Merce Cunningham
CO:MM:ON TI:ME

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NOT SO MUCH A PROGRAM OF MUSIC AS THE EXPERIENCE OF MUSIC

Benjamin Piekut
To say that the Merce Cunningham Dance Company (MCDC) played an important role in the history of experimental music since its founding in 1953 would be a severe understatement. Indeed, the lion’s share of performance opportunities for John Cage and David Tudor in the late 1950s and 1960s came through their role as MCDC’s “house band,” a performance group that expanded to include many others over the years, among them Gordon Mumma, David Behrman, Toshi Ichiyanagi, and Takehisa Kosugi. In the two decades between his first use of chance operations (in the third movement of the Concerto for Prepared Piano and Chamber Orchestra, 1951) and his return to standard notation (with Cheap Imitation, 1970), Cage launched a series of fundamental challenges to the Western art music tradition. Many will know that he obliterated the distinction between noise and musical sound, effecting a shift from musical to stopwatch time, transformed the composer’s role from making to accepting, and used the score to suggest actions rather than to represent specific sounds.

In this short essay, I shall suggest that it was Tudor, not Cage, who most exemplified experimental music following the Cagean ruptures of the 1950s and 1960s, and who most clearly draws a line from those early days to more recent experimental practices. Indeed, Cage maintained an ambivalent relationship to his own innovations, outlining several exits from the Western art music tradition but never taking any of them. The multimedia work Variations V (1965) is a good example. Cage, Tudor, and Mumma designed an elaborate electronic system of source materials and processors that interacted with MCDC dancers, whose movements triggered further electronic signals and switching when they approached vertical antennae and photoelectric cells that had been placed around the stage; Stan VanDerBeek projected films into the environment that had been altered by Nam June Paik, which further affected the signals generated by the photoelectric cells. Variations V was less a composition than an open-ended ecology that hosted mutually affecting interactions. Yet Cage created a score after its first performance at New York’s Lincoln Center in 1965; it specifies, “Performance without score or parts.” Although he would later tell an interviewer that “these are remarks that would enable one to perform Variations V,” rendering the event a composition ex post facto would seem to neutralize its most radical quality, given the tradition from which it had emerged: the elimination of the author position, or rather its distribution among a host of human and nonhuman agencies.

The abundant Cunningham repertory includes music positioned on either side of this authorial line. Much of this music assumed a traditional or at least conventional division of musical labor: a composer created a consistent or repeatable work, notated in a score or very specific instructions and performed later by somebody else. Examples can be found in the dances Biped (Gavin Bryars, Biped, 1999), Rondo (Cage, Four, 1990/1992), Change of Address (Walter Zimmermann, Self-Forgetting: Words from Meister Eckhart, 1992), Trackers (Emanuel Dimas de Melo Pimenta, Gravitational Sounds, 1991), Fractions (Jon Gibson, Equal Distribution #1, 1977), or Tread (Christian Wolff, For 1, 2 or 3 people, 1964), among many others.

But a substantial number of Cunningham’s dances feature music that scrambles these normative categories of musical labor. Even Bryars’s Biped, for example, is performed with two different prerecorded backing tracks depending on whether the composer (or another double-bassist with synth) performs with the ensemble—it exists in multiple versions. In some cases, the creator passes the score to a trusted collaborator for performance, or specifies that only a preapproved musician (or musicians) may present the work in concert, as Kosugi does for S.E. Wave/E.W. Song (for the dance Squaregame, 1976). Such a reliance on a singular performer was highly reminiscent of Tudor’s function for the New York School composers, but also brings to mind contemporaneous examples like James Brown or Captain Beefheart and their musicians. A violinist is a violinist is a violinist—not so for these collaborations, where the sonic personality of a given performer is as crucial to the resulting sound as was Tony Williams to Miles Davis’s second quintet.

