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Lectures on Anarchy: John Cage at Wesleyan

From February 22nd to the 27th 1988, Wesleyan University was host to the festival-symposium 'John Cage at Wesleyan', a celebration both of Cage's 75th birthday and of the diversity of his influence on contemporary arts and philosophy. The quiet of Middletown, Connecticut, the small New England town in which the Wesleyan campus stands, was in striking contrast to the intensity of the festival: as well as fifteen panels, lectures, roundtables, workshops and paper-reading sessions, involving 56 speakers from around the world, there were also twelve performance events in which 25 different groups or soloists performed 34 works. There were exhibitions of Cage's graphic pieces, displays related to his written works and scores and even a 'Giant Cagean [sic] Disco', at which three bands and two disc-jockeys performed simultaneously.

Cage's own contribution to the festival, a Lecture on Anarchy, was accompanied by a pamphlet, containing Emma Goldman's observation that 'anarchists and revolutionaries can be no more made than musicians. All that can be done is to plant the seeds of thought. Whether something vital will develop depends largely on the fertility of the human soil, though the quality of the intellectual seed must not be overlooked'. For Neely Bruce, the soil of particular interest here was that of the universities where, he felt, artists like Cage found haven during the 1960s. But the seeds Cage planted have borne abundant fruit in fields much wider than those of academia and the festival organisers (Neely Bruce, Jean Shaw and Elyse Sanzi) reflected this by inviting speakers from many different disciplines. Even apparently tightly focussed papers and discussions, under titles such as 'Cage and the Intellectual Climate of the Sixties', 'Technology and the Evolution of Cage's Music' and 'The Performance of Cage', in fact covered a wide range of topics. At the same time some topics recurred at session after session; for me five particular categories of inquiry emerged: 1) anarchy, ordinariness, egalitarianism and permission; 2) noise, chance, meaning and aesthetics; 3) mindfulness and Zen philosophy; 4) ideas about teaching and universities; 5) the nature of influence. What follows is not meant as a complete precis of the various presentations, but as a distillation of contributions germane to these topics.

Cage's own lecture was a unique study in anarchy: for more than an hour he read mesostics,¹ in which fragmented quotations from Emma Goldman, Walt Whitman, Leo Tolstoy, Errico Malatesta, Albert Einstein, Buckminster Fuller, *et al*, were arranged around names and titles appropriate to the subject of anarchy. Especial emphasis was given to Thoreau's statement, 'That government is best which governs least'. The effect of Cage's ideas about society on his other beliefs was also the subject of a special lecture by Richard Kostelanetz. Cage 'is essentially a thirties leftie', he said; 'Zen and chance and everything else came afterwards. They are merely icing on the anarchistic cake'.²

The politics of the ordinary figured importantly in the presentation by Michael Wolff, a specialist on

Victorian England. Indicating his own fascination with everyday life, Cage once told Wolff, 'You want music? Listen. You want art? Look.' For Wolff, such a perspective reflects 'the power of the ordinary imagination to make its own joy and its own sublimity'. Wolff said he found refuge in Cage's formulations from the disconnectedness of contemporary life; nevertheless he also questioned some of Cage's assumptions. First he addressed the belief that the political solution lies

in the technological utopias of Marshall McLuhan and Buckminster Fuller. [This] makes sense if for no other reason than it seems to preserve the anarchy of the self within a community of mutuality and abundance. Nevertheless, for many of us there has been a severe discontinuity between his discussion of individual aesthetic and ethic, and his hopes for a benign world order . . . Our task is to move out from the permission which Cage gives us to see ourselves as at once ordinary and artful, through the middle ground of temporary and fluid reworkings of family or clan or tribe (such as this gathering), into a world politics of the ordinary and the artful where multitudes of selves reconnect through the sharing of embodied imaginings and enactments of decency and love.

Reconnection was a concern of Sidney Monas, a Slavic languages scholar, who mentioned a kaleidoscope of movements and ideas from the sixties, including feminism, gay liberation, black power, communes, drugs, Vietnam, and aleatoric music. These ideas ultimately led us, he suggested, to a more participatory society and to the breaking down of barriers. During the panel on world music, the composer Pauline Oliveros said that 'the emergence of the women's movement about the same time that Cage's work became more and more visible is not just a coincidence, but is a resonance of ideas'. Keith Potter reported on Cage's reception in England, pointing out similarities and differences between Cage's music and that of Cornelius Cardew. He mentioned new performance and notational techniques which reflect the openness and democracy implicit in the experimental aesthetic once shared by the composers.

