EXPERIMENTATIONS

John Cage in Music, Art, and Architecture

Branden W. Joseph

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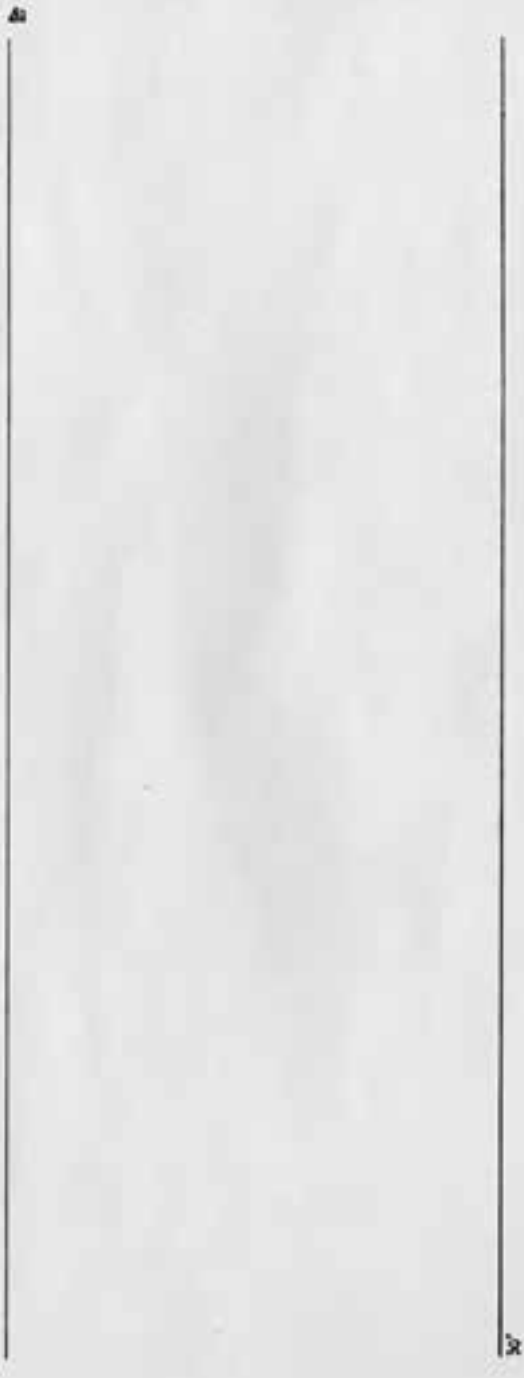
Figure 1 John Cage, *4′33″*, 1952. Score in proportional notation, 1953. Key and first page.



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Contents

Acknowledgments

In many ways, this book could be considered my first, since working through the legacies of John Cage's music, thought, and writing was a prerequisite for the investigations I have made into "neo-dada" art and minimal tendencies in art, music, and experimental film over the course of nearly two decades. During this time, my research has benefited from a great many individuals and institutions. Particular thanks are due to all those who generously read and commented on earlier versions of these chapters: Danielle Fosler-Lussier, David Grubbs, Hannah Higgins, Doug Kahn, Rebecca Kim, Reinhold Martin, David Patterson, Ben Piekut, and Julia Robinson, and, before all of them, Yve-Alain Bois, Norman Bryson, and Benjamin H.D. Buchloh. Thanks are also due to my editors at Bloomsbury, Ally-Jane Grossan, Michelle Chen, and Leah Babb-Rosenfeld, to project manager Balaji Kasirajan, and to Gabriel Rodriguez and Emily Shaw at the Media Center for Art History, Columbia University. Heartfelt gratitude is due to Laura Kuhn of the John Cage Trust, whose knowledge, generosity, and support have marked the entire field of Cage studies. Thanks also to Nancy Perloff of the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, and to the staffs of the Northwestern University Music Library in Evanston, Illinois, the Columbia University Libraries in New York, and the New York Public Library, as well as New York University's Bobst Library, which has served as a particularly valuable and hospitable site for my research on Cage over a great many years. For help with images and permissions, thanks are also due to Gene Caprioglio of C.F. Peters Corporation, Hannah Higgins, Julia Robinson, and Christian Xatrec. Extra special thanks are due, as always, to Felicity D. Scott for everything.