Another class of works relied on custom electronics and hardware; though designed by the composer to ensure a certain repeatability across performances,  

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1. The author wishes to thank Joshua Barber, Mary Coane, Ronald Kuivila, Cassie Mey, and Gordon Mumma for their help with this essay.
2. I’ve borrowed the “house band” label from historian of downtown Bernard Gendron.
4. Here and in the following descriptions I draw upon MCDC’s online archive, Merce Cunningham Trust, http://dancecapsules.mercecunningham.org; I have also referred frequently to Amy Beal’s indispensable “A Short Stop Along the Way: Each-Thingness and Music for Merce,” liner notes to Music for Merce (1952–2009), New World Records 80712–2, 2010, 10 compact discs.
such pieces only remained in the repertory as long as their designer was around to troubleshoot and maintain the equipment. Many of Tudor’s works for the company fall into this category. More recently, composers seem to have had repeated perforability in mind, creating music for portable and universal media such as CDs or AIFF sound files. For example, in his New Ikebukuro (For 3 CD Players) (for the dance Pond Way, 1998), Brian Eno composed ten unique snippets of music and distributed them as tracks among three CDs, which are inserted into CD players set to shuffle mode and allowed to self-randomize for twenty to thirty minutes before the performance, when an engineer fades them up in the house mix. For their contribution to Cunningham’s Split Sides (2003), Radiohead created ten digital audio files to be processed live during the performance (i.e., using spatialization, filtering, and so on). For this band and Eno, sound recording ensures perforability even when the composers aren’t present, but spontaneous operations supplement the medium to keep every concert unique. Indeed, although Cunningham had largely abandoned indeterminate choreography by 1965 or so, the company resolutely avoided fully canned music with very few exceptions.

In later years, MCDC improvised novel solutions to the problem of recorded music’s predictability, even if it might have been the only way to keep some works in existence. For example, company musician and technician Jesse Stiles created software to “perform” archival recordings of Tudor working with his live electronic systems for the pieces Sextet for Seven and Phonemes (created for the dances Quartet[1982] and Channels/Inserts[1981], respectively). In other words, past performances by Tudor became the raw audio material for future realizations, which (presumably) reshuffle the order of events, their spatialization and dynamics, and other modulations. Tudor himself undertook a similar procedure for the 1994 revival of Sounddance (1975), which had originally featured the composer operating his self-designed electronics. For the 1994 version, he created three stereo recordings to be mixed and spatialized by the performer in concert (judging by concert programs in the Merce Cunningham Dance Company Foundation Archives, this performer was almost always Kosugi in the years after Tudor’s death).

The Merce Cunningham Trust’s online Dance Capsules occasionally register a certain failure: a work drops out of the repertoire because Tudor did not succeed in externalizing his process to such an extent that another musician could pick it up and reactivate it. For example, the information sheet for Weathersings (created for the dance Exchange, 1978) reports, “Due to the esoteric nature of the electronics as well as Tudor’s singular performance techniques Weatherings can no longer be performed live”; the sentence is repeated for Neural Network Plus (composed for Enter, 1992).

Existing in several versions, only performable by an approved musician, reliant on custom electronics or sound files prepared by the composer, employing archival recordings of the author’s performance, or simply disappearing from the set of possible performances—all of these works written for the company manifest a nonnormative status vis-à-vis the Western art music tradition that is their most obvious forebear. While composers in that tradition were in the business of creating scores that leave their hand and enable repeatable performances in remote times and places, this music never quite escapes the gravitational pull of its creator. Western art music history textbooks customarily refer to this disruption in the usual division of artistic labor with the awkward appellation composer-performer, which creeps into their narrative at about the same time that MCDC reaches its zenith.

By the time of the Walker Art Center’s exhibition Merce Cunningham: Common Time—indeed, much earlier—such an arrangement of roles in experimental music had become not simply unremarkable but expected. Miya Masaoka, Francisco López, Morgan Craft, Ikue Mori, Raven Chacon, Jon Rose: when these musicians go onstage or into the studio, they very rarely perform the work of another, and they just as rarely rely on somebody else to perform their creations. Many factors have contributed to this change, including the revaluation of sound recording over live performers for the distribution of new work as well as the rapprochement with jazz-derived free improvisation and the incursion of rock-affiliated figures into experimental music performance and discourse. In both jazz and rock, of course, the fusion of composition and performance is hardly unusual.

To this predominant form of contemporary experimentalism, Tudor after the 1960s appears a fellow traveler, if not a progenitor. His embrace of self-designed electronics took him not only away from the piano, but also from notation itself. In a 1972 interview with Victor Schonfield, Tudor was quite explicit about this evolution: “But there is a paragraph in [Ferruccio] Busoni which speaks of notation as an evil separating musicians from music, and I feel everyone should know that this is true. I had been completely indoctrinated with the idea of faithfulness to notation in the early days... Notation is an invention of the devil, and when I became free of it... it really did a lot for me.”

