

**Elena Colzi**

*University of Rome Tor Vergata, Rome, Italy*

<https://orcid.org/0009-0000-0356-2154>

## The Event Score as a Transnational device. Fluxus Practices and the Case of Giuseppe Chiari (1926–2007)

**Abstract:** The contribution examines the Event score as a key artistic device for the development and expansion of Fluxus avant-garde as a transnational, non-hierarchical movement. Originating in the experiments of George Brecht and informed by John Cage's ideas on Indeterminacy, the Event score is understood as a transcultural language capable of circulating beyond national, disciplinary, and authorial borders. Through an analysis of artists' collaboration, mail correspondence, and Dick Higgins's concept of exemplativism, the study focuses in particular on the work of the Italian composer and Fluxus artist Giuseppe Chiari (1926–2007). His practice demonstrates how the score functioned simultaneously as a compositional method, performative instruction, and a medium of exchange, allowing Fluxus works to travel internationally without requiring the artist's physical mobility.

**Keywords:** Fluxus; Event score; Transnationalism; Indeterminacy; Giuseppe Chiari.

### Introduction

Fluxus was an Avant-garde movement focused on the principle of *total art*, common to musicians, chemists, visual artists, performers, writers, and dancers. Even though those involved were officially grouped under the name *Fluxus* only in 1962 by the Lithuanian artist George Maciunas, the seeds of Avant-garde experimentation had already been developing worldwide since the late 1950s. From the very beginning, Fluxus disregarded disciplinary borders and categories, favoring process, action, and exchange over fixed artistic identities. Strategies of collaboration and the international circulation of information became the means by which Fluxus fashioned an approach to both art and life in a radically critical manner. In doing so, Fluxus anticipated and helped shape many of the ideologies that today define the twenty-first century interdisciplinary artistic life.

Hannah Higgins, scholar and daughter of Fluxus artists Dick Higgins and Allison Knowles, provides terminology to understand the long-distance collaboration of Fluxus avant-garde artists, defining their border crossings as a transnational process.<sup>1</sup> As Higgins argues, while certain modern movements can be understood through their

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<sup>1</sup>Hannah Higgins, "Border Crossings. Three Transnationalisms of Fluxus," in *Not the other avant-garde. The Transnational Foundations of Avant-Garde Performance*, ed. James M. Harding and John Rouse (University of Michigan Press, 2006), 265.

ability to articulate a distinctly national *gestalt*, as in the case of phenomena such as American painting or Italian Futurism, we can recognize another modern trajectory that arises precisely in opposition to this logic. According to her, the Avant-garde defines itself as consciously transnational, seeking to transgress and ultimately disregard national borders, as well as the centrist political and economic formations that came to define the modern era. The term *transnationalism* in her argument, drawing in part on Ken Friedman's writings, is explicitly positioned against the notion of the *internationalism*, a term frequently employed by Fluxus artists to denote the consolidation of American hegemonic power in the postwar period. It is therefore unsurprising that Abstract Expressionism, elevated to the status of an American triumph in the 1950s, was strongly rejected by the Avant-garde. From this perspective, the primary characteristic that distinguishes Fluxus as a transnational movement lies in its fundamentally non-hierarchical nature.

Building on this premise, this contribution seeks to foreground the fundamental role embodied by the Event score format, one of the main artistic devices developed within Fluxus. In particular, it argues that the Event score functioned as a key device that enabled the international dissemination of Fluxus practices, facilitating their circulation across geographic and cultural boundaries. Most notably, it is a format that began with George Brecht and played a crucial role in enabling the emergence of an art practice that could operate transnationally, thanks to the combination of conceptual form and concrete materiality. Due to the simplicity and essential nature of the format, often consisting of single sentences on paper describing elementary actions such as walking, listening, drinking, or eating, Event scores possessed both a universal potential and a deeply individual dimension, as even the most ordinary action is performed differently according to individual, cultural, and contextual conditions. The Event score is here intended as a transcultural language, capable of traveling much further than those who produced it, whose creation is specifically aimed at its activation by thirds. Within the context of Fluxus formats such as Fluxkits, Fluxfilms series, the production of ready-mades, and the many other artistic formats documented to date, the Event score in its performative dimension, stands out for its particular ease of transmission, as scores were often sent through regular mail; for the dissolution of hierarchical distinctions between author and performer, thus enabling a radically open interpretative field; and for its frequently immediate intelligibility, largely independent of the cultural and social context of its origin, which significantly contributed to its wide and transnational circulation. Particular attention will be given to composer and artist Giuseppe Chiari's scores (1926–2007), as the only Italian Fluxus artist whose works have been performed beyond Italian borders, from Florence to the United States. By examining the Event score as both a conceptual and operative framework, the contributor argues that Fluxus articulated modes of artistic production that deliberately resisted hierarchical structures and national frameworks.