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Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona [MACBA], 2009); and "*HPSCHD*—Ghost or Monster?" in *Mainframe Experimentalism: Early Computing and the Foundations of the Digital Arts*, ed. Hannah B. Higgins and Douglas Kahn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012). Much of the research in Chapters 1, 4, and 5 first appeared in my Ph.D. dissertation "Experimental Art: John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg, and the Neo-Avant-Garde" (1999). Although I have endeavored in all cases to take into account the current state of Cage research, the chapters that follow inevitably reflect, and are no doubt limited by, the contexts and circumstances of their original publication. Throughout these essays, I have elected not to retain the beautiful eccentricities of Cage's often chance-derived typographical innovations.

List of Illustrations

Introduction: Interpenetrations and Displacements

In the summer of 1966, the *Tulane Drama Review* published a letter to the editor by Allan Kaprow. In it, he questioned the prominence given to John Cage and Marshall McLuhan in the journal's special issue on happenings, a genre of artistic performance with which he had been closely associated since the debut of *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* (1959) (Figure I.1). Kaprow characterized

Figure I.1 Allan Kaprow, *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*, 1959.

the significance afforded to the American composer and the Canadian media theorist as "oversimplified," proposing, ultimately, that it was "really unfair to these men."[1] In actuality, since McLuhan's name only appeared briefly toward the end of Michael Kirby and Richard Schechner's interview with Cage, it was almost certainly toward Cage that Kaprow primarily directed his response (Figure I.2).

Cage had indeed figured prominently throughout the issue, both in the editors' lengthy interview and in Kirby's opening, overview essay, "The New Theatre," which pronounced him "the touchstone" of happenings, Fluxus events, and

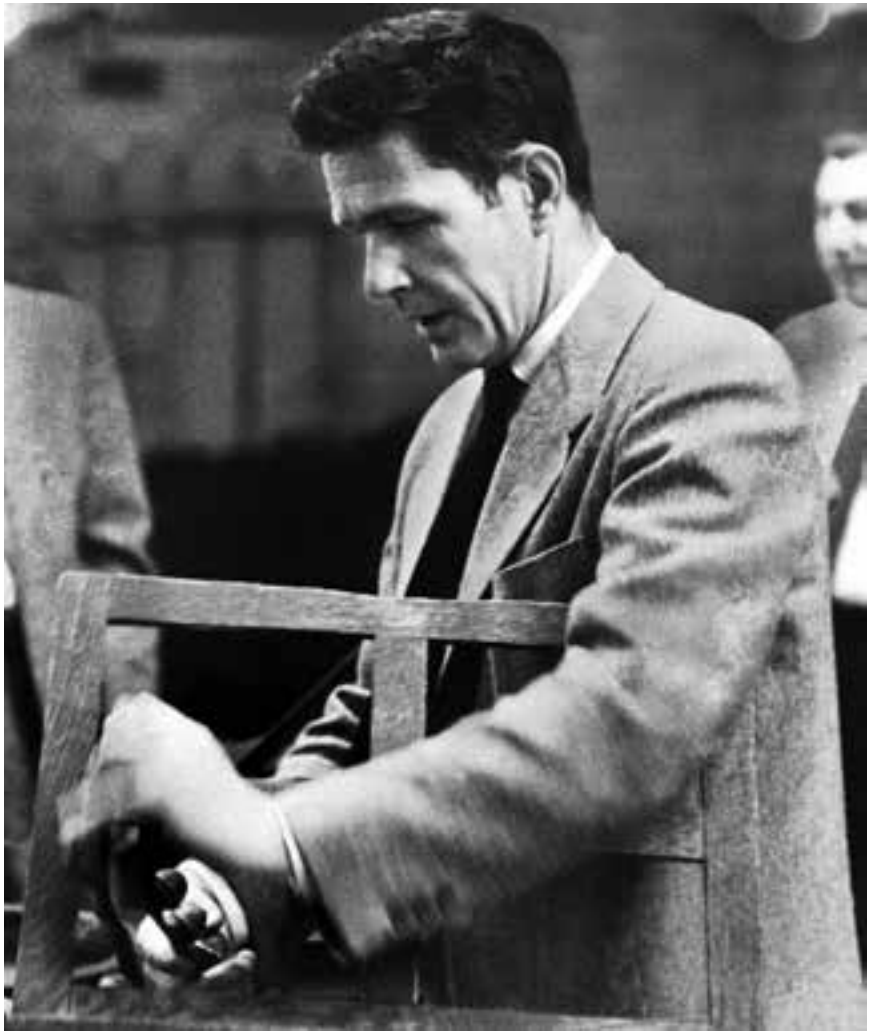

Figure I.2 John Cage, 1958.

