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#### John Cage and the Aesthetic of Non-Intention

The impact of Mr. Cage on Western aesthetic thought, particularly on Western music of the 1950s (and since the 1950s) can scarcely be exaggerated and is so well known as not to need recital here. What I would like to explore briefly are some historical roots and implications of a major aspect of Mr. Cage's experimental music of the last thirty years--one of the most controversial aspects of it, in fact: the embrace of all sounds, intended and non-intended (the non-intended being "silence"). I refer to the embracing of sounds not primarily caused or generated by an intellectual ordering process: the introduction, that is, of indeterminacy, lack of control, in such celebrated works as Imaginary Landscape No. IV for 12 radios, Music of Changes, 4'33", Atlas eclipticalis, and many others, such as Theatre Piece, which we saw performed yesterday evening. As Mr. Cage put it in a 1957 lecture on Experimental Music, "One may give up the desire to control sound, clear his mind of music, and set about discovering means to let sounds be themselves rather than vehicles for man-made theories or expressions of human sentiments. . . . Just an attention to the activity of sounds."<sup>1</sup> This non-causal aspect, where one sound-moment does not necessarily generate the next through implication, where a composition can comprise a succession of unrelated instants, involves a quite radical reorientation of our standard listening process,<sup>2</sup> which has traditionally been more teleologically grounded, trained to search out goals, fulfillments, climaxes.

The principle of a purely "causal" music, of course, can be discerned as operating two centuries ago during the Enlightenment, particularly with the

so-called "Classical" syntax (or, better "pre-Classical" syntax). There, in sympathy with the mid-18th century view of humankind, music was written to display rhetorical symmetry and balance--"good manners," if you like. And very slight formal or harmonic disturbances (dissonances or modulations) created a musical situation which "caused" a desire to restore the general equilibrium. Often it was the measuring and balancing itself (more than the intensity of the content) that was the major point (an absorption into the sensus communis), which is why the language of the mid- and late 18th century varied little from composer to composer.<sup>3</sup> The balance of the classical periodic phrase and related stylistic elements are, in effect, metaphors for the causal process. In this style any phrase generates or completes an expectation, and the composer's task was to fulfill expectations tastefully. In a metaphorical sense one moment of this 18th-century music causes another within the expectations implicit in a highly conventionalized style, and the music is thus subordinate to the teleological principle. Time is evoked as something continuous, shaped, and thoroughly comprehensible to the tasteful, rational mind; the reigning metaphor is logical causality.

With the beginnings of the artists' rebellion against society's conventions in the late 18th and early 19th century, we see the gradual introduction of non-caused (and hence structurally inessential) elements into music: harmonies that are more chromatic or complex than they need be in terms of classical structure; expressive violations of formal symmetrical balances; thicker, more spectacular textures of sound. Here in the 19th century pure continuity in the classical sense begins to be adulterated by being intermixed with searches for momentary intensity, according to the Romantic ideal. Surely the 19th century emphasizes the intense moment far more than does the mid-18th century, which was more interested in the symmetrical balancing of expanses of time.

In the 19th century, that is, the spontaneous moment begins to demand "equal rights" and a secession from the ideal of absolute consistency, continuity, and causation. The 19th century begins tentatively to explore discontinuity and lack of necessary causation. (One need only recall the procedures of Berlioz and Liszt, the chromaticism and non-periodicity of Wagner--the whole concept of "musical prose"). The problem arising from the weakening of tonal centers as generating (or "causing") the harmonic choices of a piece becomes acute by the late 19th century. We speak of Debussyan harmony, for instance, as often "non-functional." One chord, that is, does not lead to the next by metaphorical necessity--the principle of expectation is receding. And the crisis became even more severe with early Schoenberg, the pre-World War I non-tonality (Theodor Adorno's so-called "heroic" decade of modernism). One way of viewing this whole development, then, is to observe the progressive abandonment of the Enlightenment's view of temporal continuity and causation. And lacking necessary causes for its musical choices, music was plunged into a very serious situation in the early 20th century.

There were, of course, many responses to the crisis of causation, but perhaps I could mention what may be two of the "purest" solutions. In the 1920s Schoenberg responded to the prior anarchy by, in effect, inventing ex nihilo an artificial causal system (the twelve-tone method)--an intellectual ordering that could be imposed by fiat upon the otherwise straying pitches. Even when internal or acoustic (or social) causes are lacking, Schoenberg demonstrated that we may simply impose a personal causal agent by force of will (a solution still very much forged out of the 19th-century German Romantic conception of the individual artist).

