



John Cage, installation, 1994. From "Rolywholyover, A Circus."

HOUSTON

"ROLYWHOLYOVER, A CIRCUS"

THE MENIL COLLECTION

When he died two years ago, John Cage was heavily engaged in working out "Rolywholyover, A Circus" in conjunction with Los Angeles' Museum of Contemporary Art curator Julie Lazar. It would be easy to look on it as his final legacy, or final broad gesture anyway. Cage's revolutionary spirit is reflected in the show's main title, taken from *Finnegans Wake*, with its implication of a

reevaluation of all values; the subtitle "A Circus" holds out the promise of high jinks in a usually solemn place.

This traveling exhibition, opening at the Guggenheim in New York this month, is divided into three areas. In the first, smallest, most site-specific, and least interesting—"Museumcircle"—the works are from local museums, chosen at random from lists compiled by the participating institutions themselves. The second part of the show consists of various works by Cage, from watercolors to musical scores. Finally, comprised of pieces selected via a computerized method based on the I Ching, the third and largest area is the exhibition.

The 159 works exhibited and/or stored in that part of the show were chosen by Cage and Lazar on the principle that they had something to do with Cage's life. Many of them come from Cage's collection, so they amount to an odd and personal portrait of Cage. They range from '40s Barnett Newman paintings to interactive, computerized video. Many were made by his friends, including early-'50s works by Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, old Black Mountain buddies who were there when it all began, and those by more recent friends such as William Anastasi (represented by more pieces than anyone else) and Dove Bradshaw, whose works Cage collected.

Cage of course had an interesting mind and eye, so the selection of materials is engrossing. But it's his mastery of showmanship in the installation that's the genius of the piece. More than a circus, it is a musically scored dance performance. The installers work from a score, computer-generated for Cage and ultimately based on the I Ching, which contains instructions for activities to be performed over one and a quarter hour periods such

as 3:00–4:15 PM. The score instructs them to take, within each time period, objects with certain numbers and relocate them in specified positions, or rotate them, say, a specified number of degrees, or remove them into the storage area, and so on. At any moment some of the works are either on view, some are in the open storage area, which is also in the exhibition space, and some are being carried around and reinstalled.

The effect is quite electric. The same kind of excitement that hangs in the air the day before an opening—or the day of it—is there every day, all day. At least I noticed it on the three occasions I dropped in. Cage's precisely timed instructions serve as a musical setting; the movements of the crew shifting the stuff around forms a dance. This dance goes on, directed by the ghostly hand of the dead composer, to this more or less silent music all day long—stops at night—then resumes. Off on Sundays. Bye, John.

—Thomas McEvilley