

JOHN CAGE: TOWARDS A POETICS OF INTERPENETRATION AND NON-OBSTRUCTION

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John Cage is perhaps better known today as a writer than as a composer and musician but, while admitting that his recent concerns have been literary rather than musical, he nonetheless maintains that his ideas "certainly started in the field of music".¹ I will therefore begin by considering his ideas about music. Very early on in his musical career, during his study with Henry Cowell and Arnold Schoenberg, Cage concluded that the whole Western tradition of music was based on the separation of intentionally produced sounds from silence and the unintentional sounds present in the environment. This view of music presupposed the existence of sounds as entities with identifiable physical characteristics, that is, as objects which could be isolated, measured, and combined into meaningful wholes (compositions) that were to be presented to listeners for admiration and contemplation. The notion of a musical piece as a linear structure with a beginning, a middle, and an end, a time-object which is purposefully set apart from other objects and designed to focus attention on itself as an artistic artifice, was totally unappealing to Cage for, on the one hand, it blocked off from music a whole range of ambient, unintentional sounds, of noises and silence alike, while, on the other hand, it introduced into music an element of determinacy, or predictability. More importantly, however, it fostered the sense that art is separate from life and, through the notions of intentionality, meaning and beauty, it implied the superiority of the artificial order of a musical composition over the acoustic chaos of nature.

In his early compositions, Cage tried to integrate non-musical sounds and silence into music by putting special emphasis on that of the four aspects of sound which is also a characteristic of silence, namely, duration (the other three being frequency, amplitude and timbre). He thus brought into prominence rhythm as the most important element of music, which was reflected in his early devotion to percussion instruments. Yet his revolt against the esthetic

¹ John Cage, *A Year from Monday* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1969), ix. Subsequent references follow in the text with the title abbreviated as YFM.

assumptions of modern music theory still lacked legitimacy in the sense that Cage could not convincingly argue that sound and silence were not opposite but complementary, that they were fully commensurate and compatible with one another as musical material, and that their separation was not only unwarranted but in fact detrimental to music. Such an argument was provided quite accidentally when Cage was given an opportunity to enter an anechoic chamber. Once in the chamber, he discovered, to his surprise and satisfaction, that, though physically separated from the outside world, he could still hear sounds. As was later explained to him, they were the sounds of his own blood circulating and the nervous system operating in the body. This experience convinced him that, from the human point of view, silence is an utterly abstract phenomenon. As a result, by acknowledging the non-existence of silence and by recognizing the role of human subjectivity in the perception of auditory phenomena, he was now capable of eliminating not only the sound/silence dichotomy but also all the other dualisms intrinsic to the modern system of thought. Referring to his experience in the anechoic chamber, he observed: "...the situation one is clearly in is not objective (sound-silence), but rather subjective (sounds only), those intended and those others (so-called silence) not intended. If, at this point, one says: 'Yes! I do not discriminate between intention and non-intention', the splits, subject-object, art-life, etc., disappear, an identification has been made with the material, and actions are then those relevant to its nature".²

What Cage's identification of music with its material, that is, sound, whether intentional or unintentional, audible or inaudible (silence), amounts to is that music can no longer be regarded as the result of a composer's or musician's purposeful activity, or action. For, Cage insists, music always already *is*, it exists eternally as a field in which sounds freely interpenetrate with one another without, or despite, man's conscious intervention, or, as he would say, obstruction. From the traditionalist point of view, this idea is a contradiction in terms, for how can music be art if it is merely a natural phenomenon? And how can a composer or musician be an artist if music does not require any activity on his part in order for it to happen, to be? But Cage says that the contradiction is not in his thinking but in the thinking of those who ask such questions, for by doing so they reveal their blind devotion to the dualistic conception of art as separate from life, of artistic activity as consisting in the act of isolating from the chaos of natural phenomena certain identifiable, discrete entities (sounds), separating them from the rest of life and imposing upon them some kind of artificial, or, as Wallace Stevens said, violent order. Cage points out that it is this frenzy to separate, organize,

² John Cage, *Silence* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 13-14. Subsequent references follow in the text with the title abbreviated as S.

rationalize and control that is contradictory, contradictory to life, to the way nature operates. To his critics, who have accused him of being unreasonable, or irrational, he has this to say: "Any attempt to exclude the 'irrational' is irrational" (S. 62). For contrary to what such critics might think, Cage is not out to destroy art by allowing music to dissolve into life and disappear as a form of creative activity. Rather, he tries to show that it is only when one thinks in dualistic terms that one feels compelled to keep the two separated, to choose one or the other; whereas to a holistic mind, merging art with life does not mean that art must cease to be art and become life instead, but it means that art is brought into a complementary relationship with life and is no longer opposed to it. It is then that music (and other art forms as well) may become "ecological", inseparable from, but not subordinated to, the rest of life.

