John Cage*

Reflections of a Progressive Composer on a Damaged Society

HANS G. HELMS

When John Cage, the now sixty-year-old American composer and thinker, taught a few years ago as a guest professor at the University of California at Davis, he announced his lectures as follows: whoever registers for the course will receive the highest grade, an A; he is opposed to learning as a form of capitalist competition. His teaching activities concern an as yet unknown object. With the help of chance operations according to the *I Ching*, the Chinese *Book of Changes*, each participant had to figure out which five books or sections of books from the university library to read, in order to discuss them later. Since each had in this way a different experience, each could present his knowledge to the others, instead of competing with the others for better knowledge and better grades, as is usual.

Over the past two decades, John Cage has developed similar methods in his musical praxis. His goal is to attack, if not to abolish, the principles of competition and authority, not merely in order to free individuals from the coercion of ossified relations and forms of communication dictated by the capitalist ratio, but primarily with the far-reaching aim of making the individual conscious of the fact that he must eliminate his preferences and dislikes, which are a function of ossifications in consciousness and the internalization of capitalist coercion, to make social use of this freedom of communicative reason. *Silence* is Cage's general term for this freedom.

JOHN CAGE

When I went to the University of California at Davis I was asked to teach a class. And the first thing I announced was that everyone in the class would get an A because I am opposed to the grading in schools. Well, when this news got around the campus, the size of the class increased to 120 people who all wanted to have A's. Gradually, it settled down to about 80 people who came to the class all the time. But even those who just came and registered got an A. My first talk to them explained my point of view. And that included the fact that we didn't know what we were studying. That this was a class in which we didn't know what. And in order to make that clear that we could subject the entire university library to chance operations, to the *I Ching*, and each person in the class would read say five books or part of five books if the books were too long, and the *I Ching* would tell them which part to read. And in that way we would all have, I thought and they agreed, something to talk about, something to give one another. Whereas if we did as other classes do and all read the same book and knew what we were doing, then we could only be in a position of competing with one another to see which one understood the most. Whereas in this other class we all became generous to one another, and the conversations were unpredictable.

When I collected together writings in my first book I called them all *Silence*. And I think that this is perhaps the best description of my work, if one understands what I mean. By *Silence* I mean a freedom from one's intentions. And in different ways those pieces show, I would think, a greater and greater faithfulness to silence.

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In his *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* of 1957–58, Cage has, for this freedom, refrained from laying out the individual parts in a network of relations fixed by a score; instead, he has equipped each voice with certain directives and certain freedoms; the conductor also has a part, and signals the acceleration or slowing of the course of time with arm movements similar to those of the hands of a clock, so that the participants can orient themselves. Instead of a system of dependence on the conductor, there is only the orientation to the course of time, equally binding for all.

Neither for Cage nor anyone else is this musical model of freedom more than one of free communication within the narrow framework of a group of intelligent musicians. Although not a prefiguration of a liberated society, it allows us to imagine how Cage sees these beginnings of a development in the social sphere that might lead to a socialist society. Cage believes he glimpses such beginnings in China, which, still devastated until a few decades ago by floods, barrenness, invasions, and civil war, has now, thanks to Mao's practical transformation, achieved pacification and satisfaction.

For Cage, Mao's success depends on the insight that it does not suffice to copy the Soviet model, since in China it is not, as in Russia, the factory workers who form the basis of society, but the peasants. China's problems are thus different from those of other societies and require their own, Chinese solutions. As Mao saw, they must be based on the unanimous will of the majority, a majority beyond the boundaries of class, beyond rich and poor.

What happened in China was that the country and the people were facing disaster which had come to them both from other countries, from within, that is to say from other Chinese people . . .
(Helms: You mean during the last couple of decades?)

Yes, and also great disasters from flooding of the rivers, from draught and so forth. So that it was evident to many in China that a problem, a very serious problem, existed. And by clear thinking Mao saw that the solution would come from a unanimity of the largest number of people.

But what is evident is that there was some decades ago this serious problem and that Mao found a solution, so that the people are not divided as they formerly were between the rich and the poor, but they are working together to solve the problems as they see them. Mao was more clear-headed, I think, than some of his Chinese communist associates who looked to Russia as an example to be copied. Whereas Mao realized that each place has its unique characteristics, and that the characteristics of the Chinese problem were different from the characteristics of the Russian problem, so that he thought of the peasant in China as being the basis of the society rather than the factory worker.