"chance theatre" pieces such as Jackson MacLow's *The Marrying Maiden* (1959).[2] Contending that "Cage's thought, in his teaching, writing, lectures, and works, is the backbone of the new theatre," Kirby discussed Cage's Black Mountain College Event (*Theatre Event #1*, 1952) and *Theatre Piece* (1960), his interest in chance operations and arraying musicians throughout the available space, and the acoustic intermingling of "art" and "life" effected by his infamous silent composition *4′33″* (1952).[3] Kaprow, as the most active and visible proponent of the happening, not surprisingly blanched at being positioned as a mere epigone, his attendance of Cage's experimental composition courses at the New School deployed, however inadvertently, to make him appear as something of a student following the iconoclastic composer's lead.

It was almost certainly not Kirby's essay, however, that inspired Kaprow's letter, but rather the unexpectedly harsh criticism lobbed his way in Kirby and Schechner's interview. In discussing the question of intention, Cage disparaged Kaprow's turn toward increasingly evident symbolism in happenings like *The Courtyard* (1962), where Letty Eisenhower appeared in the guise of "the Earth Mother" (Figure I.3).[4] "She is the nature goddess (Mother Nature)," Kaprow explained in Kirby's *Happenings: An Illustrated Anthology*, which Cage had clearly read. "She is either benign, yielding nature or devouring, cruel nature … she was Aphrodite (Miss America) as well—a goddess of Beauty, which is another subdivision of the large, benign nature image."[5] Cage clearly found the whole business retrograde. In appealing to such symbols, he declared, "You're involved in a whole thing that we have been familiar with since the Renaissance and before."[6] More consequential, however, was Cage's denunciation of Kaprow's obliging the audience of *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* to move from room to room as a "policed moment"—an illegitimate imposition of force.[7]

Clearly stung, Kaprow responded by distancing himself from the composer's aesthetic parentage. "Cage's indirect stimulation should not be underestimated," he declared,

> but to place upon him the burden of sponsorship for a range of activities which in part he had nothing to do with, and which in part he is not comfortable with, is to do him a disservice. I do not know how McLuhan feels about this, but Cage is apparently uncomfortable with his assigned role; his interview in T30 [the special issue of *Tulane Drama Review*] made that perfectly clear.[8]

After emphasizing the happening's roots in futurism, dada, surrealism, and abstract expressionism (a lineage that, in fact, Kirby had indicated toward the

Figure I.3 Allan Kaprow, *The Courtyard*, 1962.

end of "The New Theatre"), Kaprow moved to downplay the significance of Cage's New School courses. "I did my first Happenings in his classroom," he conceded. "Yet I possibly learned things which Cage was not inclined to teach, although I was quite satisfied. This is reason enough to relieve him of any responsibility for my different interests."[9] Even in attempting to distance himself from Cage, however, Kaprow betrayed how closely their legacies were interwoven. His line about relieving Cage of responsibility was only a thinly veiled paraphrase of Cage's own response to critiques leveled against him in the 1950s. "I am told that Alan Watts has questioned the relation between my work and Zen," Cage noted in the first pages of his book *Silence*. "I mention this in order to free Zen of any responsibility for my actions."[10] Kaprow clearly expected the allusion to be recognized, and his message was presumably the same as that of Cage to Watts. As Cage stated about his heretical actions, "I shall continue making them, however."[11]

