
The Anarchy of Silence

John Cage and Experimental Art

23 October 2009 – 10 January 2010

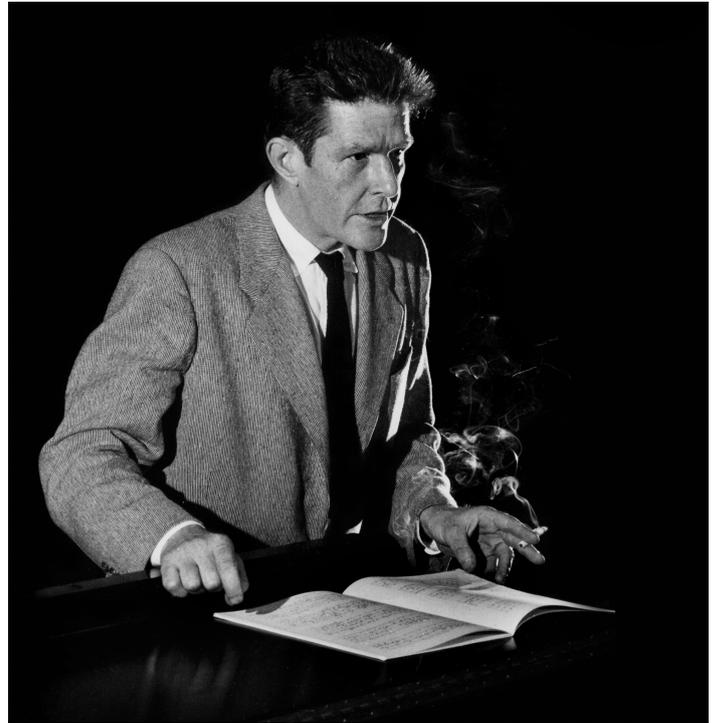
If this word, music, is sacred... we can substitute a more meaningful term: organization of sound.

John Cage, *The Future of Music: Credo*, 1940

The American composer John Cage (1912–1992) defined a radical practice of “experimental” musical composition that not only changed the course of modern music and dance, but generated a new horizon for the art of the late-twentieth century. Born in Los Angeles, Cage moved to New York in the early 1940s, performed extensively in Europe throughout the 1950s, and made an international name for himself by continually questioning the conventions of music. Cage’s more than fifty-year career ushered in numerous formal, structural, temporal, and media innovations that remain cornerstones of contemporary consciousness.

The present exhibition offers the first historicization of his practice, and the precise field of transformations that placed musical structures at the forefront of advanced art. The exhibition moves through Cage’s career, decade by decade: from percussion music (1930s), to “prepared piano” compositions (1940s), to chance and indeterminacy (1950s), to new media (1960s onward), through to the political focus that ever more explicitly informed the works of the last decades of his life.

In his percussion pieces of the 1930s, Cage tried to introduce a spectrum of unfamiliar sounds using unorthodox “instruments,” building on the moves of his modernist predecessors (from Edgard Varèse to Luigi Russolo). In so doing, he not only expanded the concept of percussion music, but discovered the important function of the structure of time, which was open to “noise” as well as conventionally understood musical sounds. Faced with the exigencies of creating music (and space) for dance – composing for choreographer Syvilla Fort’s *Bacchanale* (Seattle, 1940) – Cage “invented” the “prepared piano,” extending the move of his teacher Henry Cowell of opening the lid and sounding the strings directly. By inserting all manner of objects between the piano strings, Cage created a new spectrum of sounds, destabilizing a



John Cage, c. 1958. Photo by Aram Avakian

cornerstone of bourgeois culture in the process.

At the turn of the 1950s Cage was giving lectures in New York at The Artists Club in Greenwich Village, the headquarters of the Abstract Expressionist group of painters, and a brewing climate of machismo that could not have been more foreign to him. Fearless, Cage signaled the sweeping conceptual change at the core of his practice with his Eastern philosophy-inspired “Lecture on Nothing” (1950), and “Lecture on Something” (1951). It was at this time that his student Christian Wolff gave him a copy of the *I Ching*, the Chinese “Book of Changes,” which sparked Cage’s systematic use of “chance operations” (such as the tossing of coins and the consulting of chance answers drawn from this oracle) to generate all the variables (sound, dynamics, durations) for his compositions. Significantly, the chance operations also erased the traditional function of the author/composer. The new approach materialized in the complex *Music of Changes* (1951–52) whose full score appears here. Through the 1950s, before ever-more hostile audiences, Cage extended the idea of using “chance” in the process of writing the score, to chance in the realm of performance, with his concept of “Indeterminacy.”

The 1952 work for which Cage is best known, *4'33"* (or Four Minutes and Thirty-Three Seconds), incorporates both chance operations and Indeterminacy. Its only parameters are time, those four minutes and thirty-three seconds, marked out on the score with no notes in between the temporal brackets. Long simplified as Cage’s famous “silent” composition, visitors to this exhibition will see this score realized in several versions, revealing it as the dynamic conceptual object – changing in scope as Cage’s thought developed – that has secured its reputation as a landmark of the twentieth century. Moreover, the better to position *4'33"*, Cage’s contemporaneous scores using water and radios (*Water Music* and *Imaginary Landscape No. 4*, both 1952) are also shown.

