Excerpted from *Artists for Artists: Fifty Years of the Foundation for Contemporary Arts*

*Founding the FCPA: An Oral History*

Carolyn Brown, Jill Jakes, Jasper Johns, and Lewis Lloyd

The creation of the Foundation for Contemporary Performance Arts in 1963 was the work of several key individuals, among them Jasper Johns, who has remained the Foundation’s board chairman and president since that time, and Lewis Lloyd, who served on the board until 1965. Carolyn Brown, a Merce Cunningham dancer and FCPA board member from 1966 to 2001, and Jill Jakes, the FCPA’s first board secretary as well as a member of the board until 1971, joined Johns and Lloyd in offering their recollections of the FCPA in the 1960s.

JASPER JOHNS: I met John Cage after a concert at the music publisher C.F. Peters, on 57th Street across from Carnegie Hall. The artist Sari Dienes, who had a large studio on 57th Street, gave a party, and I think I met John there. I met Merce Cunningham after a performance of his dances at the Henry Street Settlement.

CAROLYN BROWN: I had just graduated from college, married Earle Brown, and moved to Denver. In 1951 Merce and John were on a tour. John was playing his Sonatas and Interludes and other pieces, and Merce was doing solo concerts. At that time, I was studying and dancing with a former Martha Graham person who knew Merce and invited him to come and teach classes. She gave a couple of parties for them. Earle and I sat at their feet the first night. Merce never had much to say. John had a lot to say, always. He was an extraordinary, visionary person. At the end of that period, Earle and I said, “We have to go to New York.” But we didn’t have the money to move, so that didn’t happen for another year or so.

LEWIS LLOYD: Barbara Dilley, whom I had married in the spring of ’61, was very eager to be a member of Merce Cunningham’s company. She was a young dancer out of Mount Holyoke and this was her dream, so she was going to that studio all the time. I used to go over to Fourteenth Street and meet Barbara after her classes. I met John at the studio. That summer we were going back and forth to Williamstown and at one point we went to New London, to the American Dance Festival. That was the first time I saw Merce’s company.

JOHNS: In 1954 I had helped Bob Rauschenberg a bit with his Minutiae set, his first for Merce. We became friends with Merce and John and saw them frequently. In 1955 there was an evening of Cunningham/Cage performances at Clarkstown High School in Rockland County where we met Emile de Antonio. Bob, De, as he was known, and I decided that there should be a concert devoted to John’s music in a public place, and John agreed to make a selection, sampling 25 years of his work. We had little money but the three of us each gave $1,000, a lot for us in those days. We formed Impresarios Inc., which financed and produced the retrospective of John’s music at Town Hall in New York. I don’t remember what the rental fee for the hall was or the other expenses. Somehow everything got covered. In 1960 we also presented Merce Cunningham and Dance Company at the Phoenix Theatre, downtown on Second Avenue. Those were Impresario Inc.’s two ventures.

LLOYD: At the time there was a path from the Yale Dramatic Association into CBS. Sure enough I got a job there the summer after my senior year, in 1960. I was assigned to work on a soap opera, *The Brighter Day*, and a quiz show, *To Tell the Truth*. After several months, I realized selling soap and detergent was not my idea of theater. I started looking for a building I could put a theater in. I ended up looking at this fleabag film house on Third Avenue called the Comet Theater. Through one set of circumstances or another, I took over the building, including four floors above it. So my partner Arthur Conescu and I took it apart and put it back together as the Pocket Theatre.

*The Foundation came into being around the attempt to produce a Merce Cunningham and Dance Company season on Broadway in spring 1963.*
JOHNS: I doubt that Merce told us [that he wanted a season on Broadway]. My guess is that John told Bob and me of Merce’s ambition. Bob and I said, “We’ll help. We’ll each give a painting to be sold to help cover the loss that a Broadway ‘season’ would incur.” Cage said he had a Richard Lippold sculpture that he would contribute, a work in five parts that he had returned to Richard years before. Now that he needed it, John decided that it was his again. Richard must have gone along with the idea, because he gave it to the cause. We estimated the value of these three works and it seemed a bit more than Merce’s season would require. I asked him what we should do with the extra money, perhaps a couple thousand dollars. And Merce said, “Help others, because we’re all in the same boat.” So I said, “Well, it’s not enough, really. Why not invite other artists to join us and give works, and then we’ll be able to help others.” That’s how it started.

