

SCARTH, J., TAWADROS, G., BILLING, J. and WINTER, J. 2023. *Hear, now. Episode 22: Johanna Billing*. [Podcast]. Hosted on SoundCloud [online], 19 December 2023. Available from: <https://soundcloud.com/whitechapel-gallery/hear-now-episode-22-each-moment-presents-what-happens>

Hear, now. Episode 22: Johanna Billing.

SCARTH, J., TAWADROS, G., BILLING, J. and WINTER, J.

2023

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TRANSCRIPT

Hear, Now
Episode 22

Johanna
Billing

A Podcast from Whitechapel Gallery

JS: Hello, and welcome to Hear, Now, a Whitechapel Gallery podcast that delves in to the stories behind the exhibitions on view at the gallery here in the heart of East London. Each episode invites a curator to be in conversation with artists, collaborators and other thinkers about the works and themes explored in the displays, giving you special access to the ideas that shape the artworks.

My name is Jane Scarth, curator of public programmes, introducing you to today's episode which looks in depth at our current exhibition, 'Each Moment Presents What Happens' by Swedish artist, Johanna Billing, a film work created in collaboration with students at Bristol Grammar School, inspired by John Cage's 1952 piece, untitled event, Theatre Piece number one.

In this episode which was recorded live, Whitechapel Gallery director, Gilane Tawadros interviews Johanna Billing alongside curator and specialist in art schools and their histories, Judith Winter, to discuss the genesis and influences of this piece. The exhibition is free to view in Gallery 2 from 11 October 2023 to 14 January 2024.

GT: Thank you all for coming today. It's wonderful to be here. I'm absolutely thrilled that we're able to show Johanna's amazing film here at the Whitechapel Gallery. I've long been a great fan of Johanna's work and I urge you to read Judith's wonderful essay in the booklet we've produced to coincide with the show. And I'd like to thank both Johanna and Judith for being here today from different parts of the country,

Aberdeen and Stockholm. I'd also like to thank Hollybush Gardens who've been incredibly supportive of the show and the project.

So I hope you've had a chance to see the film, 'Each Moment Presents What Happens'. But if you haven't, please do after the talk. The work was commissioned by Bristol Grammar School to mark the opening of the 1532 Performing Arts Centre. And Johanna invited students largely from Bristol Grammar School in England to reimagine a seminal work by the American artist, John Cage, which was called, untitled event, Theatre Piece number one from 1952, which is credited for being the first happening, but for...but which was never properly documented apart from some scant memories of people who were there at the time.

And so I want to start with a question for Johanna based on, you know, this question of why Johanna has chosen to imagine and recreate a performance that is undocumented and half remembered and which, for me, raises some important questions about art teaching and art making, because what we have here is a project which is an act of collective reconstruction and unlike conventional teaching, you know, you're not asking the students to recreate these, sort of, canonical artworks faithfully and precisely, but actually you're asking them to interpret the work by feeling it, by making it, by imagining it and drawing on their own knowledge and experience to do so. So could you perhaps say a little bit, Johanna, about why you chose to use this John Cage work as the basis?

JB: Yes. So it's a...it's very, very nice context for me to show this work in this institution because this film is...maybe you mentioned this, it's really about the public commission from the beginning and at the same time, it's not like a monument, it's a new building that was made in Bristol, a performing arts centre, and they needed a new work. At the same time, the film doesn't maybe really have a home. We have a process, we have the film, but it's so nice to also be able to be here and to have it communicated to a more public, wider audience.

So it was a public commission. It was about a new performing arts centre in a school and I think I was very struck about the fact that you mentioned that the school here is a grammar school, which I'm sure many of you who live here are very familiar with, but for somebody from Scandinavia, it's more of a rare thing, or it takes a while to understand what is this really and how does it work and what does it really mean for the students in the end that are in this situation.

And I found it difficult because it's a public work in somehow, kind of, a private bubble, also as a school can be no matter what school it is. But I was somehow intrigued because I've been also working with a...I've been teaching myself for many, many years and...so I'm always interested in the climate, also how is it like here and I thought a lot about the amount of pressure that is in this grammar school particularly. I mean, it's pressure all over in society about how it somehow has become maybe impossible to fail.

