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Twenty-five Meditations on SITI Company's *Theater Piece No. 1*

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by David Dudley

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1. While at **Black Mountain College** (<http://www.blackmountaincollege.org/history/>) in North Carolina, **John Cage** (http://johncage.org/autobiographical_statement.html) ate breakfast every morning with friend/lover/dancer **Merce Cunningham** (<https://www.mercecunningham.org/merce-cunningham/>) and architect/designer/author **Buckminster “Bucky” Fuller** (<https://www.bfi.org/about-fuller>). It was during one of these breakfasts in 1952 that Cage conceived of what would become *Theater Piece No. 1*. By lunch, he had written time brackets on sheets of paper, which he then gave to Cunningham, Fuller, painter **Robert Rauschenberg** (<https://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/>), and poets **M.C. Richards** (<https://www.nytimes.com/1999/09/20/arts/m-c-richards-poet-potter-and-essayist-dies-at-83.html>) and **Charles Olson** (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/charles-olson>), among others. Each person was to perform as themselves for the duration of time written on each piece of paper. Those sheets gave structure to *Theater Piece No. 1*.

“Overthinking is deadly to the process of creating art.”

2. A single sheet of paper from the event remains, preserved in the New York Public Library for Performing Arts. **Written** (https://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/abs/10.1162/pajj_a_00407) in Cage’s hand, the text reads:

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

3. During *Theater Piece No. 1*, also known as *The Event*, Cage lectured on Zen Buddhism and read from his “**Lecture on Nothing** (<https://seansturm.files.wordpress.com/2012/09/john-cage-lecture-on-nothing.pdf>) ” from atop a ladder. Cunningham danced through the audience chased by a dog. Richards and Olsen took turns reading poetry from atop a second ladder. Rauschenberg's white paintings are said to have hung from the ceiling over the audience's heads as he himself played Edith Piaf records on an old Victrola. The audience, as they entered the space, found cups resting upon each seat. At the end of the evening, coffee was poured into them. A kind of ritual, Cage concluded.

4. As Cage (and, presumably, **SITI Company** (<http://siti.org/>)) would have it, this article will not be about me. I will not appear in it. It is about SITI Company's *Theater Piece No. 1*, inspired by Cage's work by the same name.

5. Canadian philosopher and media theorist **Marshall McLuhan** (<https://www.marshallmcluhan.com/>) said that the electronic age created an environment in which everything happened simultaneously. While this has surely always been the case, perhaps it was less obvious to humans who believed the Earth was flat than it was to those who are perpetually connected. Thus, **the happening** (<https://www.theartstory.org/movement-happenings.htm>) , with its intentional simultaneity displacing the protagonist's journey and random task-based actions replacing unidirectional narrative, is a truer reflection of the way we experience life today.

6. But is it as compelling as Sophocles? Williams? Shepard? Churchill? *The Walking Dead*? Let the viewer decide.

7. A woman once asked me what a happening was. I said that I didn't know, I just make it up as I go along.

“The primary directive Bogart asked the company to consider between rehearsal and performance was to 'work together and play freely.' Is this not what the world needs now?”

8. **Marcel Duchamp** (<https://www.theartstory.org/artist-duchamp-marcel.htm>) believed that art is a collaboration between the artist, the work, and the viewer; the latter upon whom the deciphering and interpretation of the work ultimately rests. By creating space for the viewer to simply exist, artists invite them to collaborate. Each collaboration leads to the affirmation of our beliefs or the changing of our minds. Or both, preferably.

9. At lunch one day I spoke with SITI Company co-artistic director **Leon Ingulsrud** (<http://siti.org/content/leon-ingulsrud>) . I marveled at the idea that Cage had conceived *Theater Piece No. 1* in the morning and had performed it that evening. (This in contrast to institutional timelines that go into the distant future, if they lead anywhere at all.) Ingulsrud then spoke of the process of art-making, with its strange, alchemic relationship between rigorous preparation and discoveries arrived at by total accident.