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5 David Tudor, “From Piano to Electronics [Interview with Victor Schonfield],” Music and Musicians, August 1972, 24.
we will see, this liberation from notated scores also opened Tudor up into more improvisational modes of performance. "I can't distinguish between the experiment and the performance," he once said. "If I do that, I'm getting into ... the product and there's no product here." And what replaced product? One could say "process," or one could say "improvisation," or one could say "electronic system," but in light of the collapsing distinction between composer and performer—Bryars plays Bryars, Tudor plays Tudor, Kosugi plays Kosugi—we might also say "personality."

As MCDC dancer Carolyn Brown has observed, Cunningham's unparalleled reputation as a collaborator across media is somewhat ironic, if not downright puzzling. "The truth is, Merce is no collaborator," she wrote in 1975. "He is a loner." Preserving the distinct-but-equal relationships among choreography, mise-en-scène, and music surely unlocked unprecedented aesthetic treasures, but it also allowed Cunningham to seal himself off in a world of dance during the creative process. Brown viewed the choreographer as aloof or even secretive; he kept details of the scenery, lights, and music from the dancers until the last possible moment, she recalled, sometimes even until the first public performance. Brown continues, "I will not pretend that this is not extremely difficult for the dancers. Loudness, especially unexpected loudness, affects the inner ear, the seat of balance, of equilibrium." (One cannot help but think of La Monte Young's 2 Sounds [1960], the musical accompaniment to Winterbranch, perhaps the darkest work in the repertory and one of very few that depends fully on tape playback. Cloaked in shadow, the action begins with seven or eight minutes of silent dance, which is interrupted violently by the playback of Young's abrasive, full-spectrum noise work.) Given how widely known was Cunningham's (non)collaborative process, we might surmise that many composers followed the example of Earle Brown, whose Indices was paired with Springweather and People in 1955: "Merce gave me his time structure, which I meditated upon and then ignored."

Although the relationship between dance and music in MCDC was paradoxically separate, the relationship among the musicians themselves grew steadily more cooperative, reaching its apogee in the early 1970s. When Cunningham began developing his own choreography in the 1940s, Cage wrote the music and performed it himself, occasionally grabbing friends to help with ensemble works such as Credo in US. By the end of the next decade, Tudor had become a fixture in the company as pianist and performer; Cage was music director. Gordon Mumma writes, "In the 1960s these categories became irrelevant as the functions became increasingly shared and diverse, and I joined the ensemble [in 1966]. When Cage became uncomfortable with the idea of being 'music director,' all categories disappeared. By the 1970s, with the addition of [David] Behrman (and others on occasion) we had evolved into a remarkable collaboration." The reshuffling of musical subjectivities also coincided with a shift in the musicians' instrumentation—electronics turned out to be a great enabler of egalitarian arrangements. Carolyn Brown noted that, prior to 1966, MCDC featured two musicians who traveled light: sheet music, piano preparations, and some small electronics. By 1972, they transported close to 1,500 pounds of electronic equipment.

Tudor's role in effecting these material shifts in aesthetic labor and machinery cannot be overstated. Born in 1926 and employed as an organist from his teenage years, he met Cage around 1950 and quickly established himself as a leading pianist of the postwar modernists; Cage wrote Music of Changes for him, he gave the US premiere of Pierre Boulez's Sonata no. 2, and Karlheinz Stockhausen wrote many of the Klavierstücke for him.

But it was with the indeterminate works of the New York School—Cage, Christian Wolff, Morton Feldman, and Earle Brown—that Tudor established himself as an unprecedented type of musical performer, one who could be counted on to add a measure of co-composition to the final product; his role was not simply interpretive, but generative. As Cage later explained to an interviewer, he never needed to instruct the pianist on how to perform one of his indeterminate works: "There was never any conversation.... Nor did I consult with him about what he could do, or what he couldn’t do—none of that." Although one can explain this total trust with reference to Tudor's formidable talents at the keyboard, it might be more productive to interpret it as the result of a co-compositional relationship. After all, Tudor premiered every one of Cage's piano works between 1952 and the mid-1960s, a period of increasing indeterminacy, and these pieces were among the elder composer's most important. In light of subsequent developments, the conventional split between composer and performer

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10 Brown, in Klosty, Merce Cunningham, 30.

appears particularly inadequate to capture the dynamics of this duo.

