The thesis: John Cage’s goal is to turn history into indeterminacy by way of the technological production of global transparency. His method is precision. His ethics are formally situational, and their content is compassion. This brief essay will work to expand upon and explicate these terms, moving toward a general theory of Cage’s practice and its relevance for contemporary culture.

It is what amounts to Cage’s theoretical statement on the philosophy of history, “History of Experimental Music in the United States,” he quotes Sri Ramakrishna’s answer to the classical question of theodicy: why, if God is good, is there evil in the world? Ramakrishna’s answer is simply, “To thicken the plot.” Cage will borrow this response, but in so doing will completely transgress its logic. He writes, “Why, if everything is possible, do we concern ourselves with history (in other words with a sense of what is necessary to be done at a particular time?).” In other words, given the fact that everything is potential, possibility, indeterminate, why do we have to deal with actuality, precision, determination?

In his lecture on “Indeterminacy,” Cage frames this problem through a description of a music performance, Duo II for Pianists. He writes of a situation in which the performers are needing to operate so fast that they cannot reflect on what they are doing but must simply react. In this situation, “Rather than making the not-conscious parts face the conscious part of the mind, the conscious part, by reason of the urgency and indeterminacy of the situation, turns towards the not-conscious parts.” Indeterminacy (the performers must always react; nothing is prescribed for them) is not given here. It is produced through the intensity of the performance. In this space of indeterminacy, one acts, and acts with urgency.

This is perhaps different than the way we usually think of the indeterminate, as something chaotic, diffuse, dispersed. Here indeterminacy is something produced. For Cage, indeterminacy does name the primordial chaos of life, but in the world we live in, there is something called history—there is a series of events and logics that, if we let them, determine us, and, in so doing, remove our humanity. He makes this point earlier in the lecture on Indeterminacy, where, in a moment of self-critique, he writes against his own piece Music of Changes: “The fact these things [directions for performer] that constitute, though only sounds, have come together to control a human being, the performer, gives the work the alarming aspect of a Frankenstein monster.” Politically for Cage this is a charged situation, where a slight movement in this general mode of communication equates the space of performance and the space of politics, and we move over from “Frankenstein monster to dictator.”

What is inhuman, then, is that which determines. Humanity is gained, affirmed, achieved, or regained, in the technological production of indeterminacy. The strands of Cage’s texts we have seen still have not made this point clear. Let us return to his rewriting of theodicy, with these other moments now in mind. Why do we concern ourselves with what has to be done at a particular time if we could be doing anything? Because there are Frankenstein monsters. Because there are dictators. And what those monsters do is to force a certain determination, deny this very possibility of noticing that all is possible. What becomes necessary in this situation is the production of situations—such as the Duo II for Pianists—which move our minds out of a mechanical determinacy and open them to the urgency of acting in an indeterminate space.

Hence for Cage we must move away from the theological question and towards the historical question. There can be no God who determines the universe—even if in a humorous way to “thicken the plot.” It is we ourselves who must thicken the plot, and not with mere intrigue or entertainment, but in order to enrich and expand the possibilities for contemporary experience. At the same time, this is not a purely formal move, or one which comes without ethics. (As I was recently reminded, Hannah Arendt claims that the origin of totalitarianism is the belief that anything is possible.) Hence Cage continues his re-writing: “One does not then make just any experiment but does what must be done. By this I mean one does not seek by his actions to arrive at money but does what must be done; one does not seek by his actions to arrive at fame (success) but does what must be done; one does not seek by his actions to provide pleasure to the senses (beauty) but does what must be done; one does not seek by his actions to arrive at the establishing of a school (truth) but does what must be done.” I am reminded of the statement by the World War II resistance fighter Jean Cavaillès, “The logical processes of mathematicians are necessary, even the stages of mathematical science are necessary, and likewise this struggle we are leading.” In other words, one clears out the ego, the conscious, the concern with one’s own life, success, pleasure, production, and moves toward a model of making situations in which we can become “resistant by logic” as Canguilhem said of Cavaillès.1

But the question for so many today is, what do we resist? We are not in Cavailles’ day of a clear object to resist, the Frankenstein monsters and dictators. We live in a time of vast oppression and cruelty, but it is not so transparent, not broken through to the surface in order to announce its presence. The present is difficult to resist because it hides itself so well. In his book Violence, Slavoj Žižek tells a version of the following joke. A man goes to an avant-garde theater to see a performance with his friend. Right before the show starts, he asks his friend where the bathroom is. The friend says it’s around the corner to the left. He says further that he won’t see a normal bathroom (its an avant-garde theater after all) but only a pot in the corner. So the man goes, pees in the pot in the corner, and goes back to his seat. He asks his friend if he missed thing. The guy says, Yea, this idiot came out on stage.
technology opened up the possibility for "global village" - for Cage the focus on part of what McLuhan termed the given that these networked technological manipulation of sound via electronics - steel for instance, but, even more, Cage's By working with technology to produce memory, communication, and security. - an assertion that has only grown truer were now effectively in the outside world Buckminster Fuller, and D.T. Suzuki. influences of his: Marshall McLuhan, and D.T. Suzuki. in I-VI, a series of lectures given at Harvard, Cage compiled a number of citations brought together through selection and chance operations. One of the quotes is the following, from Thoreau: “Compassion is a very untenable ground. It must be expedient. Its pleadings will not bear to be stereotyped.” Thoreau makes the statement in the context of a passage on the inherent violence of nature, and the fact that such violence cannot be considered immoral – rather only amoral. To say that compassion is an untenable ground is to say that a logical defense of it in this context of violence is impossible. Compassion cannot be a ground, further, because it is not about reflection and then action; it is action – it is quick, precise intervention. Thoreau uses the word only twice else in Walden. In one instant, he speaks of the momentary compassion of a hunter who does not shoot a fox, but then, compassion wanes, and he fires. Compassion cannot be defended as ground, for, on reflection, a hunter realizes that he hunts. Compassion can only occur, and maintain itself, in an urgency of the situation. The hunter found no such urgency. But compassion, if it cannot defend itself, can still plead with us. It can beg of us in a moment to do otherwise than what we would do; it can speak to us, to say, “do what must be done.” Stereotyped, as Thoreau uses it, has two meanings: (1) that it cannot be fixed and (2) in a more obsolete sense, that it cannot be printed, that is to say, will not find its defense in writing. Compassion will be an expeditious moment, one born of a situation, or it will be nothing at all.

To speak in the present of an ethics of compassion is to speak of an ethics other than critique. Compassion is not analysis, it is not défendable, it cannot be written; often, in most instances, it cannot even be witnessed. If history is the gathering up and narrativization of events, and indeterminacy the insistence on meaning outside the clutches of Meaning, then compassion is the ethics of indeterminacy; that is to say, compassion is what ethics looks like when we cannot give an account of ourselves, but must nevertheless count ourselves as responsible. In opening up history to indeterminacy, Cage sought to open up the subject to the sounds, the vagaries, to the exterior moments that would require expedient subjects. Or again, from Cage’s “History”: “He was attached to sounds and because of this attachment could not let sounds just be sounds. He needed to attach himself to the emptiness, to the silence. Then things – sounds, that is – would come into being of themselves.” All of Cage’s practices were devoted to letting sounds be sounds, to letting them come into their essential indeterminacy so that subjects could experience and implement a compassion that could never defend in words, in the midst of history. Hence: John Cage’s goal is to turn history into indeterminacy by way of the technological production of global transparency. His method is precision. His ethics are formally situational, and their content is compassion. - Avi Alpert

1. I owe these citations to Alain Badiou’s Metapolitics