

as a back payment on promised work. Freed from the question, What am I most behind on?, students may ask something more interesting: What is in front of me? There is space to mull over events that flew by, to connect seemingly disparate experiences, to relocate one's agency as a learner.

Thus, even as Black Mountain arranged myriad encounters in which one found oneself stretched and refracted, it took care to ensure that there was time and space to recollect, to digest, to integrate. With its architectural insistence on personal space and its attunement to the rhythm of engagement, Black Mountain saw to it that students would have space for periodic retreat from the demand to enact oneself in the dance of interpersonal recognition.

LEARNING HERE AND NOW

I didn't understand what was going on but I knew something was happening.
—Fielding Dawson²⁹⁸

In his 1947 rectoral address, Bill Levi charted four dimensions of soul action: inwardness, outwardness, forward-looking, and backward-looking, explaining how the college sought to nurture each.²⁹⁹ It is interesting to compare Levi's formative compass to the doubly dialectical theory of experience on offer in Dewey's *Democracy and Education*. Dewey sums up a crucial stretch of his argument as follows: "The idea of education advanced in these chapters is formally summed up in the idea of continuous reconstruction of experience, an idea which is marked off from education as preparation for a remote future, as unfolding, as external formation, and as recapitulation of the past."³⁰⁰ I called this conception "doubly dialectical" because it seeks to interrupt educational hypostasizing on the twin axes of space and time.³⁰¹

Let us look first at the spatial dimension. Is education best understood as an unfolding of what is already within the student or as a formative influence from outside? Such a question, Dewey suggests, has already gotten the whole thing wrong. It presumes that we already know what is internal and what is external when, as we saw above with Arendt and Albers, one of the elements of growth is precisely the ongoing dialectical disclosure of inner and outer worlds. My sense of what I am made of is occasioned

and shaped by what I have encountered. There may be aspects of who I am lying dormant and hidden, having never encountered the enviroing conditions that would call them forth. Or life may lead me to significant reinterpretations of known aspects of my identity. For example, what we call our “needs,” are made up both of what Jürgen Habermas calls “need dispositions” and the social “need interpretations” through which they come to be understood and expressed.³⁰² Thus, what I come to discover inside of myself is contingent on my life events and cultural-historical world. But the same is true in reverse. What I encounter “outside” of me is not my literal “surroundings” but rather my “environment” or, in Dewey’s memorable phrase, “the things with which [one] varies.”³⁰³ To pinpoint a person’s surroundings, all we need is a GPS device. To know a person’s environment, we need to know a good deal more: their past trajectory and current intentions, their hopes and fears, their habits and practices. Otherwise, we cannot know what are the salient features, the active ingredients as it were, of one’s surroundings. What we deem outside of us is simultaneously contingent on what is inside.

Now, let us look at the temporal axis, where Dewey again suggests a dialectical approach. For Dewey, calendars are overrated. They suggest a linear conception of time: here is a sequence of days, and here we are at this point in the sequence. But this is not where we live, in this calendar-day present. As Dewey rightly observes, we inhabit a “moving present” in a “constant reorganizing or reconstructing of experience.”³⁰⁴ We do not merely move along a timeline: our movement through life is marked by our continual redrawing of the line. Consider the simple example of aging. According to the calendar, our twentieth birthday came and went but once, and it sounds like science fiction to suggest otherwise. In fact, we will likely have multiple experiences of turning twenty, and the first of these may be far from the richest. When we first turn twenty, as it were, we have been sixteen and eighteen but never thirty or forty, and this shapes the moment. The fifty-year-old, revisiting that moment, has a very different sense of what it meant to turn twenty.

Consider a second, thicker example, featuring a character I will call Nathan. Nathan grew up in a small town. Later, he attended a big state university, and after graduating he moved to Los Angeles. The city in which he arrived was to him the quintessential big city, defined in large part in

contrast to the smaller places he had left behind. So far, the temporal structure seems linear: first there was his small-town past, then his college days, and now his big-city present. But now let us play out the story, checking in with Nathan some years later. Living in LA has changed Nathan's sense of what makes a place big and what makes it small, and he now understands very differently what it means to have come from his home town. Thus, we can say that Nathan now, in the only way that matters, comes from a *different* hometown than the Nathan who first arrived in LA. And, since the past frames the present, Nathan also now inhabits a very different "big-city" present than the Nathan just out of college. In short, the calendar lies: life is full of such spiraling temporal structures in which past and present shape each other reciprocally.