When I came over there, I remember I had just read this study about how young people today fear actually failure more than the death of someone close. And this was before COVID, so maybe...I don't know, things are changing a lot but I think this was also for me a starting point that it's...this is difficult to begin with and it's extra difficult if you...if the pressure is so high and especially when I'm...when you're asked to work with students about art and creative things. I found this to be particularly interesting because maybe...you...in order to become...I mean, if everything is about being professional and trying to move towards that from the school perspective, you have to embrace failure on...along that way and how is that possible. So that was the starting point.

GT: Thank you. We can...'cause there's lots...so much, the film is so rich, and just in what you've said as well, there's so much to unpack there. But let me come back to that. And let me turn to Judith because the original work that was a starting point, John Cage's performance, took place in Black Mountain College which has a...it was founded in 1933, is an interdisciplinary experimental school in North Carolina, and it's achieved a mythical status among historians of art and art education. I wonder if you could tell us a bit about why it's got this status and what was so special about Black Mountain College?

JW: Yeah. I think it's an incredibly relevant art school today for us to think with and think about. And it's not just an art school. It's...it was a, kind of, philosophy of education. I think it's really important as an art school. Why it has mythical status is because

the...Andrew Rice, when he set it up, he was really disenchanted...dismissed actually from an art school and wanted to create a different kind of educational system and model, was questioning all the normative values that we have about education, all our assumptions and saying that really...wanting to gather together people in a different way, so hence my title of the essay is Coming together differently.

The key thing was that he was very influenced by the philosophy of John Dewey who was already very well established as a pragmatist, he was a really, really...his philosophy of learning by doing, and that's the key thing for all...for any students to understand, it's not putting theory before practice, it's learning through practice.

And...so this school...I think what's important about that is it attracted lots of émigré from Europe who were escaping Europe from the Nazis and...you know, and the generosity of that secluded community in Black Mountain in North Carolina is very important. You know, it was, how do we...and in a way incredibly idealistic as a venue...as an institution, as an art institution.

Josef Albers and Anni Albers came to Black Mountain and they were very instrumental in the pedagogy and then there was a, sort of, invitation to the most incredible range of musicians, philosophers, potters, poets, who all were gathered together to teach in new ways. But there was no assessment. I think that's...or the assessment. And I think the one key statement

just to...is that school is never out at Black Mountain. It was about learning and a life philosophy.

GT: Well, I think we'll come back to that, pick that up in a minute. But just to come back to John Cage specifically and Richard quoted this quote from John Cage's Lecture on Nothing from 1959 which becomes a motif through the film. This is a talk about something and actually a talk about nothing. But each moment also...apart from the happening that took place in Black Mountain College also references another John Cage work, which is his prepared piano pieces from...and originally the act of preparation of this work was that various objects were inserted between the piano strings of a piano, things like bolts and screws and other objects. And in your film, Johanna, we see the students again reconstructing this work and introducing lots of different objects like toys and stationery and cutlery to distort and activate the piano in different ways.

You've talked about your use of John Cage's work in the film as a Trojan horse. And I wonder if you could say a bit about what you meant by that.

JB: Yeah. And I...yeah, yeah. No, I guess...and that...the piano was somehow a starting point and...I mean, I always personally like Cage's prepared piano works because the way...when he came up with that idea, it was also by accident somehow. It wasn't only to make this experiment. It was, like, he needed a percussion, he couldn't have people playing drums for a dance performance. So he had to make the piano become a

percussive instrument. And...so that has for me always been very special.

So I...and when we came to the school, I met a lot of the teachers and had meetings and we talked a lot about the system and measuring and assessments and all that. And then the music teachers explained that Cage's prepared piano had to be removed from the teaching in the school because it wasn't measurable. And I think that for me became, like, okay, wow, this is interesting, we can somehow start working with this.

And from there, I got interested in setting up this dialogue specifically also with Black Mountain because it was interesting to somehow have these two schools, to somehow make, like, a play between them in space and time.

