



## Restaging Hi Red Center's *Cleaning Event* Warren Enström



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### Abstract

As the genre of performance art ages, we will need to develop strategies beyond photo, video, and audio to document this form of art. This article looks closely at the Fluxus tradition of event scores, comparing three different restagings of Hi Red Center's *Street Cleaning Event* in order to find elements of performance art pieces that people can think about in undertaking a restaging process. The article references the musicological concept of historically-informed performance practice in order to highlight how music, a performing arts discipline that also relies on scores to restage pieces, has tackled the issue of restaging pieces for which only scores (e.g. no archival documentation beyond the score itself) exist. Using historically informed performance practice to model the author's thought around scores, it becomes clear that scores are never enough to be able to restage a piece. More research is necessary. The five aspects of restaging the author investigates are location, material, context, intent, and style. When research documents (works of art, archival photographs and footage, and interviews) are analyzed for these five elements, event scores are much easier to interpret and restage, without relying on creating a direct re-performance of the original work. As the artists behind these original works die, new traditions will need to develop around restaging these works. The historically informed performance practice movement in music makes a clear argument for carefully balancing research and creativity in order to bring these old pieces into the present in an informed way, historically and artistically.

**Keywords:** Fluxus, performance practice, Hi Red Center, Japanese avant-garde, performance art

### Introduction

What does it mean to restage a happening? As performance art has entered the canon of art history, there have been many attempts at reenacting, restaging, and re-performing events. As an example, *Yoko Ono: One Woman Show, 1960-1971*, which

ran from May 15 to September 7, 2015 at the New York Museum of Modern Art, included many aspects of Yoko Ono's creative history (Museum of Modern Art, "Yoko Ono: One Woman Show"). Of primary interest in this case are the performances of *Bag Piece* (1964) that visitors participated in. Although Ono was not involved in every performance, visitor performances remain credited to Ono despite her absence. The fundamental identity of the work is unchanged, despite being performed by others. For works of performance art that engage more directly with space and place, like Fluxus event scores or Alan Kaprow's Happenings, experiments with restaging become complicated.

In this article, I will examine Hi Red Center's performance, *Cleaning Event*, first performed on October 16, 1964, in Tokyo Japan. This piece involves cleaning the sidewalk with tools ill-suited for the task, emerging from a specific political and cultural moment in Japan's history. I compare the first *Cleaning Event* (1964) with ones performed in New York (1966) by George Maciunas, and my own restaging in Middletown, Connecticut (2016). Analyzing how each restaging used the original event for source material, I argue that as the genre of the event score ages, the concept of performance practice, borrowed from musicology, becomes increasingly relevant in realizing these kinds of scores. This case study explores strategies for restaging art performances seemingly bound to the historical contexts in which they were performed.

### ***Street Cleaning Event, Tokyo, 1964***

On October 16, 1964, the Japanese performance art collective Hi Red Center walked up Namiki Street, in the Ginza district of Tokyo, Japan, got on their hands and knees, and began to scrub the sidewalk with tiny brushes, industrial solvents, and fine

linen napkins. They claimed to be from the government, which had been busy preparing Tokyo for the coming 1964 Summer Olympic Games. The small group wore lab coats and facemasks, carrying signs in both Japanese and English that commanding the city to “Be clean!” Following their defeat in World War II and after years of US occupation, the Japanese government saw the Olympics as Japan’s opportunity to reenter the global stage, an opportunity to show Japanese citizens that it was committed to its citizenry (Wilson 2012, 177-178). In order to prepare the nation for the international gaze, the Japanese government invested in many civic projects, such as building new stadiums, constructing new highways, and undertaking social engineering projects. One such project was to reduce litter through a “clean up the city” campaign. Hi Red Center took this campaign literally. They were so fastidious about their approach that a police officer thanked them for their service (Tozawa 2011, 38).