Another name for this spiral structure is "the hermeneutic circle."³⁰⁵ We find ourselves in a present, framed by what we have brought from the past but also containing novel, recalcitrant features. This inheritance (our store of meanings, our diet of questions, our vectors of interest, our weights and measures) simultaneously opens the present to us as a space of productive encounter and limits this moment to *the* present of *this* past. However, the assimilation of present possibilities—possible presents—to our past fund of meanings is never absolute, and thus we always face the question, How well has my past, as I have understood it, prepared me to meet the demands of my present? As we work with the recalcitrant features of our present, we may begin to rework our sense of the past.

The hermeneutic circle applies both to individual trajectories and to the movement of tradition. The history of ideas—the "tattered maps" left behind by alert spirits, and flawed human beings, who were trying to take stock of where we had been and where we were heading—both funds and limits our present.³⁰⁶ But the same can be said in reverse: our present enables us to perceive some aspects of these texts while making us oblivious to others, and it leads us to construe those aspects of the text in particular ways. What we call "the past," Dewey notes, should "be seen as the past of the present."³⁰⁷ We thus live within the spiral movement of tradition. (Here I speak of genuine, living traditions, not traditionalism, or reverence toward dead letters.) The constructions of past thinkers enable and constrain us in meeting the demands of our present. At the same time, our present opens up new ways of understanding traditionary texts. Take, for example, the tradition of the self-portrait from Parmigianino and Van Gogh to Frida

Kahlo and Cindy Sherman. These artists are working within, reflecting on, an intervening in an unfolding set of ideas about the self. It is not implausible to say that one of the effects of this tradition—as it intersects with economic forces, technological developments, and so on—is the selfie. And now when we look back—peering over the crowds with their selfie sticks—at the *Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror* or *The Film Stills*, these works reveal new veins of meaning. And when we return from our fresh engagements with these renewed works, our selfie moment looks different in turn.

Thus, while Levi's and Dewey's compass roses look the same, there is an important difference in their approaches. Levi is suggesting that growth amounts to a leading out of the student's attention along these four lines. Dewey's dialectical or hermeneutic conception of experience complicates this, helping us to distinguish the hypostasized versions of inside and outside, past and future, from their living dialectical counterparts. The critical purpose of Dewey's heuristic is precisely to show how education has been deformed by allowing its attention to drift away from the flying present where past and present, inside and outside, are dialectically intertwined, toward one or another of these hypostasized impostors. In each of these four directions, argues Dewey, lie traps where we mistake education as "unfolding" from within or forming from without, as "preparation for a remote future" or "recapitulation of the past."

For Dewey, the important temporal question for education is not which way we lean on the linear timeline—toward conserving a calendar past or preparing for a calendar future—but how we become aware of the limits and possibilities of a given timeline. The calendar present is generic and shallow. It is a box to be checked, twenty-four hours to be used, as one recalls grand old worlds or ushers in brave new ones. The *pedagogical present* is singular and replete, containing within it both clues for understanding our current, dominant ways of understanding where we have been, where we are, and where we are going and pointers toward alternate timelines.³⁰⁸ (I embrace the sci-fi ring of this last phrase, which I take to signal not that hermeneutics is far-fetched but that this beloved genre both engages in thought experiments about literal time travel and taps into the kind of time travel we engage in all of the time.)

Dewey's idea of reconstruction suggests a similar reorientation of attention regarding what we might call the "geography" of education. The important question is not whether education inclines toward what is taken

to be inside the student (e.g., instincts, faculties, needs, meanings, commitments, an unfolding developmental logic, a true self, etc.) or outside the student (the logic of the subject matter, timeless truths, moral norms, social needs, etc.), as if we already possess a final charting of inner and outer worlds. But if the *innerwelt* and the *umwelt* are co-constructing, then the question is not where to locate the pedagogical capitol (and pedagogue's capital) on a ready-made map, but what resources we find in a *place* of learning for making sense of how we have understood and might better understand what lies within and around us.