And then I was also...I mean, the Trojan horse thing was about...I mean, what you learn is that in this situation what happens in this theatre, performing arts centre, is that often you put up a play and you work with something. It's King Lear or something you know and you try to do it as good as you can and...so it becomes also professional and well made and you can measure it and...but then I thought it was so interesting to think about this super famous event that this performer – Cage – did in the '50s. It is, I mean, it's so well known in art history.

At the same time, we don't know much about it because it's what you said in the beginning, is mostly what people remember and talk about and they also

remember very differently, which I think we can come back to later. But I thought it was still...you know, in order for us to be able to work with the students and get all teachers engaged, we needed also...it was good to somehow say that we're going to study a very important piece in history. At the same time while doing that and really going in to the whole mythology about what Cage did with chance and everything, we could insert other ways of thinking that maybe is not...you cannot explain it from the beginning, it's something that happens while we do it.

And especially, you know, when...the more when we start to work with it, it becomes also clear for everybody, there is no script. We don't know. We don't know anything basically, and that's also why it became so interesting for the students that they could...it was really about them proposing or suggesting and imagining what they could do.

So the piano is one part of the film. And we see in the film that they are collecting all this stuff. I mean, it's...that is also not again about repeating Cage's work because they get stuff from their personal environment and we see them source stuff from the various departments and it's in the end quite a lot more messy and weird than maybe what you imagine that Cage did. And then it's the event itself that we somehow performed in this theatre space. Yeah.

GT: I mean, it touches on so many things. And you've touched on so many things now about, you know, what it means to be an artist, how can you teach...and this is a conundrum people have been grappling with, how

can you teach being an artist? You can teach certain skills, drawing, you can teach how to cast, teach how to print but actually what remains elusive is teaching that curiosity, that ability to draw on your own experience, to take risks, to take on the possibility of failure. And in a way, this also takes us out of the realm of art making, much more in to social change and what's happened in recent years and which so many areas of our life are codified and also doesn't exist unless it's been measured...

JW: Yes, absolutely.

GT: ...evaluated...

JW: Yeah. I think what you're saying there as well is it's something about...that we've lost touch with how significant the environment is and the dynamics of that environment, who orchestrates it, how it's created. And I think that that is really missing in our current systems, that we've actually managed them rather than created an ecology. And I think what...that...the prepared piano is really wonderful in the film. It's one of my favourite pieces, where really what you've got is...you know, if you think about what John Cage was trying to do, was you've got a system of dampers and piano strings and...that have a certain structure that are meant to be played in a certain way and played correctly.

And then there's a certain discipline that happens when you practice learning piano. And what he's trying to allow the students to do and what Johanna is also opening up in that work is you can experiment

with this, you can break the system, you can change the structure. You know, how can you transform it.

So what seems like a very prosaic everyday...you know, we're just going to play with these materials that we place in the piano strings, is actually very political. But quietly political. It's political from the inside. It's allowing people to realise how they can make shifts and changes. And I really love that piece and you describing that...when we were talking in the essay, you know...about the essay, and constructing that, but I think the things you were saying about how the students just opened up when they started to do that experiment, is really interesting.

JB: Yeah. But that also...it's maybe good to say, took a lot of time. I mean, this project took many years to do. And then of course in the end you have...you make something and it's a lot of improvisation and it...some...it...it's in that moment and it's all about being in that moment. But it was a long somehow preparation, not a preparation where students would rehearse or...more of actually trying to create that climate where they can be allowed to not know exactly where it should lead up to. Because I think that's...there's all these facilities and we see in the film that the school and the new build centre, they have so much stuff there. It's very rich. Amazing. But if you don't have the opportunities...I think that is what we were trying to raise there...

JW: Yeah, how to bring that to life somehow. How to...like, you can have all the facilities in the world, but if you haven't got the human agency and the dynamics to

make it do something, that it's void. And we're seeing that in most of our institutions, I think.

GT: Just to talk a bit about the...another aspect of the film, which is that each moment takes place over the course of a single day, although it took many years, the actual film unfolds over a school day. And we have a lot of blurring between, sort of, what is art or performance and what is the everyday reality of the school. So you have students preparing work, they're speaking publicly in the dining room, they're playing the piano. And all these performances are embedded in the structure of the day. But you also have parallel stuff going on in the theatre black box. And in here, we have this tracking camera which follows a circular track which operates on one hand like a, sort of, clock, kind of, punctuating time and...so it moves from the different hands, but it also acts as a stage and people are constantly crossing from real life, if you like, in the stage, constructed space. And I wonder if you could talk a little bit about that.

