribed. That allows the musician to have a very specific type of relationship with the other performers and the audience, which couldn't happen in a less prescribed setting. By using the term "instrument," is the musical reading one that you embrace?*

I first used the term to animate the work, to distinguish it from object, sculpture, architecture. An instrument is a tool—both a musical apparatus and scientific device. An instrument performs.

My instruments are musical in that they speak to one another. The connections between them extend through boundary planes and across spatial gaps. I found that architectural drawing conventions were unable to graphically represent this energetic network. I turned to scores as a format that could organize these relationships within a visual and temporal frame.

I began by looking at fugues.<sup>3</sup> Regardless of one's musical training, when looking at the score of a fugue, you can recognize simple patterns. You can see how notes repeat, how sequences are mirrored, without having to understand how the fugue sounds. This was fascinating to me: it offered a way to visualize vibration in time.

In a composition, the time of the performer's labor is implied by the score. But what happens when

feedback loops evolve, when they are infinitely unrepeatable and always dependent on the action of any single player? There's never a way to hold that whole time.

*I'm curious about the idea of the unrepeatable. In your interactive architectural revisions, such as your work at the Wexner Center for the Arts, do you view each visitor's interaction with the work as unique and unable to be repeated?<sup>4</sup>*

Each person enters a system in their own time with their own energetic rhythms. There's a constant flow of energy passing through the system between different bodies in different locations. The metabolic system is impossible to contain as a repeatable entity. At the same time, my work limits behavior by shaping gestures, restricting or reflecting a visual field, altering a path of procession.

This is not unrelated to improvisation. While improvisation appears to be entirely unscripted and unfolding in the present, the form requires significant temporal investment prior to performance. Time is required for skill acquisition and media fluency, for thought and preparation. Improvisation is shaped by that history.

*In your definition of improvisation as opposed to composition, where does your work fall?*

My work creates alternative affordances within existing constraints. I see it as an improvisation within a networked field. That's why the Fluxus documents seem so relevant to me: there is the constraint of the score, but each score invites a playful reinvention of action. By constraining action, they invite elasticity. Like a sandbox, there's a defined terrain, but it remains open in gesture.

*I think there are elements of composition as well. No two recordings of a Bach fugue are the same because the interpretation of the score never repeats itself. Every orchestral performance involves a different combination of humans, using gestures like audible sniffs or breaths to cue entrances, similar to the cueing needed to operate your work. Your work regulates the interactive time very compositionally.*

Yes, the more you start to differentiate between composition and improvisation, the more entangled they become—the more it seems that composition is deeply improvisational. Something that is fascinating about the coordinated breathing that you're describing is the creation of a shared gesture among the performers, a synchronization that is necessary for entering. I imagine a revolving door at an airport, where there are a million people and their bags and overlapping paths of circulation, but you modulate yourself to other people in these dense environments. It's beautiful to think about music as a way of sharing an entry.

Synchronization is relevant to how my work is structured. Each piece invites coordination with others. When people spend time with the work they become aware of measure, of their own self in space and their entanglement with others.

This also makes me think about history and performance practice. There's a subconscious set of learned actions that go with a revolving door, and it's difficult to remember encountering one for the first time. Because your work is well-known, many people are already familiar with its operability before they visit it in person, meaning they've developed a performance practice or way of interacting with your work before even encountering it.

I am interested in how a work might make a familiar space unfamiliar. In the case of a swinging or revolving door, we have absorbed this behavior as an embodied gesture. We react proprioceptively, we don't need to consider the constitutive elements of each action. This is true of so much our bodies do in space. But if a revolving door were to suddenly pivot around a non-vertical axis, we would become aware of a displacement, a difference. It's that sense of *shift*

I hope people encounter when interacting with my work.

Fluxus happened in a very specific era, the 1960s, with the distinct intent to counter institutional narratives of art. You work in an institutional context, often in buildings with gridded systems and flexible floor plans that build on the tradition of modernism. I'm trying to understand your relationship to that context. There's a potentially radical reading of your work as something that questions those systems through intervention, and I'm curious what your reaction is to that reading.

That's a great question. The 20th century avant-garde already proposed alternative systems of representation built on a repudiation or demolition of historical precedent. In contrast, I want to respond to what's already there. I'm interested in the generative potential of an existing system. I've been thinking a lot about the meaning of the term "adaptive reuse." What does it mean to build upon a city that is already built? I look for patterns—frequency and rhythm—in our existing environment.