The 1960s have long appeared as the peak decade to witness Cage’s impact on advanced art, and while this is so, the exhibition will reveal how the deep relevance of his work avant-garde artistic practice can be traced much earlier. The exceptional artistic example in Cage’s life, and thus in the present exhibition as well, is

Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968). Associated with the art movement known as Dada (1916–22), and inventor of the “readymade” – an everyday object inserted into the context of art to question its very conventions – Duchamp was also a pioneer of the use of chance. Duchamp and Cage met in New York in the 1940s and they collaborated on several occasions – from the late 1940s to the late 1960s, the end of Duchamp’s life – producing works that deployed visual elements, sound, and chance. While Cage developed his model of chance independently, and from an entirely different discipline to Duchamp’s, the latter held a singular position in relation to artistic practice and its conventions, which Cage instantly recognized. Just as Duchamp is understood as one of the most powerful conceptual forces of the twentieth century, Cage now emerges as the figure who took up this mantle, and anticipated the media-saturated landscape of postmodern and contemporary practice.

Because of its special position of exploring the work of a composer from the perspective of a museum of contemporary art, the exhibition considers Cage’s encounters with artists as a key part of the historicization of his practice. From Black Mountain College, North Carolina, and his meeting Robert Rauschenberg (between there and New York) at the turn of the 1950s, and his contact with Ellsworth Kelly in the same period in Paris, through his connections with the Fluxus artists, and Andy Warhol in the 1960s, we recognize how Cage’s project often dovetailed with theirs, albeit from the standpoint of “music” rather than “art.” Starting in 1968, Cage’s expansion of the parameters of composing led to a surprising emphasis on visual – or *theatrical* – elements (including several works composed expressly for appearances on television).

Cage’s commitment to rupturing the boundaries of his own discipline continually opened his practice to applications well beyond music. His courses at the New School for Social Research in New York in the period 1956–60, just as he was shaping his model of Indeterminacy and establishing his theory of “Experimental Composition,” became a workshop in which his challenging new concepts were transmitted directly to the next generation. Attesting to the interdisciplinary implications of his practice, the class included not only musicians, but concrete poets, and the artists who would create the time and performance-based activities known as Happenings, Events, and Fluxus. Meanwhile, Cage’s presence at the summer courses in Darmstadt (1958) was also significant for advanced art in Europe, and notably sparked the first forays into composing with television created by (the then Germany-based) Nam June Paik.

As media-specific categories dissolve, we find Cage at the center of practices without boundaries: his *Variations VII* (1966) formed part of Rauschenberg’s Experiments in Art & Technology (EAT). And we witness the arrival of Cage’s own, ever-expanding, media-based works such as the computer-generated slide, sound, and film piece *HPSCHD* of 1969 (represented in one of the last galleries of the exhibition). The final spaces of the show reveal Cage’s willingness to test the furthest reaches of technical and technological possibility. In diverse ways, the works deploy his politicized assaults on authorship and attention, as well as overt statements – as in the final large-scale installation *Lecture on the Weather* (1975) realized in 2008– and lectures such as “Overpopulation and Art” (1992). With a sense of finality and urgency, these bring us to the heart of Cage’s lifelong efforts. The final works illuminate the engaged rationale – the politics of anarchy – built on a foundation of tireless questioning. With this perspective, not even the most seemingly absurd gesture on Cage’s part, from his apparently “empty” score to his smiling television appearances,

can ever again be taken too lightly.

Cage’s music and his ideas are bound together in an engaged philosophical project – registered through the many formats through which he mapped their aims and commitments – based on the conviction that liberation from disciplinary conventions, from taste, and traditional models of subjectivity at an aesthetic level can infiltrate all aspects of an engaged *modus vivendi*. Though Cage’s avowal of anarchy was expressed comparatively late in his life, the premises for this position are present much earlier. Cage’s convictions, his ethics, his insistence on the fragility and preciousness of our perceptual competencies, are the abiding motivation behind his systematic undoing of disciplinary convention. Without them, the art of last fifty years might have unfolded very differently.

Julia Robinson

Activities

Friday 23 October

7.30 pm Lecture by Julia E. Robinson, curator of the exhibition
9 pm Concert: Margaret Leng Tan, piano
Selection of John Cage’s short piano pieces
MACBA Auditorium. Free admission. Limited seating

The Cage–Cunningham Autumn

The exhibition is accompanied by an extensive programme of activities (concerts, performances, screenings and workshops for families and young people), some of them featuring the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, directed until recently by Merce Cunningham, who was John Cage’s partner and companion for fifty years. These activities are part of the joint programme of different local institutions to honour two key figures of avant-garde art.

Further information www.macba.cat

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(Included in the ticket price)
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Saturdays at noon and 6 pm
Sundays and public holidays, at noon

Available in English every Monday (MACBA Collection)

Publication

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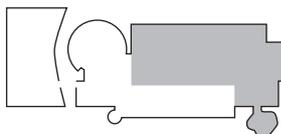
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Opening times

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