

Talkin' 'bout my Generation | Roundtable #7 GALLERY OQBO BERLIN 2021

INTERVIEW

As you hear, you hear nothing / Cage's 4'33'' - still relevant today ?

MICHAEL BAUSE asks 5 questions to:

GABRIELE KNAPSTEIN | Director Hamburger Bahnhof - Museum für Gegenwart - Berlin; ARNOLD DREYBLATT | Artist and Composer, Berlin; DUO SILK / ANNA BUCK, JOHANNES SCHNEEBERGER | Musicians* and Composers*, Berlin

Michael Bause:

As part of the Talkin' 'bout my Generation series of talks, Round #7 is about music. One hundred years ago John Cage was born, one of the most important composers of the 20th century. His 4 minutes and 33 seconds of silence is legendary.

On August 29, 1952, pianist David Tudor performed John Cage's piece 4'33" for the first time. The concert at the Maverick Concert Hall near Woodstock created a moderate uproar in the audience. Not as tumultuous as, say, after Stravinsky's *Le sacre du printemps* premiere, but still so violent that it went down in music history. Cage had decreed that the performing musician not operate his instrument - for four and a half minutes.

Through 4'33", the noises of the room, the clearing of throats in the audience, the mounting discontent became audible all at once. Tudor himself saw in the piece "one of the most intense listening experiences you can have." In other words, "4'33" is an expansion of the concept of what music is and can be, produced with the simplest of means.

1. hundred years ago John Cage was born, one of the most important composers of the 20th century. His 4 minutes and 33 seconds of silence are legendary.

Today nobody gets upset about 4'33" anymore. The character of the piece is discussed now and then, but its legitimacy is not.

Does this radical attitude from 1952 still influence contemporary thinking about music today?

Dreyblatt:

In many ways, the implications of 4'33" are just as relevant today, if not more so, depending on how widely or narrowly we interpret his gesture. 4'33" certainly took western music tradition to its logical conclusion, allowing one to begin anew. If the legitimacy of the work is no longer questioned, now that Cage has entered the canon, I think that the work permanently altered how we understand composition and performance, along with our reception to it. This is especially true if we might enlarge our consideration to encompass how we experience the world with all of our senses and rethink our roles as artists/composers/makers. One need only look at his early influence through his classes in the 50's at the New School in New York on artists such as George Brecht, Allan Kaprow and others.

It's interesting to compare a precursor to 4'33" Cage has described a composition he created in the late 1940's called "Silent Prayer". The work contained a few minutes of silent music which he later proposed to sell to the MUSAK company for distribution in their networks as "canned silence". I think that at this point, he still thought of silence as the absence of sound, so it's interesting to understand this as a kind of anti-

capitalist conceptual statement, selling a minutes of “nothing” to the Musak corporation.

On the other hand, 4'33", is composed completely within and as a provocation within the format of the western classical music tradition. All of the cultural signifiers are present - a notated score in standard music notation in which the minutes and seconds are translated into musical bars indicating “TACET”, that is, do nothing. There is an audience seated before a proscenium which probably hosted conventional music before and after 4'33". There is a musician, most likely a pianist, who performs all of the necessary actions required by convention. He is well-dressed, he walks to the piano (it is most often played on piano but can be performed on any instrument) he sits down, and in the first performance David Tudor closes the keyboard cover when the music began and opened it to mark the end.

I always found it interesting that Cage, who had life-long relationships with visual artists, choreographers, etc., and whose work moves across so many boundaries, seemed to feel most “at home” in the company of composers and in the millieu of the contemporary music world. Yet, if we look at the gesture of closing and opening the keyboard cover as a kind of parenthesis which marks a period of time (or as in the pressing of the stopwatch), we see a connection to his concept of “time brackets” from “Theater Event No. 1” from 1952. We know that in this performance, participating resident artists at Black Mountain College performed simultaneous activities of their own choice within pre-determined time periods, indicated on an informal score which only indicated beginning and ending times. I think that there has always been a tension in Cage’s work, from his interest in addressing the “problems” of 20th century music composition leading to the conceptual consequences of his thinking.

He belonged to a generation of artists, anarchists and counter-cultural figures who understood their practice as a call to “change the world”, and his extensive writing reflect this.

2) What was your first encounter with Cage like and did John Cage change and influence you, your approach to music?

Dreyblatt:

I was first introduced to Cage in 1973 by my literature professor in college (Irving J. Weiss) who had experienced the legendary “ONCE Group” in Ann Arbor. He played us the recording of Cage’s “Variations IV” and we discussed Cage’s ideas by reading “A Year from Monday”. Buckminster Fuller also visited the college in that year, and Cage and Fuller were part of a canon of alternative, revolutionary and anarchic thinking (also including Marshall McLuan Norman O. Brown many others) that permeated the arts and the general culture at that time.

