

# *Silence in an Age of Mass Media: John Cage and the Art of Living*

by Jonathan A. Anderson

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Silence and blankness have played a profound role in the development of twentieth- and twenty-first-century art—a role that generally grew in proportion to the proliferation of mass-media technologies in metropolitan life. With the advent of photographic and phonographic technologies—mechanical devices for recording and reproducing visual and sonic impressions of the world—the various corners of the earth became visually and aurally accessible in unprecedented ways. Discrete phenomena and sense perceptions could be captured, modified, and made available in repeatable forms to an indeterminate number of locations and moments—and in fact could be integrated into endless streams of multisensory, nationally broadcast media such as radio and television. The character and function of representations thus came to carry meaning in ways they never had before, increasingly deployed toward mass commercial and informational ends (namely, entertainment, advertising, and journalism).

In this context, many artists explored the necessities and possibilities for aesthetic stillness and silence. As mass media made the world increasingly accessible and

mediated, artists often explored inaccessibility, singularity, and the withholding of representation. What is often underappreciated in the writing of the history of modern art, however, is the extent to which modernist experiments in silence and blankness were oriented not only by the changing social and material conditions of modernity but also by religious and theological traditions that offered deep resources for thinking about these conditions. The aesthetic sparseness of Kazimir Malevich's "bare and frameless icon of our times," for example, or Robert Rauschenberg's early *Mother of God* (which led directly into his blank *White Paintings*) were directly informed by Christian traditions of apophatic theology. Indeed, similar examples of the theological background to modernist explorations of aesthetic silence are numerous in the history of twentieth-century art.<sup>1</sup>

The musician and composer John Cage (1912–1992) provides a fascinating case study in this matter. Cage was interested in testing the distinction between "music" (which exhibits some kind of structured intelligibility) and "noise" (unintelligible or unwanted happenstance). In questioning this distinction, he began borrowing some key insights from Eastern philosophy: "Quite a lot of people in India feel that music is continuous; it is only we who turn away."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, this notion provided the basis for one of the central ideas that subsequent artists would learn from Cage: the fundamental difference between music and noise is not in the qualities of the sounds but in the attentiveness of the listener.

Many of Cage's most salient insights into the nature of music emerge from his investigations into *silence*. In 1951, he visited an anechoic chamber at Harvard University in an effort to hear true and total silence. Upon exiting the chamber, Cage reported that (against his expectations) he actually heard two sustained sounds while inside—one high and one low—which he was informed were his eardrums picking up the activity of his nervous system (high) and the circulation of his blood (low). This was an enormous revelation to the musician: absolute silence is absolutely elusive because there is always the sound of hearing itself, the sound of one's own body supporting the listening, the sound of *being here*. Eventually Cage would see that the same observation might be made on a more massive social scale, with respect to the social body: "The sound experience which I prefer to all others is the experience of silence. And the silence almost everywhere in the world now is traffic."<sup>3</sup> For Cage, the definition of "silence" flipped around: it cannot be a total absence of sound but rather only a silencing of oneself in order to really hear the sounds that the world is (always) giving and to hear the systems that are (always) operating in the "background"—whether those systems are physiological, economic, or otherwise.

The experience in the Harvard chamber propelled Cage into his most infamous exploration of silence: his 4'33" (1952), a piano performance in three movements lasting a total of four minutes and thirty-three seconds. The work was first performed on August 29, 1952, by the remarkable young pianist David Tudor at the Maverick Concert Hall in Woodstock, New York. After walking onto the stage and taking his seat at the piano, Tudor (per Cage's instructions) initiated the beginning of each movement by *closing* the lid of the piano keyboard and the end of each movement by opening it. The three movements were assigned specific durations of musical rest—30", 2'23", and 1'40"—which Tudor timed using a stopwatch while depressing a different foot pedal throughout each of the movements. Not a single note was played on the piano for the entirety of the work. When Tudor finally opened the keyboard lid for the final time and stood up from the piano, the already frustrated audience burst into "a hell of a lot of uproar," "infuriated" and "dismayed" according to those recalling their experience of the event.<sup>4</sup> Cage certainly expected this kind of response, but he believed that there were much deeper implications available to those willing to give it further consideration: "I knew it would be taken as a joke and a renunciation of work, whereas I also knew that if it was done it would be the highest form of work."<sup>5</sup> As he consistently maintained, this work emerged with the conviction that it was a good and meaningful thing to do: "I have never gratuitously done anything for shock, though what I have found necessary to do I have carried out, occasionally and only after struggles of conscience, even if it involved actions apparently outside the 'boundaries of art.'"<sup>6</sup>

