

JOHN

CAGE



# PART ONE

1902/1903

# ABOUT THE ARTIST

John Cage was a composer, writer and artist. He was born in Los Angeles, USA, in 1912. Much of Cage's visual art was produced during his time working at Crown Point Press, a print workshop in San Francisco and was influenced by his time at Black Mountain College. He only began to work as a visual artist in his mid 60s. Cage died in 1992.





# ABOUT THE WORK

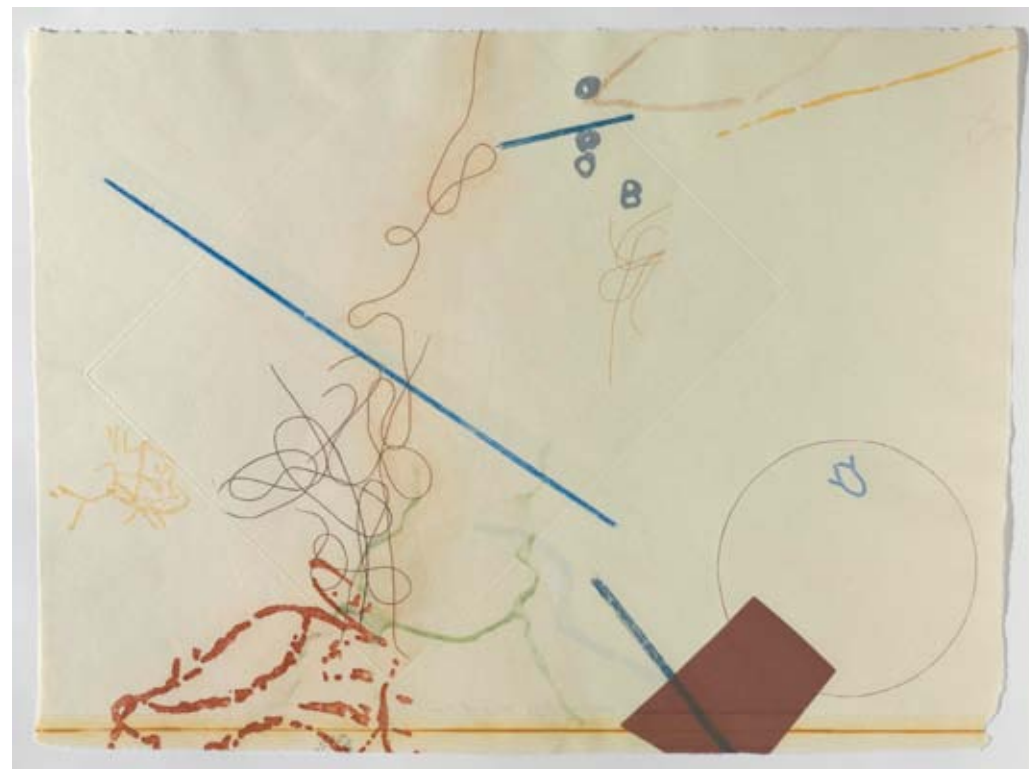
John Cage was an experimental composer, whose most famous work is *4'33"*, a musical piece in which no sounds are played. By presenting the audience with silence, this work invites them to pay attention to the sounds in their surroundings, for example, the scraping of chairs or members of the audience coughing. Cage also worked as a writer, performer, and visual artist, producing prints, drawings and watercolours. Across all the disciplines in which Cage worked, he was interested in the use of chance within the creative process. After deciding upon a set of rules, he used 'chance operations' to compose his musical works, and to create his visual art. Cage would decide on a question to ask and use *The I Ching* or *Book of Changes* to determine the answer. For example, in his composition, he would ask the *I Ching* which sounds to use and how long they should last. This involved a process of tossing coins and consulting the ancient Chinese text to interpret their meaning. In the early 1980s Cage started to use a computer program to speed up this process.



# ABOUT THE WORK

*Every Day is a Good Day* is an exhibition of John Cage's visual art, including prints, drawings and watercolour paintings. Cage used a variety of printmaking techniques including etching, engraving, drypoint and aquatint. He used 'chance operations' to make decisions such as which colours to use or where to make marks. For the *Ryonaji* series, named after a zen garden in Japan, Cage drew around the outline of stones that had been placed on the paper according to chance. In one of these works he drew around 3375 stones. Cage experimented with ways of altering the paper he used, such as, burning it, branding it with hot iron teapots or staining it with a teabag. In his watercolour paintings, he often painted with feathers rather than paintbrushes. Using chance in the creative process meant that Cage could not know in advance how the finished piece would look. The answers provided by the *I Ching* in response to his questions suggested ways of using line and colour that Cage might not have chosen himself.

