The 1952 Untitled Event

The untitled event was a multimedia performance of several unrelated solos that included dance, film and slides, paintings, phonograph records, poetry readings, a lecture, and piano. Mary Emma Harris writes that this single performance at Black Mountain College has become the “activity that was to have the greatest impact on American art” (M. Harris 1987, 226). This touchstone of later developments, as in the Happening and the general performance art movement, has been previously documented, but no two sources contain the same recollections, and many sources omit details. The confusion in documentation also includes the matter of the score. The existence or nonexistence of a score will be discussed after presenting the basic documentation of the performance.

The first basic documentation of the untitled event was in the 1965 interview of John Cage conducted by Michael Kirby and Richard Schechner, followed by Martin Duberman’s 1972 study of Black Mountain College with interviews of various performance participants and audience members. This material, together with more recent supplementary interviews, is synthesized in abridged fashion in Mary Emma Harris’s 1987 book on Black Mountain. The following performance material will therefore be redundant to some readers already familiar with the 1952 untitled event, however several additional details appear which have not been previously recorded.

The event was held in the Dining Hall at the college. The duration of the performance, the time of day it was performed, and the date are all questionable from the conflicting recollections. Most informants recall it
being in the evening, but M. C. Richards recalls it being in the afternoon (Richards 1989). Most recall the total duration to have been 45 minutes, but Francine du Plessix (an audience member) recorded that it lasted for two hours (Duberman 1972, 352). Carroll Williams (an audience member) recalled it being “early in the summer” (Duberman 1972, 353), but du Plessix’s journal from 1952 states that it was held in August (Gray 1990, 300). David Tudor vaguely recalls playing Water Music in the untitled event (Tudor 1989b), and he performed a solo piano recital at the college — including Water Music — on August 12, 1952 (Dunn 1962, 43). The Black Mountain College calendar of events for August, 1952 lists a “concert” by John Cage to be held August 16, and while there is no corroboration, this may be the actual (or approximate) date of performance (Calendar 1952).

The audience in attendance was small and comprised faculty, students, and local people in the Black Mountain community. None of the previous accounts explicitly mention how many were in attendance, but M. C. Richards recalls:

_There wasn’t a large crowd, so there was plenty of room for these activities to take place. There were maybe 35 or 50 people there, certainly not very many. (Richards 1989)_

The audience was itself part of the theatrical nature of the event. Cage comments:

_The seating arrangement... was a square composed of four triangles with the apexes of the triangles merging towards the center, but not meeting. The center was a larger space that could take movement, and the aisles between these four triangles also admitted of movement. The audience could see itself, which is of course the advantage of any theatre in the round. The larger part of the action took place outside of that square. In each of the seats was a cup, and it wasn’t explained to the audience what to do with this cup — some used it as an ashtray — but the performance was concluded by a kind of ritual of pouring coffee into each cup. (Kirby and Schechner 1965, 52)_

A depiction of Cage’s verbal description of the seating arrangement appears in Fig. 22. All previous accounts, however, have been vague about the floor area used by the performers around and in this audience
square. A more comprehensive floorplan, drawn by M. C. Richards, appears in Fig. 23. Typed indications have been added for identification. Two arrows appear in her original drawing, and are worth noting. The arrow of going into the Dining Hall is explicit in showing the audience square to be slightly to the right of the doorway. The arrow from the audience square to the poet's ladder shows where she sat when not performing. The faint line that begins at the right and extends through the diagram shows the relative point of entry by Merce Cunningham for one of his dance solos. Although Richards does not claim that the floorplan is an accurate recollection, David Tudor in looking at this has not found any inconsistencies, nor has he been able to add any further details to her diagram.

The single most relatively complete performance description is from Cage:

At one end of the rectangular hall, the long end, was a movie, and at the other end were slides. I was on a ladder delivering a lecture which included silences, and there was another ladder which M. C. Richards and Charles Olson went up at different times... Robert Rauschenberg was playing an old-fashioned phonograph that had a horn... , and David Tudor was playing piano, and Merce Cunningham and other dancers were moving through the audience. Rauschenberg's pictures [the White Paintings] were suspended above the audience... They were suspended at various angles, a canopy of painting above the audience. I don't recall anything else except the ritual with the coffee cup. (Kirby and Schechner 1965, 52-53)
Fig. 22. The seating plan for the untitled event at Black Mountain College (1952), reconstructed in 1965 (Kirby and Schechner 1965, 52). Reproduced courtesy of TDR/MIT Press.

All of the performances were independent, and not all participants were performing at the same time during any particular moment.

The motion picture that was shown was by Nicholas Cernovitch, who recalls:

*I think it was fragments of the film I was working on. The film was black and white, and silent. The screen was to the right side of the Dining Hall entrance.* (Cernovitch 1989)
M. C. Richards recalls that the film was probably of Cornelia and her husband George, the cooks at Black Mountain College (Richards 1989). Michael Kirby, in researching the performance, notes that the film images...

...were projected on the ceiling: at first they showed-the school cook, then the sun, and, as the image moved from the ceiling down the wall, the sun sank. (Kirby 1965, 32)

The slides, projected on the other (left) side of the Dining Hall, were...