Throughout the 1950s, however, Tudor seems to have been content in that arrangement. For example, consider Earle Brown’s description of Cage and Tudor’s 1960 realization of his graphic score, December 1952, to accompany a solo for Carolyn Brown called Hands Birds. “In this case it was performed by Cage and Tudor on (and in) two pianos,” he wrote, “it is the most ambiguous, ‘free,’ improvisation piece that I have ever written. It always intrigued me that John’s ‘realisation’ sounded very much like his own music and David’s sounded very much like my fully composed music at the time, but beautiful and a pleasure to listen to.”12 In other words, Cage played his own music, while Tudor played Brown’s. Within a few short years, however, Tudor would play his own music, too, often simultaneously with Cage; we might call this activity improvisation.

The transition, as we have already noted, coincided with a shift from piano to electronics. In the latter case, Tudor no longer interacted primarily with a written score. Instead, he substituted electronic systems that he could observe and interact with in real time. Two compositions by Cage—Cartridge Music (1960) and Variations II (1961)—assumed critical importance in Tudor’s passage from performer to designer of systems. As other commentators have noted, Cartridge Music required a density of texture and fluidity of temporal control that inclined its performers toward improvisation.13 Among the many materials that make up the score can be found a clock face on transparent paper, which, once combined with and intersected by lines printed on other transparencies, dictates to the performer a certain time range—say, from 0:35 to 0:42—for one given sound in the complex texture. The most likely interpretation of that instruction would be that the sound to which it pertains will last seven seconds, beginning at 0:35, or 1:35, or 2:35—that is, in whichever minute the predetermined sequence of sound events might dictate. But once Tudor and Cage actually performed the piece regularly, they discovered that there were too many things they had to do beside monitoring a stopwatch; these included manipulating several phonograph cartridges connected to feathers, pipe cleaners, twigs, and other sound-producing digits as well as conical microphones that had been affixed to objects around the performance space. So numerous were their on-the-fly activities that each performer routinely missed entrances; only after many years of presenting the work did they discover that they had both furtively hit upon the same solution: disregard the minute hand and only read the second hand. If you missed a cue for the next sound, you simply had to ready yourself for when the fast hand swept around sixty seconds later. In place of an agreed duration for the piece with internal segmentations already determined, this practice prompted a more fluid, rolling temporal pace.14

Preparing his realization of Variations II took Tudor even further into electronics. Perhaps the most open-ended of Cage’s “music-kit” scores, Variations II supplies its performers with transparencies to determine the frequency, duration, loudness, timbre, timing, and structure of each sound event. As James Pritchett explains in an illuminating analysis, Tudor’s realization exhibits none of the meticulous measurement and specificity that was typical of his approach prior to this piece. Instead, his written materials remained exceedingly simple because his extensive electronic preparation of the piano required close attention during performance; numerous condenser and contact microphones around the instrument as well as phonograph cartridges and implements, when amplified, created a highly complex, nonlinear, and essentially uncontrollable electronic ecology that threatened to feed back at every moment. “Cage’s music of the 1950s, of which Variations II is the culmination, was about sound and its independence from thought. Tudor’s realization and performance isn’t really about that at all, but instead is about the performer’s action, his personal discovery and exploration of the amplified piano,” Pritchett concludes.15

If Cartridge Music and Variations II allowed Tudor to develop a craft of live electronics, then that craft also discharged him from notation’s grasp and the conventional arrangements of creative musical labor. He explored the space between these arrangements in the 1966 Happening Bandoneon! (a combine), his contribution to the “9 Evenings” of experiments in art and technology at the 69th Regiment Armory in New York City. The collaborative multimedia performance—too complex to detail here—possessed no “composer” in the traditional sense of the term, according to Tudor. In a program note for the event, he wrote that Bandoneon! “uses no composing means since when activated it composes itself out of its own composite instrumental nature.”16 In the absence of

12 Earle Brown, untitled chapter in Klouty, Merce Cunningham, 77.
a composer’s centralized control, Tudor and his collaborators could explore a repertoire of improvisational modes based on response, interaction, and adaptation in real time.

