Cage in Retrospect: A Review Essay
Here Comes Everybody: The Music, Poetry and Art of John Cage

Mills College, November 15–19, 1995

CHRISTOPHER SHULTIS

My
mEmory
of whaT
Happened
is nOt
what happeneD

—John Cage (1988)[1]

Late in his life, John Cage became interested in the making of history. He frequently mentioned his question of the historian Arragon: " 'How does one make history?' He said, 'You have to invent it.' "[2] Cage was once asked "What have you invented?" to which he replied "Music, not composition,"[3] and it was during that period that Cage eventually removed the frame around his most famous piece *4'33"* (1952).

However, that was only true of a very short period in Cage's career. Most of the time, Cage was busy inventing a variety of compositional frames from the square root form pieces in the 30s and 40s to the time bracket or "number pieces" (as Mark Swed and others have called them)[4] written right up to the very end of his life. His poetic and visual work show even more obvious evidence of such framing devices, from the use of stones in his visual art to his invention of the "mesostic" in his texts, an example of which, "Composition in Retrospect," began this essay.

[1] John Cage, *Composition in Retrospect* (Cambridge, MA, 1993), 5.
[2] Private correspondence dated April 29, 1991.
[3] John Cage with Daniel Charles, *For the Birds* (London, 1981), 15.
[4] Mark Swed, "Cage and Counting: The Number Pieces" in *Rolywholyover: A Circus* (New York, 1993).

Scholars in the discipline of music are only recently beginning to assess how to accomplish this same task with Cage's life and work. How does one frame and contextualize a career that spanned most of this century? And if chance was the longest lasting method by which Cage himself framed his compositions, scholars may find the multiplicity of choices available in making such an assessment to be at least as risky as chance operations.

The Mills conference, the first of its kind in this country since Cage's death in 1992, represented the work of many currently active Cage scholars, doing what even now must be regarded as "early" Cage scholarship: there simply has been and continues to be so little so far. Much of that work has been related to issues of chance and non-intention. There has also been an emphasis on freedom and the breaking down of so-called traditional boundaries.

These are by no means misguided approaches to Cage. There are, however, other approaches forthcoming that address the aforementioned multiplicity of other complex aesthetic issues concerning Cage's work and crossing at least the boundaries represented at Mills of music, poetry and the visual arts. Those approaches were at least tangentially addressed all week. While current work was being presented, there were frequent opportunities throughout the conference for comments about other possibilities for research that were not. As such, it is likely that "Here Comes Everybody" will be remembered both for what was included and what wasn't.

This essay will offer an overview of what has already happened in music, poetry and the visual arts as it was presented at Mills College. It will conclude by combining what happened with the reaction *to* what happened. History itself will decide whether my memory of what happened is accurate or, if we will someday be struck as Cage was:

> i aM struck
> by thE
> facT
> tHat what happened
> is mOre conventional
> than what i remembereD[5]

The design of the conference, as I revisited it, really was more conventional than what I remembered. The overall schedule consisted of papers and panel discussions during the day and concerts and films at night. There was also an exhibit of Cage's visual art at the

[5] John Cage, *Composition in Retrospect*, 5.

Mills College Art Gallery. All totalled, from Wednesday through Sunday, there were nine panels, five films and five concerts. This review will only address the papers and panel discussions.

The conference began with a panel entitled "Cage and the Visual Arts" chaired by Constance Lewallen who guest-curated the Cage exhibit at the Mills Art Gallery. She introduced Kathan Brown, owner of Crown Point Press, whose invitation led to Cage's series of etchings at Crown Point in 1978. This was not Cage's first experience with visual work. There is the obvious visuality of his scores, for example, as well as his *Not Wanting to Say Anything About Marcel,* a specifically visual work done in collaboration with Calvin Sumsion in 1969. However, this was the beginning of a sustained activity in visual art that continued for Cage until the end of his life.

Brown talked about Cage's work at Crown Point. During his initial visit, Cage made both *Seven Day Diary (Not Knowing)* and an etching of his *Score Without Parts (Haiku).* The first is a very beautiful result of a simple experiment: what can one do in the medium of etching? The second is a print version of a pre-existent musical score of the same name that Cage brought with him. After these initial forays into the medium, Cage's visual work began to concentrate on some central themes: placement of stones or rocks in space (related to the Japanese garden Ryoanji), use of the Journal-entry drawings of Thoreau, and beginning in 1985, (with a piece entitled *Earth, Air, Fire, Water*) the use of fire.

Brown mentioned that Cage's series of works based on Ryoanji began as a drawing: *Where R = Ryoanji* done at Crown Point Press in 1983. The tracings of stones, central to the creation of *Ryoanji* both as music and visual art, continued during Cage's two visits to Virginia at the Mountain Lake Workshop. Ray Kass, the second panelist, invited Cage on both occasions. He has said it was the Ryoanji drawings Cage did at Crown Point that led to his invitation: "I commented that the Ryoanji drawings suggested the possibility of a painting experiment in watercolor that might use the rocks from the site on the New River."[6] Cage's modest beginnings, smallish etchings at Crown Point, eventually graduated to large, in some cases wall-size, watercolors exhibited in 1988 at the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C.

