

L. Hunter Curra
Night of Tribute to John Cage

assembled
April 22 2005

This event was a night of tribute to 20 century composer/conceptual artist John Cage. Seven of the Cage's original works were re-interpreted through nine artists live.

Preparation-

This show came to me as an idea at the end of Winter '05 quarter. I had been reading a bit about Cage up to that point and started to realize the potential for a revue of some of his works. I also had participated with a few other students in *Incident '05*, an audio/visual live art performance night based around students working with the visual programming language Max/MSP.

I had not originally intended for this project to be my senior studio thesis. Perhaps for the lackluster response I had from my first arranged interest meeting on March 24th, perhaps also because I was not sure if I wanted to depend on others to show through who would also be working on senior thesis.

Before I arranged this meeting I did research on all of Cage's works, and what they would entail. I made a list of about 14 pieces that appeared workable to me and others, even with a strict schedule. For these pieces I avoided his early percussion and piano pieces and tried to aim towards his conceptual, or change pieces.

After receiving several emails and word of mouth in the halls about possible performers missing the original meeting due to other obligations, I decided to throw a final interest meeting April 16th where we would define a date, the pieces to be worked, who would be assigned to each piece, and order of the show.

At this point I had 5 other participants other than me, this was enough for a small show – but I knew I'd have to push some less motivated others who owed me favors into performing if the event was to be anything worth going to.

We also decided at this point to make some of the pieces 'interpretations' of the originals, and some true to Cage's original instructions.

April 30th was set for the date, 8:30pm for the time, and my house's parking area and garage for the stage.

Before the show-

Everyone was to take their selected works, and practice or setup what they needed on their own, unless of course they were in a group. We set the night before the show as a 'prep night' to allow us a few hours to work out kinks, sound checks, equipment, and other technical issues.

The weather was projected to be scattered thunderstorms. This bothered me because there was an event the weekend before cancelled because of some rain. I didn't want the same to happen to us, and all of our schedules were so booked up I just didn't know if postponement was even a possibility.

I arranged a graphic designer to put together our program which would double as our flyer two weeks in advance and we got them out a week and a half in advance. I also called the student newspaper to see if we could get our event publicized. They agreed, and also did a two page spread on the show which came out 4 days before the projected night. Thing seemed like enough for us to have a decent turnout.

We lost two members of the group due to problems with scheduling, but I managed to scrounge up 4 more people interested in performing.

I didn't think any Cage tribute would be right without a 'prepared piano' an instrument made from placing meditated objects into the open side of the piano in order to make it sound like something new. We arranged to pick up a baby grand from a woman trying to get rid of one in Bufort, South Carolina. This took surprisingly a whole day. I'll never doubt the weight of a piano again.

Prep night came and we decided that the best solution to the weather was to house the main event in our double garage, and to put up a large tarp for an area outside the garage. This worked well, and we found out soon that using the garage allowed us to keep our audience close and connected to the show as an active element. No one had the best seat so to speak.

We had some technical issues involving how to set up a main sound system while still allowing easy flow from one piece to the next, which we soon resolved using a labeled mixer and some auxiliary amplifiers for specific pieces. Other technicalities worked out involved some layout issues, trying to surround the audience with sound due to our odd setup, and other issues piece by piece.

Night of show-

At 7:00 pm the performers all showed up. We decided that we wanted to be overdressed in order to separate us from the audience. We quickly made sure all instruments were ready and some last minute adjustments were made.

It was drizzling so we decided to wait until 9:00 to start the show. We began with about 20 people there (not including the performers) and at our height I counted 38 audience members.

Piece 1 – Speech (1955); All performers

Original Description:

This piece entailed six performers each with a radio randomly changing elements of tone and volume at a five beat structure created by Cage in the instructions.