After some thought, Ingulsrud said that Rauschenberg's “**combines** (<https://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/art/series/combine>) ”—his series of works that bring together aspects of painting and sculpture—came about because his teachers (**Josef Albers** (<http://www.albersfoundation.org/>) ,

among them) at Black Mountain College didn't like his work. Thus, Rauschenberg was always working on two paintings: one for his teachers, and one for himself. He hid his personal work beneath the floorboards, where debris collected on the surface of the canvas. Instead of thinking them ruined, Rauschenberg saw potential. This led to the combines.

10. Overthinking is deadly to the process of creating art. As artists, are we not all trying to get out of our own way? Are Cage's ideas perhaps the most effective ones for breaking through the blocks we create for ourselves?

11. *Why am I always asking questions*, Cage asked. Those words echoed through time, reverberating in the space occupied by director **Anne Bogart** (<http://siti.org/content/anne-bogart>) and author **Kay Larson** (<http://wheretheheartbeatsbook.com/kay-larson/>) as they discussed Cage's thought, methods, and work before a rapt audience of thirty collaborators who would be staging their own version of *Theater Piece No. 1* later that evening.



Will Bond and Ellen Lauren match wits upon the chess board. Photo by David Dudley.

12. On June 23, 2018, SITI Company rehearsed and staged *Theater Piece No. 1*, conceived and directed by Bogart and played by company members **Will Bond** (<http://siti.org/content/will-bond>) and **Ellen Lauren** (<http://siti.org/content/ellen-lauren>) .

This version was built around the SITI show ***Chess Match No. 5*** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3sEGf-QQeUg>) , which is composed of quotes culled by Bogart from transcriptions of conversations between Cage and his friends and collaborators. Bogart had sent two hundred pages of these transcripts to Irish playwright **Jocelyn Clarke**

(<http://www.theatermitu.org/company/jocelyn-clarke/>) , who then sculpted the raw material into a dense, taut, expansive thirty-page script.

13. The night before *Theater Piece No 1*, *Chess Match No. 5* played to a packed house. Waiting for it to begin, I felt uneasy. I wondered, impatiently: *What's the hook? When will it come?* Bond entered. He stood before the audience, smiling, rocking on the balls of his feet. We all leaned forward waiting for him to speak. He made a slight gesture that suggested he was about to, but then...he laughed. I was on the edge of my seat.

14. During a training session designed to prepare performers for work on *Theater Piece No. 1*, Bond had asked: *What's the story? What's the underlying logic of what we're all doing?* Then he invited everyone to think about the subject of time: *What are the durations of each action?*

15. Lauren prefaced that same morning's training with a note on the work that had to be done: "We are trying to create evenness from the chaos. This is not easy work." The company then progressed through the six basic Suzuki movements, breathing, moving, and speaking in unison. Lauren deftly orchestrated this training, glowing with the lightness and joy borne of purposeful action. Not a breath was wasted.

16. During the one and only rehearsal for *Theater Piece No. 1*, which followed the morning's training, Bogart spoke briefly to everyone present: "The challenge of today is to create a model of society in which there's no hierarchy of ideas... This rehearsal is about finding the right atmosphere. It's about finding spaciousness, which I think is the most beautiful thing in the world."

17. At some point before the rehearsal began, Bogart looked up to sound designer, **Darron L. West** (<http://siti.org/content/darron-l-west>) , and said: "We should begin with a period of silence." To which West, who had presumably been steeped in Cage's work for some time, replied via microphone: "I'm all about silence these days."

18. Speaking on one of his performances, Cage articulated its purpose as "to make the world work, so any kind of living can take place." Silence is one of many ways in which spaciousness is created.



Performer and educator Mark Lococo listens to the strange, varied sounds emitting from the radio. Photo by David Dudley.

19. *Theater Piece No. 1* begins with silence, stillness. Then the performers enter and begin to move about the space, researching the environment in **Viewpoints** (<http://siti.org/training>) vernacular. A photographer drifts in and out of the action, composing bodies within the false environment of the frame, trying to capture images that communicate the feeling of this event, moment by moment.