Themes of equality and ordinariness pervaded the presentation by the music theorist Leonard Meyer, who began by recalling that when he and Cage were both at Wesleyan's Center for Advanced Studies in 1961, 'I was naive, pretending to be sophisticated. He was sophisticated, seeming to be naive'. Turning to an analysis of Cage's place in twentieth-century music, an art which he claimed was still in the ardent embrace of Romanticism, Meyer noted that egalitarianism, a concept rooted in the politics of Romanticism, permeates Cage's 'conception of musical experience and aesthetics, and his compositional practice. [These] emphasize the irrelevance of context, convention, and prior learning while affirming the primacy of unmediated, innocent apprehension'. The Romantic glorification of nature developed into two different ways of viewing the world, according to Meyer. First, there was organicism, which stressed the unity of a work, the constraints that lie behind the surface of the sounds, and which leads ultimately to the deterministic techniques of structural anthropology and linguistics, Schenkerian analysis and strict serial composition. The other perspective, followed by Wordsworth, Thoreau and Cage, 'emphasizes the value of unmediated, innocent experience of the phenomenal world... To make an underlying structural principle more important, somehow more aesthetically significant than perceived stimuli, [as the organicists had], is almost like confusing the structure

of the DNA molecule that constrains the development of daffodils with our experience of them tossing their heads in spritely dance'. While acknowledging his great debt to Cage, Meyer nevertheless admitted that he does not know how to attend innocently to nature or art. 'I leave innocence to those who can bear the tedious burden of eternal purity.'

The resonance of ideas and the problem of meaning also figured heavily in the presentation by the social theorist Charles Lemert who connected them with the fundamental revolutions of the last quarter-century. He indicated that by the sixties Cage and a number of others had already 'cleared the way to a very profound and important critique of linearity, of our understanding of the idea of the centre'. Lemert used the contrast of silence and noise as a model for the ideological conflicts of the period. Students and leftists reacted to the silence of the fifties with noise and a good deal of talk. This helped create among social theorists and others a special interest in linguistics, according to Lemert. One significant consequence was deconstructionism, 'a frontal assault intellectually upon classical metaphysical terms which sought, in the words of Derrida, to restrict the play of thought by relying too heavily upon the notion of either a cryptic or explicit metaphysical center. Of course, Derrida is a very important... thinker in relation to this conference... because his work was designed, at least in the early stages through 1968, primarily to attack the classic notion of a voice, the notion that meanings in consciousness could be at the center of social life and thought about social life.' This parallels Cage's belief that each activity is centred in itself and that there exists a plurality of centres, a belief derived from his studies in Zen philosophy during the fifties. For Lemert, deconstructionism, Cage's philosophy, and such sociological techniques as ethnomethodology are 'radically relativizing notions [which] have fundamentally changed the way in which we think about our political lives and also about our intellectual lives.'

In formulating a philosophical response to Cage's work, the Wesleyan philosopher and member of the writers' panel, Noel Carroll, talked about the use of noise to redefine music. 'Part and parcel of Cage's brief against musical tradition... is that the sounds he foregrounds neither say anything nor do they have a purpose. Chance preempts a direct operation of the will on the material. This makes their interpretation in terms of the artist's intention impossible, for the artist no longer has the means to express herself or to realize intended purposes.' But in fact, Carroll maintained, Cage's works do have meaning and purpose, otherwise they would be indiscernible from the noises of everyday life.

Cage's noises are not like everyday noises... They are, to use Nelson Goodman's terminology, exemplifications of everyday noises. They are samples of everyday noises... in the way that tailors' swatches of material are symbols but at the same time physical samples. Ordinary noise is not a symbol in this sense, because ordinary noise is not framed [as it is in Cage's work]. One reason that I think contemporary philosophers might disagree with the claim that Cage's music is meaningless is because many of them have been convinced of the Wittgensteinian notion that meaning is a function of the use of a word or a gesture within a context, a context that has a structure... In virtue of its historical context, Cage's compositions have a subject; that is, they are about something... the contrast of ordinary sound and musical sound. Indeed, through his ingenious intervention in the tradition of music, Cage may well have created an entirely new aesthetic category, that of ordinariness... But

this isn't to disparage Cage... Cage's work opened art to the environmental surround, which in turn led us to the appreciation of the cultural and historical surround.