The famous education rallying calls—to individualize or socialize, to conserve the past, or usher in a better future—are pleasant vistas to gaze on as one rides the conveyor belt, distractions from the pedagogical here and now where we might struggle for some genuine freedom of movement in our thinking and doing. And what do we call the practices that focus our attention on the pedagogical here and now: the arts. The arts do not need to be *applied* to education: they are some of our richest practices for dislodging us from the grooves of routine, opening up the spiral of experience. Education does not need to *employ* the arts: education is the communal pursuit of spaces that awaken us to the dialectics of experience, that attune us to the genius loci and the unrepeatable Now. Thus, at Black Mountain, what we find is not an already-worked-out-theory of formative, general education and a resort to one handy instrument, the arts, for achieving that desideratum. Rather, BMC was set up to be a home for aesthetic-educational happenings.³⁰⁹

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One evening (though some say it was afternoon) in the summer of 1952 (memories differ as to the date), the BMC community gathered in the dining hall (on the location, all agree) for a mixed-media collaborative performance piece “composed” by John Cage and performed by Cage (lecturing), Merce Cunningham (dancing), David Tudor (playing the piano, and perhaps a radio), Robert Rauschenberg (exhibiting his white paintings and playing records), MC Richards and Charles Olson (reading poetry), and Nicholas Cernovich (projecting slides and film fragments).³¹⁰ Untitled at the time, it has come to be called *Theater Piece No. 1* and to be regarded as the first happening.³¹¹

The music program at BMC was far from conservative. Heinrich Jalowetz, a friend and student of Arnold Schönberg, had been its beloved, leading figure

from 1939 until his death in 1946. And this mainstream, European avant-garde was still represented by his widow, voice instructor Johanna Jalowetz. Meanwhile, the summer of 1952 saw not only the return of Cage, but also the arrival of Stefan Wolpe. A student of Anton Webern, Wolpe would go on to direct the BMC program through its final years, further extending the influence of the Second Viennese School.³¹² But as faculty member David Weinrib recalls, “These people, they come from your German radicalist tradition . . . but they could never make the next . . . leap.”³¹³ Cage was upending more than tonal conventions. His new Zen-inspired, chance-driven compositions were meant to dissolve the foundational assumptions of even the most experimental strands of modernism: that composition flows from intention; that music is distinct from silence and from noise. Suffice to say that there were skeptics in the audience that night.

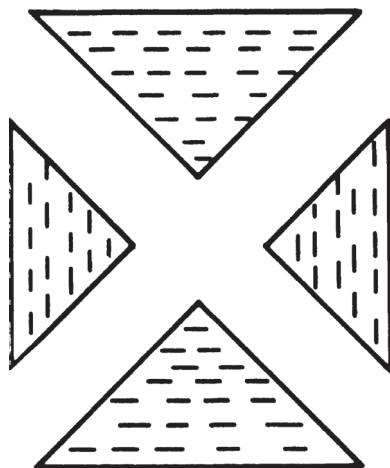
Skeptical or not, Jalowetz was the first to arrive. It was her custom to arrive early in order to get the best seat in the house. However, she was greeted by an unfamiliar setup. Cage had discarded the usual blueprint, noting that it embodies a highly consequential assumption:

When you have the proscenium stage and the audience arranged in such a way that all look in the same direction—even though those on the extreme right and left are said to be in “bad seats” and those in the center are in “good seats”—the assumption is that people will see *it* if they all look in one direction.³¹⁴

To upset this assumption, Cage arranged the space in a variation of theater-in-the-round that we might call “theater in, around, and through the square.” As Cage describes it,

The seating arrangement I had at Black Mountain in 1952 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.³¹⁵ (See figure 1 for a sketch of this arrangement)

In a traditional theater—with its unidirectional tiered seating, dimmed house lights, and illuminated, raised stage—it is relatively easy to ignore the audience around you. Theater-in-the-round, as Cage rightly notes, disrupts this illusion by putting a portion of the audience in your field of vision. You are watching the show *and* you are watching others watching the show. Cage’s arrangement



Black Mountain performance,
seats and stage-space, 1952

Figure 1

Adapted from John Cage, Michael Kirby, and Richard Schechner, "An Interview with John Cage," *Tulane Drama Review* 10, no. 2 (1965): 52.

goes further by staging most of the action in a circle around the seating: with Cage's lectern at six o'clock, the ladder atop which Richards and Olson would read abutting the seating at seven or eight, Rauschenberg's phonograph at twelve o'clock, paintings suspended from the ceiling at one o'clock, and the piano at four o'clock.³¹⁶ Though recollections of the event vary widely, it seems that Cunningham, whose dance crisscrossed the aisles, may have been the only one to occupy the central area, and then only temporarily.