Among the many components of Bandoneon! were four cart-mounted, roving loudspeakers that employed transducers to vibrate materials of various kinds. A gizmo for transforming an electronic sound signal into vibration, a transducer essentially allows one to turn any object into a loudspeaker. When Cunningham commissioned him to create a new piece to accompany RainForest (1968), Tudor made these gizmos the centerpiece of the new work. A stone classic of postwar experimentalism, the musical principle of Rainforest (no capital “F” in the musical title) is relatively simple: an audio-source signal—it could be produced via prerecorded tapes or oscillators—is sent to a transducer that resonates an object like a clay pot, the sound of which is subsequently amplified by a contact microphone and sent to another standard loudspeaker. Several such resonators/loudspeakers are employed in the composition. Variations on this formula, mostly having to do with different sound sources, led Tudor to make four different versions of the piece between 1967 and 1973, yet it remains risky to mark conclusively the boundary line between versions, or between any discrete “works” of Tudor. As Matt Rogalsky explains, “The most convincing arguments for approaching Tudor’s work from this perspective are the recurring comments I have heard in interviews and discussions with his colleagues: that his performance practice was based on experimentation and constant change; that it was a rarity for a piece to be assembled in exactly the same way twice; and that Tudor’s score diagrams, while giving some idea of the principles at work in his compositions, are definitely not to be mistaken for blueprints that might define an ‘authentic’ performance setup.”

Indeed, according to Ron Kuivila, Tudor’s “transformation from composer to performer ... was a complex and multithreaded process that resists a simple narrative account.” One reason for the multivalence of his development is the extent to which it was imbricated with his musical collaborators in MCDC. Although Cage didn’t replicate each of Tudor’s overlapping transformations (from performer to creator, from piano to electronics, from notation to improvisation), he did warm up to the idea of improvisation during the years of Tudor’s metamorphosis. As the musicologist Sabine Feisst has detailed, Cage delivered his poetic works of this period—Mureau (1970), 62 Mesostics re Merce Cunningham (1971)—as improvisations at the microphone, a fact revealed not only by recordings but also through explicit discussion of his practice in interviews from the time. As a duo, they combined different pieces for a given “set”—for example, they paired Cage’s Mesostics with Tudor’s Untitled in concerts during 1972. (The latter piece required no input signal, instead generating and then modulating feedback from inside the designer’s complex circuit; a later version, Toneburst, was created to accompany Cunningham’s Sounddance in 1975.)

In 1966 Mumma had joined Tudor and Cage in MCDC, and by the end of that decade, the trio had evolved into something of a leaderless ensemble. Even the “composed” works they performed tended toward an open, improvisatory approach. For example, Pauline Oliveros’s score for Canfield (1969), called In Memoriam: Nikola Tesla, Cosmic Engineer, came in the form of three typewritten pages of instructions that detailed the general effects she desired as well as the kinds of hardware that would be required to achieve them. Inspired by the story of Tesla’s “earthquake machine,” which he claimed could bring down a steel building using nothing more than vibration, the piece asked its performers to interact materially with the performance space during the unrelated action onstage. In Mumma’s account, they structured their realization in three sections (according to the composer’s instructions), beginning with a (presumably amplified) discussion of the concert venue’s history and the life and work of the inventor. Then they conducted various acoustic experiments to analyze the hall’s resonant characteristics, using buzzers, whistles, oscillators, and other instruments (even Mumma’s French horn) to pull out and record resonant frequencies in the space; these tests took the pit musicians all around the hall, into the wings, and behind the audience. They stayed in contact via walkie-talkies and recorded the process so that it could be reintegrated into the third section that formed the performance’s climax. Emerging from silence, the conclusion began with droning low frequencies that had been tuned—according to the results of the previous experiments—to the hall’s hot pitches; soon, the previously recorded material was added in a swirl of vibration and noise. “If the search for the resonant frequency has been successful,”

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18 Kuivila, "Open Sources," 17.
20 On Untitled, see Kuivila, "Open Sources.
21 For the following description, I am relying upon Mumma, Cybersonic Arts, 123–125, as well as the "Music Overviews" in the online Dance Capsules, Merce Cunningham Trust, accessed February 24, 2016, http://dancecapsules.mercecunningham.org. 

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COMM:ON TIME
Oliveros wrote, "the musicians can cause the performance space to add its squeaks, groans, and other resonance phenomena to the general sound. Thus the space performs in sympathy with the musicians."