Poet and performer Jackson Mac Low, who had earlier given a provocative account of Cage's impact on various poets, reacted to Carroll by underlining the subjective nature of meaning. 'I've always felt that, in the use... of anything produced by the human voice... there is an embodied meaning. But I tend to veer away from talking of symbols... Meaning is enacted rather than referential... When we perceive, meaning becomes enacted within us - and it is a different meaning since we take part in it. Especially, this would be true of chance works.'

Cage once said that sounds are facts, not symbols. At the festival, I discussed these ideas with him. His perspective is that experience transcends meaning. 'In life, what we're involved in', according to Cage,

is reflection, transparency, superimposition, etcetera. All you have to do is look anywhere around the room, or into your glasses, and you're seeing the whole thing at once, and seeing it reflected back in surprising and interesting ways. If you start getting that complex situation and reaction we're living in, which involves both seeing and hearing predominantly, and if you try to make that thicker by making it symbolic or... philosophical, or other than what it actually is, then you have such a complex thing that I think you'd hesitate to have an idea, or even an experience. I remember asking a lady once, 'What did you think of what you just saw?' She said, 'Oh, I'll have to think about it.'

The San Francisco Conservatory's Doug Kahn, and two members of the panel on Europe, French philosopher Daniel Charles and Polish musicologist Zbigniew Skowron, addressed Cage's attempts to abandon meaning. They connected the appreciation of the sound object and the processes by which it is produced with the philosophical precepts of phenomenology and contrasted these with the assumptions of symbolism.

In explaining the influence of Zen Buddhism on Cage's life and work, a musicologist from the University of Illinois, Heidi Von Gunden, focused on the practice of mindfulness, that is, attuning the mind and the body to whatever is happening at the moment. She demonstrated how unimpededness, interpenetration, and compassion have deeply affected Cage. By contrast, the oracular Norman O. Brown of the University of California at Santa Cruz compared the perspective of Zen with that of James Joyce. 'We go with *Finnegan's Wake* rather than Suzuki. In that Dionysian body in which all are members of one body, things are necessarily confused. Ordinary language is always wrong. We do not want to recover our sanity. "What a mnicc old mness it all mnakes." It is not true that each thing is itself and not another thing. It is not true that men are men and sounds are sounds. All lives, all dances.' He further observed that 'John Cage is an extreme case of the artist suffering the contradiction between Dionysian and Apollonian tendencies - a living oxymoron.'

Ideas about teaching and universities came up often during the festival. Leonard Meyer delineated three ways that universities deal with knowledge:

You can take fields of knowledge and [plough off the top two inches]. That's a general education. Then you can take a post hole digger and go straight down as far as you can. That's called a graduate education. Then you can take a shovel and dig a hole. [Anyone who has ever done this] knows that the farther down you go the broader the perimeter of the hole at the top has to be. That seems to me the way one has to

become interdisciplinary . . . , not because one wants to, but because one has to . . . Some are born interdisciplinary and some achieve it . . . , all the rest of us have it thrust upon us.

An audience member, taking up Meyer's analogy, said that universities are good at handing out shovels and showing people plots to be dug, by, for example, having Cage in residence, but that they fail to encourage one to keep digging. Meyer replied that such encouragement comes from faculty who ask interesting questions but do not give the answers. Dick Higgins, one of Cage's students at the New School of Social Research in the 1950s, pointed out that this was the way that Cage taught. At another point during the festival, Yale's Vivian Perlis said that Cage once told her he did not think that teachers should teach anything to students, but that they 'should discover what it is that the student knows – and that's not easy to find out – and then, of course, encourage the student to be courageous with respect to his knowledge, and to be practical, and to bring his knowledge to fruition . . . Once John asked David Tudor, "How should I behave at these university situations?" . . . Tudor said, "Think of yourself as a hit and run driver." ' Citing Cage's remarkable work on mushrooms, Neely Bruce offered the metaphor that the university should be a rich layer of horse manure into which the right kind of spores would fall.