Hi Red Center was founded in May 1963 by Genpei Akasegawa, Jiro Takamatsu, and Natsuyuki Nakanishi (Tozawa 2011, 34). These three were the core members, but like many anti-art collectives, Hi Red Center had a fluid membership depending on the needs of each event. The aims of the events the group created were to “shake up the bored but affluent middle class” through performances that intersected with everyday life (Havens 2006, 148-149). These direct actions used quotidian tools – brushes, napkins, and the act of cleaning – and brought them onto the public street, combining them with a bureaucratic aesthetic that poked fun at the Government’s social micromanagement of society, evidenced through the institution of litter reduction programs in specific cities.

These poorly suited tools used by Hi Red Center made an epic endeavor of a simple task. Wearing lab coats and facemasks transforms a daily activity to a matter of national health. By representing themselves as the government, the community's responsibility of keeping the street clean becomes a bureaucratic extension of the state. Art historian Alexandra Munroe identifies performances such as these as critiquing the "mechanical banality and covert authoritarianism underling Japan's mass capitalist society" (Munroe 1994, 159). Per Thomas Havens, such performances by Hi Red Center were "acerbic critiques of the safe, predictable middle-class society then taking shape under bureaucratic management," providing Japanese citizenry the opportunity to "exercise greater agency by taking an active part in politics rather than resigning themselves to the state's penetration of civil society" (Havens 2006, 149).

It is important, however, not to overstate the political interpretation of *Cleaning Event*. Genpei Akasegawa notes that Hi Red Center was "thinking seriously about jokes all the time" (quoted in Tozawa 2011, 39). Thus, while critique of governmental power is a pertinent factor of this piece, the group's concern with playfulness and humor set the terms for how they would engage with the government's call to clean the streets. Hi Red Center cleaned with deliberate misunderstanding. Passersby watch on, seeing the governmental figures happily attending their Sisyphean task.

### ***Street Cleaning Event, New York, 1966***

The second *Street Cleaning Event* was staged at the Grand Army Plaza in New York City on June 11, 1966, through the organizational efforts of George Maciunas. Like the first event, this staging incorporated lab coats, industrial solvents and linen napkins, and performed the event on a downtown street. The New York staging was announced

as a performance of Hi Red Center's *Street Cleaning Event*, not as a bureaucratic organization sent by the government to clean the streets. An audience gathered around the participants in New York not only for its intervention, but because it was part of Fluxfest, a concert series put on by George Maciunas and other artists involved with Fluxus in New York City (Museum of Modern Art, "Street Cleaning Event"). The piece was evolving.

The New York staging marks a shift away from the piece's original Japanese context, toward an abstract performance of the piece itself. While Hi Red Center's aim was to critique their government, Fluxus appreciated the group's meticulous focus on the quotidian activity of cleaning. It is important to note that like Hi Red Center, Fluxus maintained radical positionality against governmental and economic power, demonstrating the two groups' affinity for each other. Certainly, both groups' desires for radical aesthetic intervention in daily life made avant-garde street performances an intriguing form with which to experiment. Further, the circulation of artists between New York and Japan allowed for a regular exchange of ideas, and New York's Fluxus group had a strong representation of Japanese artists such as Yasunao Tone, Yoko Ono, and Takehisa Kosugi, who had been involved in Hi Red Center pieces, (Tozawa 2011, 37).

A text score describing the concept of the work accompanied the second Street Cleaning Event. It is a simple score:

Performers are dressed in white coats like laboratory technicians. They go to a selected location in the city. An area of a sidewalk is designated for the event. This area of sidewalk is cleaned very thoroughly with various devices not usually used in street cleaning, such as: dental tools, toothbrushes, steel wool, cotton balls with

alcohol, cotton swabs, surgeon's sponges, tooth picks, linen napkins, etc. (eds. Friedman, Smith, and Sawchyn 2002, 49)

The score appears in the *Fluxus Workbook* compiled by Ken Friedman, Owen Smith, and Lauren Sawchyn in 2002, suggesting it was written for, or after, the 1966 New York City staging. Fluxus artists in particular were interested in creating simple event scores and communicating them through verbal means.