Perhaps even more pertinent to this discussion was the direction of Cage's intentions as he became more and more involved with a medium of permanence. Cage's move toward the intentional, which I

[6] Ray Kass, "The Mountain Lake Workshop" in *John Cage: New River Watercolors* (Richmond, VA, 1988).

have documented elsewhere,[7] can be easily traced in the development of his visual art, especially his use of fire. Cage's interest in fire finds its way into his visual work in 1985. It can also be found as early as 1974 in "The Future of Music" and, although it would require more than space allows to elaborate, I believe there is a direct correlation between Cage's interest in fire and the increased balancing of chance and choice in his creative work beginning in the 1970s. In the aforementioned text, Cage wrote the following about Thoreau's setting fire to the woods: "First of all, he didn't mean to set the fire. (He was broiling fish he had caught.)," and finally he quotes Thoreau on the usefulness of fire: " 'It is without doubt an advantage on the whole. It sweeps and ventilates the forest floor, and makes it clear and clean. It is nature's broom. . . .' "[8] Cage may have, like Thoreau, unintentionally set the first fire by using a hot teapot to burn rings on paper. But his subsequent choice to use fire both at Crown Point and Mountain Lake is as intentional as the painterly gestures that find their way into his work with the brush, no matter how intentionally nonintentional those strokes may be.

If the first two speakers provided insight into how Cage himself worked in the past, the final two gave some inkling of the use and reception of Cage's work in the future. Kenneth Baker, an art critic for the *San Francisco Chronicle* who is currently working on a book about John Cage, spoke of an installation of Cage's in Pittsburgh. For Baker, Cage viewed questions of meaning, form, composition and beauty as events rather than entities or things. According to him, the "notion of the art object as a culminating experience by someone who cares about what you see is being eroded, judgments about what you see shaken up." He then positioned Cage as someone who shook up such judgments by applying certain "extravisual aspects" to visual art: "not so much about the way things looked as to what we *do* with them."

Regardless of whether Baker accurately reflected Cage's views, our use of Cage's work is an entirely different matter. As Cage once wrote: "Composing's one thing, performing's another, listening's a third. What can they have to do with one another?"[9] I would argue that, to the contrary, they have quite a bit to do with each other and Baker's analysis is a step in that direction—the direction of connecting rather than separating listener, performer and composer.

[7] Christopher Shultis, "Silencing the Sounded Self: John Cage and The Intentionality of Non-Intention," *The Musical Quarterly* LXXIX (1983), 312.

[8] John Cage, "The Future of Music" in *Empty Words* (Middletown, CT, 1979), 186–87.

[9] John Cage, *Silence* (Middletown, CT, 1961), 15.

The danger is in misinterpreting the intentions of a composer whose work is unintentional. Cage's modus operandi was decidedly aesthetic and even, to some extent, traditionally so: "The history of art is simply a history of getting rid of the ugly by entering into it, and using it."[10] He goes on to speak of removing distinctions between the beautiful and the ugly to "see them just as they are." Baker's opinions are thus verified by Cage's point of view. But here precisely is the opportunity for criticism to move beyond parroting what Cage had to say and instead look and listen to what he did as an artist. If Cage preferred to believe Suzuki when he said "there seems to be a tendency towards the good"[11] is it too much to infer that Cage also believed in the ugly tending toward the beautiful? Regardless of what Cage said about his work, its beauty often speaks for itself.

Julie Lazar, curator of *Rolywholyover: A Circus,* showed a video and then spoke about her experiences with Cage while preparing the exhibit that first appeared in Los Angeles at The Museum of Contemporary Art. In her essay "nothingtoseeness" found in the *Rolywholyover* catalog that accompanied the exhibit, Julie Lazar wrote: "What would such a project be called? He [Cage] quickly responded, 'A circus,' but not one named after him."[12] The publication by Rizzoli, on the other hand, prominently places Cage's name in the midst of the "Rolywholyover A Circus" title. During her presentation Ms. Lazar said that Cage did not want the exhibit to be "about my life." On the other hand, the Rolywholyover exhibit included drawers full of Cage's interests and readings, places to play chess, and concerts of Cage's music. One of the most beautiful places in the whole exhibit was a room of Cage's visual art with one of Henry David Thoreau's journals opened and placed in the middle of the room. This was a moving tribute to John Cage, a reminiscence of many of his most important contributions, not the least of which was his impeccable taste (an ample selection of Cage's favorite artists and composers were included) in both art and music. It is doubtful that anyone who visited the exhibit would see it as being about anything but John Cage.

As with the recent premiere of *Ocean,* billed as the final collaboration between Cage and Merce Cunningham, Cage's participation was visually and aurally missing from the final product.[13] For a

[10] Richard Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage* (New York, 1987), 211.

[11] His final published mention was in "Overpopulation and Art" published in *John Cage: Composed in America,* Marjorie Perloff and Charles Junkerman, eds. (Chicago, 1994), 26.

