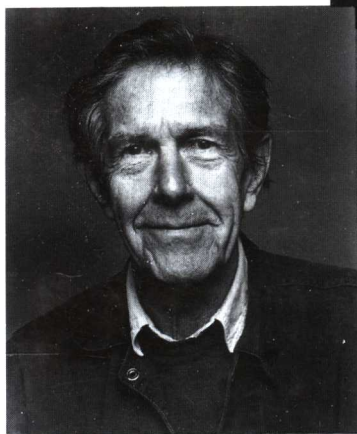




WRITINGS ABOUT

John Cage



Richard Kostelanetz,
Editor

MICHIGAN

Writings about John Cage

Edited by
Richard Kostelanetz

Paul Bowles, William Brooks, Joseph Byrd, John Cage,
Deborah Campana, Daniel Charles, Henry Cowell,
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The silence we preserve after an experience is a space, created for us as the space of the experience, within which, and on which, we dwell, prolonging the experience, extending it, culminating it, in order to *have* it, progressively, in more significant degree.

Our meta-experiential conversation is like the sound after a sound, in music, which amplifies the silence-resonant aftersound space to extend, to culminate, to cultivate, to—yet further—have the experience our conversation is trying to keep us alive within.

And discourse extends the effort to retain and protract experience to a maximum frontier of time, space, and awareness.

—Benjamin Boretz, *Talk* (1985)

Unfortunately, with the last and highest category of artist—the genius—the test of time comes too late. For when alive he will probably defy recognition by signs. Either he resembles ordinary men too much for our storybook minds, or he gives so few proofs of worldly judgment that it is hard to credit him with any capacity whatever, or again the mixture in him of talent and folly, or talent and turpitude, discourages further inquiry.

It is safer to go to the work than to the man. But the work, the masterpiece, presents difficulties of its own, the chief of which is that it usually does not correspond to any established taste, however sophisticated, and hence is literally of no use. In effect, no one really wants a masterpiece, there is no demand for it, which is why it ultimately signifies an addition to our riches. The only desire for it at first is in the breast of the maker and it is for this that he is called a creator. After a while we see that he belongs to a tradition, that he has forged the next link in a chain, but this hindsight takes a great deal of effort, and often requires the removal of the rubbish that stood between the masterpiece and the world, namely the rubbish of pseudo-art representing as real a world departed.

—Jacques Barzun, "Art Against Society" (1951)

Preface

Though several scholars have finished doctoral theses on John Cage, no one has yet published a full-length critical monograph on work that ranks, by common consent, among the most extraordinary achievements in modern arts. Until such a long-awaited book is published, it seems appropriate to collect an anthology of essays from my fellow Cage critics, writing about various aspects of his activity in a variety of ways. One measure of the weight of an artist is the wealth of critical literature engendered by his or her work. Two rules in selecting Cage criticism were that nothing here should be currently available in a book in print and that reviews of individual concerts would be acceptable only if they appeared before the mid-1950s, when a genuine critical literature begins. (Reviews of Cage's works in other arts could still be reprinted because, even by now, little extended criticism of them exists.) I thought of reprinting Michael Hicks's exhaustive investigation into Cage's early professional history ("John Cage's Studies with Schoenberg," *American Music* [Summer 1990]), but decided it was less criticism than history. James Pritchett's "From Choice to Chance: John Cage's Concerto for Prepared Piano" (1988) would have been here, were it not so long and its author reluctant to make an abridgment. (Besides, Pritchett may well be the first to publish the kind of book described at the beginning of this preface.) I thought of doing a brief history of Cage criticism, to appear as an introduction; but since this manuscript was limited in advance to a certain length, criticism took precedence over criticism-of-criticism. I initially planned to include previously unpublished criticism, especially from those doctoral essays mentioned previously; but since a book could be made from material already in print, it seemed best to leave unpublished Cage criticism to the next editor.

