

# the guardian

## The Bride and the Bachelors: delighting in Duchamp

The Barbican hosts a miraculous show examining the fruitful relationships between Cage, Johns, Rauschenberg, Cunningham and the French master



**Adrian Searle**

guardian.co.uk, Friday 15 February 2013 15.32 GMT

 [Jump to comments \(100\)](#)



[Link to video: Philippe Parreno on The Bride and the Bachelors at the Barbican](#)

Reading this on mobile? [Click here to view video](#)

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

**The Bride and the Bachelors**  
Barbican Art Gallery,  
London  
EC2Y 8DS

Starts 14 February  
Until 9 June 2013  
[Venue website](#)

The word "NO" dangles on a wire tacked to the front of a beautifully shabby and drab painting by [Jasper Johns](#) at the [Barbican Art Gallery](#). The shadow of the metal word gets confused with the grey painting behind it, where Johns used the template as a stencil. Somewhere else in the exhibition *The Bride and the Bachelors*, a drawing – or should we call it a text – by [Marcel Duchamp](#), just says "NON".

Hanging there like a suspended refusal, is Johns's no a reply to Duchamp? Is it a no that really means yes? Is Johns saying yes to no? As soon as you mess with Marcel, things get complicated.

Painting, music, sculpture and dance come together with shared ideas, influence, friendship and love in this exhibition, which details the fruitful relationships between [Marcel Duchamp](#), [composer John Cage](#), [choreographer Merce Cunningham](#), and artists [Jasper Johns](#) and [Robert Rauschenberg](#). Duchamp presides, as enigmatic as ever he was in life.

And why not add another figure: French artist [Philippe Parreno](#), who has both orchestrated the exhibition and made contributions to it all his own, at the inspired invitation of [Carlos Basualdo](#), who has curated this monumental and affectionate show. It has travelled from the [Philadelphia Museum of Art](#), which has the biggest and most important holdings of Duchamp's art in the world. Anyone with even the remotest interest in Duchamp's legacy, or in the work of Johns, Cunningham, Rauschenberg or Cage, should go to the [Barbican](#).



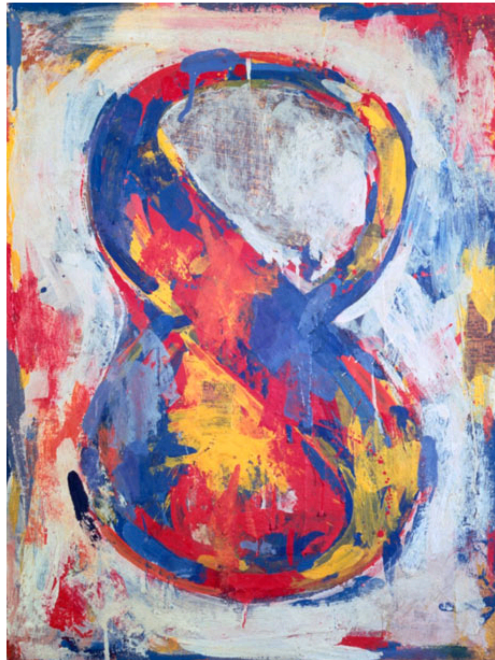
Merce Cunningham's *Walkaround Time* (1968). Photograph: James Klosty, 1972

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

There is so much to see, to hear and to watch. The exhibition takes us from early Duchamp paintings, including the lubricious intestinal mysteries of his 1912 *Bride* (from Philadelphia, far superior to the Tate's second version), to ghostly Disklavier piano performances of Cage's music, via knockout paintings and sculptures by Johns and Rauschenberg, and sections devoted to chess, chance, the readymade and the remade object, and live presentations of Cunningham's dances.

Never dull and never dead, it is also a show full of shadows and hauntings. Of the original artists, only Johns survives. Cunningham died in 2009, and one of the inspirations here came from a memorial performance of his dances held that October at New York's Park Avenue Armory, which I wrote about at the time. The audience, free to wander between several simultaneous performances on the Armory's vast open floor, seemed to become part of the choreography itself. It was an unforgettable event of overlappings and meetings, partings and driftings, encounters and collisions, for the audience as much as the performers. I found it incredibly moving. To tell the truth, it changed the way I thought.

Thinking differently was what Duchamp encouraged. And so it is at the Barbican. We flow between Duchamp and Cage, Rauschenberg, Cunningham and Johns, who continually face each other and form new constellations, act in consort and react, overtake, fall back, regroup. The "soundscape" Parreno has created in the gallery slides between them, overlapping, shifting the focus and redirecting our attention. Lights brighten and dim. The spirit of the show, and the collaborative conversations between the artists, is palpable.