Chance has also been used to decide how the artwork should be displayed in the gallery space at BALTIC. The art works included in the exhibition have been selected using a random number programme. Rather than displaying all of the works at eye level with an equal distance between them, they are hung at different heights and in groups that have been randomly chosen. During the exhibition period, some works will be removed from the gallery space, whilst others will be added.



# THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

Choose one of the drawings, prints or paintings in the gallery.  
Look closely at the colours, marks and composition of the image.

- Can you tell that the artist has used chance to make decisions when making their work?
- Does it matter whether or not you know that the artist has used chance to make decisions?

Look around the gallery space at how the artworks are hung on the wall, in groups and at different heights.

- Does the way in which the artworks are hung effect your experience when you look at the work?
- Why do you think that artworks are often hung at the same height, with an equal distance between them?

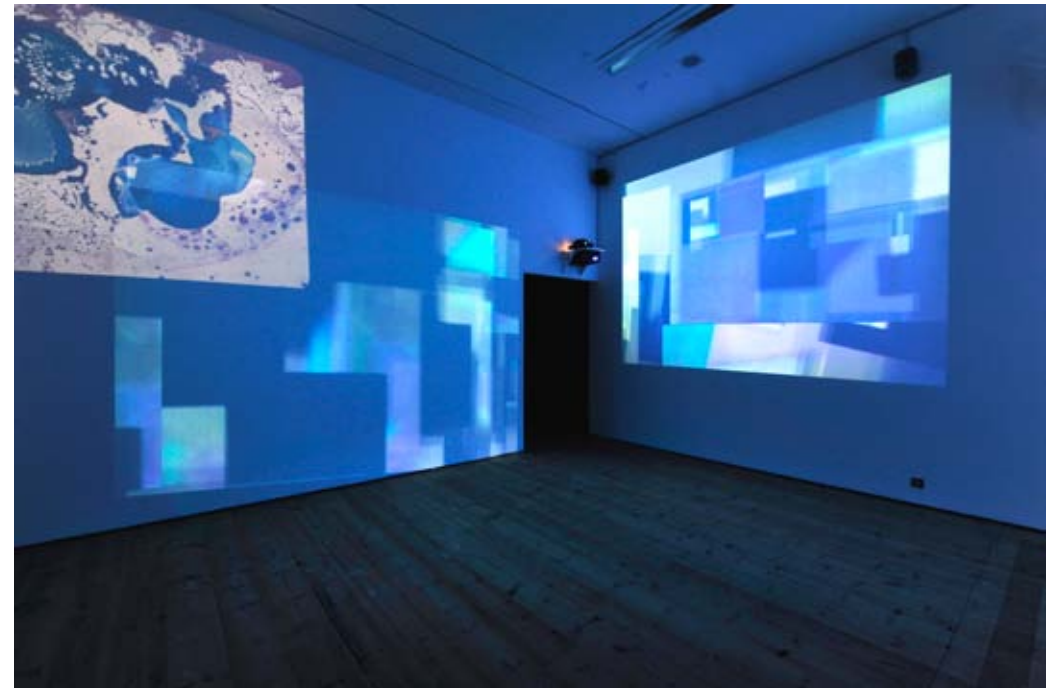


# IN MY OPINION

**'I use chance operations instead of operating according to my likes and dislikes. I use my work to change myself and I accept what the chance operations say...'** *John Cage*

Work in pairs or small groups to discuss this statement by John Cage. Think about the role of the artist.

- Why do you think an artist would decide not to make their own choices about the artwork they are creating?
- What do you think it would feel like to make an artwork that you do not like?
- What other ways can you think of to make decisions by chance, as well as tossing coins?
- Can you think of any examples of things in everyday life that are decided by chance?
- Which decisions in your life would you be happy to leave to chance and which would you not?



# HERE'S ONE I MADE EARLIER

Have a go at creating your own group artwork, making all of the creative decisions by chance.

- Place a large sheet of paper on the floor.
- Draw a grid on the paper and give each square a number. Write each number on a slip of paper.
- Decide on ten different actions and write them on slips of paper e.g. draw a black line, draw a body part, draw an animal, make a mark without using your hands, draw around an object, stick down something out of a newspaper or magazine, paint over an existing mark in white.
- Fold all of the slips of paper containing numbers and actions. Place them in two boxes.
- Now you are ready to play the game! Take it in turns to pick out an action and a number. Carry out the action in the corresponding square on the paper and watch your artwork emerge.