Another way to look at patterns in constructed space is to think of repetition as a way to avoid lawsuits. If you follow a standard procedure or have repeating processes, you're much less likely to get into a situation where a contractor doesn't know how to interpret something, does it incorrectly, and triggers a change order. At one point the free plan was a radical invention brought about by new construction technology. Now it's a standard procedure. Stan Allen touches on scoring and construction in his writing about the allographic arts.<sup>5</sup> He connects the composer and the architect because they both produce documents that they don't enact themselves. Is it accurate to say that you're very involved with both the production of documents pertaining to your work and the construction of the work itself?

Absolutely. A work can graft itself on many different existing structures—both material and semantic. One document rarely discussed in this context is the contract and its role in demarcating an artwork. For example, a sales contract can define an artwork's boundaries and intersection with site. It raises questions. If a site is demolished or modified, what is the status of the artwork? If the work is moved to a new location, is it the same artwork?

In the case of some of my works, the physical manifestation of the thing is not the artwork. *610-3365*,

a piece with a notable material presence, was acquired as a certified document. This contractual definition allows the work to be reconstructed in new spaces and materials while preserving the original object. The document allows a piece to be both sited specifically and reproducible.

Some of the Fluxus scores require very specific environments. For example, one score involves two audiences facing each other. The relationships you establish in the titles of your works are not tied to a specific environment. However, because much of your work is located in more recent buildings, it uses the language of drywall or insulated glass units. How would that language change or react if one of those works was located in a radically different context, like a church in Rome?

Interesting you should mention Rome. In 2010, I was a fellow at the American Academy in Rome and spent significant time in Renaissance churches. I was spellbound by their intersecting axes of symmetry and how these patterns choreographed procession through space.

How do we tweak the pattern enough that we become aware of the pattern existing?

I have used a twofold process to make such patterns apparent. The first maneuver involves the insertion of a discrete and bounded instrument—a threshold, a column, a beam. This element distinguishes itself from the surrounding architecture. The second maneuver involves the alteration of preexisting architecture and is designed to remain unnoticed by the viewer. For example, by thickening the columns at the Wexner Center for the Arts, I was able to camouflage structural alterations. The term "camouflage" is important: it suggests disguising difference by extending the patterns of an existing landscape. This hiding can be performed in plain sight. The two moves work in tandem to shape behavioral awareness and pattern recognition.

Is the camouflage codified in your construction documents? If you weren't involved in the construction of one of your works, could a contractor still effectively conceal it?

Absolutely. A contractor would be able to enact the camouflage because it is constitutive of how the work is constructed.

Your work requires a great deal of collective labor, which you acknowledge very proactively. In the Fluxus scores, it's very clear that they were riffing as individuals within an artistically free and open milieu. However, they weren't working within the frame of professional collaboration. Instead, they were trying to produce radical acts of performance. Your process, like architecture offices, requires professional collaboration. Have you felt the influence of that professional milieu?

Yes, for sure. If you want to engage with the patterns of a place, you must connect with the people who shape it. That's true on both social and material levels. Labor, the labor of making and maintaining our environment, requires an intimacy with the material world. This work is inherently collaborative and involves time spent learning the many languages of diverse types of labor. This is a generative process:

fabricators, engineers, programmers, architects bring tremendous knowledge and resources to each project. This is, of course, a professional collaboration and also a longitudinal set of relationships.

This said, the sense of presentness—the riffing you are referring to in these artworks produced in the 1960s—feels very far away. Creative strategies have shifted to meet the demands of a future-looking market. Something has changed in our modes of production, which, of course, has great implications if we want to make a sustainable creative life.

Regardless of its influence, the upside of typing on an index card is that it's immediately accessible, and it's something I conceivably could go and do today, without needing a reputation or institutional platform. Your work aligns people and capital to produce something quite complex, often through an institution. How did you get there? The earliest work on your website is from the Drawing Center, where you studied the effects of different drywall arrangements on visitors.<sup>6</sup>

For my work at the Drawing Center, “research” and “exhibition” were coincident. Artwork construction was live. I developed a set of tests, solicited test subjects, and used the exhibition budget to manually construct modular walls. Within the gallery, 16 modular wall panels were repeatedly reconfigured in response to observations of test subjects moving through the space. In hindsight, my manual labor feels anachronistic and nostalgic. I was interested in speaking to contemporary conditions of inhabiting architecture, but my means of production were those of an *auteur*. I needed to learn how to mirror and integrate the labors and technologies of contemporary life into the work.

