



Intermedijski edukativni program
SJECIŠTA - ples, glazba i zbirka MMSU

Završni koncert –
John Cage
kompozicije za
preparirani klavir
Izvode **Joe Kaplowitz**
i **Mihael Nikolić**

Nastupaju učenici
4. razreda osnovne škole
suvremenog plesa
Izložba djela iz zbirke MMSU

Ponedjeljak, 30. 5. 2011.
MMSU, Dolac 1/II
19.30 sati
Ulaz slobodan.

Organizatori:



Saradnici:

FilmAktiv
Katie Grace McGowan

Playing, Making, Thinking: Intersections with the Avant-Garde

"I am trying to be unfamiliar with what I'm doing."

— John Cage

Few artistic collaborations are as celebrated as that of composer, poet and artist, John Milton Cage Jr. (1912 –1992) and choreographer and dancer, Mercier "Merce" Philip Cunningham (1919–2009), and with good reason. This prolific duo collaborated closely for over half a century—in their artwork and as life partners. Beyond the massive contribution each artist made to his respective field, Cage and Cunningham's biggest collective gift to the canon of contemporary art is the way in which they grappled to unlearn the rules of their respective art forms. The pair worked in constant conversation across media. These conversations took myriad forms. Through relentless experimentation the duo resisted categorization and never succumbed to stasis.

After meeting in 1942 at Seattle's Cornish School of the Arts, Cage and Cunningham became figureheads of the American avant-garde, working collaboratively with artists of other media to create their own brand of non-representational splendor.

Like many of their contemporaries, Cage and Cunningham became summer instructors at Black Mountain College, a short-lived hotbed of progressive education in North Carolina. Like the artists it attracted, Black Mountain was experimental and ahead of its time. Here grades and quality points as a mark of achievement were abolished—a gesture that would still make many uncomfortable in 2011. Its Utopian ideals such as communal living, farming and maintaining a faculty-run college were unsustainable given all the particulars of the time. The school lasted just under twenty four years, but its effects still resonate today.

During his distinguished 67-year career, Cunningham choreographed nearly 200 dances, most of which involved collaborations with leading visual artists who contributed costumes, sculpture and custom set pieces. Cunningham's collaborators include luminaries of the 20th century art world including Andy Warhol, Frank Stella, Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, among many others. Even toward the end of his life, Cunningham and his company continued working with the next generation of artists, including the contemporary Brazilian sculptor, Ernesto Neto and the fashion designer Rei Kawakubo.

Cunningham championed novel forms of collaboration as well as cutting edge music—his "Suite by Chance" (1953) was the first dance performed to an electronic score. Cunningham and Cage were also interested in the way collaborating artists could work together by creating their respective elements—costumes, choreography, or musical composition—then combining them without having consulted the others. This commitment to chance and play exemplified the couple's working relationship.

Perhaps Cage's most famous, or infamous, coup is "4'33". This provocative composition consists of three-movements, during which the musician or musicians do not play. The piece debuted on 29 August 1952, when David Tudor and an unknowing audience—come performance troupe—executed the symphony of sounds, inadvertently. The bewildered audience rustled in their seats. Dry throats coughed, uncomfortable bodies shifted and history was made.

In part, "4'33" was shocking because of the way in which it toyed with the audience. They came to the theatre expecting a musical performance and got nothing they considered music in return. More importantly though, the piece was a revolution in that it highlighted the role of silence in composition. Here Cage had no way of controlling what ambient sounds would be

heard by the audience. By consciously relinquishing this control Cage left the composition entirely up to the audience, up to chance.

Coin flipping here is more than proverbial. Cage and Cunningham became devotees of chance operations in the 1950s. Both regularly employed The *I Ching* or *Book of Changes*, an ancient Chinese divination system, to determine aspects of their work.

Cage studied Zen for much of his life. This study undoubtedly honed his power of observation and likely informed his interest in silence. A fan of subtlety and the delicate nuance of sound, silence is something Cage spent a lot of time experimenting with. A book of his collected writings even bears the name *Silence*. Within it he dissects the notion of silence from countless angles. One is left with the conclusion that there is no such thing as silence and that every sound we hear is music. Cage himself began studying the notion of silence after visiting an anechoic chamber at Harvard University. Here he noticed the sound of his pulse and the utter lack of silence...

For **Intersections** the contemporary dance faculty and students from OŠ Vežica School for Classical Ballet and Contemporary Dance climb out of their roles as pedagogues and pupils, onto the allegorical floor where they are free to become a writhing mass of arms and legs. Monsters, angels, magicians and spacemen emerge from their human shells. Here there is no expert, no apprentice. There are bustling bodies, of dancers, working together. Eyes look up to the sky and to the future.