More to our point today is another "pure" solution, one ultimately accepted, as I understand it, by Mr. Cage for many of his pieces. This is the turning of the problem (non-causation) into the solution: the embracing of discontinuity, of fragmented, intense moments as a fundamental aesthetic principle. One clear outcome of this is indeterminacy, in which compositional causes are minimized. In 4'33", for instance, we have various spans of silence--non-intended sound (the sounds of our own bodies, the air, the audience noises). No sound "causes" another in the Enlightenment sense, yet we are urged to attend lovingly to every moment, every discontinuous or non-caused moment.<sup>4</sup> And the experience is roughly similar in much of Mr. Cage's music. As he has explained, "My intention was precisely to stop music from going anywhere! I sought to let sounds go wherever they would go, and to let them be whatever they are. That led me to a continuity, but one that no longer tries to reach a climax."<sup>5</sup> This non-teleological "continuity," that is, consists of a stretch of time filled with individual intense moments, not necessarily connected with each other--something that would certainly be considered discontinuous by the Enlightenment mind. There is no teleological "purpose" here, only individual sounds existing for themselves, as we have been told many times.<sup>6</sup> And although there is no inner, shaping purpose within the music, this is not to say that the music is without ultimate point or effect. Here again Mr. Cage has helped us by calling this aesthetic method of non-intention "an affirmation of life--not an attempt to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply a way of waking up to the very life we're living, which is so excellent once one gets one's mind and one's desires out of its way and lets it act of its own accord"<sup>7</sup> [i.e., to "let sounds be themselves"].<sup>8</sup>

The more that sequential connection is minimized within any art form, the more one stresses the quality of the individual moment--the gain in intensity which we saw emerging in the 19th century. As each "now" becomes equally valid and subordinated to no other set of "nows," the tendency, as Northrop Frye has pointed out in a literary context, is for each moment to acquire an extra sense of profundity<sup>9</sup>--what others might refer to as "being-saturated" particularity. Art that minimizes sequential connection tends to become oracular or revelatory in its best forms, and thus to embrace this plunge into the beings of eternally separate moments is ultimately an attempt to re-establish contact with the sacred.<sup>10</sup> If I understand him properly, Mr. Cage is urging us to avoid the categories, the abstract intellectual balances and symmetries, and the generalizations that may indeed lead to an internally teleological music, but that ultimately draw us away from the special, virtually sacred, intensity of the ungeneralized particular, the glorious epiphany of the now, the concreteness of the thing itself. This may recall to some of us, perhaps, the concerns that Heidegger had for the recovery and grounding of being (recapturing the thingliness of the thing).<sup>11</sup> Or we might recall the Russian formalists of the late 1920s, Victor Shklovsky and his assigning to art the task of defamiliarization, the reinvesting of being into a non-noticed world by once again allowing us "to make the stone stony."<sup>12</sup> This is why the intention of Mr. Cage's music, ultimately, is metaphysical, why, when we let sounds "be" themselves in their particularity and concreteness (instead of tampering with them) we may hope in the best of circumstances to draw nearer to their ultimate essences. Since all sounds of life, in all their randomness, may be subjected to this loving, intense listening (since even stones can become stony for us) Mr. Cage may be teaching us to re-sacralize our environment.<sup>13</sup> Everything can become a

momentary epiphany if we simply allow it to be. Thus the perennial art/life dialectic is given here a resolution through the embrace of non-causality and consequent intensification of the moment. Raw life can become art--identity--and the artist regains his long-lost role of effectively sacralizing the cosmos.<sup>14</sup>

Mr. Cage, of course, was profoundly influenced by Eastern philosophies in coming to this position, which I hope not to have misconstrued here. In particular, one thinks of the powerful principles of Zen Buddhism to which he has referred so frequently and so fondly. Perhaps, then, I may close my brief essay here with a quotation from one celebrated instructor of Zen, D. T. Suzuki--a quotation describing the Zen metaphysical experience of non-intellectual involvement, an experience of being that also characterizes Mr. Cage's aesthetic ideal of non-intention and non-causality:

Life as it is lived suffices. It is only when the disquieting intellect steps in and tries to murder it that we stop to live and imagine ourselves to be short of or in something. Let the intellect alone, it has its usefulness in its proper sphere, but let it not interfere with the flowing of the life-stream. If you are at all tempted to look into it, do so while letting it flow. The fact of flowing must under no circumstances be arrested or meddled with; for the moment your hands are dipped into it, its transparency is disturbed, it ceases to reflect your image which you have had from the very beginning, and will continue to have to the end of time.<sup>15</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>John Cage, "Experimental Music," in Silence (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1961), p. 8.