## Origins of the Event score

From the late 1950s to the early 1960s, experiments in sound art and performance art were taking place simultaneously in Japan, Germany, Eastern Europe, and the United States. As for the origins of the Event score genre, it is important to note that it revolves around John Cage's 1957–59 Experimental Composition Course at the New School for Social Research in New York, which Brecht attended during the summers of 1958 and 1959.<sup>2</sup> Here, he observed how scores could operate in an indeterminate or ambiguous relationship to their realization. In this context, Event scores were developed to outline performance works without relying on traditional musical notation, while also integrating perceptual phenomena that extend beyond sound. Following Cage's example, whose ideas on the indeterminacy of the arts (and life) were at that point well known, many of the artists and musicians who attended his course became interested in the use of musical instruments as symbols, rather than as sources of sound. By doing so, they were moving away from the idea of musical gestures toward the pure, plain action.<sup>3</sup> Cage described his approach to the class as a teaching situation that didn't involve a body of material to be transmitted by him to them. It was important that students conduct musical and non-musical experiments using chance operations adapted to a variety of formats, from poetry to installation and performance.<sup>4</sup> European Fluxus cell of activity developed around composer Karlheinz Stockhausen in Germany. His course in Darmstadt was the center of European Avant-garde music. Stockhausen also worked in the electronic music studio of West German Radio in Cologne, as well as in the performance atelier of his wife, the painter Mary Bauermeister, also in Cologne. Even though European Fluxus developed an independent aesthetic, it is significant that Events written by Cage's students in New York were presented in Cologne in 1960. Both Cage's class and Stockhausen's atelier are described by Higgins as comparatively non-hierarchical exchanges of information across national, disciplinary, and age boundaries, since both the class and the atelier were free exchanges among artists.<sup>5</sup>

Many of the Fluxus artists met one another in contexts related to experiments in the field of musical education. This is no coincidence: among all artistic languages, music was the point of departure from which these avant-garde ideas first emerged, before extending beyond it. If we think about a musical score or a melody, and about the elements that traditionally constitute music, we realize that they belong to a universal language. Music does not depend on complex verbal grammar, spoken language, or cultural barriers; whether melodic or non-melodic, it represents a form of expression that is more immediate than artistic forms that involve verbal language,

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<sup>2</sup> Natilee Harren, *Fluxus Forms. Scores, Multiples, and the Eternal Network* (The University of Chicago Press, 2020), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Rovere and Patrizio Peterlini, *Sense Sound/Sound Sense* (Danilo Montanari Editore, 2019), 36.

<sup>4</sup> Hannah Higgins, *Fluxus Experience* (University of California Press, 2002), 2.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

such as poetry or literature. For this reason, it can also be more easily grasped and absorbed, allowing experimentation and radical innovation to emerge more naturally.<sup>6</sup> This is already evidence of an avant-garde movement, Fluxus, that, even in its earliest and most embryonic form, was inherently transnational.