Intersections is an exhibition and month-long educational residency at MMSU in which students explore the relationship between dance, music, and visual art. In partnership with MMSU's Education Department and Senior Educator Milica Đilas, the OŠ Vežica faculty designed the residency to inspire freethinking in their pupils.

Primary school students are introduced to groundbreaking techniques for composition alongside their regular lessons. Immediately the mind is made to wander...How would artists' visions be revolutionized if those artists were unconditionally encouraged to explore and play rather than first having their spirits quelled into submission? How would the world change if all of our educations emphasized innovation and experimentation?

The old adage about a painter needing to acquire the skills to paint formal, representational pieces before she may be allowed to try abstraction, is put out to sea. Instead these creators are learning the skills and formal techniques of their art form while also learning about practices on the very edge of that art form.

Rather than relying on staid educational techniques, the teachers combine elements of experimentation from the historic avant-garde with a few tricks of their own to facilitate a month-long exercise in student-centered learning and discovery.

Chance operations are employed as tactics for creation and experimentation. Students are exposed to visual artworks from MMSU's permanent collection and encouraged to react. According to co-organizer Kate Foley, this collaboration between MMSU and the contemporary dance faculty and students was motivated "by the need to introduce fundamental principles of modernism and interdisciplinary dialogue in dance education for young people in Croatia." And introduce they do. The dance instructors each approach the task in a unique way.

Instructor Mila Čuljak began by having her 1st year students listen and react to Cage's "And the Earth Shall Bear Again" and "Sonata V." The students wrote down a list of words that came to mind...tuga, mirnoća, cvjetanje, uzbuđenje, dinamičnost, prikradanje, buđenje,

samoća, krivnja, veselje, bučnost, buka, glazbala, predviđanje, napetost, očekivanje, kraj, strpljenje...these words were then used as jumping off points from which to build movement improvisation. Čuljak facilitates exercises that stress the agency of the child dancers all the while letting them play, the way children and artists are prone to do. The students also worked with materials from MMSU's collection, including Jean Messagier's "Prolječna katastrofa sa cvjetanjem" and "Nepoznato proljeće," and from drawings they themselves made.

For their 2nd year students, Sanja Josipović and Kate Foley chose Vlastimir Mikić's "Dajem kraljevstvo za konja" (1983). "We are reading Mikić's painting as a score to guide decisions about the use of space, shape, movement actions, rhythm, characterization and feeling. These students are learning how to interpret a painting and make dance from it, how to dance together, how to build an image in time together and how to use space," explains Foley. The piece is set to Cage's "Daughters of the Lonesome Isle" from 1945.

The 3rd year students, studying under Sanja Josipović, are working with issues surrounding the body. Here dichotomies such as freedom and constraint, and stillness and motion, are explored vis-à-vis representational sculptural works that deal with the human body. The trajectory of the dancers' bodies is investigated in relation to the performing space as well as the general spaces in life. For this project, Josipović chose Cage's "Triple Paced" and "Sonata XIII."

The 4th year students perform works they choreographed in collaboration with their teacher, Kate Foley. This composition, set to Cage's "Bacchanale" (1940), is in dialogue with three artworks from MMSU's collection. The visual artworks include "Tryptichos Post Historicus" by Braco Dimitrijević, "Moj dio neba" by Viktor Libl, and "A Feast of Danubian and Adriatic Painting II" by Laszlo Kerekes. The sculptures incorporate readymade objects—a concept

made famous by French provocateur Marcel Duchamp in the last century—and address issues of ephemerality and gesture. For this piece, each student choreographed several four-bar movement phrases. They then exchanged one measure of their movement with another student, which resulted in many recombinations of the collective material. After further manipulation of tempo, spacial proximity and context, the choreography took on new layers of meaning.

Educational techniques built on the cult of the expert don't apply here. As working artists themselves, these dance teachers take the same sort of risks in their pedagogy as they do in their own artistic practice. Relinquishing control to allow room for the children's authorial voices makes for refreshing choreography and a holistic learning experience for audience and student alike.

Intersections is both homage to John Cage and Merce Cunningham and adventurous pedagogical exercise designed for the young students of OŠ Vežica. In an interview, Cage is quoted as saying, "get yourself out of whatever cage you find yourself in." Here it feels like some people really took this to heart.

--[Katie Grace McGowan](#)

Rijeka, Croatia. May, 2011