There is an interesting correspondence between the Bauhaus in Germany and its American representatives and Mao. Cage refers to the book by Lazlo Moholy-Nagy called *The New Vision,* which strongly influenced him.

Just as the circle in Moholy's book represents the individual as capable of anything, so Mao Tse-Tung insisted that each Chinese should be prepared

I noticed an interesting correspondence between the Bauhaus in Germany and Mao. In English there was a book of Moholy-Nagy's called *The New Vision,* and this book was very influential for my thinking.

Near the beginning of Moholy's book there is a circle which describes the individual, an individual human being, and shows that the individual is totally capable, that is

to participate in each necessary task. From this participation of everyone in all social tasks should come the extension of the traditional Chinese family so that now the Chinese nation becomes one huge family.

to say, each person is able to do all the things that any human being can do. But through circumstances and so forth we often become specialists rather than whole people. Well, one of the things that Mao has insisted upon for the Chinese is that if there is an army that everyone is in it, if there is agriculture to do everyone should be able to do it, if the land is to be changed so that it will not be flooded periodically, everyone in the community goes to work to bring about this change, even those who are old, even those who are young, so that the experience of the family has been extended through Mao's influence so that in a sense the nation itself is a family.

And I find this very beautiful.

To the question whether Cage sees a relationship between Mao's ideas and their realization and his own music, he answers modestly that he has indeed transformed his musical intentions in various ways, but that this should not necessarily be of interest to Mao.

Cage's first step along the difficult path from a subjectively determined music to one that would finally be truly objective, that is to say, determined socially for the first time, was the work with chance operations, which freed him, as he says, from his own sympathies and antipathies. As a musician, he became increasingly open to various sound possibilities. His aesthetic preference is neither for his own music nor that of any of his colleagues, but rather for the sounds and noises of everyday.

Well, I've made a number of changes in my music as the time has passed. And my first change was one which would be of no interest to Mao whatsoever, I think, namely I wished when I first used chance operations to make a music in which I would not express my feelings or my ideas but in which the sounds themselves would change me, hmm? They would change in particular my likes and dislikes. I would discover through the use of chance operations done faithfully and conscientiously, I would discover that things that I had thought I didn't like that I actually liked them, hmm! So that rather than becoming a more and more refined musician I would become more and more open to the various possibilities of sounds. This has actually happened, so that my preference as an individual in terms of musical aesthetic experience is not any of my music and not any of the music of any other composer but rather the sounds and noises of everyday life.

I think Duchamp would agree with me. He said, for instance, the human mind works very poorly. And though in his case it worked, I believe, better than usual, it still works extraordinarily poorly and particularly when it is involved with organization. Because only the simplest possibilities seem to fascinate the organizing mind. I might even or someone else might say of me that my whole dedication to music has been an attempt to free music from the clutches of the A-B-A. When I was just beginning to write music I made a list of all the permutations of numbers such as would produce forms or relationships of parts in a musical composition. And I made them for all the

In 1947 Cage composed a rhythmic study called *Music for Marcel Duchamp* for the Duchamp sequence in Hans Richter's film *Dreams That Money Can Buy*. The study was an exemplar of Cage's insight, shared by Duchamp, that human understanding is only capable of dealing with the simplest forms of organization. When he began to compose, he attempted to work out permutations of numbers, and already with the number 11 there were such infinite possibilites that by comparison those formal and structural relationships used in European music were infinitely small. Cage sees his own musical activity today as the attempt to free music

from the A-B-A form and to uncover the brilliance of the unorganized sounds of everyday life.

The complexity of modern music would not interest Mao. But, if not useful as a mushroom gatherer, Cage believes he might be useful to the Chinese as someone who makes accessible the beauty of environmental sounds.

The next conceptual step on the way to the liberation of musical praxis from its repressive organization occurred with the development of the principle of "indeterminacy."

The piece *34'46.776" for One or Two Pianists* was Cage's first composition in which the interpreters were handed the materials and left to decide the What, How, and When. The interpretation became indeterminate or unforeseeable. John Cage is thoroughly explicit about the fact that if performers have not, like David Tudor and himself, freed themselves of their own preferences and dislikes, they will misuse such conditions in order to string together arbitrarily their own learned stupidities, the threadbare clichés of their thinking. When the performers are free and disciplined,

numbers from 2 through 11. By the time you get to the number 11 the possibilities are extraordinarily numerous. Now, when you look at all those possibilities of formal or structural relationships, you see that European music has used only a tiny number of them, whereas if you simply listen to environmental sound you're over and over struck by the brilliance of nonorganization.