[12] Julie Lazar, "nothingtoseeness" in *Rolywholyover: A Circus.*

[13] The piece itself makes no claim to being a Cage composition. It is instead an idea of both Cage and Cunningham realized choreographically by Cunningham and musically by both David Tudor and Andrew Culver although the composition entitled *Ocean* is Culver's alone.

composer who valued "process not goal" (borrowing from the poet Charles Olson's famous remark),[14] the fact is that a "finished" Cage composition required the hand of the composer from start to finish. Cage's choices, usually in the form of the questions he asked, can now be seen as the truly essential elements of his work. Not only providing the frame, but also choosing or not choosing the materials that will participate in the process: these were both essential characteristics of Cage's work. As interesting as both *Rolywholyover* as an exhibit, and *Ocean* as a musical composition were, the interest ultimately resides with Julie Lazar, curator and Andrew Culver, composer. Both also serve as reminders that Cage himself is no longer with us.

> Time present and time past
> Are both perhaps present in time future,
> And time future contained in time past.
> —T. S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton"[15]

"Burnt Norton," Eliot's great discourse on memory, is built upon a poetics nearly antithetical to the work of John Cage. On the other hand, Cage is now a memory and this conference often seemed to place him within a historical context quite similar to that famous opening of Eliot's poem.

The first paper session, "Cage and Performance," is a good example of how such placement occurred. Music in general and performance in particular are rooted in time. Time past, present and future were the unspoken themes of this session. Their interaction one with another played with the same complexity of music's confrontation with time. John Holzaepfel's paper, "David Tudor and the *Concert for Piano*," was read by Austin Clarkson. Holzaepfel, who was unable to appear in person, has recently completed a dissertation on Tudor entitled "David Tudor and the Performance of American Experimental Works 1950–1959." His paper addressed Tudor's two realizations of *Solo for Piano* which was written as part of Cage's *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* (1959). This piece, according to Holzaepfel, was not only an inventory of Cage's compositional techniques of the 50s; Tudor's first realization (which can be heard on Cage's Twenty-Fifth Retrospective Concert) was a summation of his interpretive work as a pianist. In fact, by comparing the first realization to the second (first heard on the Folkways recording of *Indeterminacy*), one can see the evolution of Tudor from pianist to sound artist.

[14] ". . . the motive of reality is process not goal" in Charles Olson's *The Special View of History*, Ann Charters, ed. (Berkeley, 1970), 49.

[15] T. S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton" in *Four Quartets* (New York, 1943), 13.

Gordon Mumma's paper, "John Cage as Performer," was an informative look at that aspect of Cage's career. He divided the career into three parts: piano and percussion beginning in the 1930s, piano, electronic music, and a little voice in the 1950s, and primarily voice in the 1970s. According to Mumma, Cage's frequent anecdotal remarks about his "not having an ear for harmony," for example, belied his musical gifts: "he had a great ear for music."

If the previous two papers were a consideration of Cage's musical past, Laura Kuhn's paper, "John Cage's Late 'Number Pieces': Anticipating CD-ROM," threw time past into time future. Kuhn worked closely with Cage from 1986 until 1992. She assisted Cage in the production of both his Charles Eliot Norton lectures *I–VI* and his *Europeras I & II,* (1987) the latter of which was the subject of her dissertation.

Using the so-called "number pieces" as her material, Kuhn described means by which the musical events, existing within flexible time brackets, could be recorded and stored so that a computer could recall them in perpetually different forms. The result would be a flexible and ever-changing "performance."

Cage's aversion to recordings is well documented. As early as his "Lecture on Nothing" Cage remarked, "The reason they've no music in Texas is because they have recordings in Texas. Remove the records from Texas and someone will learn to sing. Everybody has a song which is no song at all: it is a process of singing. . . ."[16] Kuhn spoke of her work with CD-ROM as a means toward producing a recording capable of being labelled a process (singing) instead of an object (recording).

But what is the nature of a musical experience that takes fixed objects from the past and projects them into unlimited and flexible events with infinite possibilities in the future? Is it perhaps an experience that, by denying the possibility of ephemeral sounds produced by living performers "in the moment," has no "time present"?

David Revill, a composer and author of *The Roaring Silence* (the first published biography of Cage), closed the session with a lecture/performance of his own, blending time past and present with recordings, readings and performances of Schoenberg, Beethoven, Ives, Emerson, Thoreau, Cage, Satie, Grieg, and others. It exemplified, rather than explained; in this case a reference to Cage's frequent use of a phrase by Marshall McLuhan: "brushing information against information."[17] However, exemplification in this case was not a mere

[16] John Cage, "Lecture on Nothing" in *Silence,* 126.
[17] Cited in John Cage's *I–VI.* (Cambridge, MA, 1989), 447.

brushing without reference and neither was the work of John Cage. The second part of Revill's talk, "What is the Question?" made this plain. In notes provided by the performer in the published program, Revill writes: "What kind of question is productive of good answers?" Cage himself once said that if the results of his work were not "radical," the fault was with the question asked. In both cases, point of view at the very least, if not taste, to be more bold, determines "good answers," in Revill's case, to the "good questions" that for Cage produced "something you haven't heard before."[18]

Point of view and personal taste were, in fact, constantly in the foreground of this paper session, be it in the past: Cage's work with David Tudor (the performer's equivalent of going to the "president of the company" as Cage remarked when discussing his years of study with Schoenberg)[19] and Cage's "great ear for music"; in the present: David Revill's exemplification of Cageian practice in his own work; and even in the future through Laura Kuhn's on-going attempt to liberate recorded music from its status as an object toward a more "process-oriented" work of which Cage himself might have approved.