While artists involved with Hi Red Center were actively making event scores similar to these, Hi Red Center's approach also involved the creation of objects or artifacts, coupled with post-facto documentation. An example of this is *Bundle of Events*, a poster written by Hi Red member Shigeko Kubota to describe the original performance, to be exhibited at the second performance at Fluxfext (Museum of Modern Art, "Bundle of Events") (Carter 2013, para 3 plus map image's label):

16 Oct. 1964

Cleaning event on Namiki St.

Ginza, 9.30 AM.

1. Performers were dressed in white coats, white gloves, surgical masks, blind mans spectacles and armbands with Hi Red Center insignia "!"
2. Performers used dusters, floor brooms, housecloths, scrubbing brushes, sand paper, wire brushes, coat brushes, tooth brushes, cotton balls, window cleaning fluid, soap, deodorizer, alcohol, etc. to clean the streets which they did very gently as they would their own rooms.
3. Cleaned streets were marked by posters saying: "this place already cleaned". (Museum of Modern Art, "Bundle of Events", item 20 in image)

The documentation examined here differs from and the *Fluxus Workbook* score in a couple key areas. First, the description of the garb. In *Bundle of Events*: “white coats, white gloves, surgical masks, blind mans spectacles and armbands with Hi Red Center insignia.” In *Fluxus Workbook*: “white coats like lab technicians”). Significantly, the manner of cleaning also differs: “clean the streets [...] very gently as they would their own rooms,” compared with “cleaned very thoroughly with various devices not usually used in street cleaning.” Yet, the two are nearly the same document. *Bundle of Events* was produced by George Maciunas and written by Kubota as a way to introduce New York to the interventions that Hi Red Center had already undertaken in Tokyo. It also was support material for Fluxfest’s upcoming staging of two Hi Red Center performances (*Street Cleaning Event* and *Shelter Plan*).

The Fluxus description of the second staging’s events canonized *Street Cleaning Event*. The piece possibly became a score between 1964 and 1966, to be referenced in further recreations of the work. Aspects of the score become necessary to the work (“white coats like lab technicians”, “various devices not usually used in street cleaning”), and others apocryphal (“Clean streets were marked by posters saying: ‘this place already cleaned’”). As scores become further divorced from their origins, questions of interpretation arise. What is the “right way” to perform the score? To think about such questions, I propose we turn to an unexpected resource: historically informed performance practice of Western classical music.

### **Performance Art, Performance Practice**

In music, “performance practice” often refers to historically informed performance of music from previous centuries. This can mean choosing tempos that are appropriate

to the period in which the piece was written, changing how vowels are pronounced, adding or subtracting vibrato, and even changing what instruments are used.

Performance practice is not a settled matter – there are disputes over which styles are appropriate to which countries or time periods, and still further disputes over how seriously contemporary performance should take performance practices from previous centuries (Parrott and Peres Da Costa 2011, para 2).

Before discussing the specifics of how performance practice can influence our understanding of restaging text scores, we must discuss why classical music performance practice matters here. Both Hi Red Center and Fluxus were filled with contemporary musicians. People like Yasunao Tone, Yoko Ono, and Takehisa Kosugi were all working directly with music and sound during their collaborations with Hi Red Center, as well as people like Dick Higgins, John Cage, and Ben Patterson who were integral musicians in Fluxus. The aesthetic importance of music to Fluxus and Hi Red Center artists is central to each group's development as performance-based groups because of music's position as a performing art.

The document describing how a Fluxus performance is to be undertaken is called a "score," demonstrating one clear connection between Fluxus and the Western classical music tradition. Though not all Fluxus scores deal with sound or music, the influence that classical music had on Fluxus performances, as well as the documentation of those performances, is crucial to the movement. Using a score as an impetus for performance, Fluxus artists like Nam Jun Paik were able to explore abstract, performance-based ideas that were able to be recreated, such as Paik's *One for Solo*



*Violin*, in which a violin is never played (at least as one might traditionally play a violin), but instead is smashed to pieces.

The development of scores allows for performances (whether their genre is music or performance art) to be transmitted across time and space as a form of documentation, often written using language. Thus, all scores require an understanding of their language to make sense. One simply has to read a score in order to make sense of it.