And here we come to another connection with Mao.

He would have little interest in the complexities of modern music. And were I to go to China I would, I believe, only be useful to the Chinese as a mushroom hunter, but I might also be useful as a person who could point out the pleasure of environmental sound which I think is accessible—well, as we say here in the United States—to the man in the street.

We were speaking about the use of chance operations on my part with the intention of changing myself so that I became more open to my life experience. As this work with chance operations continued, I became interested in, oh, what I've since called indeterminacy.

(Helms: John, one question to that: when did you first make use of this term with this particular content?)

I think it was first for those lectures in . . .

(Helms: . . . in Darmstadt?)

. . . in Darmstadt . . .

(Helms: in '58?)

. . . in '58. But before that in '54 already, this thing of indeterminacy had begun, for instance in those time-length pieces—*34'46.776" for a Pianist*—

(Helms: Is that the one which David [Tudor] played in Bonn?)

No, in Donaueschingen in '54, and I played with him.

In *34'46.776" for 2 Pianists*, instead of specifying the piano preparation, I not only specified it only roughly with regard to categories of material like plastic, rubber, metal, and so forth, leaving the decisions free to the performer. Another element entered into the musical composition which was *x*, in other words, something not thought of at all. So that it gave a freedom to the individual performer. This giving of freedom to the individual performer began to interest me more and more. And given a musician like David Tudor, of course, it provided results that were extraordinarily beautiful. When

however, such a performance indeed presents a model in miniature of such a future free society. A performance of his composition *Reunion* in Toronto, in which Teeny and Marcel Duchamp, among others, participated, conveyed such a model. Cage speaks of the practicability of anarchy in Henry David Thoreau's sense: not absence of social order, but rather a society without domination.

this freedom is given to people who are not disciplined and who do not start—as I've said in so many of my writings—from zero—by zero I mean the absence of likes and dislikes—who are not, in other words, changed individuals but who remain people with particular likes and dislikes, then, of course, the giving of freedom is of no interest whatsoever. But when it is given to disciplined people, then you see—as we have seen, I believe, in our performances with David Berhrman, with Gordon Mumma, with David Tudor, with Alvin Lucier, with Lowell Cross, sometimes all of us together, or in a piece that included many of those whom I've just named together with Marcel and Teeny Duchamp and myself in Toronto, a piece called *Reunion*—in that case you give an instance of a society which has changed, hmm? Not an individual who has changed but a group of individuals, and you show, as I've wanted to do, the practicality of anarchy.

A group of people acting without anyone of them telling all of them what to do. Now, you might say that in China we have the instance of one quarter of the world's population acting because they were told what to do. But I think that when we have more information about the revolution in China that we will see that many individuals in China, other than Mao, were able to make contributions; in other words, much of the activity was original. Because Mao insisted not only that the Chinese situation was different from the Russian but that local Chinese problems were different than any, say, Peking Chinese problem. And that each group of people had to discover what the nature of their problem was in order to bring about a useful solution.

Cage disputes the received wisdom that in China everyone is controlled strictly from above. For Mao himself emphasized the various problems of the Chinese provinces and demanded that each group analyze its own problem in order to find an appropriate solution, so that essentially no one tells anyone what he or she has to do.

Cage has always applied this good Marxist theorem—analyze the circumstances in order to positively modify them—to the musical realm. He concerned himself early on with two conditions: the opening of music to environmental sounds, and the application of the most progressive technology. The results were tape compositions, produced at roughly the same time as the earliest experiments with *musique concrète* in Paris and the first experiments with electronics at Cologne.

Whether the usefulness of such music from the availability of everyday sounds may be deduced remains doubtful.[1] To be sure, there exist for it other, more valid criteria. No less dubious are the reflections and futurist projects, based on utilitarian considerations, of the architectural theoretician Buckminster Fuller, which have impressed Cage considerably. It is unquestionably

Well, we come in the end, don't we, to the music I already spoke of, which is no music, simply environmental sound, and it's available to use continually. Therefore its usefulness is not to be questioned.

I think what I would like to see is a correspondence between the projects of Buckminster Fuller and the accomplishments of the People's Republic in China. I would like to see those as not being different.

