

engage lecture: A PIECE OF STRING

John Cage and education

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David Toop

“Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak.” These are the first two sentences of John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing*. They establish sight as the primary human sense and introduce the idea that looking is the medium through which we establish our place in the world. What Berger ignored, of course, was the fact that sound comes before seeing, and the child hears before it looks.

This is the wider context in which sound work is regarded in relation to visual work, and this is a conference for people engaged in various ways with the visual arts, but as we know from the history of Black Mountain College, one of the most influential events from that enterprise was the happening staged by composer John Cage in the summer of 1952. In the dining room of the college, a performance was enacted during which Cage read a lecture from the top of a stepladder, David Tudor played piano, Robert Rauschenberg played records on an ancient windup gramophone, Merce Cunningham danced through both performers and audience, Charles Olsen and Mary Caroline Richards read poetry from the heights of a different stepladder. Rauschenberg’s white paintings were hung from the ceiling, and the walls of the room were brought to life by projected slides and films. Cage’s lecture from the ladder ended with the words: “A piece of string, a sunset, each acts.”

Accounts of the performance depict a very familiar scenario, whose reverberations can be felt in the happenings and clubs of the psychedelic 1960s, right up to contemporary hi-tech theatre productions directed by Heiner Goebbels and Simon McBurney. We think about John Cage as a composer, a man obsessed with sound and silence, yet his significance extends far beyond the world of music into literature, drawing, dance, theatre, and philosophy. Cage defined theatre as everything going on at the same time, which was like life itself. From this point of view, there is very little point in making hard divisions between the arts; we can only

note their similarities and differences, and the way in which they amplify or confound our approach to life.

Cage is notorious for his composition of 1952, 4' 33". This was composed in that same summer at Black Mountain, clearly a very productive period in an intensely productive life. The piece was written for an instrumentalist who would not play for the designated duration, itself divided into three parts. For the premiere, given at the Maverick Concert Hall in Woodstock in August 1952, David Tudor solved this peculiarity of an already strange work by opening and closing the piano lid.

4' 33" is often known colloquially as the silent piece and Cage was encouraged to pursue this venture into silence by the white paintings made by Robert Rauschenberg at Black Mountain in 1951. I particularly like what Cage had to say about Rauschenberg's white paintings, his own silent piece, and Nam June Paik's *Zen For Film*.

In 1964, at the Fluxhall on Canal Street in New York, Nam June Paik gave the first public screening of *Zen For Film*. This was a projection of a roll of clear leader film. The only image that could be seen in the darkness was a small rectangle of light, animated only by the scratches and dust that accumulated on the film.

Just as Cage's 4' 33" placed listeners in the unfamiliar role of opening their ears to random, ambient phenomena and listening not to the piece that they had come to hear, but to themselves, and to the environment in which they were immersed, so Nam June Paik's *Zen For Film* also affected the spectator. Film curator Bruce Jenkins had this to say, in an essay entitled *Somewhere Over the Rainbow Movie*. I quote: "Redirecting attention to what had previously seemed distinctly background features of the medium – the arena of visual noise – *Zen For Film* indulges and exposes our primal, mothlike fascination with this luminous medium and playfully modulates the range of attraction from the micro level of constant frame-by-frame change to the macro level of a seemingly static blank screen."

John Cage went on to write a number of short but interesting essays on the connections and differences between these three explorations of audible and visible silence. “Now offhand,” Cage wrote, “you might say that the three actions are the same. But they’re quite different. The Rauschenberg paintings, in my opinion, as I’ve expressed it, become airports for particles of dust and shadows that are in the environment. My piece, 4’ 33”, becomes in performance, the sounds of the environment.”

To continue quoting from Cage: “Now, in the music, the sounds of the environment remain, so to speak, where they are, whereas in the case of the Rauschenberg painting the dust and the shadows, the changes in light and so forth, don’t remain where they are but come to the painting. In the case of the Nam June Paik film, which has no images on it, the room is darkened, the film is projected, and what you see is the dust that has collected on the film. I think that’s somewhat similar to the case of the Rauschenberg painting, though the focus is more intense. The nature of the environment is more on the film, different from the dust and shadows that are the environment falling on the painting, and thus less free.”

With this last point, Cage reaches a conclusion. “These things bring me to my thought about silence,” he wrote. “To me, the essential meaning of silence is the giving up of intention.”

What is revealing here is the way in which Cage locates and compares all three activities – painting, music and film – within the frame of silence, a condition commonly associated with the aural, notably in environmental states and in relation to speech. The transfer from auditory to visual suggests that silence is more a state of mind than a fixed mode of perception.

In her essay, *The Aesthetics of Silence*, Susan Sontag wrote that there is, and I quote, “no such thing as empty space. As long as a human eye is looking there is always something to see. To look at something that’s ‘empty’ is still to be looking, still to be seeing something – if only the ghosts of one’s own expectations.”