LLOYD: I was in awe of Jasper and Bob. At Yale, my art history professor, Vincent Scully, had lectured about modern American art, and I had heard Jasper’s and Bob’s names for the first time.

BROWN: John had originally asked another person, Carmen Capalbo, to produce the Broadway concert, and he had turned it down. So Lew said, “Wow, Broadway. OK, I’ll do it then.”

LLOYD: In fall 1962, John walked into the lobby and looked around at the theater, which was virtually complete at that point. He said, “I like this little theater and maybe we can put together some music concerts for next summer.” It was very vague.

JOHNS: I can’t think of any organized efforts at that time that operated to support artists. A few individuals, friends of particular artists, would help them. And I imagine performing artists of various sorts approached benefactors, friends that they thought had means to help and asked them to do so. But I know of no organized effort.

LLOYD: My attorney, Alfred Geller, and I were trying to organize a mechanism for the Broadway season for Merce. Then somehow we realized, wait a minute, when Martha Graham performs on Broadway, it is always supported by the Bethsabée de Rothschild Foundation. So why are we bothering with a commercial partnership, which is only going to get rolled up anyway?

BROWN: In terms of support, there were individual patrons. Merce had Paul Williams for the [1953] Theatre de Lys season, and he also supported Cage’s tape music. The Guggenheim Foundation was also there for a long, long time—they gave a grant to John, and eventually Earle got one—but sometimes it was for just typical conventional composing.

LLOYD: I give John a lot of credit in coming up with the way to put this together. Alfred and I were basically the mechanics, trying to figure out a way to accomplish the goals, which was to get Merce’s work produced, but also to benefit the donors.

JOHNS: We were going to call it the “Foundation for Contemporary Performing Arts” but John said, “The arts do not perform.”

LLOYD: Our board meetings were very simple and very quick. John knew what he wanted to accomplish, and if Jasper had a particular idea, we would talk about it for about 30 seconds, and that was it. Alfred and I were doing the legal and logistical organization. Once I said to John, “Well, who am I in this whole picture?” He said, “Oh yes, do they need somebody to call themselves secretary, or incorporator? Because you can do that.”

JILL JAKES: I don’t think I was asked to be involved through Jasper or John—I think Lew had heard of me because I had worked as a production assistant off-Broadway and in movies.

*The Foundation began to make plans to hold a first benefit exhibition in February 1963.*

LLOYD: The discussion about how to raise the money for the Foundation was so informal, and it was all between John and Jasper and Bob. I think it then got around by word of mouth.

JOHNS: In order to explain to artists what we had in mind, we invited them to come to the Allan
Stone Gallery for a cocktail party. We sat down and drew up a list of painters who we thought should be represented and sent each of them a telegram invitation, thinking we were being very smart. A lot of artists showed up and it was a nice occasion. Alfred and I spoke. We explained our intention to establish a foundation and asked them to contribute works for a benefit show. The response was enthusiastic. Artists, particularly then, their work hadn’t been turned into commodity the way it has more recently. They were not accustomed to being asked to give things for purposes. Many people who were there said they would help and some did not. We began to plan an exhibition. Allan offered us his gallery and his time and offered to take no commission on anything sold at the show.

LLOYD: It dawned on us that, well, if we are going to ask artists to donate paintings, we wanted them to have a tax advantage. So Jasper proposed it.

JAKES: I was put in an empty room with a desk, a typewriter, and a telephone. It was so impoverished. I guess I was paid something. It was so unconventional; it was improvised, as it should have been under the circumstances. The whole enterprise was out there on the edge. Down to what’s usually the most mundane aspect it was equally improvised. Maybe Alfred Geller contributed the room?

JOHNS: I think we all knew Allan Stone, but [FCPA board member] Elaine de Kooning was friendly with him. She must have been the one who asked him to help.

