



Above: Lynne Harlow, *BEAT*, 2007, acrylic paint, drum kit, live performance with musicians. Installation view. Photo: Julio Grinblatt.

Opposite page: View of "Notations: The Cage Effect Today," 2012. Foreground: Edgardo Rudnitzky, *Octopus*, 2008. Background: Kaz Oshiro, *Orange Speaker Cabinets and Gray Scale Boxes (18 parts)*, 2009. Photo: Julio Grinblatt.

BEST OF 2012

# "Notations: The Cage Effect Today"

Hunter College/ Times Square Gallery, New York

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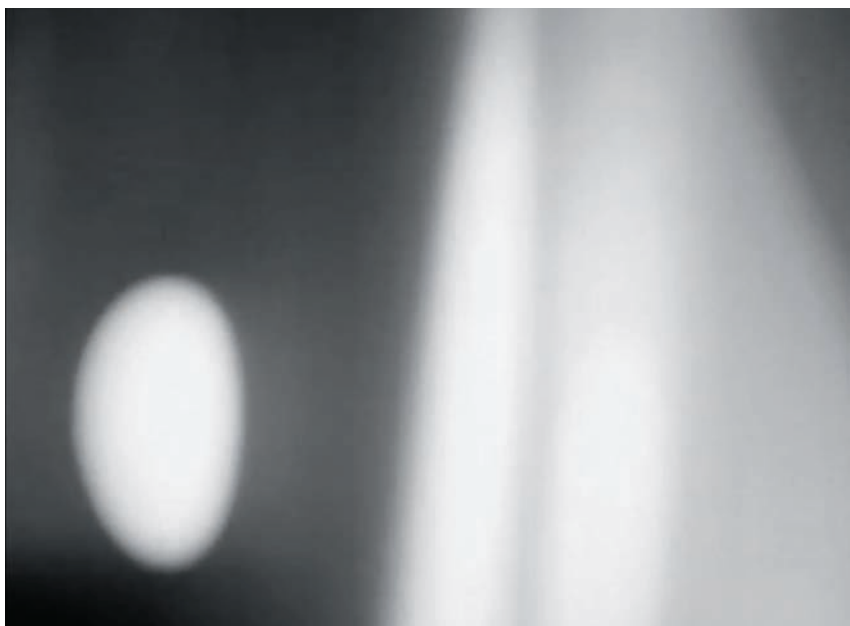
**THIS PAST WINTER**, the Hunter College art program mounted “Notations: The Cage Effect Today” in its Times Square Gallery on far-west Forty-First Street. For an exhibition in honor of a composer who chose *Silence* as the title of his collected writings, the cacophony of traffic rumbling and screeching in the lee of the Port Authority Bus Terminal seemed both contradictory and entirely apposite. The visitor, rattled by the abrasive sonic events on the exterior, gladly surrendered to the relative peace of the gallery’s grotto-like spaces, into which the racket outside entered as the sort of randomized aural ambience to which Cage so often called attention. Blending with muffled external sounds in the first of the gallery’s labyrinthine, high-ceilinged spaces were speakers playing his ninety-minute orchestral work *103*, which premiered in 1992, the last year of his life. *103* is a piece “for orchestra without conductor. Each instrument plays a series of single tones. The notation uses time-brackets.” Those composer’s instructions carry a patented Cage signature of parsimony and controlled indeterminacy but could not

prepare one for the harmonic richness the full orchestration actually produces, percussion and brass entering at unpredictable intervals but never disrupting the composition’s slow, tidal momentum.

As Cage had intended, *103* accompanied a screening of *One<sup>11</sup>*, made in the same year, projected on a wall in the first gallery. The black-and-white film, the first of Cage’s long career, simply follows the play of a beam of light over the walls of an otherwise dark, empty room, its movements mostly unhurried and without apparent plan. That “Notations” should have announced itself with this installation made every kind of sense as one progressed through the separate spaces, each artist’s work installed at generous intervals, some room-filling and others minuscule punctuation marks in a cavernous surround. The year 2012, as the centenary of the composer’s birth, prompted expectations of concerts and exhibitions of the artful calligraphy in his written scores. While organizer Joachim Pissarro and his Hunter collaborators (including cocurators Julio Grinblatt, Bibi Calderaro, and Michelle Yun) did not neglect these

dimensions, the exhibition aimed for a more comprehensive tribute—a mapping in broad strokes of a “Cage effect,” which required for its elucidation the work of artists at radiating orbits of proximity to the master in terms of media, space, and time.

From an inner orbit comes William Anastasi’s *Sink* of 1963. It exists in an edition of four, one of which belonged to Cage and Merce Cunningham—ownership in this instance bringing with it an unusual level of commitment. A plain steel plate, twenty inches square, rests on the floor, the artist’s instructions being that the plate be watered, up to but not over its edges, until the water evaporates; then repeat indefinitely. The ceaselessly corroding, oxide-encrusted surface of the plate takes on the attributes of a garden, an effect enhanced in the show by striking placement and lighting. The appeal of the piece to Cage is easy to discern, both in its parsing of time via unpredictable but rational intervals and in its analogies to Japanese stone gardens and the pitted surfaces of the Chinese scholars’ rocks that the composer prized. And those associations



Left: John Cage, *One<sup>11</sup>*, 1992, 35 mm, black-and-white, silent, 90 minutes.



Above: David Lamelas, *Limit of a Projection I*, 1967, theater spotlight in darkened room. Installation view. Photo: Julio Grinblatt.

Opposite page: Céleste Boursier-Mougenot, *indexes (v. 1)*, 2012, piano, PianoDisc system, computer. Installation view. Photo: Julio Grinblatt.