It seems to me that Fuller's solutions

1. This reverses Cage's meaning. Trans.

legitimate to consider Mao's ideas as utilitarian and not solely as political, for political ideas must justify themselves by their usefulness to society.

Cage confronted acoustic technology for the first time in 1939 with the task of demonstrating its social usefulness in the more restricted sense of its musical utility. In 1939 he composed *Imaginary Landscape No. 1* for variable-speed turntables, frequency recordings, piano, and cymbals. It was not conceived for live performance, but for radio broadcast or recordings. If there had been recording tape in 1939, he would have used it. It is, so to speak, "radiophonic music," the direct forerunner of concrete and electronic music. In the New York Town Hall concert of 1958 *Imaginary Landscape* was performed as a tape piece.

Today Cage is interested neither in these early experiments nor in the propagandistic music which Mao uses as a means in political advertising; he is interested in the music that the Chinese people produce without any musical intentions, as they perform their tasks as soldiers, farmers, and students. In other words: he is interested in the core of social life.

Cage's interest in incidentally arising sounds and noises leads ultimately to the desire to include the public in musical praxis so that this is no longer predetermined by the composer. Musical praxis means, therefore, the abolition of the division of labor between professionals and laymen. He was able once to bring this about successfully in the fall of 1971 at the University of Wisconsin, where the public was allowed to experience environmental sounds, in that by means of chance operations he composed a route on the map of the university campus which he then followed together with the audience, listening attentively and as quietly as possible. This was a social rather than a musical experience for everyone.

are not political in any sense but are based upon utility, a utility to individuals, a utility to the society, and a utility to nature. Mao's solutions appear to many people to be political. But I like to think of them as being utilitarian, like Fuller's.

The two kinds of music now that interest me are on the one hand a music which is performed by everyone. And I would like to say that the Chinese people are, from my point of view, now performing a beautiful music which I would actually like to go and hear. And I mean, doing that not intentionally within the field of music but that the music which arises from their activity as farmers, soldiers, students, whole members of a whole family, I am sure, produces a beautiful music, even though they do it unconsciously as music. And I prefer that music of the Chinese to their propagandistic music in theater which Mao uses; just as Madison Avenue here in the United States uses art to advertise its products, so Mao uses art in China to further the revolution.

So I like that music by many, many people. And here, more and more in my performances, I try to bring about a situation in which there is no difference between the audience and the performers. And I'm not speaking of audience participation in something designed by the composer, but rather am I speaking of the music which arises through the activity of both performers and so-called audience. This is a difficult thing to bring about, and I've made only a few attempts so far and with mixed results, you might say. I think the most enjoyable from my point of view was last fall at the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, when I was asked to give a demonstration of sounds of the environment. And about 300 people came to a concert hall, and I spoke to them much

as I am speaking to you about the enjoyment of the sounds of the environment. And then, through *I Ching* chance operations, we subjected a map of the university campus to those operations and made an itinerary for the entire audience which would take about forty-five minutes to an hour. And then all of us, as quietly as possible, and listening as attentively as possible, moved through the university community. It was a social experience.

(Helms: . . . rather than a musical one?)

It was also musical, and was discussed as such and as society when we returned to the hall.

The other kind of music that interests me is one which has been traditionally interesting and enjoyable down through the ages, and that's music which one makes oneself without constraining others. If you can do it by yourself you're not in a situation of telling someone else what to do.

But I find the conventional musical situation of a composer telling others what to do, I find that something which I now don't myself instigate. If someone plays my earlier music in which that situation takes place, then I don't make any objections, but I myself would not have organized the concert.

At the same time, what counts for Cage is the sort of music that one can play oneself, without bothering anyone else. Thus, he would not arrange for anyone to perform his older compositions today. In fact, the charm of all of Cage's music results to a not inconsiderable degree from its simplicity, which, beyond the degree of technical difficulty, certainly often results in mistakes. When perfectly interpreted, as the *Sonatas and Interludes* were by Mao Ajemian at the 1958 Town Hall concert, they actually sound as though one could have played them oneself. The *Sonatas and Interludes* for prepared piano, composed between 1946 and 1948, are exemplary of the individual aspect of a musical praxis conceived in socially utilitarian terms.