Earle Brown, Christian Wolff, Gordon Mumma, Alvin Lucier, and William Duckworth on the panel 'Cage and Other Composers' talked about what Cage's permission, encouragement, and discipline have meant to them. The topics they addressed covered a wide range, though much of what they said was anecdotal. Brown traced some of the differences between his style and Cage's. Wolff talked about the responsibility that comes with detachment. Lucier said that a Cage concert he attended in Venice had such a strong effect on him that he did not write a note on five-line staff paper for twenty years thereafter. Mumma recounted his experiences collaborating in performances with Cage. Duckworth reminded us of the perspective explained in the *I Ching*, that influencing people is gradual and comes about by constant and patient concern for one's own moral development. Other speakers discussed influence in terms less personal than those used by the composers. Using Yugoslavian art movements as examples, the musicologist Niksa Gligo discussed the mutual influences between 'centres' of culture and 'peripheries'. In one case, Cage himself was hardly referred to at all by the artists involved, though their work was 'obviously related to him as an almost unknown source of radiation'. In another case, he was an explicit point of reference, but 'actually only as an excuse for quite independent interpretations'. Influence is not always as clear as it may seem, according to Gligo, who characterized it as 'that something hanging in the air which falls to the earth without any explainable reason'.

In addition to the panels, there was an important roundtable on Cage research. This included presentations about the three major Cage collections: by Rita Bottoms of UC Santa Cruz where the mushroom archive is held, by Elizabeth Swaim who is in charge of Wesleyan's archive of Cage publications, and by Deborah Campana from the music library at Northwestern. Campana gave a marvellous slide show of Northwestern's large collection of items related to Cage's personal history and to his work with various types of notation. Everyone felt that a list of the

locations of other Cage artefacts – manuscripts, letters, posters, etc. – should be drawn up, and Campana agreed to maintain such a catalogue.

The Cage works chosen for performance during the festival ranged from the simple, quiet piano solos of the 1940s, through the massive orchestral works of the 1950s, to the finely crafted string quartets of the 1980s. In a note about the concert of 1955, Cage's first appearance on the Wesleyan campus, music professor Richard Winslow wrote that the effect of Cage's visit continued for days after the concert. 'To an astonishing extent the aesthetic focus created by Cage's music and ideas took center stage – for debate, for vilification, for anger, for embrace.' Neither Cage, Winslow, nor David Tudor, however, remembers exactly which pieces Tudor performed that night. The first evening's concert of the festival, consisting of piano works by Cage, Feldman, and Stockhausen, commemorated, even if it did not duplicate, that previous concert.

The most interesting concert of the festival *recreated* one held in 1965 at the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis. There were two pieces in the first half, one an amplification of the body, another of the mind. Cage's *0'00"* is a solo to be interpreted in any way in a situation provided with maximum amplification. The composer performed it sitting at a table in a squeaky chair and writing a letter. Every movement of the pen or his body filled the concert hall with sound. The effect was fascinating. Then Alvin Lucier presented *Music for Solo Performer* using enormously amplified brain waves and percussion. Lucier explained that the score calls for assistants to pan alpha signals to loudspeakers which are physically coupled to percussion instruments. 'The cones of the speakers move, sometimes violently, in response to [the signals], causing the instruments to sound'. During the performance, Lucier sat motionless with electrodes taped to his head.

The social nature of performance is the subject of Christian Wolff's *For 1, 2, or 3 People*, which he performed along with Lucier and Cage. The players must learn a complex set of symbols and instantly take cues from each other and the environment. The outcome is unpredictable. Instrumentation being indeterminate, these players chose a piano and a balloon. A good deal of the power of this performance came from watching Cage mash the balloon against the edges of the piano until it finally broke. A spectacular rendition of Cage's *Rozart Mix* by approximately thirty students of Lucier and Mladen Milicevic followed the Wolff piece. They had prepared eighty-eight tape loops, some of great length, consisting of thousands of spliced pieces. During the concert, they extended these from at least a dozen tape recorders to microphone stands positioned throughout the concert space. Crawling over the stage, around each other, and among the audience, they created a wonderfully complex sculpture and sound texture. Cage, sitting in the middle of it all, was clearly pleased.