I wish I could have included some of those passing encomia that

contribute so much to our understanding of Cage and his influence. Back in 1946, the composer Elliot Carter, in the course of reviewing recent dance concerts for *Modern Music*, identified "one by Merce Cunningham, called *Mysterious Adventure*, to an ingenious fancy of John Cage for prepared piano. The score, a maze of shivery strange and delicate noises, is a play of sound with neutral content and mood which allowed the dancers great latitude." A quarter-century later, in his introduction to *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara* (1971), John Ashbery wrote:

We were both tremendously impressed by David Tudor's performance at a concert on New Year's Day 1952 of John Cage's "Music of Changes," a piano work lasting over an hour and consisting, as I recall, entirely of isolated autonomous tone-clusters seemingly at random all over the keyboard. It was aleatory music, written by throwing coins in a method adapted from the *I Ching*. The actual mechanics of the method escaped me then as it does now; what mattered was that chance elements could combine to produce so beautiful and cogent a work. It was a further, perhaps for us ultimate, proof not so much of "Anything goes" but "Anything can come out."

An ironic appraisal of Cage's presence in the early 1950s appeared in John Gruen's memoir, *The Party's Over Now* (1972), where he quotes the painter Elaine de Kooning.

[Arts critic] Harold Rosenberg . . . surveyed a full house before a Cage-Cunningham concert and said in his booming voice, "Here it is almost curtain time and [the painter Ibram] Lassaws aren't here yet." Everyone doubled up laughing. We all attended every event, and everyone in the audience knew everyone else.

Buried in the literature about contemporary art are many more like these, perhaps to be collected in yet another book.

My original plan was to include more essays initially published in languages other than English, from writers other than Daniel Charles (whose essays here were originally written in both his native French and his own English) and Heinz-Klaus Metzger, Cage's most persistent European critics; however, the few other examples that came to my

attention were not worth reprinting. Perhaps suitable essays in German, Italian, Japanese, and so on will emerge when this anthology is translated, as it should be, into other languages. (The reason I am doing this book, rather than assigning it to someone else, remembering my rule never to do anything professionally that someone else can do better, is that I've done anthologies of *criticism* before.)

I am grateful to Joyce Harrison and her colleagues at the University of Michigan Press for commissioning *Writings about John Cage* as an appropriate sequel to earlier books of mine published elsewhere, then to Don Gillespie for guiding me through the criticism he has collected as Cage's editor at C. F. Peters, to Martin Erdmann for his incomparable bibliography of Cage criticism in several languages, to Deborah Campana for rescuing obscure materials from the John Cage Archive at Northwestern, to Frans van Rossum for sharing his discovery of the 1934 Cage-Cowell colloquy, to Anne Del Castillo for her editorial assistance, and finally to the contributors for granting me permission to reprint their materials.

This book would have been dedicated to its subject, had he not already received another book of mine, *Recyclings* (1984); it might have been dedicated to his longtime coconspirator, Merce Cunningham, had he, too, not received yet another book of mine, *American Imaginations* (1983). And so it goes to the composer Lars-Gunnar Bodin, whose invitation to the Electronic Music Studio of Stockholm prompted me to advance my compositional activities far beyond what I had previously imagined. Thanks again, Lars-Gunnar. And thanks again, John, now no longer with us, for letting me do so much with/about your work, both explicitly and implicitly.

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Imaginary Landscaper (1982)

Eric Salzman

When David Tudor sat down at the piano no one laughed. When, after four minutes and thirty-three seconds, he got up from the piano, they laughed and they cried—cried out with rage or admiration. The pianist had played not a single note. John Cage had struck again.

The year was 1952; Cage was 40. This year—September 5, to be exact—he will be 70, and no one is laughing.

What is 4'33"? A piece of music? A bit of *épater les bourgeois*? Musical dada? Zen Buddhism? The random sounds of the environment revealed by the framework of David Tudor's non-performance? Theater? Conceptual art? A hoax? A mere nothing?

Who is John Cage? A musician? A charlatan? A master of *épater les bourgeois*? A musical dadaist? A Zen Buddhist? The inventor of chance, random, concept, environmental and/or aleatory art? A theatrical entrepreneur and self-aggrandizer? The first performance artist? A hoaxer? A passing fad or a major figure? All of the above? Can one be a Zen master at 40? An *enfant terrible* at 70?

In fact, whatever you think (and anything you say about Cage is probably true), it is impossible to dismiss him anymore. At age 40, the composer (or, if you wish, non-composer) of 4'33" could be put down by the music world as an eccentric or even a charlatan. At age 70—and John Cage really is 70 this year—he is nothing less than the elder statesman of avant-garde art in America.

