

## Introduction to the exhibition

Playing John Cage  
5 November 2005 – 15 January 2006

This exhibition examines the influence and legacy of John Cage, exploring themes relating to his ideas and fascination with sound, chance, accident and Zen Buddhism.

To discuss 20th and 21st century music without acknowledging John Cage is impossible, but despite being one of the most important and revolutionary composers of the last century, he remains a difficult and controversial figure. Playing John Cage presents work by Cage alongside new work from contemporary artists and historic pieces from the 1960s.

### GALLERY 1

**Ryoanji** is a collaborative piece by three artists responding to Kyoto's Ryoanji temple garden, possibly the most famous of Japan's Zen gardens. Ryoanji (meaning temple of the peaceful dragon) is a simple rock garden consisting of nothing but 15 large rocks placed on a bed of white sand. It was a major influence on Cage and many of his works relate to it. **Takagi Masakatsu's**

video is compiled from still photographs taken at the garden. The soundtracks, composed by **Carsten Nicolai** and **Ryoji Ikeda**, are unsynchronised with the visuals, left on random shuffle, so that the work constantly shifts and changes. Taking inspiration from the philosophy of Zen, this piece relies on chance over structured sequence.

**John Cage's** drawing **Where R =Ryoanji R/17-2/88** is one of a large number of works he made directly inspired by the Zen garden. Gathering together fifteen stones (the same number found at Ryoanji) from his own collection, he arranged them by chance, according to the I Ching (an ancient Chinese system of divination based on chance), and traced around their contours. The title of the drawing refers to how many times he traced around the stones, in this case 17 times using 2 pencils. Cage continued to work on these drawings from 1983 until the time of his death in 1992.

This sheet is intended as an introduction to the exhibition. Please speak to a steward for further information.

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The garden shed situated in the corner of the gallery is an installation by **Alvin Curran**. **Gardening With John** creates an enclosed listening space in which to experience a 'sound portrait' of Cage (who was also a keen gardener). Compiled from a large number of different sound sources, the work features Cage's characteristic laugh along with recordings made in the New York loft where he lived with Merce Cunningham. To these Curran has added many other sounds that relate to Cage and his music including playing chess and cooking mushrooms.

The four framed text pieces are works from the 1960s by contemporaries of Cage. **Gavin Bryars**, **Michael Parsons**, **Meiko Shiom** and **Christian Wolff** were greatly influenced by his ideas and were involved in the experimental practices of Fluxus, the Scratch Orchestra and the Experimental Music Catalogue.

The text pieces here can be thought of as scores or instructions for performances. Each score is accompanied by an ipod on which you can listen to contemporary realisations of the work.

For **Rolf Julius**, as with Cage, music is everywhere and anything can become music. His installation consists of five separate works; all characterised by the use of very small speakers and extremely quiet sounds. Julius is also interested in the relationship between the aural and the visual, often with the sound referring to the material of the piece. In **Water**, for example, there is the combination of real water with the sounds of water.

His 'small music', as he calls it, combines natural and electronic sounds and can easily go unnoticed. These pieces require us to get up close and listen carefully to the music Julius has created. By using a simple combination of basic elements in these diminutive works, Julius creates relationships between sensations of the visual and acoustic realms.

**Pyramid** by **Akio Suzuki** consists of sheets of glassine paper piled up on the floor. In the centre of the upper most sheet lies a clay replica of an ear-shaped stone found by the artist.

Visitors can interact with the work by carefully walking across the glassine sheets, which over time will cause the piece to change. Cage employed chance and randomness in his work as key creative principals. By introducing these elements to this piece Pyramid explores cause and effect and changes in form by demonstrating the many different ways in which people engage with objects.

**Akio Suzuki's** other work, considered as a 'sound walk', is also participatory. **Otodate Bristol** consists of a symbol painted on the ground at various points outside Arnolfini, around the harbourside. These locations are intended as 'listening spots' where people can stand, listen and, according to Suzuki, 'purify their sense of hearing'. The otodate (literally meaning 'sound places') symbol is derived from a sketch that Suzuki made of John Cage's ears.

To locate the listening spots please use the map drawn by Akio Suzuki and available in the gallery.

The chaise longue surrounded by hanging tree branches is called **This Is For You** by **Kaffe Matthews** Like **Gardening With John** this piece also creates an enclosed listening environment. Matthews invites us to simply sit and listen, encouraging us to focus on the ambience of the room and the myriad of 'background' sounds that we normally block out. This piece, along with Akio Suzuki's **Otodate Bristol**, is inspired by John Cage's most notorious composition, his so-called silent piece, 4' 33", which consists of the performer(s) playing nothing at all for four minutes and thirty-three seconds.

Like Cage, Kaffe Matthews challenges us to contemplate the nature of silence and causes us to become aware of the huge number of different sounds present in the gallery, which may otherwise pass us by.

#### GALLERY 5 (FLOOR 2)

Cage, an avid collector of mushrooms, once said: "Sound is vibration. Everything is vibrating. So there is no earthly reason why we can't hear everything...Mushrooms are making sounds, and we should be listening to them." Mushrooms are notoriously unpredictable in where and when they will grow and this indeterminacy fascinated Cage. Taking these ideas as a starting point, **Michael Prime**, who trained as an ecologist, has created **Ha, Ha! Your Mushrooms Have Gone?**, a work in which we are invited to listen to the sounds of mushrooms growing.

All living organisms produce a faint electrical field which can be measured and amplified to produce sound. Through the use of a bioactivity translator we are able to

'hear' the sounds of different mushrooms living their lives, which will change as new specimens are brought in during the course of the work.

The Shitake mushrooms used in this installation are a delicious edible species, with many health-giving properties.