No notes were played on the piano for the duration of 4'33", but the music hall was in fact full of sounds. The Maverick Concert Hall is a rustic theater in which the back wall (opposite the stage) opens out into a surrounding forest. "After the first embarrassed shuffling of feet," writes Tony Godfrey, "the audience, if they were prepared to, could detect far-off bird songs or cars traveling or wood creaking—silence was surprisingly noisy."<sup>7</sup> Or rather, silence was surprisingly full of *sounds* that might be experienced as musical. And it seems this was exactly the point: an attentive audience had gathered here to hear music, but the artwork they were offered withheld everything they expected to hear (a carefully composed series of vibrations on the piano's strings) and instead gave the temporal space of the performance over entirely to the sounds of the hall itself and its surroundings. Presumably, *this* was the music the audience was being prompted to attend to.

The outrage that ensued was the result of (understandably) frustrated expectations. The concertgoers who had gathered at the Maverick that August evening were there to support the Benefit Artists Welfare Fund; these were people who generally supported modernist music.<sup>8</sup> But even they felt they had been jilted, refused the

kind of sonic experience they had come for. They were poised to hear innovative and challenging musical performances, and they found themselves (at least for four and a half minutes) given only the sounds of their own listening and the sounds that had been going unnoticed all around them. In addition to the ambient sounds of the concert hall, it was thus also the structure of the audience's (denied) expectations—and the cultural norms that support them—that was exhibited in plain sight.

The fact that Cage regarded this as “the highest form of work” obviously has nothing to do with its deployment of skill or artistic genius (or even cleverness), nor with any construction of narrative, symbol, or formal compositional complexity. Rather, his regard for the importance of this work derives from his overriding belief that art is whatever intentional human activity functions as “a means of converting the mind, turning it around, so that it moves away from itself out to the rest of the world.”<sup>9</sup> The highest form of art is whatever discloses the sheer givenness of experience itself and turns one toward the world with a deep sense of meaning and gratitude. For Cage, this kind of art belonged to “a purposeful purposelessness or a purposeful play” that is oriented toward “an affirmation of life—not an attempt to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply a way of waking us up to the very life we're living, which is so excellent once one gets one's mind and one's desires out of its way and lets it act of its own accord.”<sup>10</sup>

Cage's experiments in music had extensive influence in the visual arts. Allan Kaprow, for instance, identified the implications for his own artistic practice: “As Cage brought the chancy and noisy world into the concert hall (following Duchamp, who did the same in the art gallery), a next step was simply to move right out into that uncertain world and forget the framing devices of concert hall, gallery, stage, and so forth.”<sup>11</sup> And thus Kaprow developed what he called “happenings”—intentionally initiated events that engage the materials and activities of everyday life in such a way that they stand out as unusual, unexpected, and salient.<sup>12</sup> “But here,” says Kaprow, “is the most valuable part of John Cage's innovations in music: experimental music, or any experimental art of our time, can be an introduction to right living; and after that introduction art can be bypassed for the main course.”<sup>13</sup> If the goodness of art is in its ability to turn us toward a fuller living of life, then of course art could not be the end in itself. In 1988, in a conversation with composer William Duckworth, Cage affirmed the extent to which his 4'33” had indeed become a way of life: “No day goes by without my making use of that piece in my life and in my work. I listen to it every day. . . . I don't sit down to do it. I turn my attention toward it. I realize that it's going on continuously. More than anything, it is the source of my enjoyment of life.”<sup>14</sup>

Kaprow helpfully identifies the underlying idea: “In Cage’s cosmology (informed by Asiatic philosophy) the real world was perfect, if we could only hear it, see it, understand it. If we couldn’t, that was because our senses were closed and our minds were filled with preconceptions.”<sup>15</sup> Kaprow almost gets it right, but designating the world as “perfect” somewhat muddles the issue; the point is rather that Cage regarded the world as inherently *good*—good simply in that it *is* and good in that we have experience of it—if we could only hear it, see it, receive it as the perpetual, gratuitous gift that it is. The world is inexplicably and gratuitously “given” at all moments, full of sounds (even if only the sound of the blood supply flowing through one’s own eardrums), which are profoundly meaningful and surprisingly beautiful “music” if truly attended to.