But if one simply has to read a score to understand how to perform it, then there should have been no variance between the original *Street Cleaning Event* in Tokyo and the second staging in New York City. As I have described, the two events were conducted differently, though not so different as to lose the identity of the piece. How can the same score result in two different realizations? The score alone cannot account for this. The difference must be performance practice.

Bernard D. Sherman identifies three options for performance practice: performances that follow the original's context as closely as possible; performances that reject the historical context entirely and strive to find their own interpretation of the piece; and performances that aim to push against the first two camps, by seeking some balance of contextualism and individualism (as cited in Butt 2002, 47). John Butt points out the similarity of these categories to those listed by Nietzsche in "Uses and Disadvantages of History," noting performances that closely follow the original context often contribute to the "mummification of cultural life" rather than reanimating a performance from the past (Butt 2002, 47). Similarly, performances that avoid historical context often result in turning the past into a series of monuments, causing the present

to appear plain in the shadow of a contextless history filled with great achievements (Butt 2002, 48). Finally, performances that try to strike a balance between context and creativity may lull us into a sense of security with our own impulses, content that we have mastered the difficult balancing act of present and past (Butt 2002, 48).

Sticking too closely to previous performances risks turning restagings into living museums. Playing too fast and loose with the context of the original may cause the original piece to be seen as a monumental classic, without context or peer. Trying to strike a balance may cause us to assume incorrectly that we have worked out the best way to handle history's role in contemporary life, rather than seeing it as a constantly evolving discussion. We can use these observations to create concrete strategies for restaging performance scores such as *Street Cleaning Event*. I explore this in my own attempt to restage *Street Cleaning Event*, attempting to balance fidelity to the Fluxus score, while still acknowledging the original Tokyo event. Now, I will compare the Tokyo and New York events to see where they differ and I will examine how these differences emerge from both the *Bundle of Events* and the *Fluxus Performance Workbook* score.

### **Conceptualizing Historical Accuracy of Restaging *Street Cleaning Event***

Fidelity to location presents the first quandary. Is the New York restaging inauthentic for the crucial fact that the piece originated in Japan? Neither Kubota's *Bundle of Documents*, nor the *Fluxus Performance Workbook* score cited that the piece must only be performed in Tokyo.

Second, material specificity must be addressed. In *Bundle of Events*, Kubota noted that the streets were cleaned using "dusters, floor brooms, housecloths, scrubbing brushes, sand paper, wire brushes, coat brushes, tooth brushes, cotton balls,

window cleaning fluid, soap, deodorizer, alcohol, etc” (Museum of Modern Art, “Bundle of Events”, item 20 in image). In contrast, the score states that performers use “various devices not usually used in street cleaning, such as: dental tools, toothbrushes, steel wool, cotton balls with alcohol, cotton swabs, surgeon’s sponges, toothpicks, linen napkins, etc” (eds. Friedman, Smith, and Sawchyn, 49). Which method is most accurate to follow?

In the few photos from the 1964 Tokyo event, I note napkins, small brooms, small brushes, and some form of cleaner are used. Photos of the 1966 New York event show again a kind of cleaner for the sidewalk, as well as small wire brushes, a pick (possibly a knitting needle), linen napkins, dish detergent, sodium borate, small hand brooms, and a few other unidentifiable objects (Museum of Modern Art, “Street Cleaning Event”). In the New York case, the performers take apparent liberties with materials.

Moreover, in the original performance, the group performed as government workers, wearing semi-official uniforms (lab coats, with arm bands signifying their membership in Hi Red Center, with face masks and glasses), carrying placards in both Japanese and English to command citizens to “Be Clean!” or to declare that a street had been cleaned. The piece was a political intervention in everyday life, responding to the government’s urging citizens to clean up the city.

The New York restaging loses some political impact. A poster advertising the New York performance in Fluxfest plays the staging for its status as a performance rather than its political intent (artnet, “FLUXFEST”). How were passersby intended to receive the piece? Without Japanese civic politics to inform the event’s backstory, the act loses Hi Red Center’s intended humour.