The Event score is the main support for a performance technique in which everyday actions are framed as minimalist performances or, occasionally, as imaginary and impossible experiments in everyday situations. The instruction is typically brief and written in colloquial language, composed to be performable by anyone. As Adrian Heathfield wrote in 2004, in performance art, the artwork is reimagined as a temporal act, blurring the very distinction between “real” time and “fictional” time, thereby transforming the work into an artistic experience rooted in space and embodied in the artist’s physical presence, becoming a different piece each time it is performed.<sup>7</sup> As Higgins rightly says: “These call for the performance of everyday rituals or routine (or absurd versions of these) in such a way that the informational structure of the routine -its experiential character, possible contradictions, or normally ignored elements are thrown into high relief for the performer or viewer.”<sup>8</sup> Alison Knowles’ piece “Proposition” of 1962 reads simply “Make a salad”. Many of these events, like the latter, evoke unusual sounds, according to the Cagean notion of “non-instrumental sound”. One of the first Event scores analyzed by Fluxus scholar Natilee Harren is George Brecht’s *Drip Music (Drip Event)*:

For single or multiple performances. A source of dripping water and an empty vessel are arranged so that the water falls into the vessel. Second version: Dripping.<sup>9</sup>

Brecht’s score became part of the standard repertoire in Fluxus concerts, first performed throughout the first European Fluxus Concert tour between September 1962 and the summer of 1963. Over the tour, as far as we know, *Drip Music* was performed at least ten times, never by the author himself. The performance was performed by Dick Higgins, George Maciunas, and the Fluxus collective, coordinated by Maciunas. Each performance differed, despite being based on the same score. The notation is a simple, uncomplicated text that describes the transfer of water from one container to another. Still, we could agree with Harren when she says that *Drip Music*’s wording is “precisely imprecise, as ambiguous as possible, a condensation of text designed to open out meaning to the widest range of interpretation.”<sup>10</sup> Its inherent ambiguity ensures that the score remains open-ended. Brecht ultimately performed his own work

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 55–58.

<sup>7</sup> Paolo Martore and Chiara Mu, *Performance Art: traiettorie ed esperienze internazionali* (Castelvecchi, 2018), 254–56.

<sup>8</sup> Higgins, “Border Crossings. Three Transnationalisms of Fluxus,” 269.

<sup>9</sup> Harren, *Fluxus Forms. Scores, Multiples, and the Eternal Network*, 1.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 1–2.

only in 1963, enacting gestures that were not grandiose but natural, in contrast to the approach adopted by the other artists in Europe. Throughout this period, Brecht maintained a favorable stance toward interpretative variability, asserting that any realization is feasible and that he would not reject any particular performance.<sup>11</sup> This way of activating scores in a personal manner, even beyond the original author's intention, was central to the Fluxus project and was conceptualized and named by Dick Higgins as "exemplativism". It was explained in his *Exemplativist manifesto* in 1976:

Any realization...will necessarily be to some extent arbitrary, and is therefore an example rather than a fixity. [...] The emphasis rests on precisely what the work is an example of, and not on the precise structure or realization of the work...Since this process stresses not the single realization as the work, but the dialectic between any single realization and its alternates [...].<sup>12</sup>

Certainly, the dialectical relationship between the performances also underpins the transnationalism of the Fluxus avant-garde. The result of this was that scores, which appeared as simple linear instructions, could be sent from one performer to another without any form of explanation, without visual support that in any way explained the execution of the Event. Within this context, the score's primordial nature endows the work with a certain generative potential: it does not require adherence, thanks to the author's depersonalization, who simply becomes the first element in a chain aimed at producing a series. In some sense, there is also a transhistorical dimension to it; the format does not belong to a specific art-historical context but exists only as long as there is someone to receive it. It is, in fact, conceived to be misinterpreted: not to produce uniformity, but to reveal difference. This conceptual position also reveals its practical advantage from a logistical point of view, serving as a concrete strategy for allowing scores to travel much farther than those who produced them. The Event score, with its characteristic openness, serves as the prototype for many of the works produced by Fluxus. While it is true that there is no consistency in the choice of formats for the works, it can be said that the works in different materials (readymades, performances, concerts, statements, etc.) share qualities of transitivity and variability and, above all, question the identity of the subject and object, and therefore also the hierarchy of author, performer, and viewer.

It is precisely the concept of 'ambiguity' in Event scores that constitutes the crucial theoretical node for understanding their function: an ambiguity that is not mere semantic indeterminacy, but an operative space in which a continuous dialectical exchange between author and performer takes place. In this sense, the score does not prescribe a closed action; rather, it opens up a field of possibilities, inviting the

<sup>11</sup> Michael Nyman, "A Conversation about Something Else: An Interview with George Brecht," in *An Introduction to George Brecht's Book of the Tumbler on Fire*, ed. Henry Martin (Muphla Edizioni, 1978), 108.