<sup>2</sup>"But advantage can be taken of these possibilities only if one is willing to change one's musical habits radically" (Cage, "Experimental Music," p. 9).

<sup>3</sup>Cf., for instance, the remarks of Carl Dahlhaus on rhetorical "balance of parts" in the opening pages of his "Issues in Composition" [1974], in Between Romanticism and Modernism, trans. Mary Whittall (Berkeley: University of California, 1980), pp. 40-78.

<sup>4</sup>"So that listening one takes as a springboard the first sound that comes along; the first something springs us into nothing and out of that nothing arises the next something; etc. like an alternating current. Not one sound fears the silence that extinguishes it. But if you avoid it, that's a pity, because it resembles life very closely and life and it are essentially a cause for joy" (Cage, "45' for a Speaker," in Silence, p. 173).

<sup>5</sup>Cage [in Conversation with Daniel Charles], For the Birds (Boston: Marion Boyars, 1981), p. 86.

<sup>6</sup>"No purposes. Sounds" (Cage, "Experimental Music: Doctrine," in Silence, p. 17).

<sup>7</sup>Cage, "Experimental Music," p. 12.

<sup>8</sup>See n. 1 above, and cf. "Where people had felt the necessity to stick sounds together to make a continuity, we four [Cage, Wolff, Brown, Feldman] felt the opposite necessity to get rid of the glue so that sounds would be themselves" (Cage, "History of Experimental Music in the United States [1959], in Silence, p. 71).

<sup>9</sup>Northrop Frye, The Critical Path (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1971), pp. 39-42.

<sup>10</sup>Cf. the Roman Catholic theologian, Jacques Maritain, Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry [1953] (New York: Meridian, 1955), p. 51: "Modern art--I mean in its finest achievements, as well as in its deepest trends--modern art longs to be freed from reason (logical reason)." In some respects this recalls what Maritain (invoking both St. Thomas Aquinas and Henri Bergson) has called the "intuition of being." For instance, from Maritain's A Preface to Metaphysics (London: Sheed and Ward, 1945), pp. 47-8.

Thus we are confronted with objects and as we confront them, the diverse realities made known by our senses or by the several sciences, we receive at a given moment, as it were the revelation of an intelligible mystery concealed in them. . . . There is a kind of sudden intuition which a soul may receive of her own existence, or of "being" embodied in all things whatsoever, however lowly. . . . [Although this is beyond doubt an intellectual technique to the neo-Thomist Maritain] it is difficult to arrive at the degree of intellectual purification at which this act is produced in us, at which we become sufficiently engaged, sufficiently empty to hear what all things whisper and to listen instead of composing answers.

<sup>11</sup>See, e.g., Martin Heidegger, "The Thing," in Poetry, Language, Thought, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper, 1971), pp. 165-82. Heidegger describes the function of art in "The Origin of the Work of Art" (Poetry, Language, Thought, pp. 17-87) as the revelation of truth, in which an object (say, the pair of shoes in Van Gogh's famous painting) "emerges into the unconcealedness of its being" (p. 36); "Art is truth setting itself to work" (p. 39); Techne [Greek, "Art, craft" but in the sense of "truth"], as knowledge experienced in the Greek manner, is a bringing forth of beings in that it brings forth present beings as such beings out of concealedness and specifically into the unconcealedness of their appearance" (p. 59).

<sup>12</sup>See, e.g., the discussion of Shklovsky in Robert Scholes, Structuralism in Literature: An Introduction (New Haven: Yale University, 1974), pp. 83-5.

<sup>13</sup>Cf. Mircea Eliade, "Sacred Space and Making the World Sacred," in The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1957).

<sup>14</sup>"If...one says, 'Yes! I do not discriminate between intention and non-intention [so-called "silence"],' 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" (Cage, "Experimental Music: Doctrine," p. 14). Cf. Frye, The Critical Path, who refers to "an absorption of the poetic habit of mind into ordinary experience" (p. 145). Frye, one presumes, would liken Cage to an "oral poet...concerned with ritualized acts, or what Yeats calls the ceremony of innocence, around which social activity revolves in an oral culture" (p. 146), a role particularly appropriate within a non-linear, non-reading/writing (either pre- or post-writing), non-rational culture.

<sup>15</sup>D. T. Suzuki, Zen Buddhism, ed. William Barrett (New York: Doubleday [Anchor], 1956), p. 9.