When John Cage declared that “art is the imitation of nature in her manner of operation,” he was not only drawing on ideas articulated in the field of mimesis but also attempting to illuminate an aspect of the process in which he ostensively removed his own hand from the creative process, allowing chance to determine any variety of one’s artistic choices. Cage believed that antinomocentric art and music was trivial, and that beyond individuals, nature herself had an inherent expressivity found in elements such as trees, rocks, and water. It is with these ideas in mind that we can reflect on Maria Elena González’s Skowhegan Birch #1, 2012, a multi-disciplinary work in which birch bark forms the blueprint for player piano rolls, and ultimately the music produced by the rolls themselves.

The genesis of Skowhegan Birch #1 came from the Cagean notion of allowing artistic choices to manifest by simply deciding which questions to ask, and was born in a moment of synesthetic curiosity in which González wondered how we might better understand the information held within the architecture of the natural world. Could this biological matrix, built on the collective history of evolution and nature’s forward march of time, be translated into a musical vocabulary, and if so, what would that music sound like?

Many who query such a systematics find Skowhegan Birch #1 unlocks this history and gives a sonorous voice and an audible consciousness to the rural Maine landscape. González has long been engaged with memory and architecture in her work, and here instead of creating a socio-political iconographic program used by the artist in the form of her recognizable maps, floor plans, carpets, and sculptural towers, she has instead relinquished dominion of her hand and literally allowed the trees to speak for themselves. While the piece remains a type of mimesis, however unconventional in this format, it shares with much of Cage’s work a clearly established conceptual framework.

Skowhegan Birch #1 is aleatory and its sounds vacillate between brief moments of silence and long, cascading polytonal phrases. But cacophony and dissonance become paradoxical concepts here as a chorus of voices, held for centuries within the trees of the forest, are freed from their confines and finally speak out at all once. Liberated from the constraints of conventional elements of music such as time and key signatures, Skowhegan Birch #1 is a symphony of sensorial effluence. The musical result is an unhindered arrangement of collected sounds that sing with immediacy and abandon. Cage believed that music could sober and quiet the mind, making it susceptible to divine influences and thus open to the fluency of things that come through our senses. Art, he believed, could help us achieve this state. In the end, it is easy to imagine that, having listened to Skowhegan Birch #1, John Cage would have likely smiledingly and delighted in the sound of nature’s emancipated music.

The collection would consist of text-based contributions from Black Skowhegan alumni. It might be composed of rather diverse forms of text-art and text-artifact—like paintings and prints, diary and sketchbook notes, t-shirts and buttons, playbills and receipts. Via the new tableau, these seemingly incongruous items—a cross section of sentimental detritus and fine art work—can be provisionally, if temporarily, linked through the identity of its producers and the connections made through the objects themselves.

As with drafting parameters for the collection of objects, the alternative method for casting the would-be collection in advance of its actual acquisition. On one hand, predetermination risks precluding the chance serendipitous submission. On the other hand, leaving the structure entirely flexible surrenders much of the impulse for creating a collection to the collective character of the objects themselves. We suspect that undertaking this project will require a bit of both methods: first drafting a wish list (of letter and of titter, of color and splatter, of spit and sprawl, of concepts and collapse) then negotiating the results.

Do we set about attaining these objects? Do we present an open call to all Black, living alumni of Skowhegan to submit text-based works and objects? The success of such a query would depend on potential group constituents identifying themselves as such and mobilizing towards a collective identity. As with drafting parameters for the collection of objects, the alternative method for casting The Present Classification (the corpus) would be to individually solicit potential members.

The paradoxic relationship between the collection and its constituents (and between the collective and its constituents) has been exhaustively explored, recently by such diverse scholars as literary theorist Susan Stewart and political philosopher Giorgio Agamben. One of the most compelling questions appears in the Deleuze and Guattari opus A Thousand Plateaus wherein the formula N–1 is used to describe a political iconographic program used by the artist in the form of her recognizable maps, floor plans, carpets, and sculptural towers, she has instead relinquished dominion of her hand and literally allowed the trees to speak for themselves. While the piece remains a type of mimesis, however unconventional in this format, it shares with much of Cage’s work a clearly established conceptual framework.

The genesis of Skowhegan Birch #1 came from the Cagean notion of allowing artistic choices to manifest by simply deciding which questions to ask, and was born in a moment of synesthetic curiosity in which González wondered how we might better understand the information held within the architecture of the natural world. Could this biological matrix, built on the collective history of evolution and nature’s forward march of time, be translated into a musical vocabulary, and if so, what would that music sound like?

Many who query such a systematics find Skowhegan Birch #1 unlocks this history and gives a sonorous voice and an audible consciousness to the rural Maine landscape. González has long been engaged with memory and architecture in her work, and here instead of creating a socio-political iconographic program used by the artist in the form of her recognizable maps, floor plans, carpets, and sculptural towers, she has instead relinquished dominion of her hand and literally allowed the trees to speak for themselves. While the piece remains a type of mimesis, however unconventional in this format, it shares with much of Cage’s work a clearly established conceptual framework.

Skowhegan Birch #1 is aleatory and its sounds vacillate between brief moments of silence and long, cascading polytonal phrases. But cacophony and dissonance become paradoxical concepts here as a chorus of voices, held for centuries within the trees of the forest, are freed from their confines and finally speak out at all once. Liberated from the constraints of conventional elements of music such as time and key signatures, Skowhegan Birch #1 is a symphony of sensorial effluence. The musical result is an unhindered arrangement of collected sounds that sing with immediacy and abandon. Cage believed that music could sober and quiet the mind, making it susceptible to divine influences and thus open to the fluency of things that come through our senses. Art, he believed, could help us achieve this state. In the end, it is easy to imagine that, having listened to Skowhegan Birch #1, John Cage would have likely smiledingly and delighted in the sound of nature’s emancipated music.