...35 mm slides, both hand-painted on glass, and sometimes montages — or collages, using colored gelatines and other paints and pigments and materials, sandwiched between glass slides. And some photographs — abstract... There were the limited theatrical lights that the school had, jelled in different colors, and on different dimmer and on-off switch circuits. (Duberman 1972, 353)

![Diagram](image)

Fig. 23. Floorplan of the untitled event at Black Mountain College (1952), drawn for the author in 1989 by M. C. Richards, showing the audience square and relative positions of the performers. Identifications have been added. Reproduced courtesy of M. C. Richards.
Cunningham would recall a dog chasing him as he danced through the aisles of the audience seats, and that...

...the music didn't support the dancing and so on..., nor was I to have anything to do with what anybody else was doing necessarily... (Duberman 1972, 356)

The floorplan by M. C. Richards indicates one entrance by Cunningham into the performance area. When drawing his path over to the wind-up phonograph, she explained that he also used the outside areas as well as the aisles for his solo (Richards 1989). Nicholas Cernovitch also recalls that Tim LaFarge was dancing (Cernovitch 1989).

One final stray detail previously undocumented is of “Tommy Jackson doing impressions in ink, printing programs with cigarette papers, which he then rolled into cigarettes” (Cernovitch 1989). No program for the event survives.

Cage has stated that each individual’s “consciousness is structuring the experience from anybody else’s” (Kirby and Schechner 1965, 55), which certainly is reflected in the admittedly fragmentary and sometimes conflicting recollections of the performance. This situation also includes the existence or nonexistence of a score for this work. Martin Duberman writes:

The idea developed in conversation between Cage and David Tudor — “and our ideas were so electric at that time,” Cage told me, “that once the idea hit my head — and I would like to give David Tudor equal credit for it — I immediately then implemented it.” (Duberman 1972, 350)

However, neither David Tudor nor Nicholas Cernovitch recall there being a score. Tudor comments:

I bet you it was done after the fact. Almost certainly John had a plan, but I don’t recall seeing it. This has happened many times over the years with people he wants to work with. He distributes a plan that you can use or not, but it’s just a piece of paper with some numbers on it. This kind of thing doesn’t get documented, and it gets lost. (Tudor 1989a)

M. C. Richards and Merce Cunningham, however, recall there being
a performance score. Richards states:

As we [the performers] came in, we were given a piece of paper that had the time on it — 32" or 4'00" — for those of us who were performing, but how I knew what that time was, I can't remember. (Richards 1989)

Her recollection is significant, for while she knew that she was to recite some poetry during the untitled event, she was not given any indication of what the poems were to be, nor did she know for how long. This also correlates with Cunningham's recollection that "I improvised the whole thing" (Duberman 1972, 356), which would suggest that, like Richards, he was given written time brackets just before the actual performance.

Whether there was or was not a score, it apparently no longer exists, or the location is presently unknown. Michael Kirby writes:

I remember him showing me the score at the time of the [1965] interview. It was framed, hanging on a wall. Perhaps it was the score to something else. It had horizontal lines that indicated when each activity would begin and end. (Kirby 1990)

Cage had commented that there was a score for the untitled event, but that it no longer exists:

I gave the time brackets within which to work. For instance, the poets could climb ladders to read poetry within certain time periods — not all the time or any time, but within certain times. That was done in order to have one ladder and several poets. I was on another ladder. I was giving a lecture which had silences determined by chance operations. The time brackets in the entire piece were determined by chance operations. (Cage 1988b)

After Cage's death, one section of the score was discovered among his personal papers. It is for the part of the projectionist, written in pencil on an 8-1/2" by 11" piece of paper, held the long way. It is:

Projector:

Begin at 16 min.
play freely until 23 min.

Begin again at 24:30
play freely until 35:45

Begin at 38:20
play freely until 44:25

(Cage 1952c)

The now no-longer known time brackets for the other performers were all apparently different. David Tudor recalls that his and Cage’s parts were the only continuous performances throughout the entire untitled event (Tudor 1989c). M. C. Richards recalls that both she and Charles Olson each had only one time bracket within the total duration (Richards 1989). Cunningham recalls having two separate time brackets within which to perform (Cunningham 1982, 111). What apparently was made known to the performers were their unique time brackets, with no further determination of actual content, thus making the untitled event the first of Cage’s theatre pieces to be scored in indeterminate notation.

The importance of the 1952 untitled event at Black Mountain College has become a part of legend, but the significance of this performance was not appreciated at the time. The composer Lou Harrison found it to be “quite boring” (M. Harris 1987, 228), while Johanna Jalowetz was heard, shortly after the performance, to mutter “Deep in the middle ages” (Duberman 1972, 353). M. C. Richards recalls that Mrs. Jalowetz’s interpretation of the untitled event was that it was basically sacrilegious (religion as a reading of Cage’s “ministerial” black suit and tie with white shirt), but otherwise Richards recalls that most of the audience liked it very much:

Oh, I certainly didn’t get the impression that it was a historic event, perhaps because all the elements were familiar, and at Black Mountain we had been doing light, sound, and movement workshops, and putting that all together seemed natural and not something really cultural-changing. (Richards 1989)

Nicholas Cernovitch adds: “Nobody knew we were creating history” (Cernovitch 1989).