As for the performance itself, is it significant that *Bundle of Events* identifies that performers were “to clean the streets [...] very gently as they would their own rooms”? The score does not mention this gentle performance style, instead focusing on the fact that the “sidewalk is cleaned very thoroughly with various devices not usually used in street cleaning”? (Museum of Modern Art, “Bundle of Events”, item 20 in image).

Attempting a historically accurate restaging of *Street Cleaning Event* requires more information than the score alone provides. My comparative reading of both scores and photographs shows that in restaging, comparing documentation and scores generates many questions to investigate through future restagings. As Tozawa notes, many of the artists and activists working on these projects have grown old or passed away. It is important to allow performance practices to emerge discursively, through careful study of documentation and scores. In the next section, I will discuss a restaging of *Street Cleaning Event* that I conducted in 2016, with close attention to discursive performance practices.

### ***The North College Lawn Clean-in, Connecticut, 2016***

In the previous section, I identified five aspects to consider when one wishes to restage a piece of performance art: location, material, context, intent, and style. Many of these overlap – context and location may tie the event



*Photo 1 - The North College Lawn Clean-in*

significantly to one place, while intent and style direct a performer to act in a particular

way. To discuss how these aspects influence a deliberate restaging, I will describe my own restaging of the *Street Cleaning Event: the North College Lawn Clean-in*.



*Photo 2 – Omar Fraire cleaning a rock.*

I was surprised to discover the political aspects of the piece through research. Fluxus was not apolitical, but the cold neutrality of *Street Cleaning Event's* score did not carry the political weight that acknowledged the context within

which Hi Red Center worked. The more I considered how to approach my restaging, the more I knew it would have to engage politically with its context in some way. I decided to stage the event on the North College Lawn at Wesleyan University, in front of the administration buildings and next to the president's house on campus, intending the event's proximity to those with power at the university as a sort of avant-garde protest.

I considered deeply the style of the piece. I truly embraced the spoofing of governmental workers acting on absurd official business. To produce this parody in my own context, I decided to create flyers and claim membership in a few Wesleyan organizations, both fake and real. I focused on caring for the earth, to add political weight. As the North College Lawn is a web of



*Photo 3 – Interacting with passersby.*

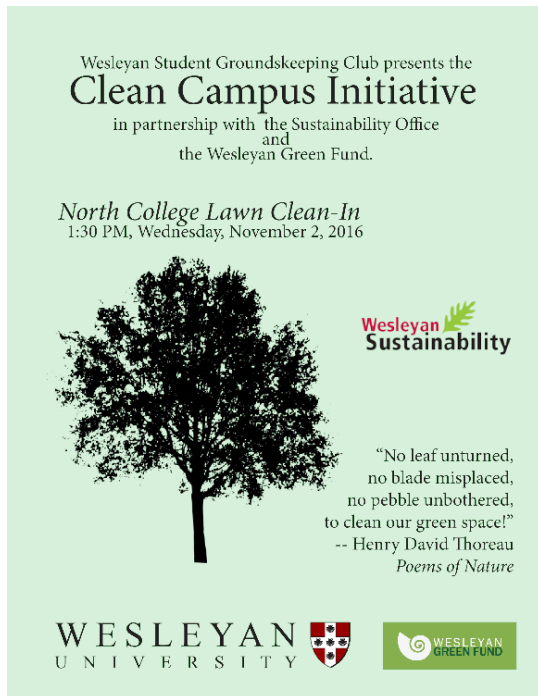


Figure 1 – The flyer used in the event.

sidewalks alternating with green space, the environment is an obvious consideration, and a dense urban locale (as in the two previous performances) was out of the question. An environmental focus helped to determine the choice in materials. The scores direct performers to be creative with their utensils, so I made use of personal beauty products: toothbrushes, tweezers, cotton pads, cotton swabs, eyebrow brushes, moustache and eyebrow scissors, and hairbrushes. I connect “cleaning” with “personal beauty maintenance,” drawing upon popular rhetoric around “Mother Earth” and “beautifying nature.” I picked up a few pairs of white coveralls, hoping to mimic the haz-mat suits workers use while cleaning oil spill disasters, still maintaining some reference to Hi Red Center’s pristine white lab coats. The sidewalks of North College Lawn are out of the way of the main sidewalks of campus, so I decided to hand out flyers to passersby, chatting about our group, The Wesleyan Student Groundskeeping Club, and discussing the aims of our performance (keeping the Earth beautiful).

