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John Cage's Chance with Other Strategies

By Tanya Silverman



New River Watercolors (Series I, #5). John Cage. 1988. Watercolor on paper. Image courtesy of Sandra Gering Gallery.

"If you use Chance Operations, the implication is that every answer is good."

--John Cage

While he may be better known for [applying](#) chance to his compositions, Cage also used it in [his visual art](#)--two watercolor works of which can be [seen](#) at *Strategies of Non-Intention: John Cage and the Artists He Collected*.

Serene and peaceful yet curious, the current exhibit at [Sandra Gering Gallery](#) features six different artists with two works by each. All 12 pieces are based on forms of chance or non-intention, be it blinding, subverting conscious thought, blotting, or utilizing unstable materials.

Artist [Dove Bradshaw](#) uses weather and chemistry as strategy of non-intention, a way of "imitating nature." Also the curator, I met Bradshaw at the gallery, where she showed me a hung vertical [copper bar](#) that was sprayed on top, intermittently since 1994, with ammonium chloride copper sulfate.

Gravity ran its course these two decades, leaving long streaks of green drip, darker and less affected at its higher level, but lighter and more concentrated at the bar's base. Stationed on the floor is her *Notation VII*(2000/2008), which [displays](#) a more singular, turquoise-shaded drip from applying the same chemical via eyedropper to a bronze prism atop a light, matte cube of limestone.

Another state of chemical reaction exhibited on the floor is William Anastasi's *Sink* (1963/1991). A slate of cold rolled steel, water is applied to its square surface to translucently gloss temporarily but rust bumps and corrode holes over years.

In an accompanying video installation that documents the artists' techniques, Robert Rauschenberg attests to "seek a maximum lack of control so something could happen" which he couldn't predict. One such strategy involved applying turpentine and lighter fluid to selected images on printed paper (for instance, advertisement photographs). Rauschenberg subsequently pressed these soaked images against a separate paper surface, rubbed off their ink, and later peeled the facing layers apart.

One featured collage case is *Apology* (1968), where a large clenched fist, an airplane, and a man's back with spread arms stand among other image transfers displayed through dark pressurized strokes.

Ethereal layers of off-white fabric hang nearby, also touched with collaged images. Titled *Scent*, Rauschenberg's 1974 piece, holds depictions of a windmill and indeterminate sea creature among other shapes that together drift subtly according to the flow of surroundings. Constantly shifting, Bradshaw describes its inherent "aleatory behavior" as "fugitive beauty."

John Cage's two 1988 paintings demonstrate thick layers of horizontal washes, plus light curves painted by feathers outlining rocks of specific sizes.

"He has the most elaborate strategies out (out) of anyone," Bradshaw says, delving into how the artist referenced *I Ching, Book of Changes* to go about the works. At times, she says, programming placement of marks and washes, with different sized feathers, brushes, rocks, and mixes of colors, (it , strike) would take Cage three hours before he might brush a single stroke.

Trying to implement an ego-less approach by finding answers in the Chinese classical text, Cage (not accurately write: "came across a difference") unusually made a program so that an artist could "perform" his visual work the way a musician could play from a score in translating *I Ching* to the visual realm as opposed to the auditory. As Bradshaw writes in her Catalogue essay:

"In the world of music the qualified performer is customarily interchangeable, but in painting where the master's hand is sacrosanct, this was certainly exceptional," writes the exhibit's accompanying catalog. "The activity is the art, not the result."

Strategies of Non-Intention: John Cage and the Artists He Collected will be at Sandra Gering Gallery in New York City until Sep. 5, 2014.