And here perhaps is where Cage and Eliot meet; as two oppositional presences dialectically joined like magnets with the same polarity facing each other:

the past must be Invented
the future Must be
revIsed
doing boTh
mAkes
whaT
the present Is
discOvery
Never stops

—John Cage, *Composition in Retrospect*[20]

Whether or not Kuhn's use of CD-ROM allows one to "revise the future" to complement the "invented past" of Mumma and Holzaepfel, is open to question. The point is the very existence of that question, equally present in the work of Eliot and Cage, and posed by

[18] Richard Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage*, 95, ". . . you can quickly tell if your questions are radical. By radical I mean penetrating. If they are not radical, the answers aren't. If they are basic, then what happens is something that you haven't heard before."

[19] Richard Fleming and William Duckworth, eds., *John Cage at Seventy Five* (Lewisburg, PA, 1989), 27.

[20] John Cage, *Composition in Retrospect*, 27.

both presence and absence in the performance of David Revill that ended the first day of activity at Mills.

> "Composing, if it is writing notes, is then actually writing and the less one thinks it is about thinking the more it becomes what it is: writing."
>
> —John Cage, "Composition as Process"[21]

But what if, instead, composing is writing words? The second day of the conference began with "Cage as Writer," a paper session chaired by composer Charles Amirkhanian, which addressed that very question. The first speaker was Marjorie Perloff, Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Stanford University. Perloff championed Cage's literary work early on, ending her *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* with a chapter that included Cage and proclaiming his "Empty Words" (1974) "an important work of art."[22] Ten years later she wrote the following: "The importance of Cage for postmodern poetics cannot be overestimated. . . ."[23] Perloff's importance for Cage scholarship cannot be overestimated either. For although Cage's work as a composer is of late finally beginning to receive the scholarly attention it deserves, Perloff's work still stands alone as the only long-term consideration of Cage's artistic endeavors by an academic of her standing in any field.[24]

Perloff's point of view has always been that Cage was a writer of the first rank. And, if one takes his views noted above seriously, Cage in the act of composing was a writer too. What was significantly new in Perloff's paper, "The Music of Verbal Space: John Cage's 'What You Say,' " was her approach to the development of Cage's mesostics[25] which emphasized the musicality of these texts. Although she

[21] John Cage, *Silence*, 34.

[22] Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (Princeton, NJ, 1981), 338.

[23] Marjorie Perloff, *Radical Artifice* (Chicago, 1991), xiii.

[24] James Pritchett, whose *The Music of John Cage* (Cambridge, 1993) is the first book-length musicological study of Cage, emphasizes from the book's first sentence "John Cage was a composer . . ." (p. 1) and then tries to place Cage within the context of "composer" as traditionally defined. But what if Cage *wasn't* that kind of a composer? What if he was, instead, a writer, whether he wrote music or texts? Isn't that just as likely as Pritchett's implied claim, since he includes discussions of both in his book, that he was a composer whether he wrote music or texts? This is the problem with such either/or distinctions. Perloff (who is not mentioned in Pritchett's book) attempted to blend music and text in the paper she read at Mills. And her work as a result is just as essential to musicology as it is to literary criticism.

[25] Mesostics are like acrostics except that the "spine" is at the middle instead of the edge of the page. "Composition in Retrospect" uses mesostic form and can be found in this essay.

read from a shortened version of a paper written for a Cage conference in Warsaw, both made the same point.[26] According to her, the mesostics were aurally rather than visually conceived. By paying attention to the sound rather than the look of the poetry, Cage's mesostics made music out of language.

Perloff's analysis paid close attention to the following conversation between Cage and Daniel Charles: "You propose to musicate language; you want language to be heard as music" to which Cage responds: "I hope to let words exist, as I have tried to let sounds exist."[27] In *The Musical Quarterly* article previously cited, I wrote that in "Empty Words" Cage's task of "musicating language" was realized. Perloff, on the other hand, sees that accomplished in his mesostics.

I mention this specifically, not to oppose one approach to another, but instead to show how two disciplines can see the same phenomena differently and in combination speak to a fuller appreciation of the work. For a musician, if one is trying to do to words what Cage did to sounds, "Empty Words," which at the very end removes all sentences, phrases, and words to become just sung letters and silence, *is* a musicating of language. However, for a literary scholar, there's not enough language in "Empty Words." Cage's mesostics, accurately characterized by Perloff as a "music of verbal space," are what come after the silence of "Empty Words," in like fashion to the silence in Cage's "Lecture on Nothing." Is the place where music and language meet in that silence, where neither words nor music exist, listening to "nothing" as it were? Or is it instead, like Cage's "Lecture on Nothing," the place that follows that silence where he writes: "That is finished now. It was a pleasure. And now this is a pleasure."[28] In other words, is the musicating of language in the silence ("Empty Words") or after the silence (Cage's mesostic texts)?