Silence aspires to transcendence, and a withdrawal from many of the conditions that artists find frustrating, “The notions of silence, emptiness, reduction,” Sontag wrote, “sketch out new prescriptions for looking, hearing, etc. – specifically, either for having a more immediate, sensuous experience of art or for confronting the art work in a more conscious, conceptual way.”

This idea of sketching out new prescriptions for looking and hearing seems to me to be a key to Cage’s importance as an educator. Reading through his copious writings and lectures, we constantly come up against an ambivalent attitude to teaching. The titles encapsulate this ambivalence: ‘How to Improve the World (You Will Only Make Matters Worse)’, or his Lecture on Nothing, given in 1949 at Robert Motherwell’s Artists’ club in New York City.

Talking about lectures, Cage said, and I quote, “My intention was, often, to say what I had to say in a way which would exemplify it, which would, conceivably, permit a listener to experience it rather than just hear about it.” Mary Caroline Richards once asked him why he didn’t consider more conventional lectures, since that would be the most shocking kind of lecture he could give. “I don’t give these lectures to surprise people,” he told her, “but out of a need for poetry.”

We can hear this need for poetry in a recording of the lecture first given in 1958, under the title of Indeterminacy: new aspects of form in instrumental and electronic music. Pianist David Tudor had suggested to Cage that he write a lecture consisting of nothing but stories and this is what he set out to do. The following year, Cage and Tudor recorded this lecture for Folkways Records, with Tudor using pieces such as Fontana Mix as a kind of accompaniment to Cage’s reading, though the tape and piano sounds sometimes obliterate Cage’s speech.

Listeners would frequently try to impose order on Cage’s unplanned sequence of stories. A woman who attended this lecture at Columbia Teachers’ College asked him, “What, then, is your final goal?”. His answer was that this same question had been asked of applicants to the Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship, and it had irritated artists for decades. Goals are anathema to process, which is a conflict as sharp today as when Cage made the point in the late Fifties.

At that time, Cage said: “My intention in putting 90 stories together in an unplanned way is to suggest that all things, sounds, stories (and, by extension, beings) are related, and that this complexity is more evident when it is not oversimplified by an idea of relationship in one person’s mind.”

PLAY EXAMPLE

What we hear in these three brief stories is Cage’s uniquely anecdotal, oblique, ambiguous yet utterly clear approach to communicating his ideas. The deeper we go into Cage, the more we find a totality of vision that is paradoxical in being prescriptive and open, nothing and something, light and profound, fractured and complete, boring and enthralling, didactic and experiential. Cage somehow manages to tell without telling, which reminds me of something he said when speaking of a Mark Tobey painting, *Untitled*, 1961. Cage said: “What’s so beautiful is that there’s no gesture in it. The hand is not operating in any way.”

By learning from others, and from his own experiences, and by avoiding the orthodoxies of teaching, Cage taught many people – students, composers, musicians, artists and writers - to listen, to relax their grip on the materials of art, to treat art work or education as one element in the continuity of life. The question then arose, what to do with this knowledge without becoming Cage?

One of the most interesting examples, because of its unpredictable outcome, was the educational work of Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer. In 1964 Schafer was invited to teach at the North York Summer School, and at the same time he attended a seminar organised by the Canadian Music Center, which studied the relationship of contemporary composers to music in schools. Schafer devised a number of useful and original strategies in response to the challenge of introducing ideas and sounds from contemporary music into classrooms, and these are documented in a series of short books published between 1964 and 1975: *The Composer in the Classroom*, *Ear Cleaning*, *When Words Sing*, *The Rhinoceros in the Classroom*, and *The New Soundscape*.

R. Murray Schafer coined the term soundscape in 1967. 'The soundscape is any acoustic field of study,' he wrote in his book, *The Tuning of The World*, then going on to examine differences between soundscape and landscape. The word soundscape appeared before this, however, in one of his educational books. These lectures, lessons and exercises were rich in suggestions of how to communicate new ideas about sound work and music. *Ear Cleaning*, published in 1967, included a lecture entitled The Musical Soundscape. This was prefaced by a drawing, a kind of map (almost a fanciful computer desktop, before such things existed) depicting a 'cone of tensions', heaven and hell, the acoustic horizon and home, then beyond this cone, silence. This sense of music as a walk-through environment pervades many of Schafer's teaching techniques during this period. *The New Soundscape*, published in 1969, began with a question: what is music? Maybe this seemingly eternal conundrum sounds tired in the 21st century (though I hear the question often enough, after lectures and classes, during panel discussions and seminars), but in 1969, when almost every kind of music had been thrown into turmoil by forces ranging from politics and war to Zen and drugs, the issue was incendiary.