My first personal encounter with John Cage was as a graduate student of Media Arts at the State University of New York in Buffalo in 1975 where I attended a workshop which Cage gave as part of "Creative Associates Summer in Buffalo". I had studied with Pauline Oliveros in the previous summer program, and she remained my first “music teacher” and enabler, rather than Cage. These workshops and the accompanying concerts were only open to music students, but Morton Feldman, chairman of the music department at the time, allowed me to participate.

In the following years as a young artist and composer in New York City, I often noted Cage's presence at cultural and social events in downtown Manhattan where he always made himself readily accessible to those around him, readily offering practical, financial and emotional support whenever needed. My memories contrast greatly with his reverential treatment in Europe, especially in academic music circles. I last saw him in the summer of 1990 at a performance of his "Musicircus" in the Kollwitzplatz in Prenzlauer Berg. He gave a lecture in a nearby storefront and the largely East-German public could hardly understand a word he said. But he had that famous infectious laugh, and they all laughed with him!

I think that Cage is certainly a reference for all those who identify with contemporary music in all formats. In my time, we were influenced by him because of his fearless ideas, his humor and personality and of course by his iconic stature. He saw himself as a spokesman for a generation and its principles and he carried that position and responsibility without regrets until his death.

Yet he was certainly not my only point of reference nor was I primarily influenced by him in terms of my own music performance and compositional practices. The composer Robert Ashley once wrote that Cage "never really understood the drone". He also did not like jazz, pop or any musical references or associations that might reek of rhythm and lowbrow references. He was primarily interested in strategies that would cause unexpected and often overlapping events. He was never interested in the acoustic components of sound itself. It is interesting that La Monte Young, my most important teacher and known as one of the first composers primarily concerned with sustained pitches and harmonic timbre, told me that he was very influenced by Cage's ideas in his early conceptual performance works as an early member of Fluxus and he retained a relationship with Cage throughout his career.

As my own work became increasingly text-based both in performance and in installation, I have re-examined Cage's oeuvre in textual composition. In "A Year from Monday" he writes, "The thought has sometimes occurred to me that my pleasure in composition, renounced as it has been in the field of music, continues in the field of writing words, and that explains why, recently, I write so much." My own interests in the visual and audio perception of fragmentary layers of textual content are mirrored in Cage's first visual work "Not Wanting to Say Anything About Marcel (1969)" and in his extensive experimentation in printed text layout, non-linearity and reading-performance. In 2011 I created a series of lenticular panel artworks for an exhibition in the Akademie der Künste which were based on my original copy of the 1967 paperback edition of "A Year from Monday". The texts were randomly chosen from sentences in which either the words "text", "writing" or "reading" occur. These fragments were perceivable from particular viewing positions and overwrite each other as in a palimpsest.

In Cage's seminal performance at Black Mountain in the summer of 1952, Theater Event No. 1, participating resident artists performed coinciding activities of their own choice within pre-determined "time-brackets," while at the same time moving throughout the audience, which was seated in four triangular areas. I have been experimenting with scored overlapping time sequences in my performative installations since the mid-1990's, most recently in "PERFORMING the Black Mountain ARCHIVE" within the exhibition "Black Mountain: An Interdisciplinary Experiment, 1933–1957" at the Hamburger Bahnhof in 2015.

3) The entire oeuvre of John Cage seems to be fully explored, is there anything new (important) to discover in Cage's work for today?

Dreyblatt:

Perhaps one could attempt to peer behind the veneer of Cage's iconic status as a composer. To date, most of the writing and criticism on Cage has unfortunately been monopolized by the musicologists. I think that it is especially important today to examine Cage's oeuvre as a writer-philosopher, as well as from the position of theater, performance and conceptual art. In terms of theater/performance, one might look more closely at the performative strategies of such important works as "HRPSCHRD" or the later "Europera" as well as numerous other examples such as "Water Walk" which has recently become popular with a younger generation on "Youtube".

I am currently involved with the realization of an exhibition which is inspired by Cage's interrelated concepts for "Rolywholyover" and "Museumcircle" - projects originally conceived as a revolving non-hierarchical display for museum or other art spaces. Cage planned for the artworks to be re-located every day, in a circulation with a storage depot, what he called the "Reservoir", with the result that a viewer who returns a second time would not witness the same exhibition. The project, entitled "Archive Carousel", which is planned for June in this year, is inspired by Cage's concept in drawing upon the enormous archive of the Akademie der Künste in Berlin rather than museum holdings.

Furthermore, there are many misunderstandings as to Cage's ideas and his person, which often conflict with the clichés which have developed over the years. Carolyn Brown's memoirs, "Chance and Circumstance" is a case in point. Brown, the most important dancer with Merce Cunningham's company and at one time married to the composer Earle Brown (a close associate of Cage), travelled with Cunningham and his company over many, many years. It is most surprising to learn about Cage's role as entrepreneur, manager and publicist in the early years of the company. Brown often refers to the flip-side of Cage's optimistic and open personality: he could be intolerant and irascible when things didn't go his way, a characteristic that is supported by many who have worked with him.