It is only logical that Cage's musical holism should lead him to recognizing music as not merely an esthetic phenomenon but as a vital element of the social texture of life. The questions he asked himself concerned both the role of man in "making" music and the role of music in "making" man's life. On the one hand, he asked if man could do anything to creatively affect his acoustic environment without disturbing its inner balance; on the other hand, he wanted to know if such interference with natural phenomena could improve the quality of man's life in any way. Answered positively, both questions entailed a further inquiry about how to do what could and should be done and, consequently, how our lives would be affected. Cage's musical ecology naturally involved a renunciation of the traditional goals of music. The first to go was obviously the very idea of goal, or purpose – "The highest purpose is to have no purpose at all" (S. 155) – which in turn meant rejecting intentionality, objectivity, causality, control, meaning, beauty, and other precepts of traditional esthetics. Rather than trying to control the material, the musicians and the audience, Cage argued, the composer should "[open] the doors of the music to the sounds that happen to be in the environment" (S. 8), so that his music could "[give] everyone (including those involved) the opportunity to have experiences they would not otherwise have had" (YFM, 151).

In order to become truly an occasion for experience, music, Cage concluded, should possess the essential characteristics of experience, which is an idea that, he discovered, had been always known to Eastern philosophers. He is particularly fond of quoting Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, who said that "the traditional [but traditional in the Oriental and not the Occidental sense] function of the artist is to imitate nature in her manner of operation" (S. 194). This means that, like life, a musical composition should cease to be an object with a logical, linear structure and become instead a process whose structure is incidental rather than intrinsic to its nature, a process which unfolds in a totally unpredictable and multidirectional way. Cage's well-known strategies of counteracting intentionality and determinacy include chance methods (e.g.,

I Ching, random jottings on rough paper) and the use of collage and arbitrary form, which are all aimed at de-controlling the process of composition. This, of course, involves lots of premeditation, but its aim is to prepare beforehand the ground for the creative act to take place later on without the interference from the artist's *ego*. Other strategies are designed to activate the listeners by drawing them into the performance, which involves not only abolishing the physical separation between the proscenium stage and the seats in rows facing towards it but, more importantly, introducing into music a multiplicity of elements from the non-musical environment in order to sufficiently complicate the situation in which music is experienced. As Cage explains, "People won't really begin to participate unless the situation is already complex. The role of the composer is to prepare the elements which will permit the situation to become complex".³

This complexity, what Cage calls "the circus situation", clearly connects his music with theatre in a way which proves that if an art form opens itself up to life, it inevitably begins to approach the condition of theatre. This is so because, Cage points out, of all the arts theatre resembles life the most closely. But the notion of theatricality that he has in mind has little to do with traditional theatre, whether in the Aristotelian or Stanislavskian sense. For traditional theatre is based on the mimetic conception of art, at the heart of which is the split between life and art as its representation, imitation, or interpretation; whereas for Cage theatre means a union with life in its flux. In fact, he claims, "theatre is only another word for designating life" (*FB*, 165). Theatre, he asserts, "is all the various things going on at the same time" (*S*. 149) and it "takes place all the time wherever one is" (*S*. 174).

Since such a broad understanding of theatre ultimately involves acknowledging its profoundly social character, it is small wonder that at a certain point in his career the social aspect of Cage's conception of music became as important as, and inseparable from, the esthetic one and his theory of composition was converted into a practical philosophy of life. His esthetic became a form of epistemology, regarded by him not as a system of knowledge but as "a freely moving continuity", a field in which a non-focused multiplicity of ideas and influences – musical, esthetic, philosophical, social, political, scientific, and even mythological – freely interpenetrate with one another while keeping the field open to the flux of everything that happens around Cage. His motto in life is to "accept everything that comes", for, he believes, "Everything we come across is the point" (*YFM*, 39).

Among the influences and ideas that converged in Cage's thought of the 1950s and 1960s were those of Daisetz T. Suzuki, Mao Tse Tung, Buckminster

³ John Cage, *For the Birds* (Boston and London: Marion Boyars, 1981), 170. Subsequent references follow in the text with the title abbreviated as *FB*.