JAKES: I think I went every regular workday to that room. But I was always late, and there was no one to supervise me. The initial letter I sent out to various artists to ask if they would make contributions—I remember I misspelled “sculptor” as “sculpter.”

JOHNS: I think we did [the publicity] ourselves. I know that I worked at it and I imagine that others did. I remember going to see someone at Art News to ask if they would do something. Anyone we knew, we approached for help.

LLOYD: Jill and I were sending Art Cart, the shipping company, all over town to collect paintings from Jasper, Bob, Willem de Kooning, Marcel Duchamp, and others, and dealing with Allan Stone and his assistant. I remember being overwhelmed at the scale of who was contributing. To see it all together in one place was unbelievable.

JAKES: I helped get the art to the gallery. I can recall the layout of the gallery with the pictures on the walls. I don’t remember much about the opening except that it was a success.

LLOYD: Jasper’s Map was in the show. I hadn’t seen anything by him before, and I teared up when I saw it. I had never had such a reaction to a work of art before. To this day, I can see it clearly as it was hung in the show. I recently spoke to Carolyn about it, to make sure that it was as I remembered it. It was. The impact of his art coming on top of such a good working relationship as we’d had with him just made my feelings for him and his art even more profound.

JOHNS: The exhibition was lively and a good many of the works were sold. It was a real expression of community feeling and of the possibility of helping someone in it.

LLOYD: Jasper was this calm, organized, pleasant guy, only eight years older than I was. He knew all the painters in the art world. And as far as I could tell, they all liked him. I guess I had a clichéd image of the modern artist, a tortured soul out of the Van Gogh school of personalities. Yet there was Jasper, very business-like and accessible.

JOHNS: After the benefit, all the works were stored in my basement, first in my apartment on 106th Street, then in the basement on East Houston Street, and later in the basement on 63rd Street.

LLOYD: Though he was one of the initiators and donated an important work, Bob was not interested in being on the FCPA board. He just was not the most systematic guy, and you can tell that in the difference between his work and Jasper’s. I remember just before we were to leave on
the Cunningham world tour, the company had never assembled all their scenery, props, and costumes in one place. There were eighteen dances in the repertory and Merce wanted to tour them all—which is insane in itself. Usually you might take five. I went to Bob’s loft, looked at this stuff, and thought, Well, we do not have containers for it. I ran around frantically buying containers—and the stuff just kept showing up, from who knows where. Finally, the day we had to leave, Bob was still wandering around in his studio. He really lacked what I’d call a systematic approach.

JOHNS: I suppose that I was the instigator of these events and that I was more interested in their success. It became a habit.

After the funds had been raised for the Cunningham Broadway appearance, a three-month-long printers union strike shut down New York’s newspapers. Without advertising, theaters were also adversely affected, and eventually the planned 1963 concert had to be canceled. Cunningham instead decided to take the company on a world tour in 1964. The FCPA provided almost $34,000 in grants to the Cunningham Dance Foundation in 1964—the equivalent of $250,000 in 2013 dollars.

LLOYD: I said to Merce many times that the newspaper strike was the luckiest thing that ever happened, because if we had gone on to that Broadway season, we would have been whacked by the critics. Nobody would have come, and it would have been a huge financial hit for the Foundation, with- out much to show for it, whereas in that time-honored fashion, we went to Europe, we were praised, and we came back a success.

BROWN: The strike was what postponed it, but what actually derailed it were three things. Merce was very particular about the size of [the stage], so it had to be limited to those choices. Then John and David Tudor had a tour that was going to take them to Europe at the same time. But the biggest reason that it was canceled was that Merce lost two of his four women dancers. To get the company back in the shape we had been in was impossible, really.

