

“REPRODUCE WHAT YOU ARE NOT”

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.

In 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

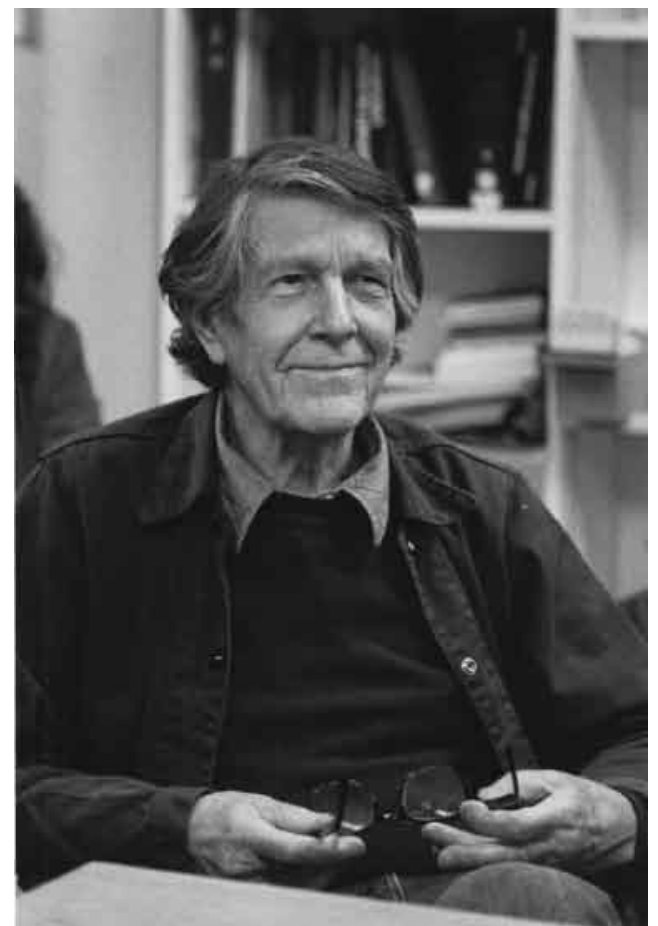
of communication equates the space of performance and the space of politics, and we move over from "Frankenstein monster to dictator."

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 re-writing 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 Cavailles, "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 Cavailles.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 (it's 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 anything. The guy says, Yea, this idiot came out on stage,



peed in the pot in the corner, and walked off. For Žižek we are like this moment - part of a world of violence but without a vision of our role in it.

Here is where we turn to the idea of global transparency. Art historian Branden Joseph has shown convincingly that Cage, under the influence of Laszlo Moholy-Nagy while in Chicago, became deeply engaged with the idea of transparency in modern architecture and sculpture. Cage's most frequent references here would be to the glass homes of Mies van der Rohe and Duchamp's sculpture, "The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even." In such works, Cage was fascinated by the way in which art and its environment were fused through the glass. In the case of Duchamp, for instance, Cage stated, "the thing that I like so much is that I can focus my attention wherever I wish. It helps me to blur the distinction between art and life and produces a kind of silence in the work itself. There is nothing in it that requires me to look in

one place or another or, in fact, requires me to look at all. I can look through it to the world beyond." The reference to Silence, as Joseph notes, is particularly interesting for Cage's work. Indeed, in his most famous piece, 4'33", in which a performer sits at a piano for that amount of time without playing anything, Cage similarly makes the work itself silent. But in doing so he does not make silence ("There is no such thing as silence," he famously stated), but rather brings the world around the event into it. A transparency is produced between the environment and the music, since, after all, one does not hear nothing during 4'33"; rather one is opened up to hear everything that is happening around one.

For Cage transparency did not stop here, however, as it tied in to several other influences of his: Marshall McLuhan, Buckminster Fuller, and D.T. Suzuki. For McLuhan, technological mediation meant that our central nervous systems were now effectively in the outside world - an assertion that has only grown truer with increasing reliance on technology for memory, communication, and security. By working with technology to produce transparency - van der Rohe's glass and steel for instance, but, even more, Cage's manipulation of sound via electronics - Cage could mediate the terms art and life with the commonality of technological expansion into both domains. Moreover, given that these networked technological systems were increasingly global - part of what McLuhan termed the "global village" - for Cage the focus on technology opened up the possibility for transparency across borders. A further influence on this question of globality was Fuller. Cage cites him in *A Year from*

Monday: "Fuller: as long as one human being is hungry, the entire human race is hungry." Since the individual is now part of this networked global society, s/he needs to be concerned with everyone the world over. But this matters not if borders, identities, egos block individuals from recognizing this interdependence. Hence the necessity of transparency.

A further philosophical meaning of transparency was provided for Cage by D.T. Suzuki. In Suzuki's work, transparency referred to the relationship between individual and world. It provided the solution to the age-old question of immanence or transcendence for it existed prior to the claims of other. Transcendence names the world by attempting to move away from it, but is left with the problem of how to prove the reality it is now extricated from. Immanence names the world by submerging into, but is left with difficulty of proving that it can speak accurately to a situation it is enmeshed in. Transparency for Suzuki is what happens when one claims neither to transcend the world nor be immanent to it, but rather simply exists, without words or concepts. What differentiates Suzuki's transparency from mere stupidity or "animal" existence is that it is something that is gained through practice and discipline. One cannot simply stop words or concepts from forming in one's mind. Rather, one must use the practices of meditation, koans, and the master-disciple relationship in order to bring into experience a transparency beyond what can be imagined. Cage believed that music, writing, art, performances, and so forth, could be part of such a regime of practices.

These two sets of influence were one and the same for Cage: "To me that means that the disciplines, gradual and sudden (principally Oriental), formerly practiced by individuals to pacify their minds, bringing them into accord with ultimate reality, must now be practiced socially—that is, not just inside our heads, but outside of them, in the world, where our central nervous system effectively now is." One could perhaps even go so far as to say that his genius lay precisely in his ability to bring together various knowledges in a sophisticated, integrated manner. He learned how to operate in history by turning history back into the indeterminacy needed for one to open up to the present and learn how to act in it with urgency and with care. And he knew that one needed exacting models of how to create situations which could produce these forms of transparency.

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 expeditious. 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 defensible, 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 expeditious 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*