## Conclusion

Tricky questions remain in the maintenance of artist traditions. Fluxus and other event-style art such as Alan Kaprow’s Happenings or the interventions of Hi Red Center rely on relationships to time, space, and political contexts that cannot be reproduced easily or shared neatly through description text such as in visual art. My analyses of the

multiple stagings of *Street Cleaning Event* identify several key components necessary to consider in the realization of event scores. Is it necessary to aim for fidelity across location, materials, style, context, or intent to be authentic?

Performance practice discourse in musicology demonstrates that there are multiple approaches to these questions: 1) to use primary and secondary documentation to create a historically informed recreation; 2) to ignore historical context and make a performance solely on interpretation of the score; or 3) to strike a form of balance between these two extremes. My own performance of the *North College Lawn Clean-In* falls into the third category, examining the original intentions and contexts of the first performance in Tokyo, while still creating a piece distinct enough to be called my own, yet one that maintains a through line to the original.

Comparing multiple stagings of the “same” event, I aimed to highlight how restaging event scores in several contexts establishes a set of performance practices in the interpretation of the score. Looking to how a work was staged in the past can help inform us on how to approach it in the future, particularly in service of our own artistic goals. It is certainly a noble endeavor to attempt to reproduce events with high fidelity, attempting to find the correct street, to use the correct tools, to perform in the correct style. Indeed, if the score and performance practice demand it, then it is necessary.

Yet, I am compelled to experiment. Art historian Hannah Higgins writes that Fluxus events rely on what she calls “primary experience,” or hands-on, livable experiences that provide direct sensory input (Higgins 2002, 36). In *Street Cleaning Event*, this means the performers are on their hands and knees, using their bodies in the work of art. Part of the piece is doing the cleaning, experiencing what it is like to

clean a city street by hand, rather than by machine. There is a bodily knowledge that is developed through following the score, and if a performance practice is too tightly bound with historical context and highly developed technical skill, opportunities to learn and grow can be stifled. However, *Street Cleaning Event* was redesigned to be ported to a variety of locations. Though first staged in Japan under specific historical and political contexts, the piece was reworked to be undertaken on “the street” as a general concept.

At the end of her discussion of Hi Red Center, Tozawa turns to the future of such interventionist art. Referencing Mieko Shiomi, an artist who worked alongside Hi Red Center and was a member of Fluxus, she calls for an “original performing art” developed by the current young generation of performance artists interested in the older works made in the 60s and 70s (Tozawa 2011, 44-45). For Shiomi, relying on previous works alone is not the way forward. Instead, she calls for a synthesis of old and new ideas to create performances that resonate with contemporary Japanese society. John Butt has identified this synthesis as the contemporary state of historically informed performance practice – mixing historical context with contemporary artistry to create new interpretations of old works. Through dedication to research and a hands-on approach to performance, artists and scholars interested in keeping event scores alive can maintain a rich tradition while creatively moving forward.



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## About the Author

Warren Enström makes sounds — but not always! His works exist across various mediums, including installation art, sonic composition, sculpture, performance art, and more. Often, his work brings audiences to see the world around them in new, detailed ways, encouraging a curiosity towards all aspects of life. Recent research includes the use of everyday life in performance art, the cultures surrounding Twitterbots and generative art on the internet, and artistic research as a form of direct investigation of the world.

Warren received a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Music Composition and Technology from the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, where he studied with Amanda Schoofs and Chris Burns. In 2017, he received a Master of Arts in Music from Wesleyan University, where he worked with Paula Matthusen, Ron Kuivila, Elliott Sharp, and Liz Phillips. In 2018, he received a Fulbright grant and lived in Gothenburg, Sweden, working with Palle Dahlstedt and Ami Skånberg-Dahlstedt on generative music techniques and artistic research practices. Currently, Warren is a lecturer at Alverno College and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

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