

# Thought-Provoking Art Through the Lens of Entrepreneurship: A Review of Ken Friedman’s Exhibition *92 events*

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## The Exhibition

In February 2023, I visit Kalmar Konstmuseum (a regional art museum in the southeast of Sweden). I’m there to see the exhibition *92 events*<sup>1</sup> by Fluxus artist Ken Friedman. I have vague conceptions of what I will experience, but when I enter the large open hall on the third floor, the exhibition turns out to be exactly what was indicated in the title: 92 of Friedman’s *event scores* hang printed and framed along the concrete walls<sup>2</sup>. The event scores are short and thought-provoking ‘scripts’ or ‘instructional poems’ according to which the reader could act or think. In addition, the museum has arranged collections of prompts/items that correspond with Friedman’s texts. For example, there are about 20 pairs of men’s shoes, cardboard boxes with different labels and a set table, all of which the visitors could enact and try out what they read in the scores. The scores, together with the props, turn the whole room into a call for action and reflection. Thus, what I encounter is 92 events that could potentially occur.

This action-oriented attitude and avant-gardist way of approaching material, everyday situations and small details as art, appears as significant to the Fluxus movement. The movement evolved in the 1960, and with names such as Yoko Ono, George Maciunas and Bengt af Klintberg, they were (and likely still are) viewed as groundbreaking in their understanding of art. and what art might be (Friedman 2023). In *92 events*, visitors follow Ken Friedman’s work from the 1960s until today. His event scores invite us to ponder our relation to things (such as Christmas trees and fruits), animals, time, public spaces and art. I find it to be an inventive mixture of down-to-earth realism and unexpected leaps of thought.

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<sup>1</sup> The exhibition was staged at Kalmar Konstmuseum 08/02–23/04, 2023.

<https://www.kalmarkonstmuseum.se/exhibition/92-events/>

<sup>2</sup> All the event scores are also printed in the book *92 Events* by Ken Friedman (2023).

<https://konstigbooks.com/art/ken-friedman-92-events.html>

## Everything Can Happen

As a researcher and teacher in the entrepreneurship field, I get intrigued by the ‘everything can happen’ atmosphere that I experience at the exhibition and the way in which the Fluxus movement has organized and created value through art. In my view, the exhibition reflects a broad perspective on entrepreneurship, although none of the pieces focus on profit or business. However, Friedman’s work appears to capture other characteristics of entrepreneurial processes, such as discussions on the identification, evaluation and execution of opportunities (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000), the creation of new organizations (Garner, 1998), creating (non-profit) value for others (Lackéus, 2018), agent-ship, interaction and the organizing of existing resources (Sarasvathy, 2001). My walk through the exhibition becomes a consideration of art through an entrepreneurial lens.

For example, in the event score *Alchemical Theatre*, Friedman plays with the relationship between humans and the four elements:

### **Alchemical Theater**

Assemble four elements.

Place the elements.

Act upon the elements.

KF

1992

**Figure 1:** *Alchemical Theatre* score, retrieved from Friedman (2023, p. 137)

From an existential perspective, this score invites us to reflect on our context with a sustainability perspective. In what way do we arrange and act upon the elements? Are we aware of the consequences? In an entrepreneurial sense, I find that the score discusses agent-ship, resources and responsibility in such ‘elevated’ manner that is characteristic of art. Thus, the event score provides me with an additional way of considering the entrepreneurship phenomenon.

The opportunity for spectator agency is further highlighted in the score titled *Distance*. Here Friedman works in the non-tangible art tradition where the interaction between the spectator and the piece is emphasized more than the physical piece itself.

### **Distance**

The distance from the sentence  
to your eye is my sculpture.

KF

1971

**Figure 2:** *Distance* score, retrieved from Friedman (2023, p. 110)

The *Distance*-score makes me stop, think, and read it again. With a single sentence, Friedman involves me as a spectator in creating my own piece of art. Furthermore, the sculpture that I imagine in the distance to the text probably differed from that envisioned by the man standing next to me. The short text is accessible, while also demanding something from me as a viewer. I need to contribute and accept the agent-ship. This is significant for all the scores. You need to reflect, and you start to look for hidden meanings and evaluate and execute the opportunities (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000). It is intriguing.

Some of the scores, such as *New Shoes Dance Theatre*, are actual scripts for performance acts that have been physically executed by artists in different contexts on different stages over the years.

### **New Shoes Dance Theater**

Organize a short dance piece.  
Create choreography to be  
danced to any classical or modern  
music. Rehearse in traditional  
dance costume or leotards. For the  
public presentation of this work,  
clothing will be the same as at  
therehearsal.

