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Coming together differently.

WINTER, J.

2023

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Johanna Billing

Each Moment Presents What Happens



Whitechapel Gallery

Coming Together Differently

Judith Winter

‘Students worry about choosing their way. I always tell them, “You can go anywhere from anywhere.”’¹

Anni Albers, ‘Materials as Metaphor’, 1982

There are many factors that might lead someone to discover a particular artwork or event, such as compulsion, curiosity, or happenstance. The same can be true for the student taking part in an event or project at school or college: the decision to participate is often quite arbitrary or impulsive, perhaps a means to escape the boredom of routine. However, we should not underestimate how transformative these detours can be. *Each Moment Presents What Happens (2022)*,² a film orchestrated by Johanna Billing, draws our attention to these unpredictable and formative moments, in which people come together differently.

Since the late 1990s Billing has focused her film work on the unquantifiable aspects of human life, particularly those elements of possibility and potentiality, or *irrealis moods*³ – imagination, contingency, speculation, longing – that subtly shape who we are. Most of Billing’s projects begin life as forms of situated dialogue in which the people participating – often across generations and social divides – explore their role within a group through performance and improvisation. Her abiding preoccupation is with the way we choreograph and perform everyday life, as well as how we are constantly modifying or recalibrating our actions in relation to others. This can be seen in works such as *Pulheim Jam Session (2015)*, where Billing turns the camera on motorists and passengers stuck in a staged traffic jam, or *Missing Out (2001)*, in which the artist recalls the anxiety of a collective breathing exercise (something common in schools in Sweden in the 1970s). The latter film presents a group of people lying on the floor in an irregular formation: they are individuals united only through circumstance, caught in a moment of pressure and obligation.

Each Moment Presents What Happens was commissioned by Bristol Grammar School, an institution with a history dating back to 1532. The project was realised over several years in dialogue with the curator Josephine Lanyon and in collaboration with staff and students from Bristol schools. It celebrated the opening of Bristol Grammar's new performing arts centre while also reaching out to the wider community. As in previous works, the process began with a predetermined situation – in this case, a highly traditional and contested educational environment – to generate the parameters of the project. As someone from Sweden with limited experience of independent, fee-paying grammar schools, the priority was to find a way to navigate the multiple perspectives and agendas of those involved and to find some common ground.

Today in the UK, as in many other places, our educational priorities have shifted, and unsanctioned moments beyond the curriculum structure are rare. As education increasingly becomes a commodity subjugated to market interests, the emphasis on climbing the meritocratic ladder grows in students and staff alike. Such discussions with the faculty on premature professionalism and the fear of failure led to a conversation about the removal of John Cage's *Sonatas I–III for Prepared Piano* (1946–8) from the A-level music syllabus. The grounds for the work being removed were largely based on the difficulty of evaluating a student's success. The 'prepared piano' created by Cage involves the altering of individual piano strings with objects such as coins and screws. These interact with the hammers and dampers, in turn changing the sound of the instrument by affecting its volume, timbre, tone and duration. Cage's piano experiments explore how one works within a given structure: the player of the 'prepared piano' can choose to follow a piece of sheet music, but the work also necessitates improvisation. Like most of Cage's work, it is also a metaphor and vehicle for disrupting systems. In response we see students in Billing's film experiment with a myriad of found objects – utensils, office stationery, toys, tubes of paint and cutlery – sourced from their immediate surroundings.

Following Cage's notions of indeterminacy and chance, Billing worked with students to reimagine his seminal performance *Untitled Event (Theater Piece No. 1)*, a collaborative happening that took place in 1952 at Black Mountain College, an interdisciplinary experimental school in Asheville, North Carolina (1933–57). In his own words, Cage 'organized an event that involved the paintings of Bob Rauschenberg, the dancing of Merce Cunningham, film slides, phonograph records, radios and poetries of Charles Olson and M.C. Richards recited from the top of ladders'.⁴ It also included the music of David Tudor, lighting and stage design by Nicholas Cernovitch and suspended paintings by Franz Kline. The event was initiated as part of an intensive summer school programme 'in the spirit of academic freedom, the receptivity to new ideas, the informal setting, the intensity of life, and the use of practicing artists who had been innovators in their fields rather than professional art educators'.⁵ Billing mirrored this approach by inviting visual artists, musicians, DJs and choreographers to develop workshops with the students, bridging these two very different educational models, past and present.

According to Richards, who contributed poetry to *Untitled Event*, 'one had to be there', present in the moment; while for others such as the composer Lou Harrison, it was all quite boring.⁶ The event was undocumented and so lives on only through the anecdotes and conflicting memories of those who participated in or witnessed it. As such the event can never be re-enacted; rather, it offers a fictive space to freely invent and imagine new possibilities. *Untitled Event* was staged within the dining hall at Black Mountain College, with the audience facing different directions and various activities taking place simultaneously around them. Many of the witnesses thus describe what they experienced from different vantage points. Instead of an audience, Billing uses a 360-degree tracking camera to recall this element, making visible the idea that even with a documenting device, things are never experienced in the same way. The camera, operated by the students, takes on a role as an active performer, while the circularity of the track also functions like a

clock and is used by the participants to count themselves into the performance. This physical relationship with time makes palpable how we act in the world, the ways we make decisions, change direction, improvise and navigate prevailing conditions, and our attempts to remain in control of how we are observed.