<sup>12</sup> Dick Higgins, "Exemplativist Manifesto," in *Intermedia, Fluxus and the Something Else Press: Selected Writings by Dick Higgins*, ed. Steve Clay and Ken Friedman (Siglio Press, 2018), 156.

performer to complete it, transform it, or even betray it. The work thus comes into being within a dynamic tension between writing and enactment.

Drawing on Mario Perniola's analysis, ambiguity should be understood as a form of polyvalent action: not a lack of meaning, but an excess of it, capable of generating multiple performative outcomes.<sup>13</sup> Perniola interprets ambiguity as a condition that suspends the rigidity of meaning and opens onto experience, making possible a mode of action that does not resolve into a single interpretation but instead proliferates through practice.

It is this operative ambiguity that functions within Event scores: an ambiguity that leads to action, always individual, because each performer actualizes it according to their own context and sensibility, yet at the same time universal, because it is grounded in minimal, elementary, almost anonymous instructions. On the one hand, as argued in American histories and surveys of performance art from the 1960s to the 1990s, performative action activates the subjective identity of the one who performs it;<sup>14</sup> on the other hand, the Fluxus substrate from which these scores emerge is so primary and depersonalized that it resists any local or identity-based rooting.

### Social dimension of scores

By 1961, George Brecht had begun to copy his scores into different formats, on various sizes of paper and started sending them to artist friends through the mail. The practice was rapidly adopted by Fluxus artists residing near one another, and it proved especially widespread among artists whose correspondence was required to traverse national boundaries. Dedications across Europe were definitely common: for example, George Brecht (American then living in Nice) wrote *For a Drummer* (for Eric), to Danish Fluxus artist Eric Andersen. As Higgins points out, a great number of these dedications involve Fluxus artist Nam June Paik,<sup>15</sup> probably because he was one of the artists in the core group that would travel all the way through the European tours. George Maciunas wrote *Twelve Piano Compositions for Nam June Paik* (1962), Emmett Williams wrote *Piano Concert for Paik No.2* (1965), and Japanese Fluxus artist Takehisha Kosugi wrote *South No.2 (to Nam June Paik)*.

### Giuseppe Chiari

Mail correspondence also offered a particularly practical means of dissemination for artists who were unwilling or unable to travel. This is especially evident in the case of the Italian Fluxus artist Giuseppe Chiari, whose work circulated widely at both national and international levels through correspondence, supported by the

<sup>13</sup> Mario Perniola, "Silence, the Utmost in Ambiguity," *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 12, no. 4 (2010): <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1670>.

<sup>14</sup> Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

<sup>15</sup> Higgins, "Border Crossings. Three Transnationalisms of Fluxus," 279.

use of the score as a dispositive in its various typologies. Giuseppe Chiari was born and lived his life in Florence. He started as a composer, devoting the early part of his career to writing traditional music in traditional notation (notes on a pentagram). From the late 1950s onward, he developed a strong interest in Avant-garde music and founded an association in Florence dedicated to its promotion, which was frequented by artists and musicians, including Sylvano Bussotti. Following his encounter with the composer Heinz Klaus Metzger, he was introduced to the Fluxus Avant-garde, and his work 'Gestures on Piano' (*Gesti sul piano*) was performed by composer Frederic Rzewski at the first Fluxus Festival (*Fluxus Internationale Festspiele Neuester Musik*) organized by George Maciunas in Wiesbaden in 1962. Over the course of his career, Chiari produced numerous works in a wide range of formats; however, it can be argued that all the forms his work assumed over the years were grounded in the same underlying concept of the score as devised by George Brecht in New York, understood as both Event score and musical score.