Both Perloff and I have made published mention of Cage's interest in the Zen Ox-Herding Pictures, the last of which has two versions: the first, is empty; the second, a smiling man bearing gifts. Scholarship, can in this case, be seen not as a matter of choosing, but as a co-existence of two experiences of the same thing. Or better yet, perhaps, between the two, the place where both interpenetrate without being one or the other, where both remain separate, yet the same:

[26] Perloff's and Jackson MacLow's papers (see below, p. 410) were first presented in longer versions at "Days of Silence," a major conference on Cage's work given in October of 1993 in Warsaw and organized by Jerzy Kutnik, a Cage scholar who teaches at Maria Curie-Sklodowska University in Lublin, Poland.

[27] John Cage with Daniel Charles, *For the Birds*, 151.

[28] John Cage, *Silence*, 124.

the "nothing between" that is the actualization of combining Cage's "Lecture on Nothing" *with* his "Lecture on Something."

> "This is a talk about something and naturally also a talk about nothing. About how something and nothing are not opposed to each other but need each other to keep on going."
>
> —John Cage, "Lecture on Something."[29]

Eminent composer and poet Jackson MacLow then read his paper "The Writings of John Cage up to the Late 1980s." It too (as mentioned above) was a revised version of a paper given in Warsaw, which was also a revised version of the original published in 1979.[30] Consequently, MacLow has been critically engaged with Cage's writings for at least as long as Perloff.

But MacLow's association with Cage and his work begins much earlier than his critical response. Jerome Rothenberg, in an introduction to a collection of poetry by MacLow, writes: "MacLow stands with John Cage as one of the two major artists bringing systematic chance operations into our poetic and musical practice since the Second World War."[31] Both were or are professed anarchists for whom chance was but one methodology in a vast collection of inventions both poetic and musical. And yet, what makes MacLow such a good critic of Cage's work (something too often lost on the critics of MacLow's work) are the enormous differences between the work of these two major artists. MacLow is able to see clearly into what Cage does as a writer because he is capable of reading both what is and *isn't* there.

In this paper, MacLow mentioned Cage's apparent dislike for the mesostics he wrote using the *Cantos* of Ezra Pound as a source text. Many have commented, MacLow included, about how Cage really didn't like the writing of Pound whereas MacLow in his paper claimed to "value him highly as a poet while abhorring his fascism. . . ." Since Cage chose his source texts (that is, the materials that Cage would submit to either mesostic or chance operations) according to his sympathy with both the text and the writer behind it, MacLow writes:

> In contrast with practices such as mine in 1960 and after, when I often drew upon anything I happened to be reading, Cage always carefully selected his sources. It is notable that when he drew upon

[29] John Cage, *Silence*, 129.

[30] Jackson MacLow. "Something About the Writings of John Cage" in *Music Sound Language Theater* (Oakland, CA, 1980). This was a catalog for a traveling exhibition curated by Kathan Brown of Crown Point Press. The featured artists were John Cage, Tom Marioni, Robert Barry and Joan Jonas.

[31] Jerome Rothenberg, "Preface" to Jackson MacLow, *Representative Works: 1938–1985* (New York, 1986), v.

> Pound's *Cantos*, a source that must have been much less congenial to him than most others he worked with, he produced a poem that, as we have seen, did not finally satisfy him.

This led to one of the most important moments in the conference, one which was missed by many who at the very end, attempted to point out weaknesses in Cage's aesthetic views. For while MacLow had just shown how both Cage's personal taste and what he called "valuation" played a major role in Cage's compositional processes, he also closed with an equally important view: Cage wished to diminish (not eliminate—that would be impossible) both taste and ego in order to "allow in the rest of creation." MacLow's point echoed that which served as the focus of the entire conference: "Here Comes Everybody."

This aesthetic view may be problematic as it exists within the social and cultural contexts of today. As mentioned above, in choosing source material Cage, unlike MacLow, didn't let everybody in. One thing to consider, however; Cage did open himself up to "otherness" at least to some extent at a historical moment when positing an active self in the world was no act of openness at all. Cage may not have changed the world and we may not want to live in the world Cage would have proposed. One thing, however, is certain, and it is an accomplishment well worth noting. If one is committed to an artistic practice that is based on self-alteration (Cage's view) rather than self-expression (still the dominant view), by what yardstick would one measure success? MacLow closed his lecture with one possible response: "What is most remarkable is that his works and the ways in which he produced them helped him to *change* his own Ego: often he came to be able to see as beautiful what he had not seen in that way previously."

Perloff and MacLow's papers were linked with two performances, the first of which was by poet Stephen Ratcliffe, who teaches at Mills. The second performance was by Cage himself, on audiotape, thanks to the efforts of Klaus Schöning, who on many occasions recorded Cage reading his texts for West German Radio in Cologne.

One night, when I was living in Germany, I heard that unmistakable voice: John Cage reading his "Writing for the Second Time Through *Finnegans Wake*" (1977) on the radio.[32] Thanks to WDR 3, and Klaus Schöning who made the recordings possible, I heard the voice of Cage, recently deceased, as if he were still alive. Hearing that voice again, in a collection by Schöning of things recorded by Cage at

[32] This is the text Cage read as part of his *Roaratorio* (1979) created with the assistance of Klaus Schöning.