There is both intention and non-intention in what the performers are doing. One person kneels before the radio, listening, feeling the grooved chrome knobs. Another dancer/photographer climbs a ladder, exploring each wrung with her hands and feet and torso and knees, feeling it support her weight. Bond eventually enters, taking his place downstage, subtly rocking on the balls of his feet, smiling, inhaling the space into his body, exhaling expansiveness. Lauren traverses the upstage wall (is this movement what some call a “**Canadian cross** (http://improvincyclopedia.org/glossary/Canadian_Cross.html) ”?) in a dress, shawl wrapped loosely around her head, a handsome leather handbag slung over her shoulder. Before long Bond and Lauren take their seats at a table, which is center stage. They play chess and wrestle with ideas big and small through dialogue that weaves coffee and toast with woolly theoretical concepts such as whether a ringing phone is an interruption or an integral part of the ongoing symphony composed by the world.

A man then enters the space, carrying a briefcase. He sits it upon a stool and proceeds to undress. Once naked—but for what appears to be a skin-tone colored thong—he pulls a red dress from the briefcase and casually slides into it. Three women (from the **Greeks** (<https://www.ancient-origins.net/myths-legends-europe/legendary-furies-ancient-greek-mythology-002261>) , **Shakespeare** (<http://shakespeare.mit.edu/macbeth/macbeth.4.1.html>) , **Chekhov** (<https://www.ibiblio.org/eldritch/ac/sisters.htm>) , or the **Iroquois myth**

(<http://www.oneidaindiannation.com/the-legend-of-the-three-sisters/>) ?) stalk the space, always together, drawing energy from the floor, through their feet, knees, hips, up through their spines, shoulders, and send it out toward the audience by whipping their hands and skulls simultaneously.

Waves of simultaneous action and stillness, sounds and silence, light and darkness flow and ebb in the space. The audience is invited to participate, some shouting directives at the performers who are free to obey or defy them. This is not the theatre of pure, simple forms; this is chaos theory embodied upon the stage.



Carter LaCava dresses before a rapt audience. Photo by David Dudley.

20. The primary directive Bogart asked the company to consider between rehearsal and performance was to “work together and play freely.” Is this not what the world needs now? To learn to work and play together, without usurping all the attention and/or resources for oneself?

Is the theatre not uniquely situated to provide space for such acts of cooperation, playful in process and serious in intention?

21. This non-hierarchical model of society, which Bogart and company have been striving for for many years now, finds an effective vehicle in *Theater Piece No.1*. Bogart expressed her hopes for the piece’s next progression: to tour and, in each new space, to include a core group of SITI performers as well as people from the community and nearby, for them to come and be part of the happening. This is a meaningful step towards inclusivity and diversity.

22. As the lights go down on *Theater Piece No. 1*, the space fills with applause. The performers are met with a standing ovation before they file past me through a doorway leading to the greenroom. Bogart is the last person to walk by. We make eye contact. She pauses, rests her hand gently upon my shoulder, and smiles. In this gesture, is spaciousness created? I feel several emotions stirring inside but rather than giving them expression—and thereby allowing any single feeling to command all my thoughts—I allow this infinitesimal moment to simply exist as it is, expanding inside of me while moving toward its end, at once filled with nothing and everything.

23. What now? What now?

24. Should we not all perform our own version of this event, or something like it, throughout the world and in our own unique ways and with our own communities? It could be simultaneously with others, or not. Moreover, should we not push theatre back into the streets, parks, and homes, thereby liberating ourselves from the structures that compel us to wait endlessly rather than doing?

While having resources such as space, lighting, professional collaborators, and so forth is ever-desirable, they are not entirely necessary. (Not that we should refuse to work with the many wonderful theatre companies of the world; rather, we should work with them as the opportunity presents itself, and work within our own communities in the meantime.) The happening as a theatrical form—make of it what you will—makes this possible. The happening can be done by anybody anywhere and with whatever is at hand. What's stopping us?

25. What now? Begin again.

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