Interpretation:

Each performer armed with a radio rolled a die five times to get five random numbers. We then would keep to a count and perform a 'change' to our radios after every new count. This piece lasted approximately 4 minutes. It was loud and extremely effective to our audience as an opener because it introduced them to the idea that lots of what we were doing that night was going to be based on instances that we had little control over.

Materials/Equipment:

9 performers
9 radios
1 die

Piece 2 – Williams Mix (1952); Hunter Curra

Original Description:

This piece entailed a collection of over 600 recordings edited to an 8 channel collage using I'ching sticks to determine the editing, duration, volume, and channel of the tape. It took Cage and assistants over a year to complete.

Interpretation:

A program was created in Max/MSP environment to choose an audio file from a large collection of sound, choose a segment of that file, and play it back in the left, right, or both channels all at random. There were two of these programs going on that were being mixed live to each other. The duration of the piece was also randomly chosen by rolling a 6 sided die twice in front of the audience. (In this case it was 12')

Materials/Equipment:

1 performer
1 computer
1 die
400 audio samples
House sound system

Piece 3 – Music Walk (1958); James Chapman, Keith Conway, Michael Brady

Original Description:

This piece was originally created for a random choreographed counter-performance. A random amount of dots and shapes were drawn and a transparency of a staff and ledger lines was laid on top. This music was site read on a prepared piano while other auxiliary instruments were also improvised.

Interpretation:

Three groups of transparencies were laid on top of each other to create a chance score for prepared piano. Another performer hand scraped and plucked the piano strings. Another performer auditioned random simultaneous radio streams around the room.

Materials/Equipment:

3 performers
6 radios
1 prepared baby grand piano
Random scrapers and tools
Transparency scores

Intermission piece 1 – Chance Cage Biography; Hunter Curra

This was a short piece intended to inform the audience not familiar with the work of John Cage, and to entertain all others. Before the show I recorded the whole passage of the JOHN CAGE section of the Encyclopedia Britannica. Segments of this file were randomly accessed and played back by a program creating a non-linear 'Chance Biography of Cage'. The duration was chosen by the roll of a dice.

Piece 4 – 0'00" (1962); Fred Leighton

Original Description:

This piece entailed instructions "Performed a disciplined act".

Interpretation:

Taking advantage of the conceptual nature of this piece, the performer set a mirror when a piano score should have been and proceeded to shave his face at the piano leaving the soap scum and remains on the keys.

Materials/Equipment:

1 performer

Intermission piece 2 – ‘Fourteen’; Frank Schaffer

At this point in the show we screened a film made by Cage enthusiast Frank Schaffer with the Ives Orchestra. Fourteen was a piece in which Cage instructed there to never be silence, and instruments must never be abrupt, they must fade in and out slowly as to almost not be noticed. This film was edited, lit, and shot using chance operations.

Piece 5 – Cartridge Music (1960); Colin Alexander, Ethan Anderson, Frank A. Napoli, James Chapman**Original Description:**

This piece entailed performers using phonograph cartridges and other small amplified items to compose a score for dance.

Interpretation:

One performer manually played media records through the house system. One performer bowed an amplified cymbal with a contact mike through a guitar amplifier. One performer jiggled and stuck prepared objects into a record player cartridge being amplified. The cymbal and the cartridge were being affected by a fourth performer armed with a slew of pitch shifting and echo effects. The duration of this piece was also determined by a throw of the dice.

Materials/Equipment:

4 performers
2 turntables
1 prepared turntable
Various effect units
House system
1 cymbal bowed and contact miked

Piece 6 – Newport Mix (1967); Thomas Sime

Original Description:

This piece entailed a party/performance that John Cage threw at a yacht where no one could get in without a tape loop. If they did not have a loop they were provided with equipment to record one. Once inside Cage live mixed the loops as a piece.

Interpretation:

Before and during the performances of the night a performer recorded blips and bytes at random intervals into a mini disc recorder. When the point of performance arrived the mini disc recorder was attached to the house system and set to random playback of the clips recorded that night. This piece's duration was also set to the roll of a die.