And it is precisely there that Cage’s ethic of “right living” comes into view, as well as (by implication) the possibility of wrong living—of being asleep to the life one has been given, of having one’s mind and desires very much in the way of experiencing the world in its abundance. Cage occasionally vocalized his concerns about how prevalent he believed the collapsed life was:

Many people in our society now go around the streets and in the buses and so forth playing radios with earphones on and they don’t hear the world around them. They hear only . . . whatever it is they’ve chosen to hear. I can’t understand why they cut themselves off from that rich experience which is free. I think this is the beginning of music, and I think that the end of music may very well be in those record collections.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, Cage worried that mass media might be generally threatening to “right living” to the extent that it deadens our capacities for attentiveness, gratitude, and ultimately joy.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, as one digs into Cage’s aesthetics, one finds an ethics, which is itself rooted in an essentially religious ontology. On the one hand, this ontology is strongly influenced by Zen-Buddhist practices of mindfulness, which Cage discovered in his late thirties. On the other hand, these Buddhist principles were appropriated into a particularly American religious sensibility that was more deeply rooted in Protestant Christianity—both that of his own upbringing and that of the broader culture in which he was raised. Whereas the Buddhist notion is to move out from oneself in order to “lose” oneself (*anatta*), the effect that Cage (and many of the artists he influenced) most valued was to “find” himself experiencing the sheer good givenness of being in all of its astonishing particularity. The silent mindfulness that directed Cage’s work was oriented toward personal experiences that issue in fuller and more thankful ways of receiving the world as it is.

Interestingly, Cage was a devout Protestant Christian as a young man—to the point that he even considered “devoting my life to religion.”<sup>18</sup> And he continued to think about his work in relation to Christian theology, even after leaving the church. For instance, he linked his love for the givenness of environmental sounds to Jesus’ admonition to “consider the lilies.” In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus urges those who hear him to reorient their affections:

I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what [clothes] you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? . . . Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. [Mt 6:25-30 NKJV; cf. Lk 12:22-31]

For Cage, the sonic equivalent was to say that even Beethoven in all his glory could not compose sounds like those going on around us at every moment. Cage sought to quiet his own aesthetic “worry” for musical meaning and to instead receive the given sounds of the world as richly meaningful in themselves: “The work of the lilies is not to do something other than [be] themselves . . . and that, I think, could bring us back to silence, because silence also is not silent—it is full of activity.”<sup>19</sup> Indeed, he believed that this conviction that “everything communicates,” even in silence, is in fact “very Christian.”<sup>20</sup>

Unfortunately, the Christian churches that Cage attended as a young man were anemic institutions preoccupied with otherworldly sentimentalities. By his own recounting:

When I was growing up, church and Sunday School became devoid of anything one needed. . . . I was almost forty years old before I discovered what I needed—in Oriental thought. . . . I was starved—I was thirsty. These things had all been in the Protestant Church, but they had been there in a form in which I couldn’t use them. Jesus saying, ‘Leave thy Father and Mother,’ meant ‘leave whatever is closest to you.’ [cf. Mt 19:29]<sup>21</sup>

It is precisely on this point that Christian commentators like Hans Rookmaaker should have found great sympathy with Cage. The kind of escapist Protestantism that left Cage spiritually starving and thirsty is exactly the same “gnostic” religiosity that Rookmaaker also objected to and sought to correct. And though Cage didn’t quite say it in these terms, the currents of his work were oriented toward the practical recovery of a more thoroughgoing creational theology—one that sought



Maverick Concert Hall in summer, Hurley, New York  
2005, shot from below

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[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Maverick\\_Concert\\_Hall\\_in\\_summer.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Maverick_Concert_Hall_in_summer.jpg) (accessed April 8, 2017)

to *return* to all the “closest” aspects of creaturely existence and to become more fully conscious of and thankful for the gratuitous goodness and givenness of the world. This was the theological orientation that Cage recognized as latent in the Protestant church (though too often warped into unusable forms), and this is what might have resonated deeply with Rookmaaker had his conventional theory of art and the sheer momentum of his narrative not precluded him from recognizing it. Sadly, he utterly misinterpreted and underappreciated Cage’s work, regarding it as the epitome of “meaningless and essentially inhuman freedom since there is no possibility of communication.”<sup>22</sup> And because he reduced the function of the artwork to the “possibility of communication,” he entirely missed the point: “As such it means death and absolute alienation.”<sup>23</sup>