Cage and Kaprow's disagreement will be taken up again in Chapter 5 within the context of the monumental, multimedia opus *HPSCHD* (1967–69) that Cage composed with Lejaren Hiller. Here, however, I wish simply to draw attention to two evident but nonetheless important factors in their exchange. The first concerns its cross-disciplinary nature. Given how long Cage has figured within art historical discourse, one tends to overlook the fact that he was, and remained, primarily a composer ("a professional composer," in the words of Henry Flynt), however much he had expanded that designation by the mid-1960s, while Kaprow was a visual artist (equally professionally, holding positions at various universities) with a background in painting and collage.[12] Because of Cage's close association with Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns (Figure I.4), with the abstract expressionists before them, and with Marcel Duchamp, this fact hardly seems remarkable—indeed, Cage dismisses it as such in his interview with Kirby and Schechner.[13] Nevertheless, it is a testament to Cage's unique status within the visual arts that one could scarcely imagine Kaprow feeling pressed to respond to similar or even worse criticism from, say, Aaron Copland, Milton Babbitt, or Karlheinz Stockhausen, or even Richard Maxfield or Henry Cowell, to name two other composers whose New School courses appealed to visual artists. (As a point of contrast, it might be noted that neither the theater actor George Grizzard nor the director Alan Schneider, both of whom came in for much harsher and more personal criticism during Cage's interview with Kirby and Schechner, felt the need to reply despite the *Tulane Drama Review*'s significance for their field.)

Figure I.4 Bill Giles, Anna Moreska, Robert Rauschenberg, Merce Cunningham, John Cage, and Jasper Johns at Dillon's Bar, New York, 1959.

Although primarily devoted to Cage's music and thought, this book nonetheless approaches him from a perspective rooted in art history, my primary discipline, examining his work and writings with an eye toward what they gained from and contributed to the visual arts, including architecture. However much is drawn from the literature and methodologies of musicology, this art historical perspective clearly influences the types of questions raised, the specific compositional techniques and aesthetic strategies examined, and the interlocutors (like Kaprow) afforded particular prominence. The study of twentieth-century art has long been concerned with issues of the relationship of artistic practice to commodification, the interactions between the historical avant-garde movements of the 1910s and 1920s and their neo-avant-garde

counterparts after World War II, and the associated topics of collage, montage, perceptual estrangement, and the readymade. The essays collected in this volume are all marked by such concerns, which, as I hope to have shown, seem legitimately to have been Cage's as well. But those concerns are likely not the most pronounced aspect of the art historical perspective brought to bear on Cage's production. That is rather to be found in the manner in which attention is given less to individual scores or compositions than to a succession of aesthetic strategies, techniques, or concepts developed over the course of Cage's career. Making such practices legible is, to some degree, what this book sets out to accomplish, and it involves not only the isolation and exploration of terms such as "space," "silence," "transparency," "multiplicity," and "actualization," but also the formulation—even, in some sense, the formalization—of them as distinct strategies with consistencies that have heretofore often gone unrecognized.

The most relevant art historical precedent for such an approach is found in the study of Duchamp, whose legacy has been understood as a series of distinct conceptual strategies (including chance, the readymade, the index, "precision optics," "pictorial nominalism," even the transvestism of Rrose Sélavy), the reception of which can be traced through a number of progressive phases.[14] Within art history, however, Duchamp's precedent has generally been utilized to minimize, dismiss, or negate the significance of Cage, as the latter is presented as simply repeating the elder dadaist's innovations or merely conveying them to a new generation. The following investigations, by contrast, point toward a much greater distinction between the two figures than generally acknowledged. As outlined, for instance, in Chapter 3, the Duchampian strategy of the readymade seems less important for Cage than the relatively lesser known engagement with issues of space and transparency that brought Duchamp's *The Large Glass* together with Mies van der Rohe's glass architecture. Similarly, as argued in Chapter 4, Cage left the chance techniques of the historical avant-garde behind in the 1950s for a more complex engagement with issues of indeterminacy, multiplicity, and actualization. It is surely a mark of something more like parity between the composer and the artist that minimal sculptor Robert Morris could equate their contributions, writing to a skeptical Flynt in 1962, "The problem has been for some time one of ideas—those most admired are the ones with the biggest, most incisive ideas (e.g. Cage & Duchamp)."[15]

The second notable feature of Cage and Kaprow's exchange in *Tulane Drama Review* concerns the fact that it revolved around issues of political, rather than merely aesthetic import. Especially (although not solely) for readers

approaching Cage from the discipline of art history, where he is routinely discussed as apolitical, this may be somewhat more striking than his high regard in artistic circles. However, as argued beginning in Chapter 1, certain social and political concerns motivated Cage's work almost from its inception, and an attentiveness to them is important for understanding the direction and stakes of his subsequent development. At the same time, though, as I contend in Chapter 5, the limitations of Cage's aesthetic project may be approached via certain antinomies in the avowedly anarchist political outlook he adopted and espoused beginning in 1960. For a brief period around 1972, partly on account of a fleeting and precarious alliance with Maoism, Cage's aesthetic and political project effectively turned against itself, severely compromising the liberatory goals he had pursued for nearly three decades. This book concludes with a reflection on this cautionary moment in Cage's artistic development.