WDR, was not unlike the appearance of a ghost. It struck me that Cage, like so many of the writers he admired had also become a ghost, which, in turn reminded me of Cage's introduction to "James Joyce, Marcel Duchamp, Erik Satie: An Alphabet" where he writes: "Since many of the actors (characters in the text) are ghosts, I have taken liberties with them ascribing to them imaginary works they never made."[33]

Criticism is often capable of becoming the "imaginary works" the artists themselves "never made." However, Cage followed Wittgenstein's view that meaning was "in use." If Cage's work succeeded in changing him, as MacLow suggests, the question of evaluating that work critically may concern whether or not it is still usefully capable of changing us.

"The Cage Nachlass" was the title of the next panel chaired by Laura Kuhn. Members of the panel included Paul van Emmerik, Deborah Campana, Martin Erdmann, James Pritchett and Mark Swed. Since both Pritchett and Campana gave more formal presentations as part of other sessions, I will address their work later. Van Emmerik teaches at Utrecht University in the Netherlands and is best known to Cage scholars for his bibliographical work *A Cage Documentary,* as yet unpublished but in the process of being revised and expanded as *A Cage Compendium.* Another panelist was Martin Erdmann, who in 1992 submitted a dissertation on John Cage as part of his doctoral work completed at the Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität in Bonn. Van Emmerik, Erdmann and Pritchett all worked with Laura Kuhn in the preparing of Cage's papers and their eventual purchase by the New York Public Library where they are now. Van Emmerik noted that 25,000 folios of Cage manuscripts are now in the New York Public Library and comprise the largest such collection in the world. He then added that these materials as they are better known will change our view of Cage, citing as an example his opinion that chance and Eastern thought are overrated aspects of Cage's work. Erdmann, chief organizer of a Cage festival in Berlin that was held one week after the Mills event, briefly discussed an early work of Cage's entitled *Three Easy Pieces* (1933). A lengthier presentation was given by Mark Swed, music critic for the *Wall Street Journal* and an editor for *The Musical Quarterly.* He is working on a biography of Cage for Simon and Schuster and, as part of his research, read through the many letters of recommendation Cage wrote for people who requested them of him. He shared some of those letters in his presentation.

[33] John Cage, *X* (Middletown, CT, 1983), 55. Added parenthesis is mine.

All of the above was informative; however, it was Frans van Rossum, Cage's "official" biographer (in other words the one designated by Cage) who offered the most interesting revelation by announcing that Don Sample, Cage's companion in the 1930s, was still alive and living in France. Sample's connection with Cage is addressed in an article by historian Thomas Hines.[34] What is worth noting here was van Rossum's discovery that Sample has in his possession sixty-seven manuscript pages (twenty-four of them are just calculations) of Cage's work from the 1930s. Sample also has some letters Cage wrote to his parents and manuscripts of seven short stories written by Cage. Prior to the Hines article, there was little information (particularly from Cage himself) about these formative years in Cage's personal and professional life. As such, van Rossum's presentation was enlightening, albeit brief—perhaps a preview of the biography in progress, which will certainly be eagerly anticipated in the light of what was presented here.

The next day began with the paper session "Cage in Context" chaired by Richard Taruskin, Professor of Music at the University of California at Berkeley. His connection to Cage scholarship is either famous or infamous (depending on your point of view) owing to an article he wrote for *The New Republic* following Cage's death.[35] All four panelists addressed some kind of aesthetic labelling, from Joan Retallack's positing Cage's work in the context of a "post-skeptical aesthetic" to what I called, in the paper I read comparing Cage with Thoreau, their shared "aesthetics of co-existence." Other views were addressed in remaining papers: David Bernstein's look at Cage's modernism and Charles Hamm's brief overview of Cage's work as an early example of postmodernism. And while such labelling is as problematic as it is limiting, the attempt itself provided fertile ground for discussion.

It would, in fact, be easy to suggest as Cage often did that all of the above were and are true. Cage put it in two ways, "the situation must be Yes-and-No not either-or" and, quoting Jasper Johns, "avoid a polar situation."[36] Poet Joan Retallack's presentation, which drew from the introduction to her recent book of interviews with Cage, might have on some level been trying to posit Cage's life and work as

[34] Thomas S. Hines, "Then not yet 'Cage': The Los Angeles Years, 1912–1938," in *John Cage: Composed in America*, 65.

[35] Richard Taruskin, "No Ear for Music" in *The New Republic*, CCVIII/11 (March 15, 1993). Taruskin's article is typical of much Cage criticism. Upon re-reading, the observations wear longer than the pronouncements; something that a composer like Cage, who preferred questions to answers, likely would have appreciated.