By emptying out this central space, Cage both intensifies and goes beyond the alienation effects of theater-in-the-round. Cage's arrangement intensifies the noticing of our noticing as the audience in the other three triangular areas now becomes the primary object in our field of vision. But it is not just a matter of making us more aware of how we perceive the theatrical event, because the piece challenges the very idea, still operant in theater-in-the-round, that there is a singular, theatrical event to perceive. Rather than integrate the separate components onto a designed set, Cage has invited them into a yet-to-be-defined space. Rather than knit them together into one narrative matrix, he has organized them according to randomly devised time compartments. For example, the one extant piece of Cage's "score" instructs the projectionist as follows:

Begin at 16 min.
 play freely until 23 min.
 Begin again at 24:30
 play freely until 35:45
 Begin again at 38:20
 play freely until 44:25

Thus, Cage creates a multifocal experience by emptying out the central focal area and ringing the seating area with multiple sites of performance, each making a distinct demand on our attention.

Before saying more about this centrifugal reading, it is worth noting a complementary, centripetal, Zen interpretation of this theater-in-around-and-through-an-empty square. After all, what Cage was reading that night was his Juilliard “lecture,” a prosopoetic piece about Zen, music, and poetry foregrounding, in both form and content, silence, space, and emptiness. Focusing on the paintings and projections above them, the poets over their shoulder, the piano and phonograph beside them, and the winding path of Cunningham, the audience of *Theater Piece No. 1* may have found their attention drawn back to the emptiness before them by lines such as these: “our poetry now is the realization that we possess nothing”; “each something is a celebration of a nothing that supports it”; and “I have nothing to say and I am saying it.”³¹⁷ On the Zen reading, Cage is not simply emptying the stage but staging emptiness. Here is a happening, *Theater Piece No. 1* announces, and *nothing* is what is happening.

Now let’s return to the centrifugal reading, picking up the story with the arrival of Jalowetz. The veteran theater goer encountered not only a novel seating arrangement but an emcee reared on Zen koans. In his interview with Kirby and Schechner, Cage recalls his exchange with Jalowetz:

CAGE: She had made a point of coming early in order to get the best seat. And she asked me where the best seat was and I said they were all equally good.

SCHECHNER: Did she believe you?

CAGE: Well, she saw that she wasn’t getting a reply in relation to her question so she simply sat down where she chose. She had no way, nor did I, of telling where the best seat was, since from every seat you would see something different.

I read Cage's response as synecdochical and pedagogical. The relativization of lines of sight stands in for a more general relativity of understanding. Like the teacher figure in the Zen koans, Cage is simply working with what the adept brings him, working to redirect her attention from the unproductive question she poses—where should I sit in order to take in the piece fully, not skewed by some peculiar angle of vision?—for the series of richer questions it begs: How should I sit with the anxious indeterminacy of meaning that any decent work of art presents? How do I, from my particular vantage, edit, direct, and unify the work? While I sit here trying not to miss anything, am I missing *nothing*?

Thanks to Cage's seating arrangement and Zen intervention, Jalowetz now has to choose her own seat and own the contingency of that choice. And the question of where one should sit opens onto the larger question of what one should be attending to. The simultaneous streams of performance throw into relief how we are always tuning in and tuning out, selecting and combining. *Theater Piece No. 1* not only juxtaposed the different modalities of painting, photography, poetry, music, and dance, but it featured layers within the visual, verbal, musical, and kinetic. According to some accounts, Cernovich's images (remembered variously as fragments of a black-and-white film, 35 mm photographs, and hand-painted glass slides) were projected onto Rauschenberg's white paintings.³¹⁸ Movement included Cunningham's dance and the mounting and dismounting of the ladder. Spoken word emanated both from the poet's ladder and from Cage's lectern. And there were overlapping aural streams from Rauschenberg's gramophone and Tudor's piano (which itself was more than piano, since it seems that one of the pieces he played was Cage's *Water Music*, which includes radio, a duck call, and water pouring). In such an environment, you cannot hide from the fact that your attention is selective. And as you inevitably integrate these selected fragments into a cohesive experience, you cannot escape the conclusion that it is you who have made this whole, you who has directed the performance.

Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* were very important to Cage, who cites them as the inspiration for his signature work, 4'33".³¹⁹ When we see a painting in a gallery or museum, its multiple enframings—literal frame, proper names (of the artist and the work), institutional aura, curatorial comparisons, artworld discourse—heighten and direct our attention. We begin to look pointedly. We send out a search party, as it were, to find formal features, an

artist's signature style, a commentary on social issues, and so on. What Cage admired about Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* was how their painterly poverty can help us to "unfocus our attention." Confronted by their blankness, our attention, while still heightened, becomes less teleological and more receptive. To draw a Deweyan distinction, the *White Paintings* both interrupt our "bare recognition" and invite our "full perception."³²⁰ Or as Cage puts it, "Hallelujah! The blind can see again. . . . Blind to what he has seen so that seeing is as though first seeing." And when this happens, the emptiness of Rauschenberg's canvases transforms into a bustling presence. As Cage puts it, "the White Paintings [are] airports for the lights, shadows, and particles." Thus, Cage saw them not as meagerly finished, and sealed by the artist's signature, but as beautifully open to what lay around them. Once we let go of the distinctions between the work itself and the dust it gathers, between intention and accident, composition and noise, the *White Paintings* become collaborative performances, works not only of space but of time, with a duration equal to the time you behold them. The paintings become happenings.³²¹ Both Rauschenberg and Cage saw art as part of an existential ethic. "I try to keep wide-awake," Rauschenberg will later remark, echoing the idea we considered earlier with Alfred Schutz.³²² Or, as Cage puts it, art should be "an affirmation of life—not an attempt to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply a way of waking up to the very life we're living, which is so excellent once one gets one's mind and one's desires out of the way and lets it act of its own accord."³²³

This reading of the *White Paintings* suggests that our earlier observation about Cage's seating arrangement applies to the piece as a whole. *Theater Piece No. 1* is simultaneously a Zen garden and a Brechtian intervention, an experience for the wide-awake and some help in waking up, a space to encounter the replete and irreducible present and a confrontation with our habitual evasions of that encounter. It is, after all, very difficult to maintain this state of free-floating attention. For example, rather than let the *White Paintings* slowly accrue their atmospheric dynamics, we finish them off with a label ("art," "anti-art," "abstraction," "monochrome," "white," "Rauschenberg"). It is precisely this opening up and closing off of attention staged by *Theater Piece No. 1*, with its layering, movement, and arbitrary temporal matrix. The central area is empty, and then Cunningham appears and is gone again. The *White Paintings* confront us with their unsparing blankness, then they are filled with images of other times and places, until the projection time window closes,

and the canvases empty out again. We hear silence, a poem, two overlapping poems, and silence again. Cage offers us a series of before-and-after shots of how we short-circuit perception with ready-made recognitions.

We see this same dialectic of empty and full on display in another interesting detail of the piece. “When people arrived,” Cage reports, “they found an empty white cup on each seat”:

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.³²⁴

The white cup echoes what we have just been saying about the Rauschenberg paintings, and attendee Francine du Plessix Gray recalls the additional detail that the “coffee was served by four boys dressed in white.”³²⁵ As each person took their seat, they wondered what the cup was for. Inside this practical question lurked a deeper question. The audience was greeted by an empty vessel, a nothing out of which a something might arise. Would they hold that space open throughout the event, or fill it with the habitual?

Cage was apparently partial to Huang Po, but perhaps he knew the *Mumonkan* as well, and in particular its wonderful koan 7:

A monk said to Joshu, “I have just entered this monastery. Please teach me.” “Have you eaten your rice porridge?” asked Joshu. “Yes I have,” replied the monk. “Then you had better wash your bowl,” said Joshu. With this the monk gained insight.³²⁶

At first glance, Joshu appears to be way off topic. In fact, he has hit the bullseye. The monk has arrived, full of assumptions. He assumes that he is ready to be enlightened, that enlightenment can be captured in words, and that this gift might come from the teacher. “Have you eaten your rice porridge?” The question serves to redirect the monk’s attention back to the present moment and to everyday rituals. You are looking too far and too fast, Joshu implies; slow down and remember that the sacred may also be found in a bowl of rice porridge. After eating, comes washing up. Do not get ahead of yourself. Joshu’s question also functions as more direct rebuke: why do you ask me to ladle something out when you are already stuffed full? You say you are seeking answers, but you don’t seem to have prepared yourself to receive them. Maybe you had better wash your bowl.

Meanwhile, back in the Black Mountain dining hall, something surprising was happening. With his arbitrary divisions of time and invitations to

his collaborators to “play freely,” Cage had worked, as he put it, to get his intentions “out of the way,” to let life speak “on its own accord.” And sure enough, Cage and the others found themselves graced by an uninvited participant. A dog entered the space drawn by Cunningham’s movement. “It didn’t bark,” Cunningham recalled, “it just started dancing up and down those aisles, and followed me around.”³²⁷

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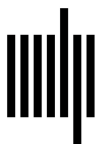
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