Fuller, Marshall McLuhan and Norman O. Brown, to mention only those referred to by Cage the most often. Their ideas were important for him not so much because they were new to him but, rather, because they provided extra-musical evidence to confirm his own inferences about art and life at which he had arrived by pondering over the nature of music. Thus, the critique of the whole modern system of knowledge implicit in Cage's esthetic rejection of the Western tradition in music was shown to possess the legitimacy of the most advanced and relevant social criticism and philosophy of the time. This critique centered upon the limitations of rationalistic thinking with its subdivide-measure-combine mode of operation which aims at *explaining* everything and thus subordinating it to reason, whether by scientific, technological or artistic means. Contrary to modern rationalists, Cage believes that "a measuring mind can never finally measure nature" (*S*. 10).⁴ To try to measure things and relationships between them, Cage maintains, is a totally misguided effort, for in nature relationships are flexible and indeterminate. As he puts it, "Living takes place each instant and that instant is always changing" (1969: 98). The simple principle of causality does not apply to life, for, as he repeats after Marshall McLuhan, "the truth is that everything causes everything else" (*YFM*, 17), and that is why it is pointless to approach nature as though it were a clockwork mechanism in which all parts remain in a stable and logical relationship with one another and the center of which is occupied by man. Rather, nature should be regarded as "a complex interpenetration of centers moving out in all directions without impasse" (*JC*, 117).

The notion of the world as a plurality of centers is admittedly a Buddhist idea which Cage picked up from his study of Zen with Suzuki, but he also identifies its equivalents in contemporary Western thought, specifically in the work of Fuller, McLuhan and Brown, which for him is proof that "East and West no longer are separate" (*JC*, 77). And it is quite obvious that through his interest in the ideas of these thinkers he should considerably socialize, and in fact politicize, his esthetic. His ecological ideas about music have led him to believe that by raising people's awareness of their acoustic environment he can significantly affect their views about society in general. Drawing from his personal experience with music, which, he admits, "has served to introduce

⁴ In fact, Cage equates measuring with stupidity, the opposite not of knowledge but of wisdom. In his "Diary: How to Improve the World (You Will Only Make Matters Worse)", he tells the following story: "He was a physicist and a composer in his spare time. Why was he so stupid? Because he was of the opinion that the only thing that will engage the intellect is the measurement of relations between things? When told that his mind could change, his response was, 'How? Why?'" (1969: 11). Elsewhere he says: "This custom of asking 'why' is the same as asking which is the most or which is the best. They are very closely related questions that enable you to disconnect yourself from your experience, rather than to identify with it" (*John Cage*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz [New York: Praeger, 1970], 13. Subsequent references follow in the text with the title abbreviated as *JC*).

[him] to the very world we're living in" (*JC*, 11), he has concluded that "Good music can act as a guide to good living" (*JC*, 84). He believes that the function of music, or art in general, should be that of "giving instances of society suitable for social imitation – suitable because they show ways many centers can interpenetrate without obstructing one another, ways people can do things without being told or telling others what to do" (*YFM*, 166). Most of his musical projects have been designed to give such instances by removing the barriers which in the past have separated the music, the composer, the musicians, the audience, and the environment from each other and prevented them from interpenetrating without obstruction. Thus, he has introduced chance operations to reduce the composer's conscious manipulation of the material at hand, he has written compositions which are indeterminate with respect to their performance, compositions which are not objects but processes communally set in motion and experienced by the performers and audience alike. In other words, he has done everything, on the musical level, to liberate the diverse forces that are brought together, but normally kept separated and under control, in a concert situation and in this way to give instances of an improved society.

Two things about his vision of such an improved society are particularly noteworthy. One concerns Cage's psychological, or philosophical, conception of man as individual, the other his political conception of man in relation to society. At the psychological level, he has attacked the view of man as encapsulated *ego*, alienated both from nature and from his own body. He says: "It is not simply by observing the individual, but by reintegrating individuals into nature, by opening the world to the individual, that we will get ourselves out of this mess. Instead of continuing, as in the past, to separate ourselves from each other, instead of being proud of our petty emotions and our little value judgements, we must open ourselves up to others and to the world in which we find ourselves. We must open up the *ego*. ... Open it up to all our experiences" (*FB*, 57). What opening up the *ego* means for Cage is placing the self on an equal footing with, as Charles Olson put it, "those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects. For a man himself is an object, whatever he may take to be his advantages".⁵ But giving up the *ego* is not the same as renouncing the self as such, denying the uniqueness of each individual. Drawing from Zen, Cage explains: "We are not dealing with the 'subjectivity' of Western philosophers, which always needs 'objects'. We are dealing with what each person is in the depths of himself: a Self, not reducible to an *ego*. ... The Self is not an *ego*; it is rather the fact that each of us is at the center, is the center of the world, without being an *ego*. The Self is what *I* do not impose on others" (*FB*, 234). Only by stripping the self of its *ego*, of its lust