The theatrical aspect, present when David Tudor opened the piano lid in order to play the strings with his fingers, or to play on the frame with a percussion mallet, was not the primary element that kindled the revolution in consciousness produced as an integral component of the Cage lectures at the Darmstadt Summer Courses for New Music of 1958. It was rather the inner-musical innovations of the *Music of Changes* of 1951, and not, one might add, with altogether positive results, insofar as an increased attentiveness to external appearances was the central problematic bequeathed by Cage's music. Finally, the theatrical aspect was separated from the musical and absolutized as "musical theater." The principle of chance which is the basis of the *Music of Changes* is now exploited by minor composers as a justification for their arbitrary

activities. Cage's current skepticism regarding the potential revolutionary function of music has grown with bitter experience. Thus he judges the critical-enlightening effectiveness of his satiric suite *Credo in US* far less optimistically than in the year 1942, when he composed it after choreography by the dance-duo Merce Cunningham and Jean Erdman.

When formulated in terms of music or dance, social criticism, be it of the American family or of the bigoted clichés of thinking, or of other social wrongs, suffers, more than verbal critique, from historical obsolescence: it ages faster. What remains has a comical or whimsical effect; one confronts such a historical work with another, so that once laughter is gone the difference between the various historical stages may be reflected upon.

Since the attempts in the U.S.A. to institutionalize Cage, against his will, as an evangelist of art, it has unquestionably become more difficult for him to free himself from social obligations, which, whether mediated or not, contribute to the promotion of social interests. One looks less and less into corners. That is all the more regrettable since it is less the individual works in his oeuvre that have changed consciousness than it is the principles and methods of their composition. Principal among these is the method of chance composition, which has found countless adepts who—to adopt a reproach which Cage has with good reason raised against many colleagues—are often badly lacking in "discipline." One can, to a certain extent, say that Cage was compelled to this discipline by the use of the *I Ching*, the Chinese *Book of Changes*, to whose

Credo in US was written to fit a dramatic duet choreographed by Merce Cunningham and danced by him with Jean Erdman. What I did was go to the dance studio and measure the phrases of the dance and produce a music that would fit the dance as it was choreographed.

And Merce's dance was actually not a credo in the U.S.A. but rather a criticism of the U.S.A. It was really a satire on the American notion of progress.

It was a duet between him and Jean Erdman, and rather than showing the glories that ballet had shown between the prince and the princess, you know, it showed the ingloriousness of the American family, as I recall. And the piece, I think, too, though at this date it's no longer wild, which I thought it was when I wrote it. Now it seems just hilariously funny. But when I wrote it, it was with a notion of social criticism.

Recently, I've become very well known so that I'm invited here and there to speak or to give concerts. And I would like more and more to become incognito or to become socially as I was when I made a discovery. If people have me talking and performing all the time, I can't make a discovery because I'm obliged to do what I did already. I want to look around in the corners and see if I find something.

(Helms: Well, there are still so many things to be found in the corners.)

I know. But when you get old, your chess playing is not as good as that of a young person.

play of numbers he has submitted, according to a set of rules he himself has designed. In the *I Ching,* only the numbers from 1 to 64 have a function.

One possible result of the computerized *I Ching* (given the accidental nature of the procedures it is of course not a prototype, but only one possibility among many), was the piece *HPSCHD,* composed together with Lejaren Hiller between 1967 and 1969, for which Cage was able to use the large computer Illiac IV at the University of Illinois in Urbana, usually reserved for highly paid special and secret projects of the Pentagon.

The number 64—which is the number that the *I Ching* works with—I found a way of relating it to numbers which are larger or smaller than 64 so that any question of regarding a collection of possibilities can be answered by means of the *I Ching,* which I now have computerized, so that I can very quickly do something using the *I Ching* actually as a computer. I found when I made *HPSCHD* with Lejaren Hiller that if you have a question for which you want a great number of answers, then it is economical to use the computer. But if you have a question which you only want one answer to, then it's better to do it yourself. And when I do it myself I use the print-out of the *I Ching* which is now computerized. Mostly I want only one answer to a question, and therefore I can work at home without going to a computer laboratory. And this box over here that has ropes around it is full of *I Ching* print-outs. So I have a great supply of answers to questions which I have not yet asked.

