When John Cage declared that “art is the imitation of nature in her manner of operation,” he was not only drawing on ideas articulated by his predecessors in the field of metaphysics such as the Indian philosopher and art historian Ananda Coomaraswamy and the medieval theologian and philosopher Thomas Aquinas, but he was also attempting to illuminate an aspect of the process in which he ostentatiously removed his own hand from the creative process, allowing chance to determine any variety of one’s artistic choices. Cage believed that anthropocentric art and music was trivial, and that beyond individuals, nature herself had an intrinsic expressivity found in elements such as trees, rocks, and water. He saw in those 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 synchronistic 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 ways in which 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 polyphonic 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 unbidden 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 smiled impishly and delighted in the sound of nature’s emancipated music.

The paradoxical relationship between the collection and its constituents (and between the collective and of litter, of color and spatter, of spit and spam, of concepts and collapse) then negotiating the results.

As with many works in the exhibition Wood in Contemporary Art, Craft, and Design, currently on view at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, this current exhibition, John Cage: The Sight of Silence, is on view through January 15, 2013.
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Neither the 

Future Plan and Program

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In Jorge Luis Borges’ description of the “Cataleptic Empire of Baldwinian Knowledge,” in Disc of Imaginary Beings, he explains that animals are divided into the following categories:

(a) belonging to the Empor (b) embalmed (c) tame (d) sucking pigs (e) sirens (f) fabulous (g) stray dogs (h) included in the present classification (i) hybridized (j) invulnerable (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush (l) at cotaria (m) having just broken the water pitcher (n) that from a long way off look like flies.

Ideally classifying systems derive from the unique interdependence of objects within a specific collection, which constitutes its overall character. Accordingly, the classification of stuff within any specific collection will be singular and inapplicable to any other collection. In “Preface” to The Order of Things, Michel Foucault wonders at the physical impossibility of a meeting ground for all these classified creatures and marvels that perhaps such a space exists only within a space created by language. Within the space of narrative, list, or fantastical description, the dissimilar find common ground and therein find their commonality. In fact, such a locus exists within this very text, wherein the concepts unifying disparate elements form a structure, a meeting ground for their coexistence.

The meeting ground can occupy a physical as well as discursive space. The first step in creating The Present Classification is both. We, “the collectors” propose a one-afternoon reenactment of The Black Lunch Table, during which participants would eat, discuss, and restage, in an expanded format, the 2005 event. Thereafter, the participants would be charged with the task of divining a common narrative out of the objects collected through submissions (including their own objects). Rather than contextualizing texts will be a critical part of the success of the overall exhibition, and that those able to attend the Lunch Table will be charged with scripting a new narrative.

 evoke the individual’s power to escape the collector that contains it: “The only way the one belongs to the multiple: always subtracted.” Here, N represents the whole, and 1 is a part dependent on the larger collection for its identity. The collection subsumes the singular object into its totality; as a result, the object’s material history is suspended as the object is placed into a greater, atemporal narrative. Within the collection, all things accumulated are reclassified by their association to one another, providing a view of the forest despite the trees.

In 2005, Heather Hart and Jina Valentine organized a performance event entitled The Black Lunch Table—a precedent for The Present Classification. The impetus for this event was their wonderment over the lack of any such table at Skowhegan’s daily group lunches. Together they decided whom they should invite to sit with them for one particular afternoon lunch. In curating the group of participants, Hart and Valentine did some guess-work, inviting as well those artists they thought might identify as Black. Those invited included other residents of African descent, the then director and dean, and several visiting artists. At the table, they discussed issues of being Black in the art world, issues of otherness in general, their individual relationships with actual and metaphorical Black lunch tables in grade school and higher education… and of course the irony of having these discussions at an invitation-only all-Black lunch table. The hyper-classification, by way of self-segregation, of Skowhegan’s Black residents functioned to both create a forum for discussion internally at other occasions, and highlight the fact that no such grouping of like-skinned people had naturally occurred thus far. Within that group of people, subsets included a. those not actually of African descent b. vegetarians c. those pending graduate review d. those whose work explicitly addressed issues of race e. self-identifying as post-Black f. included in the present classification.

In 2010 Sfaffani Jimerson organized Future Plan and Program (FPP), a provisional publishing project featuring newly commissioned literary works by visual artists of color. FPP has published texts by Skowhegan alumni including Jimerson, Valentine, and Jamal Cyrus (a “Future Plan and Program”). Like Valentine and Hart’s Black Lunch Table, FPP, as a curatorial initiative, possesses a clear set of overlapping objectives: first, to create a new publication and presentation opportunities for artists of color; and second, to provide a context for conversation about identity and rhetoric, writing and transcribing, poetics and performance, that is informed by the authors’ experiences as artists of color. These authors share a number of characteristics: each maintains an active visual arts practice, each is a person of color, and each is connected to a larger network of artists of which Jimerson is also a member. The authors all address issues of race, autobiography, and “otherness” with varying degrees of conspicuousness. Moreover, similarities in style, humor, and tone, as well as overlaps in subject matter and external references, connect their work. As a result of their involvement with FPP, the authors frequently have the opportunity to perform, read, and exhibit together, further strengthening their creative ties and mutual influence. Finally, the authors share a conviction that writing non-fiction as a form of art and cultural theory challenges the perceived roles of practicing visual artists. As a precedent for The Present Classification, FPP Biweekly creates a tableau upon which seemingly disparate works and artistic pursuits might be considered as interdependent parts of a common narrative. FPP’s corpus is composed of a. former and future bookstore owners b. thespians c. those questioning the meaning of “of color” d. perennial students and teachers e. ones that from a long way off look like flies. Included in the present classification.

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the original Black Lunch Table discussion at Skowhegan in 2005.
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Heather Hart, 37, makes installations that you should touch. She attended Skowhegan in 2005 and received her MFA from Rutgers in 2008. She lives and works in Brooklyn. Steffani Jemison, 35, works in media. She is a 2012-2013 artist-in-residence at The Studio Museum in Harlem.

Jace Mindich, 33, works with text and collage. She attended Skowhegan in 2005, received her MFA from Stanford University in 2009, and currently teaches at UVA.