Materials/Equipment:

- 1 performer
- 1 mini disc recorder
- 1 mike
- House system
- 1 die

Piece 7 – 4'33" (1952); Fred Leighton (by chance)

Original Description:

This piece entailed a single performer to not perform for 4 minutes and 33 seconds.

Interpretation:

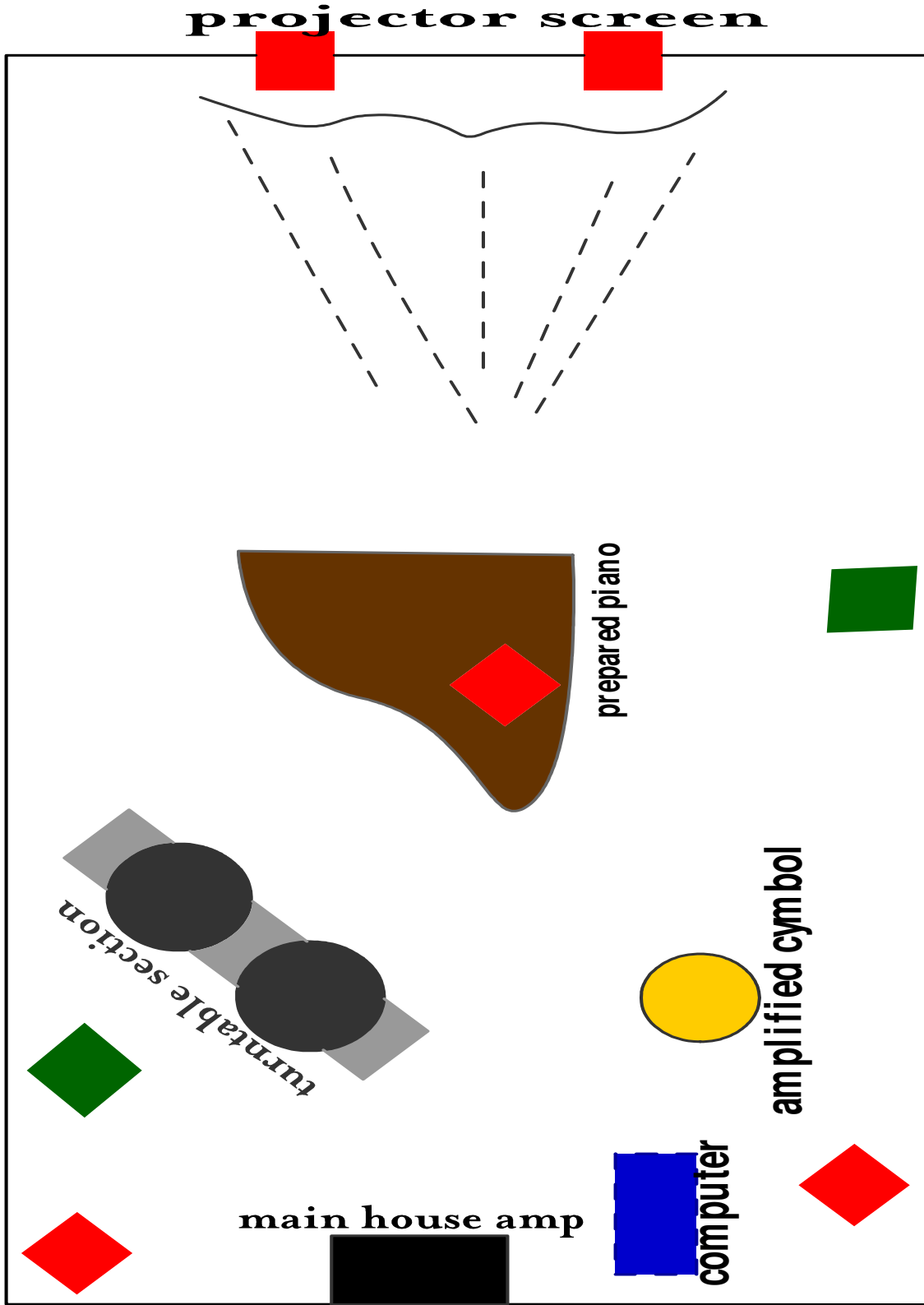
A number on the dice was set to each performer of the night's name. At random it was tossed and selected. This performer performed the traditional 4'33" at our prepared piano.