⁵ Charles Olson, *Selected Writings of Charles Olson* (New York: New Directions, 1966), 24.

for power to control other individuals and objects alike, Cage believes, will we be able to shift emphasis from the self as a discrete entity to the self as a unique subjectivity which is not separated from the rest of life but, on the contrary, is involved in an infinite play of unimpeded interpenetration with all the other selves, objects and forces present in the universe.

Ecological music is one way of approaching this condition, Zen is another, and, doubtlessly, many others are also possible. But what is really important is that, as Cage points out, "the disciplines, gradual and sudden (principally Oriental), formerly practiced by individuals to pacify their minds, must now be practiced socially" (*YFM*, ix). Simply, as he says elsewhere, "We had the chance to do it individually. Now we must do it together: globally" (*YFM*, 9). Defined in such terms, Cage's project naturally acquires broadly social dimensions. Giving up one's own *ego* is a private matter, but giving up egotism on a social, national, international and, ultimately, global scale is clearly a political matter of top priority. And here Cage's vision of an improved society derives its authority not from the philosophy of his Oriental masters and contemporary American fellow-visionaries but from the philosophy of one of America's most powerful social critics of the past, the prophet of civil disobedience, Henry David Thoreau. It is in Thoreau that Cage finds a notion of social order which the most closely resembles his esthetically-based conception of society as a decentralized plurality characterized by unimpededness and interpenetration. For just as unimpededness and interpenetration are concepts which, in the philosophy of D. T. Suzuki, mean "that in all of space each thing and each human being is at the center and furthermore that each one being at the center is the most honored one of all" (*S*, 46), Thoreau's idea that that government is the best which governs the least is aimed at, to use Cage's words, "an order that serves but does no control" (*YFM*, 165), that is, it aims at a form of social organization which guarantees what Thoreau called "respect for the individual". Thoreau's project has been identified with anarchism, but, as Cage shows, a call for "our activities to be more social and anarchically so" seems to be a contradiction in terms only when individual and society are seen as irreconcilable opposites. But when they are seen as complementary, the differences between them become insignificant, for, as Cage argues, "although all things are different, it is not their differences which are to be our concern but rather their uniqueness and their infinite play of interpenetration with themselves and with us" (*S*, 171).

The affinity that Cage discovered between his own views and those of Thoreau goes much more deeply than the level of political and philosophical ideas. He admits: "Reading Thoreau's *Journals*, I discover all the ideas I've ever had that are worth their salt" (*FB*, 23). The following remark that Cage made in the Foreword to his book *M* is particularly interesting in this connection, for it explains the causes of the recent reorientation of his interests

ove in many directions at once. The word “employ” does precisely that: it brings together “employ” and “explode”, words that would normally be used in entirely different contexts, and combines them in what Cage calls a “multiple pun”. This pun is in fact Cage’s way of criticizing Joyce for not being radical enough, for trying to explode syntax while continuing to employ it. Cage’s own attempts to explode syntax reach a climax in such texts as “Mureau” and its sequel, “Empty Words”, which are derived from Thoreau’s *Journal*. Describing “Mureau”, Cage says: “It is a mix of letters, syllables, words, phrases, and sentences. I wrote it by subjecting all the remarks of Henry David Thoreau about music, silence, and sounds he heard that are indexed in the Dover publication of the *Journal* to a series of I Ching operations. The personal pronoun was varied according to such operations and the typing was likewise determined” (*M*, i). Yet, although Cage claims that “applied to letters and aggregates of letters, [the I Ching] brings about a language that can be enjoyed without being understood” (*M*, 215), the text is rather tedious and fails as a literary work.⁸ But, like most other texts he has written, it offers evidence that there exists a profound affinity between music and literature. This affinity manifests itself the most fully in poetry, which shares with music the emphasis on rhythm and sound. Cage says: “As I see it, poetry ... is not poetry by reason of its content or ambiguity but by reason of its allowing musical elements (time, sound) to be introduced into the world of words” (*S*, x). This definition might seem to be in perfect agreement with the traditional notion of poetry as verse, that is, a form of writing dominated by recurrent rhythm, but in fact Cage’s notion of rhythm, in music and literature alike, has little to do with patterned arrangement and regular recurrence. Declaring that counting, patterns and tempi have been dropped, he says: “Rhythm’s in any length of time ... Take as an example anything which is irrelevant” (*YFM*, 123). This of course does not mean that any rhythm will do for poetry, but rather that traditional metrics should be abandoned to allow the poem to unfold in a rhythm of its own and not in the preset rhythm of the metronome. In other words, poetry should be liberated not from form but from formula, freed from what the Russian formalists called organized violence committed on everyday language.