Also, his ideas about chance and Indeterminacy were not as open to all sounds in all circumstances as one many assume. In 1974, John Cage performed "Empty Words Part IV" in front of an audience of Tibetan buddhist students at the Naropa Institute in Colorado. In residence at the institute were such figures as Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs. Cage's performance over many hours and including long silences proved to be too much for an audience on meditation cushions, and they started to make their own sounds, sing along and heckle him. He stopped the performance in anger, explaining that his intention was to hear the sounds around one and not to produce sound out of one's own "ego". In the same year, Julius Eastman realized a performance of Cage's "Songbooks" at the "Creative Associates Summer in Buffalo" which I attended. Cage adherents Morton Feldman, Gordon Mumma, Christian Wolff and Earle Brown sat in the audience. In his realization, Eastman seduced a young white man on stage. As they began to take their clothes off, Cage stood up in shock and stopped the performance, again exclaiming that this was not his intention. Cage was from a generation in which homosexuality was never discussed, and the spectacle of an Afro-American gay man (then already a respected vocalist and composer) seducing a young white man has only been researched and discussed in recent years.

4) What is left of John Cage? A classic or how does the concert(art)world remember John Cage nowadays?

e.g. - For its 40th birthday Mute now afforded a box with 58 cover versions of 4'33", which refers to the name of the label: Mute, which also means mute in German. Interpreted by pop stars like Depeche Mode, New Order or Moby, avant-garde greats like Einstürzende Neubauten as well as newcomers like Lost Under Heaven. Unfortunately, the transfer of this idea into the Mute cosmos only works to a limited extent. What do you think of such a treatment of the Cage piece?

Dreyblatt:

As I have already mentioned, 4'33", was originally composed for a dialog between musical score, concert and audience according to traditional classical music rituals. The realization of the work was either in reading the score and thereby considering its implications or to be present as performer or audience at a concert performance. The Mute set arrives in the form of the recorded event. As far as I know, Cage himself never attempted or conceived a recorded version of 4'33", though perhaps his earlier composition "Silent Prayer" is closer to contemporary treatments such as in this production. The tracks preference the recorded situation, perhaps reflecting our increasing interaction with the world through our digital screens (from which we order our music streams). It is interesting to compare the object which we hold in our hands (a box set) with the holding of a musical score. Many of those who participated in this project would find the concept of a classical score quite foreign, and perhaps undecipherable. The various invited participants on the Muse edition tried diverse strategies, mostly resulting in the recording of the sounds which are present in their respective spaces at the moment. The sounds arising from an audience squirming in their seats, the isolated coughs are missing. The live concert has become, especially in these pandemic times, an afterthought! So finally we are very far from the score and the concert, and we remain ironically in the realm of the recorded medium.

I am reminded of a video installation by the sound artist Tyler Adams called "Performing Silence" (2009). In a large projection, we see a checkerboard of "Youtube" videos (whose visual format echoes our current Zoom sessions) in which young naïve-looking musicians from all genres set-up and then simultaneously attempt a performance of 4'33" while staring innocently and impatiently at a webcam. The work, in democratizing Cage's original concept, dismisses some aspects of 4'33" while amplifying others.

I do find it generally positive and sometimes refreshing that Cage's ideas and practices might re-circulate only to be digested by those outside academic circles.

5. What distinguishes the reception of Cage in your "own" generation, from the previous or the next?

Dreyblatt:

There is a distance that exists both temporarily and even geographically to the source generation. I may not have had the privilege of knowing Cage as a contemporary or even as a younger follower, but I feel lucky to have experienced him directly within the North American context. As I became aware of Cage, he was

certainly a major figure but had not yet reached the iconic status of later years. He was not yet accepted in the academies across the States outside of a few friends and supporters who had teaching jobs at Universities. In Europe, where the influence of Boulez and Stockhausen held court for many years, there was certainly an interchange of ideas – Cage had early contacts with both of them - but he was still seen as an American “do-it-yourselfer” as in the likes of Buckminster Fuller, Harry Partch and many others. Though he was born and spent his early years in California, reflecting his early interest in non-western ideas, in the rigorousness of his conception he seems to me “very’ East Coast. He lived mostly in and around New York City for most of his life and was very much a participant in the early “downtown” avantgarde circles or the 50’s and 60’s up until his death.

It is the task of each generation to criticize, reject, re-digest and even renew. He will remain a force to be reckoned with. As the world becomes more flattened through the instantaneous reception of content, some of the Cage’s ideas will become even more pertinent and others will seem out-of-date. Though Cage’s compositional strategies seeked a liberation of the performer and a re-thinking of the reception of sound, he always had a definitive sense of the intended result and he often rejected that which was outside his orbit– to the point of seeming quite conservative at times. Even as he was an active propogandist for the sensibilities of the 60’s, I think that he might feel a bit uncomfortable in a world that is focused on debating such issues of identity, gender, low vs. high culture and post-colonialism.

But that is not to say that there is no space to re-imagine Cage!