LLOYD: Originally there were going to be two tours in 1964, one in Europe and one in India and Japan, and then it began to grow in scale. As the two parts came together, I went to Air France, since our first date was in France. At the time, it was a tightly regulated system for booking group air tickets, and you had to have a fixed itinerary and passenger list. I was not experienced enough to realize that if expedient, en route engagements came up, we would take them, and go to Poland, or as it turned out, to Finland. And, of course, unexpected things happen—one of the dancers, Shareen Blair, got married in London, and the composition of the company changed. At that point in the trip, Air France said we could no longer have a group discount, and that we had to start paying for single passenger tickets. That was a big problem. As I said to Carolyn, “We had no business not knowing what we did not know.”

BROWN: The world tour was a monumentally important thing for the Cunningham company. In London, we had a week at Sadler’s Wells and caused a sensation. Our impresario said, “We’ll move you to the West End,” which is like the Broadway of London. The audience was really involved, and theater people came. The Royal Ballet people came. Choreographers came. That was the moment when the Cunningham company took off. Clive Barnes was the dance and theater critic for several papers in London at the time and was sending reviews to New York. So we got more press coverage in New York than when we were performing here.

LLOYD: When we were planning the tour, I was sure we did not have enough money to cover what it would cost. By the end of May 1964 I was frantic. I talked to Bob about this in his loft, and I remember him taking Round Sum [1964] and saying something to the effect of, “Well, I’ll just sell another painting.”

BROWN: We had never worked so hard in our lives. We’d never had to dance night after night after night, matinee and evening. I knew from [Merce’s then-administrator] David Vaughan that Jasper was desperately trying to raise more money for the company. But I don’t think the dancers were thinking about it at all. They were just trying to stay un-hurt.

LLOYD: We had a very bad experience in Venice in June where we per- formed at La Fenice
opera house. It had been arranged by Alan Solomon, the director of the American Pavilion at the Biennale that year. He assured us, before we left New York, that the proceeds would be $3,000, a gigantic amount of money for us. Well, the management at La Fenice did a little “Hollywood accounting.” There were no net proceeds, it was zero. This was the second week of the tour, and the whole thing of course had already been set up. I was frantic. I remember throwing a bottle of Coca-Cola against the back wall of the stage, where it exploded in a million pieces. That caught everybody’s attention. And Bob said, “OK, OK, I can work this out. I can lend you the $3,000.” Carolyn points out in [her memoir] Chance and Circumstance that that was the money from the Biennale prize that he had just won.

I was able to repay Bob $1,000 later in the tour, but I don’t think he expected to get a dime back. He and John and Merce had had a terrible falling-out. Anyway, I told him that I had been able to pull some of the money together. And I think he probably said, “Well, you can just have the rest as a gift.”

The FCPA had issued its first grants in April 1963, shortly after the first benefit exhibition, beginning a 50-year tradition as a supporter of dance, music, theater, and later poetry and the visual arts, as well as the organizations that help nurture them.

JOHNS: I’m not sure when we started to get requests for grants. My memory is that we spontaneously generated the names of people who should receive help from us, because we were familiar with people that we thought were interesting, whose work was interesting. And everybody needed help at that time. Then word gets out. There were grants to Earle Brown and Morton Feldman and we produced the concert of their music at Town Hall. We also made grants to the Judson Memorial Church, the dancer Merle Marsicano, and the Paper Bag Players.

LLOYD: I think the Paper Bag Players came through me. Knowing [former Cunningham dancer] Remy Charlip and Judith Martin, I produced the Paper Bag Players at my theater. Merle Marsicano, I saw one or two concerts of her work. Her husband was the artist Nicholas Marsicano, and she was very much admired by the downtown art world and performed in the same places Merce did.

JAKES: The hallmark of the Foundation, because it was so modestly funded, was that we wanted to give grants to people for whom a little bit of money would make a big difference. It was typically artists who were very avant-garde, who weren’t in any way commercially established. In terms of what artistic merit warranted a grant, it was just the opinion of the group.

Beginning in June 1963 with “The Pocket Follies,” at Lloyd’s Pocket Theatre, the Foundation produced a number of benefits, including a marathon performance of Erik Satie’s Vexations. Other events included a Town Hall concert of the music of Morton Feldman and Earle Brown and a 1966 series of talks, “Six Lectures.”