Obviously, we wish to argue almost the exact inverse of that position: John Cage’s primary concern was with life and deliberate reconnection to the abundant gift of everyday life. As the United States experienced an astonishing expansion in economic power and mass-media technologies in the years following World War II, he and others attempted to understand and come to terms with the ways these changes were reshaping our everyday sense of life and our everyday ethical orientation toward our surroundings. His investigations into the relation between noise and silence sought to open up greater critical distances from which

to freshly perceive, reassess, and (to varying extents) resist the reorganizing of human life into the patterns of mass consumer culture. And, as we've argued, this was theologically charged for Cage, not only in terms of the religious roots and motivations that subtly oriented his investigations but, moreover, in the ways that his work raises difficult and important questions about how one retains and cultivates a sense of the holy gratuity of existence amid the cultural cross-pressures that mass media were (and still are) exerting on our sense of the world.

## NOTES

1. These and several other examples are explored in Anderson and Dyrness, *Modern Art and the Life of a Culture: The Religious Impulses of Modernism* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2016). For Malevich, see 209-25; for Rauschenberg, see 298-310.
2. John Cage, in William Duckworth, *Talking Music: Conversations with John Cage, Philip Glass, Laurie Anderson, and Five Generations of American Experimental Composers* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1995), 14.
3. Cage, video interview in the film *Écoute*, dir. Miroslav Sebestik (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1992; Facets, 2004).
4. Earle Brown and Peter Yates, quoted in David Revill, *The Roaring Silence: John Cage: A Life* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1992), 166. Had he been there, Hans Rookmaaker would have been one of the dismayed: he often pointed to 4'33" as evidence that "art in a way is dying—as a high human endeavor" and "has really become superfluous." See Rookmaaker, *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1970), 194-95.
5. Cage, in Richard Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 69.
6. Cage, "Letter to Paul Henry Lang" (1956), in *John Cage: An Anthology*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Da Capo, 1970), 117.
7. Tony Godfrey, *Conceptual Art* (London: Phaidon, 1998), 61.
8. In fact, David Revill points out that many members of the audience that night were musicians from the New York Philharmonic on vacation. See Revill, *Roaring Silence*, 165.
9. Cage, in Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage*, 241. Cage also aligns himself with a line from an unnamed English composer: "'The purpose of music is to sober and quiet the mind thus making us susceptible to divine influences.' I then determined to find out what was a 'quiet mind' and what were 'divine influences'" (230; cf. 43).
10. Cage, "Experimental Music" (1957), in *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 12.
11. Allan Kaprow, "Right Living" (1987), in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. Jeff Kelley, exp. ed. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 225.
12. Kaprow identified the purpose of the happenings as cultivating greater attentiveness to everyday life: "nothing obvious is sought and therefore nothing is won, except the certainty of a number of occurrences to which



- we are more than normally attentive.”
- Kaprow, “Happenings in the New York Scene” (1961), in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, 16-17.
13. Kaprow, “Right Living,” 225.
  14. Cage, in Duckworth, *Talking Music*, 13-14.
  15. Kaprow, “Right Living,” 225.
  16. Cage, in Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage*, 251.
  17. Cage repeatedly stated that he thought the ultimate end of art was joy. His greatest hope for the future of the arts was that they would “intermingle in a climate very rich with joy and . . . bewilderment.” Cage, *For the Birds: John Cage in Conversation with Daniel Charles* (Boston: Marion Boyars, 1981), 219-20. And on this point he also believed that “there is a close connection between art and religion or what we call a spiritual life because of the enjoyment [that they seek]. . . I think that relationship of art to the spirit continues.” Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage*, 45.
  18. Cage, “An Autobiographical Statement” (1989), in *John Cage, Writer: Selected Texts*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Copper Square Press, 1993), 241.
  19. Cage, in Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage*, 245.
  20. *Ibid.*, 278.
  21. *Ibid.*, 13-14 (emphasis original). Elsewhere Cage identifies his college years as the turning point: “At college I had given up high school thoughts about devoting my life to religion.” Cage, “Autobiographical Statement,” 241.
  22. Hans Rookmaaker, “The Creative Gift: Essays on Art and the Christian Life” (1981), in *The Complete Works of Hans R. Rookmaaker*, ed. Marleen Hengelaar-Rookmaaker (Carlisle, UK: Piquant, 2002), 3:170.
  23. *Ibid.*