JB: Yeah. Well I think it...it's the whole commission and was about making a film. That's what I was supposed to do. And then when you start to work with situation that was not documented at all, which was really about life and here and now, how can we even do that. So I thought a lot about that and in the end we decided to have...to not have an audience in that original event that Cage did with...we didn't maybe say too much of the ones he worked with, Merce Cunningham and Robert Rauschenberg and several other people. They announced it in the same day in the dining hall and then it took place there.

And then what was special...I mean, what we know or think we know at least, what people do remember is that the audience were seated by Cage in the centre and they were all facing different directions. And...so when things happened, he gave all the participants timeslots so maybe Cunningham would get a little piece of paper where they say, come in at 3:55 and continue until then, blah, blah, blah. And then somebody else got something else. So he...what he was really after, which I was interested in was not only that this was about having people collaborating or doing things together, it was rather the simultaneous thing, you know, that you do your thing, but it goes on while somebody else is doing something.

And then that was somehow underlined or enhanced by the fact that everybody was sitting and watching different directions. And I think that's also why people don't remember or remember different things, which is really fun when you read about it. So I thought a lot about that, that there is no centre of attention. There is...you can also...you can choose a bit and...

JW: You were saying something about in the original as well, that actually Cage had people all standing in different directions and that meant that the anecdotes that we have about that event are completely contradictory...

JB: Exactly. Yeah.

JW: ...and complex. No one has the same view or perspective.

JB: So, I mean, the...but still we are making a film and instead of having the audience I thought, okay, so the camera can become some kind of audience or registrator and maybe even a performer somehow. So... and it was also really important for me to make...I mean, even if I talk about pedagogical thing, I want to somehow work with the students, that they come in and do their thing, I don't want to be a teacher, but I also don't want to be a director too much because you're...it's...all these hierarchies and they are so used to being in the hierarchy always. So it was really important also to get them part of the production, allowing also the freedom to really be where you wanted inside of...you could choose if you wanted to be in...outside or what the camera filmed, or inside or...and then instead of...this was something that the students and...we came up with together, that rather than having time slots because we didn't really understood how Cage had worked with that.

We used that circular track as a clock, so they...everybody had to pay so much attention to how many realms were pushed and how quickly or fast or slow sometimes that was. So people could...would come in and do their thing according to those numbers.

And then what I also wanted to say about this simultaneous thing that I know Cage was so interested in for us to somehow be aware of what happens, why we're doing this outside or it's...for him, it was also about society, all these parallels and the...you...that's what we hear in his speeches. It's

always about...he talks about something super maybe theoretical or about music composition and then at the same time, it's like a cut and it's in the words or in the same sentence. It's about what happens in the street.

And I think that's so interesting for me, who works with film, because that's what you can also underline when you edit the work. It's going to be a completely new construction. And somehow I think that is...when...this new play that happens in the film, there was one thing that happened with the students, and then there's also something else that happens where this whole school day and the...everything that happens in the break becomes part of...

JW: The things that happen off stage essentially, yeah.

JB: And I think that also helped me somehow to play with this...the bridge between maybe another educational system or school and this new one because this group who...students who are somehow experimenting, they walk around, you know, within that normal school day, they do go and have lunch but they don't wear the uniform and they don't follow the same rules, so it was a bit of a playful thing, I think, with that.

GT: Johanna, can I say thank you so much for sharing this wonderful work with us and for being here to speak. Thank you, Judith Winter. Thank you to my colleagues, Hannah and Richard and all my colleagues here who have helped to organise this talk and event today [music plays]. And thank you all very, very much for coming and being with us for this conversation.

JS: Thanks for listening to this episode of Hear, Now. You can find all of our other episodes online at www.whitechapelgallery.org as well as iTunes, Spotify, Stitcher and SoundCloud. Don't forget to visit the exhibition, 'Each Moment Presents What Happens' on until 14th January 2024. Bye for now.

Transcribed by 1st Class Secretarial Services.