

Towards the transgression of the Arts: John Cage's influence on performance art after 1945

Alexandra Vinzenz

Lecturer, Philipps-Universität, Marburg, Germany
PhD Candidate, Johannes Gutenberg-Universität, Mainz, Germany
alexandra.vinzenz@gmx.de

Abstract

During the 1950s and 1960s, numerous artists worked towards blurring the boundaries between the arts. Such "*Entgrenzung*" conceptions stemmed from early 20th century works by Aleksandr Skrjabin (*Prométhée* and *Mystère*) and Arnold Schönberg (*Die glückliche Hand*) who in turn had based their ambitions of fusing various artistic disciplines into a theatrical act on Richard Wagner's idea of "*Gesamtkunstwerk*" (1849/50). Wagner postulated both the necessity of combining individual arts as well as the resulting new artwork's transformative power in society. Effects of his ideas still vibrate through performance art after 1945—their early 20th century reception led towards an ultimate transgression of the arts after WW II. I will concentrate on two subject areas: intermedial blending of artistic disciplines as an æsthetic idea in general and as a specific approach in the works of John Cage.

Cage held a key position in the development of the "happening" as a new art form. Ruminating on the "space-time continuum," he set off an altogether new understanding of art; adhering to Zen philosophy, he took up the quasi-esoteric positions from his 1920s forerunners. His philosophy of "change" served as a catalyst for new approaches towards the interplay of art and society. Fusing the arts became standard operational procedure not only in America: the example of Nam June Paik—e.g. his *Fluxus* action with Charlotte Moorman—shows the reception of Cage's ideas (with "*Gesamtkunstwerk*" as its core) back in Europe in the early 1960s.

My presentation will sketch a trans-disciplinary approach (with methodological contributions from musicology, drama theory and art history) towards a deeper understanding of both Cage himself and his influence on the performance art after 1945 that was hitherto largely unexamined and severely underestimated.

CV

Alexandra Vinzenz was born at Schwabmünchen (Germany) in 1983. She studied art history and musicology at Mainz University, graduating with a thesis on *The "Gesamtkunstwerk" for a New Society: On the Symbiosis of Architecture, Music, and Dramatic Arts in the Anthroposophic Society and the "Bauhaus"* in 2008. Currently, she is working on her dissertation "*Gesamtkunstwerk*"—*Revolutionizing Society through Art? Performative Interaction as a Socio-Cultural and Æsthetic Principle in Post-1945 Germany*. She has read papers at national and international congresses on art history and musicology.