[36] John Cage, *A Year from Monday* (Middletown, CT, 1967), 79.

beyond such distinctions. In one of her interviews she discusses with Cage the possibility of moving "beyond dualisms altogether," and certainly Cage's work can be seen as acting in that spirit.[37]

In practice, however, the "complex realism" that Retallack finds in Cage's life and work seems more dialectical than nondual. For example, Retallack discussed "getting away from criticism" and moving toward "poethical investigation." She also mentioned Cage's optimism as an "effort for him to maintain" posited not on his sense of reality but on "belief." What could be more constructed than ethics and beliefs? Not to mention the tension between Cage's ethics and the world around him: "make this intolerable world endurable."[38] This is a complex realism indeed and there is a fine line between Zen paradox and Adorno's "negative dialectics," between "both/and" and an *unresolved* "either/or."

Taking the work of both Cage and Thoreau at face value, my paper addressed a method of experimentalism that begins without predisposition. The experiment is open-ended in such a way that one intends only to accept whatever happens. Such an investigation is decidedly not poethical in that it is free of both ethics and belief and is instead a process of discovery without an hypothesis. In fact, if Retallack's characterization of Cage's ethics and beliefs is true, the most interesting connection between Cage and his work may be the tension that exists between Cage's didactic idealism and the actual experience of the artwork itself. Perhaps that is why Cage tried so hard to remove his likes and dislikes from his compositions in all genres: because "my memory of what happened is not what happened."

David Bernstein, chair of the music department at Mills and principal organizer of the event, and Charles Hamm, Professor Emeritus at Dartmouth College, finished the paper session with an interesting, if unintended, dialogue between Cage's work as a modernist and/or postmodernist. By showing how Cage differed from the Abstract Expressionist artists of his generation, one initially expected Bernstein to consider Cage as a *post*-modernist. However, Bernstein instead took a different turn by showing how Cage's life-long desire to make an art

[37] Joan Retallack, *Musicage* (Middletown, CT, 1996), 212–13. Retallack says: "And then, most strikingly, your work seems very fundamentally to have moved beyond dualisms altogether" to which Cage responds: "I hope so. Well, I think the absolute statement of an irreducible opposition is just not helpful."

[38] John Cage, *A Year From Monday,* 146. "We open our eyes and ears seeing life each day excellent as it is. This realization no longer needs art though without art it would have been difficult (yoga, zazen, etc.) to come by. Having this realization, we gather energies, ours and the ones of nature, in order to make this intolerable world endurable."

that is capable of change, either in the direction of the self or the world, was an aesthetic trait that is characteristically modernist in origin. Perhaps more important, in relation to Hamm's presentation, was Bernstein's willingness to allow Cage the opportunity to change. This was accomplished by showing how Cage's own subjectivity, his presence in the work as it were, increased in his later compositions.

According to Charles Hamm, what Cage said beginning in the 1930s and through the 1950s, already qualified him as a "proto-postmodernist." Hamm used the literary critic Ihab Hassan's comparison of terms either "modern or postmodern." For example, form, conjunctive or closed is modern; form, disjunctive or open is postmodern. Purpose and design are modernist; play and chance are postmodernist. The list is long and the result clear: Cage's work, according to the terms Hassan applies, is clearly postmodern.[39]

Some experts in both literature and art were overheard as saying that "Cage as postmodernist" is an already determined view. But wait. Is that the case in Cage's music? Although it would require more space than possible in this review, I do believe that the question of modern versus postmodern is still difficult to qualify. Cage's work may in fact be an ideal test case for such difficulties. And once again, the domain in which this difficulty arises is in the tension between Cage's intentions and the work itself. Bernstein points to Cage's continued use of musical ideas in composing as modern; Hamm points to Cage's diminishing of control found in performance as postmodern. Giving up control can, in fact, be a very controlling idea. Not to mention the role of performers who can potentially impose their own control when and if composers don't exercise theirs. Music's very fluidity as a medium problematizes many foregone conclusions in more fixed forms of artmaking. That is perhaps both music's blessing and curse, at least as a subject of study. On the other hand, the complexity of the relationship between composer, performer and audience is truly a "complex realism." Although all arts are reinterpreted throughout history, music does so one step prior to the other arts. It must be performed before it can be interpreted, at least if one believes in musical experiences as heard experiences. As such, music is always about the present moment in live performances and perhaps that is why Cage so disapproved of recordings.

This session on labelling and/or contextualizing Cage pointed to a problem of all music scholarship: it is hard to take a picture of a

[39] Ihab Hassan, "The Culture of Postmodernism" in *Theory, Culture and Society*, II/3 (1985), 123–24.

moving object. As such, in Cage scholarship now, two roads: Cage's intentions, which are fixed; Cage's artistic works, the results of those intentions, still living in our experience of it.

> Words move, music moves
> Only in time; but that which is only living
> Can only die. Words, after speech, reach
> Into the silence . . .
>
> —T. S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton"[40]

Good criticism does reach into that silence, simply by the engagement of someone with an artist's work, allowing those "words after speech" to speak again.

The next two sessions, "Cage and the Computer" on Friday afternoon, and "Cage's Influence" on Saturday morning, predominantly featured artists who had either worked closely with Cage, had been directly influenced by him, or, more frequently, both. On Friday, composer Frances White talked about her work with Cage making various versions of a piece for computer tape called *Essay* (1985) and Andrew Culver, who worked closely with Cage from 1981–1992, talked about how he developed computer programs that better facilitated Cage's musical and poetic processes. On Saturday, composers Gordon Mumma, Christian Wolff, Maryanne Amarcher, Alvin Curran and James Tenney, in addition to visual artist and writer Allan Kaprow, informally discussed Cage's influence. Most of the panelists spoke primarily about their personal contact with Cage and what it meant to them as artists.