Materials/Equipment:

- 1 performer
- 1 die

Diagram of Event Setup-

garage door and tarped area



Interview with 'DISTRICT' Journal-

> - When were you first introduced to the work of John Cage?

I think I heard of his name vaguely through some books I had read about the history of electronic music, but it wasn't until recently (year ago) that I made an effort to read up on more of the work; more so now that this event is on my back and I am expected to be able to answer questions like these adequately.

> - Why did you decide to organize this show?

Well, most of my life I've been a very independent type of worker, but recently I'm starting to understand and enjoy the benefits of collaboration and community. This being my last quarter at SCAD I wanted to arrange an event; something collaborative but easy to accomplish as to not tax the schedule of everyone involved. Cage's work is great in that most of his 'scores' are not at all scores, but directions or instructions of how a work could be done -- he pretty much arranged the event himself. (OK, maybe not completely)

He was an extremely pivotal figure in contemporary art around the 50's-70's in that his work acted as a hinge between lots of changes that were going on. Object to Process driven art, the deconstruction of

> - How would you classify these reworkings of John Cage's "chance music" and other pieces? Is it sound art? Performance art? What? Are they still truly "chance music" or something else?

Good question. If there is anything I've learned in the past couple of years it's that you can't completely categorize anything under one name, and names carry subjective connotations. I'm labeling this night of works as performance art because we will be in front of an audience. The term 'sound art' has no boundaries whatsoever it seems, so of course this is 'sound art'. But then again, Cage liked to be called a composer. Nobody said 'sound art' back then, and nobody wants to hear it now. We have layouts for our pieces from Cage, everything else is left up to us, unstoppable acts of nature, and chance.

> - Can you describe the specific piece(s) you worked on? How does it relate to your interests as a sound design student, musician, artist, etc.?

Lots of these works are variations of the originals. I am initiating 'Williams Mix' which was originally a tape collage of 8 channels made from approximately 600 recordings spliced and assembled from a score written by throwing I'Ching sticks (A Buddhist method comparable to tossing a coin, but with more variables). This took Cage and assistants more than a year to accomplish, but I will be using a computer to choose from my audio clips doing the composing and performance all in one go. In a sense we are bringing some of these works into our technological status quo. I consider myself an artist first, but in this case I won't have much to do with it besides facilitation. Cage was an active member in EAT (Experiments in art and technology) so I feel like he wouldn't mind this particular interpretation.

> - Is this kind of work covered enough in the curriculum at SCAD?

He was a huge mentor to the Fluxus artists, taught at the noted Black Mountain College with Joseph Albers Robert Rauschenberg and Merce Cunningham. He actively collaborated with artists from the New York School, and was mentored personally by Schoenberg and Duchamp. I don't see how it would be possible to avoid Cage if covering the 20th century in art. Sound art is an elective in the SCAD sound design program, can't pass up Cage their either.

> - Who might be the modern equivalent(s) of John Cage today?

It's easy to look back on John Cage and see his influence on art today. It's harder (almost impossible for me) to see someone like him in the now. I honestly cannot answer this question very well.

> - What do you want attendees to get out of this event?

The pieces themselves will be entertaining. But we also will be talking a bit on Cage, and showing some film on setup and breakdown.

I guess if we are successful, the audience will go home with a bit of new found appreciation for the composer and preferably not ringing ears (but no promises).