Despite our contemporary assumptions, Black Mountain was not born out of some esoteric philosophy; rather, it was highly pragmatic, its ethos founded in the philosopher John Dewey's theories of education and his concept of 'learning by doing'.⁷ In 1933 the educator John Andrew Rice began planning this very different kind of learning environment after being dismissed by Rollins College in Florida. He was joined by a cohort of staff as well as those students brave enough to follow. The founding statements of this new school were based on the idea that artistic experience is central both to learning and to democracy; that learning emerges through immediate experience; that governance should be shared by faculty and students; that education extends to social relationships and endeavours beyond the classroom; and that oversight should be limited to participants in this collective experience. The curriculum was shaped not by external authority, tradition or ideology but by contemporary urgencies and the needs of students and staff. Among the latter were many émigré artists, such as Josef and Anni Albers, who had taught at the radical, interdisciplinary Bauhaus school in Germany prior to its forced closure by the Nazis. Education was a place to start again. As Anni Albers stated: 'Beginnings are usually more interesting than elaborations and endings. Beginning means exploration, selection, development, a potent vitality not yet limited, not circumscribed by the tried and the traditional'.⁸

Albers' words echo in the opening sequences of Billing's film: a doorway to the school and its performing arts centre, the mirrored reflections of school buildings past and present, the ringing of the school bell. One is quickly caught up in the actions of the participants setting up the staging and props, practising using cameras, moving the piano, preparing canvases and rigging lights.

In resonance with the recollections of those who experienced a similar series of simultaneous events over seventy years ago, images from the performances in the theatre space are juxtaposed in the film with the tangential daily routines taking place throughout the school day. This allows all activities, including those off-stage, to become part of a performative environment.

These moments, unrehearsed and responsive, open up ways for the participants to challenge their assumptions. One student asks, 'How can something be nothing?' while another exclaims: 'Damn recapitulation.' The kind of learning taking place here is not about getting things right or moving in a straight line from A to B. These animated yet awkward moments of becoming are concerned with how we move beyond fixed positions. This is tangible in the scene where one student holds tight to the bottom of a ladder, while reading the opening lines of Cage's 'Lecture on Something' (c.1951), taking great care to perform the original spaces between the words:

This is a talk about something and naturally also a talk about nothing. About how something and nothing are not opposed to each other but need each other to keep on going [...]

What Billing proposes in correspondence with Cage is an opening of the mind to the things we discover. This approach foregrounds the relations that exist between people, things and places and acknowledges that these relationships are more complex than anything the artist might prescribe or attempt to determine. The artist is concerned not with self-expression or even self-awareness but with human agency. Such a practice is then an act of quiet resistance, one that bears witness to the crisis in education while also making visible other forms of knowledge-making. The film signposts the experiments of forebears for an emergent generation and is a potent reminder that the arts are not a mere adjunct on the fringes of the curriculum but are a vehicle for learning through life.

Endnotes

- 1 Anni Albers, 'Material as Metaphor', statement given at panel discussion 'The Art/Craft Connection: Grass Roots or Glass Houses', annual meeting of the College Art Association, New York, 25 February 1982.
- 2 The title quotes John Cage's 'Lecture on Nothing' (1959), which is recited throughout the film. Published in *Silence: Lectures and Writings by John Cage* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961) 109.
- 3 *Irrealis mood* is a linguistic term used to apply to statements that are hypothetical or possible, to indicate that a certain situation or action has not yet happened. Billing uses irrealis moods when titling some of her work, for example *You Don't Love Me Yet* (2003).
- 4 Cage, *Silence*, op. cit., 10.
- 5 Mary Emma Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1987) 100.
- 6 William Fetterman, 'The Untitled Event at Black Mountain College, Theatre Piece, Solos in Song Books, and Dialogue: Variations on Small-Group Simultaneities', in *John Cage's Theatre Pieces* (Oxford: Routledge, 1996).
- 7 John Dewey (1859–1952) was a philosopher of education and the author of *Education and Democracy* (1916) as well *Art as Experience* (1934). 'Learning by doing' challenges the idea that learning begins with a body of contextualised knowledge.
- 8 Anni Albers, *On Weaving* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1965) 52.

Further Reading

Johanna Billing, Lisa Schmidt and James Merle Thomas, *Pulheim Jam Session*, Academy of Media Arts Cologne (Cologne: Glasmoog Books, 2013)

Johanna Billing and Judith Winter, 'In Conversation: Keep on Doing', available at www.johannabilling.com/text-how-to-play-a-landscape-4/

Eugen Blume, Catherine Nichols, Matilda Felix and Gabriele Knapstein, *Black Mountain College: An Inter-disciplinary Experiment 1933–1957*, Hamburger Bahnhof, Museum für Gegenwart, Berlin and Nationalgalerie Museen zu Berlin (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2015)

John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings by John Cage* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961)

Martin Duberman, *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community* (London: Penguin, 1972)

Mary Emma Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1987)

Mary Emma Harris, 'John Cage at Black Mountain: Preliminary Thinking', *Journal of Black Mountain College Studies*, vol. 4 (April 2013), available at www.blackmountaincollege.org/mary-emma-harris-john-cage-at-black-mountain-a-preliminary-thinking/

Philipp Kaiser, ed., *Johanna Billing: Look Behind Us, A Blue Sky*, Kunstmuseum Basel, Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Basel and Dundee Contemporary Arts (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2007)

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Exhibition

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Gallery Technical Manager: Alejandro Ball
Head of Exhibitions: Helen Sainsbury

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