From the beginning, the forces pro and contra Cage were more or less fixed. When not only Cage himself is more impressed by his earlier thinking, as manifested in his book *Silence,* but both the public and his musical colleagues often prize the earlier works as well, undervaluing the newer ones, then the cause for this is to be sought in what Cage describes as a confusion in his current thought, a bewilderment that results from his openness to social problems. But this is self-evident and practically unavoidable in a composer like Cage, for whom there is no dichotomy between theory and praxis, who—unlike too many of his colleagues—does not impose retrospectively an ideological corset on his work. For Cage, this confusion in thought must consequently be carried over into musical praxis. Examined closely, most of the artistic efforts of his colleagues are probably far more confused and contradictory; instead of openly admitting their perplexity, as Cage does, they whitewash it as best they can.

This confusion, these contradictions, indicate not

People's opinion of my music and also my thinking and writing and everything is either quite enthusiastically for it or quite violently opposed to it. And there doesn't seem to be an in-between.

Some of them take me quite seriously as a philosopher and say that I am really a good philosopher and an amateur musician. And then others who find my thinking rather absurd say, well, he's really not a bad composer but just an amateur philosopher.

If, for instance, you oblige me to get out *Silence* and read some passages from it, I find them very good and almost useful for me to read now, hmm, therapeutically so or philosophically so. In other words, I rather admire my former thinking in many ways more than my present thinking. That may be because in going on I have tried to become open, particularly to social problems. And as you know, now, society as it is changed in China brings about a situation where my thinking is perhaps more confused than it was when I wrote many of the things in *Silence.* Much of what I wrote in *Silence* was a result of studying or the result

subjective error; they arose from an objective state of affairs. Cage says that the result has been that earlier—for example, with the Japanese Zen-Buddhist Daisetz Suzuki—he learned definite things or expressed himself about definite musical experiences, while today he speaks and reads on the indeterminate meaning of certain social phenomena forced into his consciousness. This means that the social wrongs he perceives around him are so overwhelming in number, in diversity, and in social relevance, and at the same time so disconnected, that Cage the musician has no choice but to examine their social nature directly, to put them into context, difficult though this always is. This problematic, articulated as confusion in thinking and behavior, is one from which Cage suffers relatively little. While he feels compelled to social reflection more directly, he sees it as the cause of the general misery of avant-garde music; too many of Cage's colleagues still believe that this misery may be overcome through music.

The apparently almost irreconcilable contradiction between the social insights of intelligent individuals—be it Henry David Thoreau, the Transcendentalist with anarchistic tendencies, whom Charles Ives valued so highly, and whose work Cage recently used as material for a musico-literary composition, or Buckminster Fuller, the contemporary architect and futurologist from the American Midwest—this contradiction between singular, insightful social conceptions and the senseless, ideologically directed behavior of the majority, the dominance of a government dedicated to the maintenance of existing property and power relations, of a centralized capitalist order, has led Cage, among others, to play with the idea of emigrating to a place where one believes it to be better. But even if this social idyll were to exist, says Cage, how is one to leave a country whose products and influence are everywhere? To say nothing of the fact that one would betray what is best in one's own country! One cannot withdraw from society into private life.

> of explaining work which I had actually done. In other words, I either knew what I was saying or I was studying, for instance, with Suzuki, and his thought of Zen Buddhism and so forth was being learned by me. Whereas now my confusion comes from the fact that I don't so much write about my work as I write about just anything that I notice. And I think that many people would agree with me that what can be noticed now is extraordinarily confusing.

> One of the things that's so confusing to us here and so exasperating is that we don't lack good advice, say from [Henry David] Thoreau, say from Buckminster Fuller, but our government and the society as a whole pay absolutely no attention. Almost every intelligent person in the United States—I'm even willing to say, the American elite without exception—has spoken against the war in Vietnam and against other policies of our government. But just yesterday, turning on the TV, you have the news that the bombing has been increased there. We live in a state of confusion which is now increased by the prevalence of robbery in our cities due to the affliction of perhaps an entire generation or several generations with the dope problem.
>
> The situation is frightful, absolutely frightful. On top of which you then wonder: what can I do? Shall I remain in America, shall I leave the country? But when you leave or have even the thought of leaving, you realize that you are being faithless to the best in America: Buckminster Fuller, for instance, who insists that we live in the world. There is no way to throw yourself out of America. In fact, wherever there is Coca-

Cola—and there's Coca-Cola perhaps everywhere except in the People's Republic of China—you have America.

To those who claim that there do exist many favorable things in the U.S.A. such as the educational system or the protection of nature, Cage replies that even this last especially harmless example, the protection of nature, shows the degree to which capitalist drive for profit and progress has destroyed everything that does not serve capitalist interests. Even nature itself consequently has been destroyed, so that if it is not to disappear completely, its remaining vestiges must be transformed into a museum.