As projects developed, they became increasingly entangled with the building site. Each manipulation of existing architecture affected building occupancy and art-viewing conventions, and therefore required further collaborative engagement of the institution.

This said, I believe it is essential to have some autonomy, to define the work in such a way that doesn't require a huge funding stream or collaborative consensus. It's wonderful if that support materializes, but there needs to be a way to always have a self-directed investigation without depending on those resources.

And prior to the Drawing Center? You studied painting during your MFA.

I made paintings that explored notational systems of human movement. But I wrestled constantly with the picture—and the picture plane. The painting as object isolates itself: it is an autonomous thing separate from where we are standing and looking. I wanted this space to be dynamically entwined with the image.

The semiotics of that representational idea are fascinating. The intellectual structure of your work is one thing, but the way that you speak and develop terminology to describe

your work consistently is incredible. What are some of your practices for developing that language?

Let me talk to you about talking to you because I think it exemplifies the process. The Fluxus scores that were an impetus for this interview gave me new language for pieces I am making now. Our dialog will inform future works. I feel that my work is in search of a new house and a new language. So while developing something that has a material manifestation, I listen for language that resonates with its physical form. When you bring the history of words into the entanglement of a tangible universe, you have a much greater ability to grasp things. Language is important when it somehow sticks to the world.

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Fluxus composer John Cage's 1958 piece 4'33" was a composition intended for any instrument or combination of instruments, which the players do not play.

2

Alison Knowles is an artist associated with the Fluxus movement. Part of her practice involves the production of soundwork and event scores.

3

Fugues are musical forms that emerged in the 17th century and feature two or more distinct musical lines interweaving melodies through the harmonic rules of counterpoint.

4

Sarah Oppenheimer's residency at the Wexner Center for the Arts resulted in the work SS-337473, which rotated on a biased axis when operated by visitors.

5

Stan Allen, "Mapping the Unmappable: On Notation," in *Practice: Architecture, Technique and Representation* (London: Routledge, 2009).

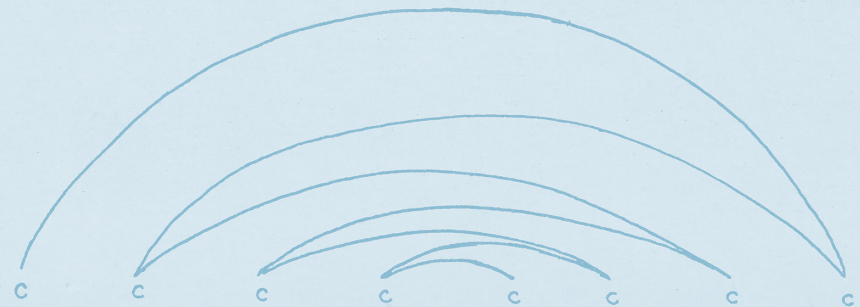
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Sarah Oppenheimer, *Hallway*, The Drawing Center, 2002. This work examined the reactions of test subjects to different configurations of drywall while walking through a hallway.

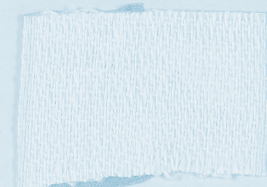
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claus bremer

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walter marchetti

Audrey Watkins is a designer, musician, and 2024 graduate of the GSD Master of Architecture I program. She is interested in the transformation of performance's role in daily life through unexpected uses of architecture.

Sarah Oppenheimer is an artist working through architectural manipulation, examining the relationship between humans and systems of built space. Oppenheimer's work has been widely internationally exhibited, including in solo exhibitions at the Wexner Center for the Arts, Kunstmuseum Thun, Pérez Art Museum Miami, Kunsthau Baselland, and MASS MoCA. She is a senior critic at the Yale School of Art and a design critic in architecture at the Harvard Graduate School of Design.

The Harvard Art Museum's collection of Fluxus Scores are examples of event scores, a feature of Fluxus performance festivals. These works explore the limits of the construction of a performance through scoring and are as often thought experiments as performable works.

p. 198 Fig. 1 Claus Bremer, *Regular-Irregular*, 1966.  
p. 199 Fig. 2 Henning Christiansen, *Jump*, 1966.  
p. 200 Fig. 3 Ludwig Gosewitz, *In-Between*, 1965.  
p. 201 Fig. 4 Ben Vautier, *Spit*, 1960.  
p. 202 Fig. 5 Walter Marchetti, *Here-There*, 1960.