*

The approach taken in the following chapters traverses, to some extent, what Benjamin Piekut has recently characterized as two distinct stages of Cage's musicological reception. As Piekut outlines it in the introduction to his book *Experimentalism Otherwise*, "The first wave of Cage studies that appeared in the late 1980s and early 1990s was concerned with legitimating the composer's music in an environment that had been all too quick to dismiss him as nothing more than a philosopher and writer."[16] To accomplish this task, musicologists adopted "the methodology of archival recovery and explication," employing textual exegesis and score analysis, reconstructing historical timelines and contexts, and establishing paths of compositional development.[17] "This approach," Piekut rightfully maintains, "creates and stresses continuities between Cage and the Western European tradition by concentrating on scores and sketches—which extend the network [of experimental composers] in time and give it further stability once they are housed in an archive—while simultaneously attenuating the ruptural possibilities of his work."[18]

Although Piekut leaves the definition of the second wave of Cage studies implicit, its contours are exemplified by his own research, which interrogates the "network" of experimental composers not just for moments of continuity, but also for points of division, heterogeneity, and even conflict in order to comprehend the particular range of allowances and prohibitions that were afforded to, or asserted by, musicians and composers who realized Cage's works and/or looked to his example. By examining such interactions, Piekut aims not simply to chart,

but also to question the relations by and within which experimental musical practices—what he terms "actually existing experimentalism"—have been defined.[19] In *Experimentalism Otherwise*, Piekut perceptively analyzes such incidents as the New York Philharmonic's 1964 performance of *Atlas Eclipticalis* (1961), which provoked resistance among members of the orchestra, and cellist Charlotte Moorman's realization of *26'1.1499" for a String Player* (1955), which elicited a censorious response from Cage, who described it as tantamount to "murder." Other "second wave" Cage studies would include Rebecca Y. Kim's examination of Cage's collaboration with the AACM-associated Joseph Jarman Quartet in 1965, Sara Heimbecker's critique of the de facto exclusion of African-American audiences from *HPSCHD* due to Cage and Hiller's institutional affiliation with the University of Illinois, and Ryan Dohoney's analysis of Cage's forceful repudiation of African-American composer and musician Julius Eastman's homoerotic 1975 realization of *Song Books* (1970).[20]

Piekut, Kim, Heimbecker, and Dohoney all draw upon George E. Lewis's incisive, and now canonic, critique of the cultural segregation induced by Cage's conceptual and terminological distinction between the musical legacies of indeterminacy and improvisation, what Lewis has termed the "Eurological" and the "Afrological" approaches to spontaneity within the lineage of experimental music.[21] Presciently demonstrated by such second wave investigations into the conflicts and exclusions surrounding Cage's oeuvre is not so much the existence of unacknowledged contradictions within Cage's practice—that, for instance, he preached an aesthetic of "anything goes" in theory, but disallowed it in fact—but, more accurately and consequentially, the presence of a series of limitations constitutive of Cage's aesthetic outlook: that a statement such as "Actually, anything does go but only when nothing is taken as the basis" authorizes only a delimited set of allowances and prohibitions, ones that all too frequently, but not exclusively, founder on the question of racial difference.[22]

This line of inquiry intersects with another, which examines the potential relationship between Cage's compositional output and his sexual orientation. Here, the pathbreaking work of art historians Caroline A. Jones and Jonathan D. Katz has been central, their investigations more recently joined and extended by musicologists like Philip Gentry and Dohoney.[23] This area of research maps out an equally important series of prohibitions and refusals: the cultural prohibition on openly expressed homosexuality within the McCarthyite America of the 1950s, in the first instance; the potential complicities with and/or resistances to such measures effected by Cagean silence, in the second; and, with another turn