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THE EFFECTS OF MINIMALISM/INDETERMINACY ON THE MERCE CUNNINGHAM AND JOHN CAGE COLLABORATION

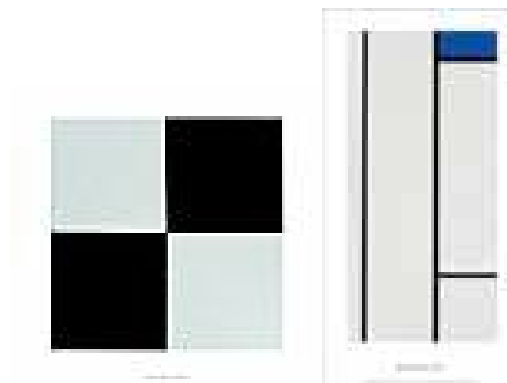
Janelle M. Morrison (Dance and Music Education)

Dr. Julie Kerr-Berry, Faculty Mentor (Dance)

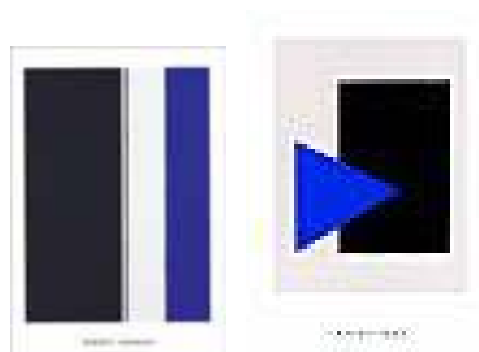
Minimalism is movement in both the visual and performing arts that strive to focus attention on the subject as an object, reducing its historical and expressive content to a bare minimum or art without meaning. John Cage's music stems from the idea of minimalism and expands itself into what he calls "indeterminacy." Indeterminacy means that chance operations will produce the score and performer's choices. Through Cage's study of Zen he learned about *The Book of Change*, *I Ching*. Using his charts, based on this book and the toss of three coins, Cage could layout the format of his compositions. Merce Cunningham's choreography explores the use of repetition and chance. Cunningham also used the *I Ching* that was passed along by Cage. He also used many other forms of choreography such as everyday movements that an untrained dancer could do, in addition to dance movements and some movements, he devised himself. (Kostelanetz, 48) This opened up a whole new world of exploration. The collaboration of Merce Cunningham and John Cage brings together two art forms using minimalism and indeterminacy. Music and dance are correlated in many ways although the arts are not always studied together. This project gave me a chance to combine both my music and dance studies into one art form.

What would you do if you found yourself trapped inside a garbage can? What kind of sounds would you hear? What kind of movements could you make? If I was trapped, there would be a lot of experimentation, repetition, climaxes, releases and a feeling of never getting anywhere with no end in sight. This is how the music of John Cage and the choreography of Merce Cunningham make me feel. Through the use of experimental music and choreography such as minimalism and indeterminacy, Cage and Cunningham became a duet trapped in a garbage can.

Minimalism (as a style, not the 1960s art movement) has been explored in all art forms through the years starting first in visual arts, i.e. paintings, and later moving into music and dance. Many of these works seem very simple, with straight lines, repetition, and basic color patterns. Minimalism is movement in both the visual and performing arts that strive to



Malevich Kasimir



Barnett Numan

Mondrian

focus attention on the object as an object, reducing its historical and expressive content to a bare minimum (Lect. 13). In music, minimalism is characterized by the repetition of short figures, tonal harmony, slow harmonic rhythm, and more or less regular pulsation (Stolba 653). John Cage's music stems from the idea of minimalism and expands itself into what he calls indeterminacy. Indeterminacy means that chance operations will produce the score and performer's choices, another term for which is aleatory. After studying Zen, a Buddhist philosophy, he

determined he would express musically the idea of zero thought. He also wanted the idea of chance to come through in his compositions. This is where the Chinese *I Ching: The Book of Change*, came into use (Stolba 644). The *I Ching* is the formalization of Changes, alchemical weddings of Yin and Yang, natural laws of circular regulation in acupuncture and in "Feng-Shui" (Chinese Geomancy), which both apply to man and his environment, setting them in a reciprocal agreement, in a very eco-systematic and yet typically Chinese way (Geomance). This book has 64 hexagrams on which Cage based his charts. Then, with the use of three coins which are commonly used with the *I Ching* he would layout the format for his compositions. By doing this Cage removed the possibility of putting his own personal preferences in his music (Stolba 644). He wanted to undo the "concert hall", where an audience sits quietly waiting for the performers who, in turn, submit themselves to the will of the conductor- who, finally, serves not his own creative faculties but the orchestral score (Trippi).