Now, people will tell you that there are good things being done in America, and they will point to the educational system or to the hospitals or to the insane asylums or to the National Wildlife Preserves. Well, now just take one of them which would seem to be the most innocent, the National Wildlife Refuges. What has happened there is a confession that nature has been ignored by our search for money and industry and progress and so forth. So that in order to have any of it left we must put a fence around it, hmm. Then, if you notice when you go to those places, with very few exceptions you are not allowed to treat nature as man traditionally treated it. You can have no relation to it except that of audience. In my last text I refer to the National Wildlife Refuges in the United States as the museumization of nature.

There is nothing in America, says Cage, which does not shame one. Ivan Illich has criticized the basic features of the American educational system in the sharpest terms, as did the American sociologist Thorstein Veblen decades earlier. Cage thinks that the facades of the universities already signal their total decadence. Capitalism and its representatives in the boards of directors of the universities, who ensure that money is used in conformity with the system, have totally corrupted the educational system. Today one attends university only with the goal of receiving a degree, which gives you better chances of success in the business world. On the other hand, Ivan Illich, an educational theorist of international renown who lives in Mexico, understands education as a continuous condition of human life. And just as for Illich or Fuller, life has no meaning for Cage unless one continues to learn. This conviction, not widely shared until now, increasingly brings people to the view that our true business is revolution. And one might add that for Cage the idea of revolution primarily signifies a learning process. With each of his musical projects Cage was concerned to initiate new learning processes

So we have nothing in this country that we can be unashamed of. Our educational system itself has been brilliantly and scathingly criticized by Ivan Illich. And even twenty-five or thirty or forty years ago Thorstein Veblen noted that the universities in the United States are examples of complete decadence. You can tell this from the facades of our universities, which are costly.

The whole thing is an attempt on the part of the trustees of the university to accumulate virtue in relation to their crimes of having made the money which produces the university, you could say, plus many other things. The deep involvement of our educational system in our capitalistic system—that is to say, you go to school not to learn but in order to get a degree which will permit you to enter into a job, into a business situation so that the moment you graduate from college what it means is that you no longer have to learn anything. Whereas, as Illich has pointed out, education is of no value unless it continues through life. And this is what Fuller has also pointed out, that we must not graduate, we must go on studying. That this is the proper life. But nowhere in America do you find these things understood in a way that is good except among individuals. And this is why not only I but now many,

and thereby to initiate revolution. His *Construction in Metal* stimulated this protracted learning process: its consequences are audible throughout contemporary music, although since then many other learning processes have begun in which Cage was often active as an initiator.

Construction in Metal was composed in 1937. When it was performed in May 1958 in New York's Town Hall by the Manhattan Percussion Ensemble, its effect on the audience was no less revolutionary than at its premiere performance twenty-one years earlier. Although the learning processes set into motion by this piece and by others by Cage are unmistakable, Cage believes that in the broader social context there is no question of such a singular piece of music (nor of music as such) having a relevant effect. The question is: How is the long overdue social change to be effected? And Cage follows this question with another: Why revolution instead of a complex of differentiated learning processes that would produce a change of consciousness and of relationships that would prevent the degeneration into power struggles between groups representing special interests?

In the meantime, the practical and nonviolent transformation of society through Mao's Long March, or Gandhi's passive resistance, or the civil rights movement as represented by Martin Luther King, Cage considers to be wishful thinking.

many more people say that our proper business is revolution.

I'm very sad—and this is a source of confusion for me—I'm very sad to see throughout our society now a struggle for power.

Instead of this struggle for separatist power, we should recognize as Mao did in China that there was a serious problem that required an intelligent solution. Well, he said that it involved power, but the expression of power that I think was the most effective in China on Mao's part was the long retreat which is remarkably like something that Martin Luther King might have proposed or Gandhi.

(Helms: Do you think that a nonviolent revolution in the U.S. could be successful?)

I think so. When I say I think so, you have to realize it's wishful thinking.