JOHNS: I think John saw the Foundation as a resource that could be used to promote ideas with which he was sympathetic.

LLOYD: John was a very paradoxical character. He had incredible will. I will not say he had ambition, because that is not an appropriate term for him philosophically or personally, because he had no interest in self-aggrandizement or accumulation of fame or any of that. What was interesting to him was to do his work and be involved with other like-minded artists who were doing their work.

John didn’t like Jimmy Waring’s work [the organizer of the first FCPA benefit performance, “The Pocket Follies”]. He thought it was much too fey and whimsical, and you can tell that from looking at the “Pocket Follies” program. Jimmy was a choreographer and a very well-loved teacher, and he was fascinated by this idea of artists helping artists. And from John’s perspective, if somebody could raise $500 for the Foundation, that was great. It did not mean he had to go to the show.

BROWN: I think a lot of the “Pocket Follies” pieces were made for the occasion, so they were
short works. Some of them were hilarious, wonderful, funny. Trisha Brown did a piece in which she just kept falling down, over and over. I was backstage, because I was going to go on for this idiotic finale. I think some of it never even had a proper dress rehearsal.

LOLOYD: Even if it was a bit fey, there were some remarkable artists in “Pocket Follies.” Ruth Sobotka was a lovely dancer from the New York City Ballet and a friend of David Vaughan’s and Jimmy’s. She was married to Stanley Kubrick at the time. And Valda Setterfield. The English actress Christine Pickles was in it, and Remy.

LOLOYD: John had been thinking about Vexations for a long time and was looking for a way to get it produced. When he told me about it, I thought it was a great idea. It was less about fund-raising than about presenting this remarkable piece of music. Because that was John’s goal, to get Satie’s work out.

JOHNS: Satie was a particular interest of John’s. And this endurance thing was the kind of thing that John enjoyed. It was very long.

BROWN: I was at Vexations at the beginning, and I came back the next morning. The audience fluctuated, though maybe that is hearsay. Sometimes there were two people there.

JAKES: John had all the different pianists lined up. The theater was dark and the piece was going on and on. One pianist would be playing and the other would sit down next to him and seamlessly take over. It was just brilliant.

JOHNS: I arrived late. For some reason, I remember that I was wearing a tuxedo, so I must have attended an opening [possibly Hans Hofmann at the Museum of Modern Art] before going to the Pocket. It seems unreal, but I do remember riding a bicycle—maybe I took a break from the performance and borrowed it to ride around the block.

LOLOYD: There was probably more press than paying patrons. The Times did something remarkable. I mean, who knew back in 1963 that The New York Times had a sense of humor? To send a relay team of critics to this little off-Broadway theater to hear an obscure piece by Erik Satie? It was a mini-media event for its time.

BROWN: The press worldwide were calling and recording. It made a huge, huge impact at the time, which I’m sure delighted John. But he didn’t think of it as a joke. Most people thought of it as a joke. It was not a joke to him.

LOLOYD: John had this idea that there would be refunds of a nickel for each twenty minutes that you stayed, so that, he said, “One will learn that the more art you consume, the less it costs.” That’s why we used the time clock. I went up to the Garment District and found a place that rented time clocks. And then of course we got a stack of time cards, too. The time card is what we sold at the box office window. You punched in, then when you got tired of listening, you punched out and handed the card to Arthur [Conescu], who was in the box office, and he calculated the amount of time and gave you your refund. I remember that there was a review in the communist newspaper which complained that the device that the theater owners used to gouge the customers was this monotonous music, which so confused them that they would forget to clock out at the box office, and thus the capitalist theater owners would keep all the extra money. That one was worth reading.

***

JAKES: Once the benefit exhibition was over and we had raised that money, the first thing we decided to do (and by “we,” I mean the rest of the group, since I had no say) was to put on the concert of Earle Brown’s and Morton Feldman’s music.

LOLOYD: I was responsible for managing “Feldman/Brown” at Town Hall, and I felt badly that I did not get enough publicity for it. But it was like pulling teeth to get the press to pay attention to
Morty and Earle.