As Cage’s own poems, as well as the poems of such genuinely postmodern poets as John Ashbery, Jerome Rothenberg, Jackson McLow or David Antin, demonstrate, such liberated poetry inevitably moves beyond the symbolist tradition and begins to approach the condition of what Marjorie Perloff, referring to Northrop Frye’s classification of the three primary rhythms of verbal expression, calls the associative rhythm.⁹ Frye defines the associative

⁸ Apparently, though, this work is quite successful when performed by Cage.

⁹ See Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press,

rhythm in the following way: “One can see in ordinary speech ... a unit of rhythm peculiar to it, a short phrase that contains the central word or idea aimed at, but is largely innocent of syntax. It is much more repetitive than prose, as it is in the process of working an idea, and the repetitions are largely rhythmical filler ... In pursuit of its main theme, it follows the paths of private association, which gives it a somewhat meandering course.¹⁰ Cage’s understanding of measure, as Marjorie Perloff points out, is certainly closer to Frye’s associative rhythm than to the traditional definition of poetry for, rather than relying on rhythmic formulas, Cage aims at the rhythmic freedoms, or what he musically calls “rubato”, which we use in everyday speech. In his written works, most of which, as has already been said, were originally intended for oral delivery, Cage employs a variety of means which, generally speaking, are designed to facilitate a rhythmic reading. Thus, many of these texts make use of repetition as a structural device and they are written in columns, with punctuation replaced by or supplemented with space to measure the silences. Cage even develops his own method of graphing pitch, emphasis, changes of timbre, breathing, swallowing and “other noises one involuntarily makes when he’s forming his thoughts while speaking” (*YFM*, 36). The overall effect is that his texts make the impression of lacking any premeditation, of being processes in which thought does not precede articulation but is simultaneous with and inseparable from it.

Significantly, the graphic and typographic means employed by Cage are regarded by him as not only crucial in conveying the text’s “soundsense”, but also visually important. As he notes, “the typography is an attempt to provide changes for the eye similar to the changes varying in tempi in oral delivery give to the ear” (*YFM*, 112). By varying the typography, setting individual words in unique faces and sizes, he tries, as he puts it, to “raise language’s temperature”, which involves not only removing syntax and replacing it with the cadence of everyday speech, but, given the fact that literature is printed material after all, it also involves erupting the traditional form of the book as an object. According to Cage, “... [the book] can receive anything. And it will work even better when it breaks all restrictive conventions, all forms of organization, all the norms, including typography” (*FB*, 117). The pulverized pages of Cage’s own books are convincing proof that when the various orderings – syntactic, auditory, visual – are allowed to connect and interpenetrate freely, literature may become truly “the experience of that which is” (*FB*, 80), for it can then be perceived and experienced as a process continuous with the flow of life. Ultimately, by embracing non-linearity and indeterminacy at all levels of discourse, both abstract and concrete, it may become, as Cage believes, “a leap ... into abundance” (*FB*, 198).

1981) and *The Dance of the Intellect* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

¹⁰ Quoted by Perloff in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, 317.

This last phrase offers probably the best way to describe the effect of Cage's approach to art and life in their various manifestations. Cage has always been open to the most diverse ideas and influences coming from many different directions. His apparent lack of discrimination in appropriating those ideas and influences, readiness always "to accept whatever comes regardless of the consequences" (*B*, 129), has perhaps resulted on occasion in explosive mixtures, but, Cage points out, we are living today in "an explosive situation. Art goes in all directions, and you cannot even discern what the directions are as long as you haven't taken them yourself" (*FB*, 119). John Cage has never hesitated to test even the most preposterous ideas and his visionary disposition certainly owes a lot to the curiosity and courage which have guided him in life and which have always compelled him to place himself in the center of every explosive situation and explore from there what he would call the "impossibilities" of musical, literary, and social discourse.