The choreography of Canfield consisted of thirteen solos with connecting interludes, the order and number of which changed for each performance, usually on the day of the event. It ranged from 20 to 105 minutes, but Mumma recalls that they enjoyed it so much that, within a year or two, "we were rarely presenting the abbreviated version of this piece in combination with other repertory works, as we had previously." The work, he averred, seemed to be "metamorphosing" into the loosely structured, improvisational Event format, an important development to which we shall return. The music for two subsequent repertory dances, Signals (1970) and Landrover (1972), continued the tendency toward distributed authorship. For Signals, Cage, Tudor, and Mumma decided that they would each make an independent contribution to the piece, and moreover that this contribution would change with each performance. Mumma writes, "[E]ach contribution would be sparing in its resources and might have a specific character, idea, or image." Usually, Cage played short excerpts of early music at the piano, which he would find using chance operations during the performance itself; Mumma chose a quiet texture of bells ringing (or signaling) at a great distance; Tudor elected to play back recordings from his tape library, including insect sounds, electroencephalographic signals, or excerpts of sentimental parlour music. These three textures were not necessarily continuous: copious periods of silence punctuated each independently structured layer, such that these silences often overlapped during a performance. The trio attempted to signal the collaborative and variable quality of the work by changing the title of each presentation to reflect its date of performance (Fourth Week of February), and by including the names of all three musicians as "composers" on the program.

As he did with Canfield and earlier with Scramble (1967), Cunningham choreographed Landrover in sections that could be rearranged for each performance. The musicians chose to divide the total time of the work (fifty-two minutes initially, but apparently variable, according to notes in the MCDC Dance Capsule) into three equal sections, each musician taking responsibility for one of them. In Mumma's memory, Cage often left much of his time frame silent, filling part of it with a short reading from Mureau; Tudor modulated recordings of seismological signals and Mumma elected to make an electronic-music realization of his own instruction score, which specified "a phenomenon unarticulated insofar as possible and sustained at the threshold of perception."

(Although he created the score so that somebody else could perform it in his absence, Mumma notes that he invariably performed it himself.) Like that of the music for Signals, the title of this piece was variable, consisting of the total duration of the piece in minutes over the numeral three ("52/3" in its initial performances). In my view, the somewhat awkward titling and crediting maneuvers in these performances around 1970 evince a kind of friction with Western art music's traditional division of creative labor, a friction that has largely subsided in contemporary experimental practices. An audience at one of the contemporary Amplify festivals, for example, expects to hear a mix of spontaneous, variable interaction and recognizable, repeating materials that also exist outside of a particular performance. Musicians might incorporate previously prepared sections, agree on a temporal structure before their set, or improvise with a single technological arrangement for a given "piece." What seemed to be unusual or unprecedented (at least in these esoteric circles of cultural production) in 1972 would be taken as a matter of course a few decades later.

The overlapping transformations we have thus far surveyed reached some kind of distillation in Cunningham's Events, which he created in response to unusual performance venues or settings that lacked a proscenium stage; they were flexible, generally evening-length (sixty to seventy-five minutes) concerts created anew for every occasion. Cunningham assembled the dance from bits of this or that repertory work; to take an example more or less at random, the company's Event in their Westbeth studio on May 27, 1972, combined sections of Walkaround Time; Loops; How to Pass, Kick, Fall and Run; and TV Run. The choreography would often proceed without a set or décor, but if the space permitted and the materials were at hand, elements of scenery from the repertory might be moved about during the performance. As ever, the musicians followed their own course, but in a departure from their usual practice, they shared no temporal structure; instead, they each improvised individual sonic contributions, often in exploration of the site itself, with plenty of silence. For instance, at Museum Event #5 (June 3, 1967, at the Connecticut

22 Pauline Oliveros, untitled chapter in Klorey, Merce Cunningham, 80.
23 Mumma, Cybersonic Arts, 128.
24 Gordon Mumma, "From Where the Circus Went," in Klorey, Merce Cunningham, 76.
25 Mumma, Cybersonic Arts, 129.
26 Mumma, "From Where the Circus Went," in Klorey, Merce Cunningham, 70.
28 This program can be found in Merce Cunningham Dance Foundation Records, (Sawtooth) 196, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, box 52, folder 4. Hereafter cited as MCDF Records.
estate of architect Philip Johnson), Cage amplified a nearby country road, Tudor sounded a sampling of electronics. Mumma threw out “romantic calls on a hunting horn and electronically modified violin,” and Toshi Ichiyanagi manipulated a large, amplified gong. The loose, overlapping quality of these collaborations harkened back to the 1952 Black Mountain College event known as Theater Piece No. 1, the rule of which might be glossed in the following way: “Gather many interesting artists from different media and make space for them to perform their activities simultaneously.” According to archivist David Vaughan, the company presented more than 800 Events before its final concerts in December 2011.