In a traditional orchestral setting the ensemble flows to the pre-written beat of the score. It tells a tempo, style, and mood. There is no swaying from it; in fact there is pressure for exact definition. John Cage hoped to sway to the exact opposite side. Where the players do not have set restraints, they may sit where they like, in some cases play the music in what ever order they would like. He did not believe there had to be harmony or even a melody for that matter. The music speaks for itself. In one instance he even composed a piece called 4' 33" where a performer comes on stage as if to play the piano, and does

nothing for four minutes and thirty-three seconds. This was to say that the music was produced through whatever noise happened by chance in the theater.

The collaboration of Merce Cunningham and John Cage brings together two art forms using minimalism and indeterminacy. Cunningham's choreography explores the use of repetition and chance, Cunningham also used the *I Ching* that was passed along by Cage. He also used many other forms of choreography, such as everyday movements that an untrained dancer could do, in addition to dance movements, and some movements he devised himself (Kostelanetz 48). This opened up a whole new world of exploration.

Cunningham studied under Martha Graham and was often one of her soloists. Soon after it was apparent he was going to change conventional dance and bring it into a new spectrum. His work was no longer dependent on a narrative, a character or a dramatic mood (Kostelanetz 1). In 1964 Cunningham introduced the idea of chance. This is where the *I Ching* became apparent in his work, he would choreograph using coins and random methods. This brought him to the idea of elements working independently of each other. "His method of dance compositions in which the scenic designer, the composer, and the choreographer each worked independently of one another, knowing the climate of a dance but not its particulars" (Kostelanetz 2).



An impression from *How to Pass, Kick, Fall and Run*. Photograph by James Klosty

Most of the changes that came through in the collaboration of Cage and Cunningham did not happen until the composition and choreography were finished. Many of times Cunningham would give Cage a layout such as: 6:5:8 and this would be phrasing or climax points for Cage to structure the music around.

John Cage: The scenario given me by Mr. Cunningham was the basis for a study of numbers with which I find it congenial to begin a musical composition. His remark, “the fullness and stillness of a summer day,” suggested that Summer would be the longest section; that, together with his desire that each season would be developed by continuous invention and preceded by a short formal prelude (formal by means of exact repetitions), and that the entire work would be cyclical and concise, brought about the following numerical situation: 2,2; 1,3; 2,4; 1,3; 1.... (Cunningham 13)

Cage would not see the choreography and Cunningham would not listen to the music, they would just see what happened when it came together. “With chance you have the possibility of doing something you never could have

thought of, such as your head going in one direction while your body must move in another” (Kostelanetz 53). By using “dancers” with no prior dance experience, Cunningham was able to teach them new movements without having preset movements in their body.

Concert dance has been changed in many ways thanks to the involvement of Merce Cunningham and John Cage. Not only has the style been affected, but the expectations of what should be perceived when attending a performance, to the audience being part of the performance. Basically, take everything you know about music and dance, everything you do not know about music and dance, everything you would hate, everything you love, everything you could ever imagine, and this is what happened to the Cage and Cunningham collaboration.

Performers now become audience members and audience members now become performers. Everyday people, not dancers, are asked for, hoped for. For the possibility of chance choreography, that new ideas not set movement would be expanded upon. The element of chance which has no real mood, meaning, and never a beginning or an ending thought was the biggest idea brought to concert dance. Nothing has to be or needs to be done for a reason. The music doesn't drive the dance and the dance doesn't persuade the music. Even the choreography within the dance is chosen with random precision. Almost mathematical, having a set number of ideas, except the possibility of having the exact same four measures is almost impossible. Remember, chance is not random. There is always a reason for what is done in chance.

With a flip of a coin there is always a chance for new ideas to be pursued. For Merce Cunningham and John Cage it was a good thing to be trapped in a garbage can. Through the possibility of new ideas, confined surrounding, specialized sounds and movements to effect concert dance, ever changing because of chance.



Robert Swinston and Cheryl Therrien of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company perform "Fabrications" at the New York State Theater on July 25, 2002, presented by Lincoln Center Festival 2002.
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Author's biography

Janelle Morrison is a student at Minnesota State University, Mankato working on her Bachelor of Science Degree in Music Education and Dance Education. She received her high school diploma from Austin High in Austin Minnesota. Janelle is currently an active member in the Mankato Symphony Orchestra. She also is a participant in the Undergraduate Distinguished Scholar program and will receive an award for her accomplishments in this program in May of 2006. In the future she would like to continue her training in music and dance in a masters program.

Faculty mentor's biography

Julie Kerr-Berry is a Professor in the Department of Theatre and Dance at Minnesota State University, Mankato and Director of the Dance Program. Her primary teaching responsibilities are contemporary dance technique, history, world dance, and pedagogy. She is also the Artistic Director of the University Repertory Dance Theatre and coordinates the K-12 Dance/Theatre Arts licensure program. Julie is active in the Twin Cities dance community where she continues to train and perform. She earned both her masters and doctorate degrees in dance from Temple University in Philadelphia. As a founding member of the National Dance Education Organization, she is also Editor-in-Chief of its official journal, the Journal of Dance Education. Her future goal is to continue her study of world dance, which was sparked while in Nigeria, West Africa, and later as a Fulbright scholar in Indonesia.