

Reviews

Exhibitions

Johanna Billing: Each Moment Presents What Happens

Hollybush Gardens, London, 24 March to 6 May

On an August day in 1952 the composer John Cage, then a teacher at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, curated a performance in the school's dining hall. During the allotted time, Cage, Robert Rauschenberg, Merce Cunningham, Charles Olson and others danced, recited poetry from ladders, hung abstract paintings, played with a phonograph and generally engaged in a free space of creative activity that openly traded in chance interactions and spontaneity. The performers surrounded an audience of 'maybe 35 or 50 people', according to MC Richards, who read poems on the day. No documentation exists, the work subsequently passing on into the realms of memory or oblivion. Was it a collaboration or a conflagration? I guess you had to be there.

The composer Lou Harrison, who *was* there, described it as 'quite boring'. 'Oh, I certainly didn't get the impression it was a historic event,' Richards said later. In a 1965 interview, Cage himself said: 'I don't recall anything else except a ritual with a coffee cup.' And yet *Untitled Event (Theatre Piece no.1)* has attained near-mythical status in the history of modern art and accrued a wide-ranging cultural significance. It is now considered the first multimedia artwork, has influenced pretty much all Conceptual Art since, and is held up as an object of rapture or ridicule depending on which side of an educational debate you stand.

Johanna Billing's film *Each Moment Presents What Happens*, 2021, reimagines Cage's work with the help of students from Bristol Grammar School. Over the film's 27-minute runtime, the ambient everyday rhythms of the school - moving between playgrounds, science labs, classrooms, a dining hall, a performing arts centre - play host to free acts of creation, interpretation, recitation and collaboration. A camera mounted on a looped rail moves around in a circle while students walk into the middle of it carrying various objects, reading from Cage's *Lecture on Nothing*, singing, dancing ballet. Records play and are scratched. A young pianist plays Chilly Gonzales songs with burgeoning virtuosity. Later, a group of students jam everything from eye-droppers to a cat's skull between the piano's strings and discuss how this affects the sound. Abstract paintings are hoisted high on a rack. Out above the playground, two hot air balloons hang perfectly still in the sky. Then, unlike Cage's piece, Billing's film seamlessly loops and happens again and again.

Dip into the gallery and watch for a few minutes and you would be forgiven for echoing Harrison on

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Johanna Billing, *Each Moment Presents What Happens*, 2021, video

Cage's original in finding it 'quite boring'. If you give the film your full attention for two or even three runs through, you'll have to concede that it's anything but. Since we can't shout up to Charles Olson reading poems on his ladder in 1952 and ask him what the hell he's talking about, let's briefly interrogate what Billing achieves in her interpolation of *Untitled Event*, and unpick the reasons why her film is (and, let's be clear, it absolutely is) such a powerful, emotionally resonant and beautiful work of art.

Part of it is nostalgia, of course. Watching allows you to dwell in an ambient childhood state of lower stakes and higher, freer potentials. We all miss our own youth, but the tone of Billing's film swerves this simple rosy tint by allowing for moments of discord and awkwardness - quick cuts and crowded audio - and also, yes, banality and anxiety. Meaning-making can be as menial as it is unmoored.

There are also, typically for Billing, political undercurrents, poignant in their contrast to the children's innocent endeavour. Harsh jump-cuts of historic buildings, crests of Oxford colleges, portraits of redoubtable former teachers/benefactors and, of course, the new, ridiculously well-equipped arts centre (Billing's film was commissioned to celebrate its opening) remind us that this is a fee-paying selective school, inaccessible to all but the most privileged of UK kids, with a history rooted in the mercantile classes of Bristol and their slave-trade wealth. A far cry from the liberal arts college ideals of Black Mountain (though Billing also avoids straight nostalgia for a different educational era - I challenge any viewer to conclude that they would prefer the adult pretensions of that 1952 dining room).

When they come, and if you're attuned to them, there is no overstating how revelatory the film's best moments can feel: when the piano player stumbles into a particularly melodic line; when a young girl struggles and eventually masters a part of Cage's lecture ('re ... re ... damn it ... recapitulation'); when the jumble of voices and noises gives way to three kids in dialogue with one another reaching frankly astonishing insights into Cage ('yeah, but, like, because silence doesn't consist of anything the only thing we can do is decide how long it lasts'); those hot air balloons, impossibly still and high. As with her 2007 film and album *This Is How We Walk on the Moon*, which adapted the falteringly beautiful cello of Arthur Russell's song as a soundtrack for young sailors learning the ropes (literally) on the choppy waters of the Firth of Forth, Billing assembles and deconstructs existing elements to induce a state of pedagogical wonder, collaboration and possibility.

Adam Heardman is a poet and writer based in London.