Beginning with one of his earliest minimalist works, *Intervalli*, composed in the 1950s and written in a conventional musical notation, his scores gradually became more performative. The shift from notes on the staff to verbal instructions occurred through intermediate phases, including handwritten interventions in pen or ink, erasures, and graphic insertions on the stave. These successive modifications increasingly questioned the status of the score itself, moving it from a fixed notational device toward a more open, conceptual, and performative framework centered on gestures. An example of an Event score closer to the Fluxus model could be represented by *Piece for Thermometer Case* (1966):

Take a thermometer case. Divide it into two pieces. Place and move the two pieces in various ways. Divide, place, move, stop, touch, contemplate, touch, place, contemplate, join, divide, place, touch, contemplate.<sup>16</sup>

The first element to emerge is the object itself: a thermometer case, domestic, modest, and yet not entirely trivial. It is typically perceived as secondary, an accessory to the "main" object (the thermometer), and precisely for this reason, it tends to be overlooked. By foregrounding such an object, the score subtly shifts attention toward what is usually marginal, inviting a reconsideration of its material and perceptual presence.

The initial gesture, dividing the case into two parts, is presented in an essential, almost neutral manner. Yet this simplicity opens up a wide range of possibilities: each performer may enact the division differently, according to their own sensibility, tools, or context, showing the score's suitability for travel around the globe. From this point onward, the score unfolds through an accumulation of verbs and actions such as placing, moving, touching, and contemplating, without any prescribed temporal structure. The sequence includes repetitions and slight variations, generating a continuous flow of gestures that resist closure or fixed interpretation.

<sup>16</sup> Giuseppe Chiari, "Pezzo per custodia di termometro," in *Musica Senza Contrappunto*, ed. Giuseppe Chiari (Lericci Editore, 1969).

While the piece may partially produce a non-musical sonic outcome through the manipulation of the object, its primary focus clearly lies in the gestural dimension. It is the unfolding of action itself, its repetition, that becomes central. In this sense, the thermometer case functions less as an object of representation and more as an instrument, carefully chosen yet ultimately subordinate to the activation of performativity in its most immediate and essential form. This emphasis on gesture reflects a broader tendency in Giuseppe Chiari's scores, in which objects serve as catalysts for action, directing attention to the experiential and processual nature of the work rather than to any fixed aesthetic result. The main tool you need to perform Chiari's pieces is your physical body.

The artist also presents events related to spatial context, still expressed in a very linear and simple manner. This is the case of *Colour* (1966):

Indicate a color actually in the room, talk about this color<sup>17</sup>

or *Untitled* (1972):

Cross a bridge.<sup>18</sup>

Chiari's work is deeply rooted in the Fluxus ethos, particularly through his engagement with the Event score that, in his practice, maintains a simple grammatical structure yet frequently accumulates verbs and actions that are both coherent and, at times, deliberately contradictory. Chiari's involvement with Fluxus can be explained by the shared vision that united the Avant-garde and the artists and was also supported by the creation of his personal network. He often produced editions of his works himself and distributed them to composers and friends, most notably to the composer Giancarlo Cardini.

This proactive, self-driven approach brought him into direct contact with Charlotte Moorman, a renowned American cellist and performer, for whom he composed a piece that, through her international tours, reached audiences worldwide. Between 1963 and 1980, she organized the Annual New York Avant-Garde Festival on 15 occasions. From 1966, this legendary festival brought together the world's Avant-garde artists in public spaces in New York, including Central Park (1966), Staten Island Ferry (1967), and Grand Central Terminal (1973). At the same time, Moorman developed her own highly personal repertoire of musical pieces, which she repeatedly performed. These included works by John Cage, Philip Corner, Jim McWilliams, Yoko Ono, and Nam June Paik. In July 1964, Moorman wrote a letter from New York to Chiari in Florence explaining her plans for the Festival of New Music in New York in the summer and, on Stockhausen's recommendation, invited Chiari to share a composition for cello that she could perform in the next edition. A few days later, in early August 1964, Chiari replied, informing her that he had sent three scores via air mail that he could propose for the Festival: *Per Arco*, *Qualche oggetto*, *La strada*. Chiari originally composed *Per Arco* in 1963 and dedicated it to musician Italo Gomez, who gave its premiere in Palermo. From a technical standpoint, the performance of *Per*

<sup>17</sup> Giuseppe Chiari, *Musica Madre* (Giampaolo Prearo Editore, 1973), 82.

<sup>18</sup> Chiari, *Musica Madre*, 105.