JAKES: I remember helping with the concert. It was a pretty big deal. We had to get musicians from the union. There was negotiating, and transportation of instruments. And rehearsal space and rehearsals.

LLOYD: The orchestra was good. Arthur Weisberg was the conductor. It was called the Contemporary Chamber Ensemble, I don’t think it ever formed again. Alvin Lucier’s group from Brandeis, the chamber chorus, was also there.

BROWN: It was thrilling, but what happened in terms of press is that these total morons left at intermission! And all of Morty’s music was played before intermission and Earle’s after. It was so painful and so hurtful for him.

***

JOHNS: I think that “Six Lectures” was, again, John’s idea of what was interesting. He had been promoting Marshall McLuhan’s ideas and Norman O. Brown’s. And he had known and admired Bucky Fuller for a long time.

BROWN: Peter Yates was very supportive of Merce and John. He wrote a beautiful piece in an architectural magazine about visiting us at a beach.

JOHNS: Yates was probably less familiar to a New York audience. But three of the lectures—Bucky, McLuhan, and Brown—must have been sold out.

BROWN: Bucky’s talk was still going at midnight, and he just would not stop.

JOHNS: Bucky had to be coaxed off the stage, because he loved to explain his ideas. He would walk away from the mic as though he had finished, and then come back and talk some more. We had the auditorium until a certain hour, but Bucky continued talking until the people who worked there were very upset.

BROWN: I remember being so impressed with Cunningham’s voice—there was recorded voice as well as live voice—and the dance. It was so seamless, so beautifully constructed. The guy who played the piano for our classes used to say dancers are so stupid that they need to have an accompanist. After he heard Merce’s talk, he said, “I’m so embarrassed. I’m so humiliated.”

Looking back, Johns, Lloyd, Jakes, and Brown comment on the Foundation’s 50-year history and its future.

JOHNS: I’m amazed that it’s 50 years. When you’re working with some- thing all the time—it’s just what you’re doing. So it’s very difficult to see it from a distance.

LLOYD: Because it did not grow out of any organized principles or long-range ideas, I thought that it would stay as a mechanism of artists helping performing artists, but on a rather modest scale.

JAKES: I lived in a world away from it for so long that I’m astonished to learn that the Foundation has had this continuity over the decades. It’s thrilling and heartening to know that the original concept had the power and that the core people, of whom Jasper is the only remaining one, had the determination and vision to keep it going.

JOHNS: The informal nature of the earlier years was more amusing and entertaining, more surprising. But it was fitting for that time and I don’t think it would be very appropriate now. And, when I think that it’s been 50 years, it makes sense to me that it’s altered so much. What is exciting about our Foundation is that it’s rooted in the community from which art arises, not in the community that uses art. Artists encouraging one another remains an interesting idea.

BROWN: Without Jasper, there would not have been a Foundation. His deeply held belief in Merce’s work, and John’s, was what started it all. He was, and still is, the driving force behind its
continuing existence. From the beginning, it was housed in his studios/homes. He gave considerable time and thought to its activities, taking him away from his own work.

JAKES: Jasper was taciturn and forceful at the same time. It is a tribute to him, the power of his determination, the force of his dedication, to involve other people in keeping it going.

JOHNS: Someone had to take care of it. And I’m the person who did it, by having everything literally where I lived and trying to keep it from disappearing. I suppose I simply fell into the habit of accommodating it.

BROWN: By the time I left the Foundation it seemed on very firm footing and I believed it could go on indefinitely. When the time comes that Jasper no longer wants to be actively involved, he wants it to go on without him.

JOHNS: Of course people from many fields have contributed over the years to the Foundation’s program. But artists themselves are primarily responsible for its existence, its growth, and its continuation. And it’s the only thing I know that is like that. I hope that younger artists will continue to be aware of this unique thing that artists have made, that they will take pride and pleasure in assisting its ongoing development.

ARTISTS FOR ARTISTS: FIFTY YEARS OF THE FOUNDATION FOR CONTEMPORARY ARTS

Published on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Foundation for Contemporary Arts

© 2013 by Foundation for Contemporary Arts
All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.