Although the Events predate many of the musical changes we have charted (the first taking place in 1964), their number increased dramatically in 1972, and almost all of the company’s performances in 1973 and 1974 were of this kind—in other words, their frequency rose to meet the concomitant drift toward distributed authorship among the musicians. Carolyn Brown’s emotional departure in late 1972 ruled out substantial parts of the repertory that had been created for her and coincided with the end of a ten-week international tour that had schlepped the company from Iran to London and left its dancers and leader exhausted. Mumma, too, would conclude his full-time work with MCDC about six months later (dancer Sandra Neels and others would soon follow). Those were a few distinct reasons for the ballooning number of Events in 1973. Another, I like to think, was the great enjoyment that most took in these collaborations, which on one occasion (Berkeley, August 2, 1971) even permitted the dancers themselves to light and choreograph their own activities. (“In the company’s history, this was the one-and-only truly collaborative Event in which the dancers contributed ideas and choreography,” wrote Carolyn Brown.)

In addition to fostering further interactive group explorations for the musicians of the company, Events provided opportunities to invite guests and occasionally play with them. Cage, Tudor, and Behrman determined these collaborators by each drawing up a list of ten or more possible names, then all voting on the complete list as a group. Many of these invitees—David Behrman, Anthony Braxton, Jim Burton, Stuart Dempster, Malcolm Goldstein, Garrett List, New York MEV (List, Gregory Reeve, Frederic Rzewski, Richard Teitelbaum), Pauline Oliveros, Nam June Paik, Charlemagne Palestine, David Rosenboom, and Christian Wolff, to name several from the mid-1970s—integrated improvisation as a core artistic practice, and even in those cases where they performed titled pieces, one could reasonably assume that the musical division of labor was similar to that of Signals or Landrover (especially in cases like List’s “Free Music” or Behrman’s “Homemade Synthesizer Music with Pitch-sensitive Sensors”). And almost without exception, the guests who performed music of a less immediately improvisational nature—including Maryanne Amacher, Robert Ashley, Rhys Chatham, Nicolas Collins, Philip Corner, Jon Gibson, Jon Hassell, Ron Kuivila, Joan La Barbara, Annea Lockwood, Jackson Mac Low, Meredith Monk, Phill Niblock, and Yasunao Tone—operated as composer-performers of their own work. For example, when La Barbara performed her “Vocal Extensions” in an Event on March 15, 1977, she included a program note that bound the piece directly to her own creative practice and highlighted its improvisational nature: “a stream-of-consciousness exposition of a new sound vocabulary I’ve developed over the years of investigating the voice. The electronics are an orchestra at my control, responding and reacting to my sounds.”

Many of these musicians would agree with trombonist Stuart Dempster, who, jolted by the offer of a commission from the company for a new repertory work in 1993, assuredly admitted in retrospect, “I have never considered myself a commission composer, preferring to ‘write’ pieces for myself to play (I do not need a written score and nobody else cares)).” In the 1970s, he had played about twenty Events, joining the company in the summer of 1976 on a tour of Avignon, Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Caesarea, Dubrovnik, and Athens, where they gave four Events at the Acropolis site. The other two musicians were Tudor and Behrman. The trio’s music, completely improvised, depended on each giving the others plenty of acoustic space, an agreement arrived at through subtle, unspoken cues rather than technologically enforced control: Tudor had informed Dempster, “One of our regular rules is: Thou shalt not turn down another person’s gain.” (Another regular rule had been established years prior, when Cage called a meeting to “lay down the law” after an Event in Chicago; according to Cage, Mumma had clearly suggested an ABA form in their improvisation by beginning and ending his contribution with

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29 Mumma, Cybersonic Arts, 131.
30 Far fewer can be documented with surviving programs in the MCDCF Records.
31 Carolyn Brown, Chance and Circumstance: Twenty Years with Cage and Cunningham (New York: Knopf, 2007), 569.
32 After 2000, MCDC began to invite artists to contribute (usually preexisting) musical works for Events, too: see Bonnie Clearwater, Merce Cunningham: Dancing on the Cutting Edge (North Miami, FL: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2007), 37–52. I base the following description of Event musical guests on my study of concert programs in the MCDCF Records, boxes 51–77 and 82–84.
34 MCDF Records, box 53, folder 5.
the same sound. "Now and then, things happen that I just can’t accept. That was one of them," Cage later told Vaughan.)