*Arco* unfolds according to an undefined temporal structure that remains conceptually open. It begins with several minutes of prerecorded audio of bombings and gunfire, followed by a pause. The work then proceeds with an extended section in which the performer intervenes gesturally with cello and bow. These interventions encompass a wide range of physical actions: dragging, rubbing, pressing, and striking that push the instrument beyond its sonic and material limits.

Starting from 1964 onwards, Chiari's *Per Arco* was included in Moorman's repertoire. In 1968, Moorman played *Per Arco* at the London Institute of Contemporary Arts. In Moorman's interpretation, this composition consisted of five minutes of the recorded sounds of bombs falling during World War II, one minute and 40 seconds of silence, and six minutes of her reaction to the sounds of war with her cello and bow.

Starting with *Per Arco*, Chiari never stopped corresponding with Charlotte Moorman; he sent her scores and posters from events in Europe, as well as invitations to various initiatives. Chiari was also very close to Nam June Paik, to whom he dedicated several works, together with Charlotte. One example is *Don't Trade Here* to Charlotte Moorman and Nam June Paik (1965):

Repeat the sentence 122 times: Don't trade here! The owners of this business have surrendered to the race mixers. On a large board visible to the audience, make a mark for each repetition. The marks can be of any shape and differ from one another. [...]19

Once again, the score exemplifies the striking simplicity and immediacy of the Event score as an international format. The core action, repeating a phrase and recording its occurrence through marks, can be enacted anywhere, with minimal means, and translated across languages and situations while preserving its performative logic. At the same time, the openness of the score allows for variation: the tone of the voice, the pacing of the repetition, the visual form of the marks, and the spatial setting all contribute to producing distinct realizations. The accumulation of repetitions generates both temporal and physical intensification, transforming a basic linguistic act into a durational performance. The visual component (the board progressively filled with marks) renders the passage of time and the persistence of the action tangible. In this way, the score operates through a dual register, verbal and visual, reinforcing its clarity and communicative power.

Between 1972 and 1973, Chiari presented his works himself, although he never stopped dedicating them to performers other than himself, in some of the most important European venues for art and culture: Staatstheater in Kassel, Bitef in Belgrade, Galerie 11 in Paris, Galleria Schema in Florence, and Kunstverein in Hannover.

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<sup>19</sup> Chiari, *Musica senza contrappunto*, 76–78.

## Conclusion

This contribution has proposed that the Event score was more than the application of one among many formats adopted by Fluxus; rather, it was the enabling equipment that facilitated the direction through which the movement could emerge, operate, and expand as a transnational Avant-garde. By combining conceptual clarity with material simplicity, the score enabled a form of artistic production that could circulate independently of stable authorship, institutional frameworks, and national contexts. In this sense, Fluxus did not merely adopt transnational strategies; rather, it embedded them within the very structure of its artistic practices. Indeed, its Indeterminacy, with roots in the teachings of Cage, placed importance on the authority of the composer to the act of realization itself, transforming performance into a site of activation rather than execution.

At the core of this argument lies the concept of ‘ambiguity’. As demonstrated, the ambiguity of the Event score is not a limitation but a generative condition: an operative openness that sustains a continuous dialectical exchange between author and performer. Drawing on Mario Perniola’s notion of ambiguity as polyvalent action, the score emerges as a device that produces multiplicity rather than fixed meaning. The case of Giuseppe Chiari has further illustrated how this structure operates in practice. While operating in Florence, but with applications all over Europe as well as the United States, Chiari’s work demonstrates how the score may also serve as a tool for composing, as a performative instruction, and a medium for communication. Therefore, through correspondence, dedications, and collaborations with figures such as Charlotte Moorman and Nam June Paik, Chiari’s works crossed borders without requiring the artist’s physical mobility. His scores exemplify how Fluxus sustained an international network grounded not in stylistic coherence, but in shared operative principles.

More broadly, this perspective invites a reconsideration of Avant-garde practices beyond narratives centered on objects, movements, or geographically bounded histories. By contextualizing the Event score as a transnational dispositive, this article highlights how artistic exchange can be facilitated through minimal, reproducible, and open-ended structures that privilege activation over authorship and circulation over localization. In doing so, it contributes to a broader understanding of how avant-garde practices anticipate contemporary modes of global artistic production, in which mobility, translation, and reactivation are not secondary effects but foundational conditions.

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