For me, the best of the afternoon concerts was that given by Mitchell Clark and Company; it revealed the striking originality and variety of Cage's musical conceptions even early in his career. *Amores* (1943) for prepared piano, nine tom-toms, seven wood blocks, and a pod-rattle was the clearest example of Cage's technique of composing with complex, interlocking rhythmic structures; or at least so it seemed the day after having heard Thomas Moore analyze it.

The programme also included the *Suite for Toy Piano* (1948), *Imaginary Landscape No. 5* (1952) for forty-two records (realized on tape), *Water Music* (1952) for piano,

radio, and submerged whistle, and the most moving piece of this group, *Inlets* (1977). During this piece four players tilted twelve water-filled conch shells this way and that to produce gentle gurgling noises which were amplified. About half way through the piece came the sound of fire as other performers burnt pine cones outside; then, again from outside, one long sounding of a conch blown like a trumpet.

The performances of the works for larger ensembles were of uneven quality. The *Concerto for Prepared Piano and Orchestra* (1951), discussed in a paper by James Prichett was a pivotal work in Cage's development, incorporating chance and determined processes, the equality of sound and silence, and the primacy of the individual musical event. The soloist Jon Barlow and the conductor Melvin Strauss brought out the many subtle layers of meaning in this work. In *Atlas Eclipticalis* (1961) Cage based the pitch choices for all eighty-six parts on star maps and dedicated each part to individual friends or couples, many of them members of the Wesleyan community where Cage was working. On the evidence of this performance it remains a popular work at Wesleyan. The performance of the *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* (1957-8) did not live up to my image of this masterpiece. Perhaps I have been irreparably imprinted by the recording of its première at the Town Hall Retrospective in New York City in 1958, one reason why Cage has rarely been enthusiastic about recording his work.

The *Song Books* (1970) are a compendium of Cage's compositional techniques before 1970, and an embodiment of musical anarchy. The score for each of the 89 solos which make up the piece indicates whether it is a song or a theatre piece, whether it is to be performed alone or with electronics, and whether it is relevant or irrelevant to the subject 'we connect Satie with Thoreau'. Performers may present any number of solos in any order, with any superimpositions, for any length of time. The hundreds of objects and actions used by the four members of the American Music/Theater Group for 90 minutes added up to a very satisfying performance.

For the final concert, the Arditti Quartet played the engaging *String Quartet in Four Parts* (1949-1950), the divisions of which signify not only the four string parts but also the seasons of the year, representing creation, preservation, destruction, and quiescence. They also played two recent works for string quartet, both demonstrating Cage's interest in accommodating variable relationships among the players' parts. Each instrument in *Thirty Pieces for String Quartet* (1983) may begin each of its 30 sections at any point within a 45 second time period, and end it within a 75 second period. *Music for Four* (1987), which the Arditti Quartet premièred here with impeccable technique, is similar, but here the flexibility of beginnings and endings varies even more than it does in *Thirty Pieces*. Also, Cage has employed chance operations to determine the ranges used by the four players in each section. The floating mosaic forms of these pieces contain a huge and gratifying diversity of compositional techniques.

The only dance work in the festival was Cage's *Four Walls* (1944) choreographed by Sin Cha Hong who, with the pianist Margaret Leng Tan and the mezzo-soprano Isabelle Ganz, performed it beautifully. Merce Cunningham, Cage's closest domestic and professional partner for the last 40 years, wrote the words to *Four Walls*, but he was not at the festival; nor unfortunately were any of the visual artists, such as Robert Rauschenberg, who have been important to Cage's

development over the years.

Nevertheless, 'John Cage at Wesleyan' was an exciting and significant contribution to the understanding of Cage's music, art, social thought, and philosophy. John Cage is a person of tolerance, warmth, and kindness and these characteristics seemed to permeate the atmosphere of the festival, where anarchy and mindfulness combined in a splendid tribute to a great composer.

¹ Mesostics are like acrostics in that individual letters in each line of a text form words or phrases when combined vertically. In acrostics it is the first letter of each line that forms the word, whereas in Cage's mesostics the designated letters may fall anywhere in the line. Cage explains how he applied the mesostic principle to *Finnegans Wake* on p.134 of his *Empty Words* (London and Boston: Marion Boyars, 1980).

² Kostelanetz also revealed that Harvard University has recently offered Cage the Charles Eliot Norton Chair of Poetics.