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might well have been extended to Cage's equivalent passion for the identification and gathering of mushrooms, which spring from the decayed matter of the forest floor. In keeping, too, with the multisensory rubric of the exhibition, there is in *Sink* an unheard but somehow evident fizz, as when an acidic solution accelerates the process that here consumes weeks, months, and years.

At possibly the furthest remove from Cage's actual presence lay a passive sculptural ensemble that nonetheless came equally saturated by inaudible music. Kaz Oshiro's 2009 installation features what appear to be electric-guitar amplifiers interspersed with plain rectangular solids of identical size, the tones of the latter distributed along a neutral gray scale. All are in fact three-dimensional paintings stretched over wooden supports, the likeness of muted orange leatherette, tweed grill cloth, and imaginary manufacturer's badge all cleverly deadpan illusions. As Andy Warhol's Brillo and Heinz boxes equated Minimalism's bland spatial units with painted containers for absent supermarket products, Oshiro updates the tactic to lend palpable shape and

color to something—overt sound production—that isn't there.

Not that "Notations" lacked for noise. Against the meditative sonorities of *One<sup>11</sup>* and *103*, which faintly suffused throughout the gallery, variously disruptive sound events asserted themselves. Lynne Harlow's 2007 *BEAT* also puts painting together with sound, but in an active mode. She paints a monochrome yellow square, some eight feet on a side, on the wall of a small, boxy gallery. In the center of the space sits a full rock drum kit, on which a succession of percussionists may improvise while facing the plain field of intense color. Few artists have so activated the position of painting's normative viewer, fixed and rapt as the modernist ethos would have it, but behaving with utter lack of decorum in the throes of another art activity. Of course, the indeterminacy of perception in front of the monochrome harks directly back to Cage's famous enthusiasm for the White Paintings of Robert Rauschenberg.

Argentinean Edgardo Rudnitzky's 2008 *Octopus* integrates kinetic sculpture with actual musical performance in a found-object package. He recorded his

own composition for string quartet on vinyl disc, such that the parts occupy separate, discontinuous bands on the record's surface. Four programmed tone arms rise and fall on the spinning record to produce their respective instrument's sound at the appropriate intervals, accompanying the music in a mechanical ballet. The penlike shapes of the phono cartridges and styli make their actions seem a delicate form of drawing—or, better, to be drawing sound out of matter. Something similar could be said of *Colgante Escultura Sonora* (Hanging Sound Instrument), 1979/2010, by Rudnitzky's countryman León Ferrari. Here, the visitor entered directly into the place where form and structure meet sound production. From a square frame suspended from the ceiling, a tightly spaced array of thin stainless-steel rods extends nearly to the floor. Passing through it as through a beaded curtain proved both physically enveloping and startlingly generative of strange, rippling chords and arpeggios of sound, once again confounding the contemplative model of spectatorship.

French composer and artist Céleste Boursier-Mougenot supplied one of the more direct Cage

homages—a 2012 reinvention of the prepared piano Cage so often employed. Boursier-Mougenot's Pleyel grand had the floor of a large space to itself, where it was wired to strike notes in response to a complex aggregate of real-time financial data from all over the world—a sinister globalism concretizing as affective sound events the perpetual, invisible shifting of the ground beneath our feet. Around every corner of the show, some distinct and often unexpected facet of the Cagean conceptual universe emerged, by no means all of them involved with sound in the manner of the examples adduced above, but finding other dimensions of duration, chance, ambience, and absence. Twenty-eight artists were represented in the show in addition to Cage himself, which allows only a small sampling of the exhibition's range here. Nor could even a complete inventory convey the organizers' deft execution, such that every work had the space it required, with surprisingly minimal aural or visual interference from its neighbors.

The occasion for the show may have been the centenary of Cage's birth, but the exhibition never seemed less than contemporary, lingering hardly at

all in the archive or in yearning for some lost moment of avant-garde grace. Its internationalism and diversity were impeccable, but with no sense of being forced, obligatory, or self-congratulating. Pissarro generously and rightly credits the indispensable research by Hiroko Ikegami on the 1964 tour by the Cunningham dance company (in which Cage and Rauschenberg famously participated), an event that built out the European Fluxus embrace of the composer's work into one of the first networks of globalized art.\* As Ikegami points out, Cage and pianist David Tudor were already familiar in Tokyo, the last stop on the tour, as they had visited in 1962 at the invitation of composer Toshi Ichihyanagi, who had carried the word from Cage's New School classes in New York. The ground had thus been prepared, as nearly everywhere in the world that Cage has visited before or since, for local artists in all media to map their concerns onto his capacious example. Ushio Shinohara, who participated memorably at the 1964 Tokyo performance, is, naturally, represented in "Notations" with six iterations of one of his "Imitation Paintings"—*Coca-Cola Plan*, 2011—a

series begun in the early 1960s as prescient appropriation pieces executed after magazine reproductions of American exemplars such as Rauschenberg.

The exhibition made plain that this fertilization process continues unabated two decades after Cage's death. The success of "Notations" in this regard depends on more than astute critical judgment alone, but fundamentally on the collective research undertaken by successive seminar groups guided by Pissarro, members of which supplement his lucid catalogue essay with entries and reflections of their own. Two seminars, one taught with Hunter's director of piano studies, Geoffrey Burleson, as well as a collective Cagean investigation by MFA students in their own work, all lay behind "Notations." The depth and variety of the show paid tribute to its curation as the outcome of higher learning, driven by young people and extended to the visitor in a spirit of unpremeditated discovery, true to the outlook of its subject. □

THOMAS CROW IS A CONTRIBUTING EDITOR OF *ARTFORUM*.

\* Hiroko Ikegami, *The Great Migrator: Robert Rauschenberg and the Global Rise of American Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010).