There will be one change: all  
performers will dance in new  
boots or new men's black dress  
shoes. Even the women will  
wear men's shoes. If the dance is  
performed more than once, use  
completely new shoes or boots  
for every concert.

KF  
1991

**Figure 3:** *New Shoes Dance Theatre* score, retrieved from Friedman (2023, p. 145)

In this score, readers are encouraged to perform. The score itself is also thought-provoking. What happens when we are faced with new circumstances? How do we handle unexpected situations, such as walking in someone else's shoes? The capacity of entrepreneurs to cope with uncertainty (Audretsch, 2014) is something that I usually discuss with my entrepreneurship students. I reflect on this question when I read *New Shoes Dance Theatre*, albeit without the courage to try on any of the shoes that are available in the room.

Other scores are difficult to stage as performing acts; they are even more reflective, which is the case, for example, with *Center Piece*.

### Centre Piece

Imagine a life.

Live it.

KF

2003

**Figure 4:** *Centre Piece* score, retrieved from Friedman (2023, p. 158)

With *Center Piece*, Friedman challenges our ability to envision the future and the opportunities that come with it. Again, the exhibition makes me reflect on the entrepreneurship field. Friedman’s ability to deploy poetic precision to set the spotlight on everyone’s opportunity to dream and live their life evoke my thoughts on the entrepreneurial “*capacity to see beyond what exists*” (Nilsson, 2021, p. 3).

### Open and Shut

Some of the exhibited scripts seem to be more of a twinkle in the eye. One of Friedman’s earliest pieces (1965) was when he wrapped an empty matchbox and wrote “*open me*” on top of it. Inside the box was another text message: “*shut quick*”. The “*open and shut*” case was then born – an ever-ceasing movement. Among the prompts in the exhibition, I find a red cardboard box with the word “*open*” written on the cover (see Figure 1). I am unable to resist opening it, and (as expected) at the bottom of the box, I read: “*shut quick*”. I follow the instruction while smiling to myself.



**Figure 5:** Photos of a prompt in the exhibition *92 events* at Kalmar Konstmuseum

Overall, the exhibition leaves me with a feeling of subtle humor, and I interpret this experience as art that embodies an entrepreneurial approach of ingenuity rather than naturalistic representations. What Friedman presents is creative, interactive and full of newness and action. In terms of entrepreneurial innovation and newness (Gartner, 1990), Fluxus has continuously explored the world while moving the boundaries of art beyond the known, a process that could be interpreted as entrepreneurship in the art industry.

Friedman has had careers both as a management consultant and in academia in addition to his artistic work. Currently retired, he claims that he again has the time and space to work with art, which is fortunate for us as we now get to share his thought-virtuoso. Based on my interpretation of the exhibition as entrepreneurial in nature, I ask Friedman whether he wants to give a seminar on art entrepreneurship. The answer I get is that these roles cannot coexist: “*You can’t combine being an entrepreneur with being an artist.*” First, I am a bit surprised by his statement. Then, I realize that he might have different interpretations of entrepreneurship from my own.

Following the development of entrepreneurship research from the 20th century focus on self-employment and venture creation to today’s broader and more inclusive focus on processes and mind-set (Morris and Kuratko, 2014), this might not be so remarkable. Friedman joined (or was headhunted by) the unconventional performance art network Fluxus as a 16-year-old student in 1967 – a time when entrepreneurship was mainly connected with business life. After a meeting with the Fluxus artist George Maciunas, Friedman became the youngest ever member of the Fluxus movement. By that time, he had been developing *event scores* for several years, which then became pieces of contemporary Fluxus art (Friedman, 2023). Although he has continued to develop countless art, music and design projects since then, he tells me that he does not describe these activities as entrepreneurship. In his opening speech, Friedman emphasize the challenges of earning a living from producing pieces that no one wants to exhibit in a gallery, let alone buy.

I realize that I interpret entrepreneurs as *worldmakers* who embrace uncertainty and are “*ready to explore all the different things that can happen*” (Sarasvathy, 2012, p. 11). From this perspective, entrepreneurs can be compared to strong poets (Harmeling and Sarasvathy, 2013) who acknowledge and appropriate contingency (Rorty, 1989) while striving to create social change (Calás et al., 2009) and “*achieve new purposes for themselves and the world they live in*” (Harmeling and Sarasvathy, 2011, p. 773). However, even if Friedman and I seem to differ in our interpretations of entrepreneurship and that an artist might not be able to make a living from their art, to me, the pieces presented are as inspiring and emancipatory as any entrepreneurship course. From this perspective, it would be interesting to bring pieces such as Friedman’s event scores into entrepreneurship and business education so that art could be used as a basis for discussions and reflections on taken-for-granted and critical perspectives. Perhaps entrepreneurship can be explored through art after all?

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