There is very often in my recent work a sense of theater, that is to say, an inclusion of what will be seen, not only of what will be heard, and often the performances include things that seem pointless or humorous to audiences because as with the sounds the theater is chance-determined, and often in ways that are not determined by me but are a result of the performers' actions, so that people who expect to hear something in my music are often put off by that inclusion of the theatrical, just as people going to one of my lectures expecting to hear something

about music, hearing something about Mao or mushrooms, think that they somehow made a mistake in coming to the lecture. But all of this arises from my conviction which I've had now for twenty-five years, I suppose, since my serious involvement with oriental thought when I asked myself: why do we write music? I came to the conclusion initially that it was in order to produce a revolution in the mind, and that now I would say it could be or hopefully would be, and yet I've just been skeptical about that, it could further the revolution in the society.

However this revolutionary perspective is to be produced, Cage is not, in any case, of the opinion that one may on its account suspend one's subjective efforts.

All I do is speak and write, and we already know that speaking and writing has no influence.

(Helms: Has music influence?)

Music less. Play any music you like for two people and then talk to them afterward and see what went on in their heads.

(Helms: Is this because music lacks semantics?)

It may be that, and it may be because people don't know how to listen, that they haven't even thought what music could be or what it could do to them.

I think that people can easily go to a concert and come away just as stupid as they were when they went in.

If the worsening of interindividual communication has reduced music's chances of setting new and necessary learning processes in motion, if because of this, Cage considers his speech and his music to be gradually more pointless because ever fewer people know how to listen, does music then still have any function at all? Will it become usual that people go to a concert and come out again just as stupid as they were before? Or in a socially modified future will there be a renewed use for music? Cage thinks of the music of the future and specifies: in the future there will not be one, given music; instead there will be all kinds of music, far beyond anything he can possibly imagine.

When I think of a good future it certainly has music in it, but it doesn't have one kind of music. It has all kinds. And it goes beyond anything that I can imagine or describe.

I would like any kind of music because people have different needs. And some music, for instance, which would not be useful to me at all might be very useful to someone else. I have little need for jazz—I can get along perfectly well without any jazz at all. And yet I notice that many, many people have a great need for it, and who am I to say that their need is pointless?

John Cage's composition *Dream* (1948) shows one of the manifold tendencies of his oeuvre, tendencies that are not mutually exclusive, certainly not in the sense of an idea of linear progress. Thus Cage has never been in doubt—and *Dream* can serve as an example of this—that in addition to musical constructions of the highest complexity there is justification for very simple structures, which are not for all that in any way trivial. If he believes that music must in the future have room for many different tendencies, then his lifework gives a small-scale impression of the variety of which contemporary music is capable, when driven by reason. At the same time, Cage provides his younger colleagues with an answer to the question, How can a music be constituted that does not conceal its social utility behind an aesthetic mystery? Remember, Cage's *Dream* is one possible answer, but certainly not the only right one.[2]

2. *Dream* is at present, together with *In a Landscape* of the same year, among Cage's most popular works for unprepared piano: it is a rather lovely imitation of Satie's desiccated impressionism; its affinity with "New Age" music is unmistakable. Trans.

Further excerpts from this interview with expanded information about Cage's work and thought can be found as recorded documentation on the record in the album *Music Before Revolution* (Electrola 1 C 165-28954/57). The album contains pieces by Cage, Christian Wolff, Earle Brown, Morton Feldman, and Toshi Ichiyanagi in at times exemplary interpretations by the Ensemble Musica Negativa. [This ensemble was founded in 1969 by H-K Metzger. Trans.]

The New York Town Hall concert referred to in the text, which was organized by painter Bob Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns to honor John Cage, and which took place on May 15, 1958, was recorded and is available as a three-LP set with the title *The 25-Year Retrospective Concert of the Music of John Cage* for the price of $25.—George Avakian, 285 Central Park West, New York, NY 10024, U.S.A. The album provides an excellent overview of John Cage's music from the first twenty-five years of his musical activities.

Pages 91–93. John Cage. 31'57. 9864" for a Pianist. *1954.*
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Various materials, metal (M), wood (W), cloth, fibre, or rubber (C), plastic, glass, or bone (P), other and free (X), are placed between the strings of a grand piano at points chosen by the pianist. The preparation given below is that obtaining at the beginning. In the course of a performance, preparations are added and subtracted, added to and subtracted from preparations, and moved along the strings. Notes regarding these changes are given in the score (E. G. 'ADD X; 1077' means 'add any object before the note's next appearance which is at second number 1077); PS means subtract from (partial subtractions); CS means subtract (complete subtraction). In the case of a notated impossible change, the pianist may act in one of various ways, for example, (1) alter the direction to one within his powers, (2) ignore the direction, (3) keep it altering the time, etc.