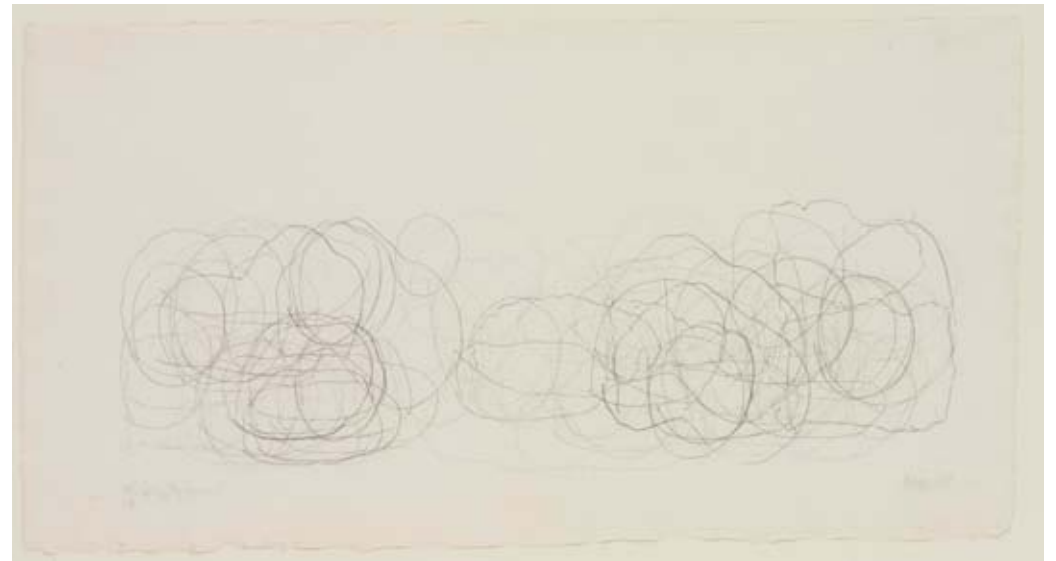




# HERE'S ONE I MADE EARLIER

Make an artwork inspired by John Cage's drawings of stones.

- Choose an object that you can place on top of a sheet of paper.
- Make an outline of the object by drawing around it.
- Try repeating the drawing again and again to create a pattern. Place the object over the edge of the paper or so that it overlaps part of what you have already drawn.
- Try drawing around the object using pencil, paint or tape. Experiment with colours and thickness of line.



# FURTHER RESEARCH

Dada

Fluxus

Jackson Pollock

Marcel Duchamp

Nam June Paik

Robert Rauschenberg

Yoko Ono

# LITERACY KEY WORDS

absence

engraving

linear

question

chance

computerised

etching

method

random

silence

composer

curate

decision

experimental

printmaking

rules

sound

composition

curator

drawing

interpret

process

watercolour

**PART TWO**



# NOTES FOR TEACHERS

Contemporary art is incredibly diverse and wide ranging and can be used to support teaching and learning as part of an entire learning experience. It can be used to generate creative thinking in all subject areas and to support learning across curricular dimensions, as well as contribute to personal development and personalised learning.

# CROSS CURRICULAR OPPORTUNITIES

- Art and Design
- Mathematics
- Music

# USEFUL LINKS AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

## BALTIC

[www.balticmill.com](http://www.balticmill.com)

## QUAY

[www.balticmill.com/quay](http://www.balticmill.com/quay)

## Library and Archive

<http://archive.balticmill.com>

'In my opinion' toolkit to help pupils approach artwork,  
formulate questions and contribute opinions

<http://www.balticmill.com/learning/Downloads.php>

Blank presentation template: pupils can use this  
to present their own research and ideas

<http://www.balticmill.com/learning/Downloads.php>

BALTIC Secondary Resources Bank: pupils can use this  
to search for and download images and other information

<http://www.balticmill.com/learning/Downloads.php>

# IMAGE CREDITS

## Slide 2

John Cage HV2, No. 17b, 1992.  
Aquatint (using twenty-four plates).  
Courtesy Crown Point Press  
© The John Cage Trust.

## Slide 3

John Cage, preparing a piano, c.1964.  
Photographer Unknown. Courtesy of  
John Cage Trust.

## Slide 4

John Cage *75 Stones*, 1989,  
Aquatint on smoked paper  
© The John Cage Trust

## Slide 5

John Cage *Dereau, No.11*, 1982.  
Colour photoetching with engraving,  
drypoint and aquatint.  
© The John Cage Trust.

## Slide 6

John Cage *Every Day is a Good Day*  
Installation view  
Photographer: Colin Davison  
© BALTIC

## Slide 7

John Cage *Every Day is a Good Day*  
HPSCHRD  
Photographer: Colin Davison  
© BALTIC

## Slide 8

John Cage *Every Day is a Good Day*  
Installation view  
Photographer: Colin Davison  
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## Slide 9

John Cage (7R)/15 (Where R=Ryoanji), August 1983  
Pencil on Japanese handmade paper.  
Courtesy Ray Kass  
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