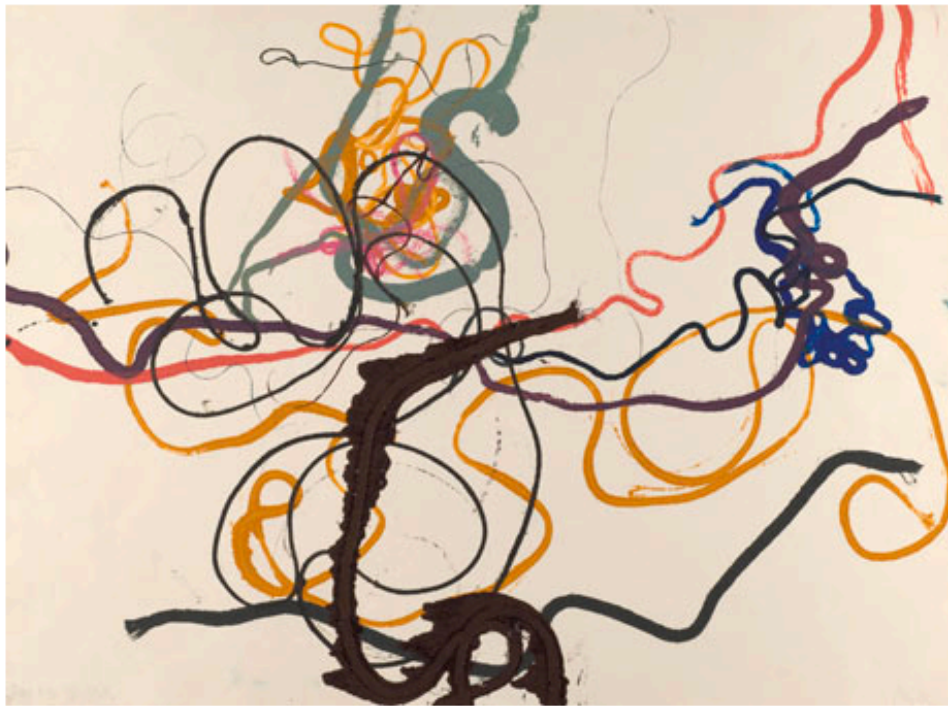
Jasper Johns's *Figure 8* (1959). Photograph: The Sonnabend Collection, New York



# GLADSTONE GALLERY

I hear the dancers coming on to the white stage in the middle of the gallery, feet thudding and sliding in one place then another. I can sense the bounce of the floor even from the upper level balcony. But there's no one on the stage below. Speakers under the dancefloor are playing back the footfalls and movements of a number of Cunningham's dances, recorded in New York using underfloor microphones. Sometimes these recordings overlap with actual dances taking place on the stage at the Barbican, real performance and ghost performance colliding. The effect of the piece, a contribution by Parreno called *How Can We Know the Dancer from the Dance?*, is eerie. And then a piano nearby begins playing itself, a *Disklavier* recording by Cage pianist Margaret Leng Tan.

Now another sound, of traffic roaring through the gallery, fed live by Parreno from the road-tunnel under the Barbican, along with the amplified hum of the windswept piazza outside, and the patter and shush of the fountains in the lake (this last recording is in homage to Duchamp's 1917 *Fountain*, the unusable urinal that still manages to upset some people). Suddenly, as the traffic churns invisibly through, everyone in the gallery stops. This is Parreno's version of Cage's infamous mute piano piece *4'33*. I duck as a motorbike careens past. Parreno is only amplifying what is already there, buried in the silence at the Barbican.



John Cage's *Strings 1-20* (1980). Photograph: John Cage Trust

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Cage understood that there never is any real silence, except when you're dead. You hear your stomach rumble, or the hum of blood circulating in your ears, even in an anechoic chamber, as Cage discovered for himself. 4'33 might be regarded as a rumour as much as it is a composition to be experienced. Most people have never seen it in performance, and don't feel the need to. Yet it remains a seminal work. In the same way, as Parreno told me this week, you don't really need to see Duchamp's readymades, though a number of them are here. They too can exist as a kind of rumour, he said, and still exert their influence. You just need to know they're there.

Duchamp said he mounted a bicycle wheel on a stool just for the pleasure of having it beside him, flipping the wheel round as he idled away afternoons in the studio. The world turns too and we turn with it, standing and looking, walking and watching, and watching others do the same, as much as we ever attend to the art. It is all part of the pleasure of being here.

More words have been spent and continue to be spent on Duchamp than almost any other 20th-century artist. There's no end to the spinning of words. For some, Duchamp is the antichrist, the artist who effectively killed painting, and whose continuing and pernicious influence destroyed all skill and tradition in the world's art schools. This view is nonsense. Duchamp didn't kill anything, and today his influence is undoubtedly greater than ever. He encouraged his viewers to play and to think for themselves – which didn't mean thinking like him.



Marcel Duchamp's Fountain (1950, replica of 1917 original). Photograph: Succession Marcel Duchamp, 2013, ADAGP/Paris, DACS/London

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Rauschenberg famously declared that he wanted to work in the gap between art and life. Cage announced that he wanted to eradicate the difference. Duchamp said he wanted to turn his life into art, and that he believed in the artist, but wasn't so sure about art. Johns, or rather his painting, said "No". Over his long career, Johns's art has both veiled and detailed the private – whether it was his everyday life in the studio or a map of the house he grew up in, while always maintaining a poker-faced refusal to explain. Perhaps that's what he meant by that NO.

All the encounters and passings, greetings and pairings that take place in Cunningham's dance are as much like those of life as they are a performance on a stage. Parreno told me he believes in collaborations and dialogue – that is where the art happens, and where we begin to create knowledge.

Lights brighten and dim. Voices traverse the space. Caught in the flow of light and sound, and between attention and distraction, I stand in the long shadows cast through [Duchamp's Large Glass](#) and realise I have been here a very long time, looking for a role among objects and ideas, words, images and things, and between friendships and love stories, the bride and the bachelors.