In 1974, 1975, and 1976, MCDC averaged more than thirty Events per year; this number diminished somewhat as the decade drew to a close. In March 1976, Takehisa Kosugi joined the company in Adelaide, Australia, where they gave the premiere of Squaregame, with Kosugi’s S.E. Wave/E.W. Song. Almost always performed by the composer, S.E. Wave/E.W. Song employed found elements (children’s songs, poetry, word-search puzzles) to be explored in performance with the violin and voice. The piece’s most distinctive quality—and the one that differentiates its vocal garbles from those of Cage’s Mureau, for example—is the rolling wash of digital delays, phasing effects, and panning that befog each sonic event; every utterance gets swept up in this fast current of electronic wind. Like so much of Kosugi’s work since the early 1970s, S.E. Wave/E.W. Song offers an uncanny mix of the vast and the intimate.

Within a few years, the violinist, composer, and improviser would join Cage and Tudor as the third sonic fixture in MCDC. Born in 1938, Kosugi had been a mover on the international avant-garde scene since the early 1960s. Associated with Fluxus in the early years, he had also performed with MCDC on their Japan tour in 1964. As a student at the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music in the late 1950s, Kosugi studied ethnomusicology with India specialist Fumio Koizumi, who instilled in his student a fascination with South Asian improvisatory practices, as well as a working knowledge of non-Western and non-Japanese instruments. Kosugi brought these interests into the Music group (also known as Group Ongaku), the free improvisation ensemble that he formed in 1958 with Shūkō Mizuno, Chieko Shiomi, Yasunao Tone, and other students at the university. Koizumi’s influence on Kosugi was even more evident in the case of the Taj Mahal Travellers, a seven-member group that the latter founded with bassist and artist Ryo Kikke in December 1969. They played drone improvisations with a certain rock feel, owing to their amplification, the use of short ostinati, and the feedback and heavy reverb of psychedelia.

Like many of the Events invitees of the 1970s, Kosugi’s practical knowledge of jazz and rock (his program bio for the 1976 premiere of S.E. Wave/E.W. Song touted his “participation in jazz and rock-music concerts in Japan”) expanded considerably the range of musical reference in MCDC performances. Many of the repertory and Event collaborators following Kosugi’s assumption of the musical directorship in 1995—Brian Eno, Loren Dempster, DJ Spooky, Steve Lacy, Christian Marclay, Thurston Moore, Jim O’Rourke, Radiohead, Sigur Rós, and John Shiurba—possessed backgrounds in free improvisation, jazz, or popular music, where the relaxation of creative roles that so thrilled Cage, Tudor, and Mumma thirty years before would go on with little notice or remark.

In this short essay, I have struggled merely to sketch what it takes to be an important change in the conceptualization and practice of experimental music performance, one that took place over many decades but with particular salience during several years of music production within MCDC. For David Tudor, this change bundled together transitions from notation to improvisation, from piano to electronics, and from performance to creation; the consequent disruption of Western art music’s division of musical labor was a permanent one for experimentalists. One could also formulate this change as the passage from a repertory-work model to a database model. James Klosty has insightfully observed that Events made available the entire repertory of the company “as a vast, pooled resource from which single details and sections may be extracted out of context and reassembled into an unforeseen and novel unity.” As Cunningham put it, the format enabled him to present “not so much a program of dances as the experience of dance.” Likewise, many musicians built up an ever-expanding individual database of instrumental techniques, technical setups, stylistic and aesthetic tendencies, stand-alone compositions, and highly personal approaches to improvisation, some or all of which might be drawn upon and “reassembled into an unforeseen and novel unity.” Cunningham’s description of Events, therefore, is also apt for experimental music today, which favors less the presentation of a program of musical pieces than it does the experience of experimentalism itself.

37 Cage, interview by David Vaughan, January 18, 1979, cassette.
41 On rock and Cage, see Elizabeth L. Linda, “Goodbye Twentieth Century: Sonic Youth Records John Cage’s ‘Number Pieces,’” in Tomorrow Is the Question, 15–38.
42 Klosty, Mercer Cunningham, 14.
43 This phrase appeared as standard boilerplate on all the Event programs until 1975, when “a program of dances” was changed to “an evening of dances,” MCDF Records.