Note that I said "art." Cage's influence, like that of his predecessors Thoreau, Whitman, Ives, Frank Lloyd Wright, Henry Cowell, and all the other great American eccentrics, extends far beyond his particular traditional medium. Indeed, more than anyone else, Cage did his part to break down the barriers of those traditional media. Is John Cage a

“composer” or “musician” in the traditional sense? He himself has redefined the question so that it no longer means what it used to.

Even the issue of what is traditional and what is radical is no longer obvious. The businessman who pioneers radical changes in technology and society may go home and devote himself entirely to listening to traditional, classical music. Your friendly neighborhood avant-gardist or radical may go live in the country and cultivate guitar-picking. The conservative financier may build an avant-garde house and collect far-out art.

If I said that I thought John Cage was, in many ways, a deeply traditional person—very much in the old-fashioned American vein—a lot of people would think that I had gone off the deep end. But Cage as a pioneer is in a very traditional American mold. We admire pioneers—for breaking ground but also for carrying along the solid, sober, old-fashioned democratic virtues. Deep down, John is just like that: an old-fashioned American democratic humanist who tells us that nothing in human experience is alien to him. He opens his ears, his senses, his heart (and ours, too) to an ever-greater sensibility and an ever-widening circle of possibility. And he invites us to put our critical faculties aside and join in. This is not a small enterprise. Cage has been busy redefining the limits of art and artistic experience out to the limits of perception. And to do this, he has invoked the whole panoply of modern technology and cosmology. He has wrapped up and digested—in an almost casual, good-natured way (and entirely without pompous Germanic, Wagnerian, or Stockhausenish theory)—the entire modernist and avant-garde movements in the arts. Everything and for everybody! Now, in light of this, are we still going to stand around and argue about whether or not he really is a composer or musician?

He is, of course, from California. Cage was born in Los Angeles in 1912. He studied there, in New York (with Henry Cowell, another California eccentric), and again in Los Angeles with, of all people, Arnold Schoenberg. During the 1930s he worked on the West Coast, organizing a percussion ensemble—one of the first anywhere—and accompanying dance classes at the Cornish School in Seattle. After a brief period in Chicago, he came to New York where he wrote for the publication *Modern Music*, organized concerts, studied Zen, helped found the New York Mycological Society (he is an expert on the identification and culinary preparation of wild mushrooms), began his long and

famous collaboration with dancer/choreographer Merce Cunningham, infiltrated the New York art scene (with which he became closely identified), and created a great deal of work and controversy.

Cage's earliest composition, somewhat influenced by his studies with Schoenberg, is based on webs of numerical patterns applied to notes and, in particular, rhythms. In the 1930s, the American avant-garde, after a period of experimentation, turned from Europe to the Orient. Composers like Cowell, Lou Harrison, Harry Partch, Cage, and others became deeply involved with qualities of larger rhythmic flow and interweaving, with non-tempered scales, and with percussive timbres. The percussion-ensemble music of that era, far from being loud and noisy, is subtle, deft, delicate, and pleasing. (There are, by the way, many connections between this music and the popular minimalist music of Glass, Reich, and others.)

What is probably Cage's most famous invention, the prepared piano, is a direct outgrowth of this interest in oriental percussion music. In working with dancers, Cage conceived the idea of turning the traditional piano accompaniment into a one-man percussion ensemble by the simple expedient of putting various materials—metal, rubber, wood—in the strings. Once again, the results, far from being noisy and extravagant, are delicate and contemplative. Much of this music is reminiscent of the Javanese gamelan, but even the freer, less oriental-sounding music of some of the later prepared piano sets is subtle and beautifully made.

Cage's interest in unusual and nontraditional instrumentation led him early on to experiment with the new recording technologies. In 1939 he used test-tone recordings on variable-speed turntables to produce a kind of electronic music before its time. This was the first of a series of works called *Imaginary Landscapes*. No. 4 in this series was the infamous piece for 12 radios where the sound was whatever happened by chance to be on the air at the time of performance. At the premiere in New York in 1952, one of the dial twirlers—following Cage's "score" of instructions—happened upon a classical-music station playing Mozart, prompting several scoffers in the audience to shout "Leave it on!"

In the early Fifties, at the very beginning of the tape and electronic-music movement, Cage was right there. He made tape collages, used feedback and the sounds of electronic circuitry. He introduced the notion of live electronic performance, preferring the variability and theatricality