Schafer first admitted that any definition had become problematic. He relates the story of asking John Cage for his definition and Cage replied: 'Music is sounds, sounds around us whether we're in or out of concert halls: cf. Thoreau.' As Schafer explains, 'The reference is to Thoreau's *Walden*, where the author experiences in the sights and sounds of nature an inexhaustible entertainment.' Concluding this introductory chapter is another indication of Schafer's next move. He notes a contemporary shift in medicine from curative to preventative and suggests that a similar approach is needed in music. 'Observing the world sonograph,' he wrote, 'the new music educator will encourage those sounds salubrious to human life and will rage against those inimical to it.'

This proactive position aligned Schafer with the emerging ecology movement, for which Henry David Thoreau's 19th century pursuit of a 'primitive wilderness life' was a profound inspiration. Schafer also coined terms such as 'acoustic ecology', 'schizophonia' (when sounds are heard divorced from their source, as on radio), and 'soundmark'. This last invention is perhaps the most interesting. One of the

disadvantages of soundscape recordings when compared to other methods of documenting an environment is the lack of a historical perspective. 'We may know exactly how many new buildings went up in a given area in a decade or how the population has risen, but we do not know by how many decibels the ambient noise level may have risen for a comparable period of time. More than this, sounds may alter or disappear with scarcely a comment even from the most sensitive of historians. Thus, while we may utilize the techniques of modern recording and analysis to study contemporary soundscapes, for the foundation of historical perspectives, we will have to turn to earwitness [another useful neologism] accounts from literature and mythology, as well as to anthropological and historical records.'

Schafer devised the term soundmark, a derivation from landmark, to describe 'a community sound which is unique or possesses qualities which make it specially regarded or noticed by the people in that community.' This established the conservationist agenda in Schafer's work, as well as seeding poetic and socially constructive links between soundscape and memory. In the late 1960s, Schafer founded the World Soundscape Project at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, and in the early 1970s, members of the Project created a highly influential publication (a book and two LP records) entitled *The Vancouver Soundscape*. Here was the historical perspective otherwise missing from audio recordings. Statistics on the introduction of telephones mix with documentation of police signals, bell-ringing and Muzak, photographs of sound generators such as steam trains, and written accounts of the noise of the Hastings Saw Mill Company or the spooky sound of the Point Atkinson foghorn, echoing under a sewing machine. The book concludes with a suggested soundwalk through a historic part of Vancouver, a guided tour past the whirr-click of Fleck Brothers' clock, the Western Electric neon light and the varying road surfaces encountered in passing by Young Iron Works.

PLAY EXAMPLE

What I find fascinating now, in reading through Schafer's hugely influential work, is the degree to which it is indebted to Cage, yet is worlds apart from Cage. Ultimately,

Schafer explores definition in order to make definitions; he follows Cage in experiencing the sounds of the world, then attempts to impose order and morality upon them, in which the hectic noise of contemporary urban life is condemned as a form of unhealthy torture. Of course, a proportion of it can be torture, but which proportion is that? The answer tends to be very subjective, which is something Schafer has been reluctant to acknowledge.

This central question - what is music? - comes up in his book of dialogues with students, *The Composer In the Classroom*, published in 1965. The conclusion is that music arises from intention, and the irony of this is that Schafer's influence has led to exactly the opposite effect. His linking of soundscape recording to memory, history, a sense of place and to Cage's statement – "There is no such thing as silence" - has encouraged many musicians and composers to pursue the idea to its logical conclusion. To record a soundscape can now be a way of making a composition. Record some ambient sound in an environment, decide on a start point and an end point, then present the recording as music. Would the intention of making a beginning and an end, plus deciding where to point the microphone and when to press record, be enough to count as intention in Schafer's definition of music?

I doubt it, because his definition of the contemporary soundscape as lo-fi, unwanted accident and what he calls "jabberware" suggests that the contemporary soundscape must be shaped and controlled in far more radical ways before it can become music. Cage's words, how to change the world (you will only make matters worse) come to mind.

At the beginning of this talk, I attempted to build a bridge between the worlds of visual art and sound. One of the challenges in talking about sound, however, is its intangibility. Cage wrote and spoke many words, and many words have been written about him and his work, yet certain aspects of his thought and compositional methods drew music further into intangibility, and without the score, or overt intent, music may seem like smoke or clouds – those atmospheric conditions whose effect is not dependent on fixity or solidity.

I would like to talk more informally now about the free improvisation classes given by drummer John Stevens in the early 1970s, and my own improvisation classes for 2nd and 3rd year BA students, given at the London College of communications earlier this year.

Of all the musics that resist analysis, improvisation must be the most difficult.

(At this point in the presentation, David Toop stopped speaking from his written text and instead improvised on the subject of improvisation – including playing examples of improvised jazz and sound pieces.)