An exception was a series of remarks made by composer and theorist James Tenney who was a member of both Friday and Saturday panels. Tenney said that Cage's historical influence, based upon the Cageian idea that any sounds we hear are music, shifted the attention from the mind of the composer to the experience of the listener. For him that began in 1951 with Cage's *Music of Changes:* a "music free of psychology." Tenney believes that Cage's music signals the end of "the operatic era" beginning with Monteverdi where "the conception of the function of music as the expression of human emotion began." Cage's *Europeras 1 & 2* were, according to Tenney, the "coup de grace": the end of opera as a medium for the musical expression of emotion. Tenney then said: "Now people see Schoenberg as the beginning of a new era; later they will see it correctly as the end." And, positioning Cage in contrast with Schoenberg: "to talk of

[40] T. S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton" in *Four Quartets,* 19.

Cage's music is to talk of the future." Regardless of whether one agrees with Tenney, his ability to discern historical rather than personal influence was a significant contribution to the Mills event. He then, strangely enough, offered in response a challenge: "how to do something else without reacting against what Cage taught us." This remark was all the more striking since it was Tenney's own work with harmony that caused a change in Cage's thinking about it. It made one wonder once again how reliable the words of an artist are in relation to the work. For certainly even if Tenney never intended his work with harmony to be "a reaction against what Cage taught us," Tenney's music at least *challenged* what Cage taught us. And, in turn, as a result of that challenge sent Cage in the direction of his last great period of work: anarchic harmony.

The final paper session chaired by David Bernstein was titled "Composition, Aesthetics and Perception." In addition to Frances White's paper, a detailed elaboration of *Essay* which she informally discussed on an earlier panel, three others are worthy of note.

The session began with Austin Clarkson's paper "Divining the Intent of the Moment: Cage's Challenge to Performance." Clarkson is Professor Emeritus of Music at York University and director of the Stefan Wolpe Archive. While attempting to deal with the problems that Cage's music poses for the performer, Clarkson touched on a subject too rarely addressed in Cage's work: religion and spirituality. He did so by considering what it meant for Cage to "sober and quiet the mind thus making us susceptible to divine influences" and what it now means for a performer to enter that same spirit.[41] According to Clarkson, Cage was "seeking to revive the religious vocation in music." It was a very revealing paper, especially Clarkson's consideration of the "third area of imaginal cognition," which is *between* the conscious and unconscious. This is perhaps the place of "neti-neti" (not this, not that) where one is neither both/and nor either/or; ultimately a place of receptivity where both activity and passivity coexist.[42] If Cage's music is "in the form of a Koan" as Clarkson mentioned here and others have in the past, it may be that such oscillation rests in the place between composition and performance: where composer and performer meet, which is always a "present moment." Divining thus should be read (in relation to Clarkson's paper) in two ways: in its use as a verb, divining, and in its origin as a noun, divine. If, as Clarkson noted, "silence is a real indication that you are in the tertiary process"

[41] Richard Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage,* 215. Cage said this on many occasions and it can be just as easily found in other textual locations.

[42] "Neti-neti" is also the title of a curiously fascinating book by L. C. Beckett (*Neti-Neti* [London, 1955]) that Cage used as source material for his Norton lectures.

between, that is, the conscious and unconscious, perhaps one is in that silence "susceptible to divine influences." While stopping short of addressing an issue of such magnitude, Clarkson's talk at least entertained the question.

The two other presenters were Deborah Campana, acting head of the music library at Northwestern University and James Pritchett, author of the aforementioned book *The Music of John Cage*. Campana and Pritchett were two of the first doctoral students to write music dissertations of any real substance on Cage and the fact that these dissertations were written in 1985 and 1988, respectively, still surprises. Campana discussed the importance of time in Cage's work; she also listed three categories to think about in relation to the work: sounds, notations, organization. Pritchett's presentation intentionally left the realm of scholarship altogether. As he himself said "I don't like to explain things anymore." The result was an interesting "brushing of information" about Cage and his use of haiku. It was a beautiful tribute to Cage; extremely well prepared it was not an explanation but instead, as with the Revill performance earlier described, an exemplification of Cage's work. As the last formal presentation of the conference, it was really like a period at the end of a very long sentence. Now that all the currently known and active scholars of Cage's work had been heard, was there anything more to say that had not already been said?

When Pritchett's talk disappeared into silence it was, in some sense, the end of an era. How so? For years, Cage scholarship has been contained within a very select group of people, many of whom had already addressed the conference. But at Mills, it didn't end there. New voices with other views were threatening to break open the "silence" that Cage and his followers practiced all week.

A surprisingly contentious panel discussion entitled "Here Comes Everybody: John Cage and Fin-de-Siècle Politics, Culture, and Society" both closed the conference and pointed to the direction of that change. The focus of this session was clearly about "missing voices" that weren't heard at "Here Comes Everybody." In fact, the conference began to take on the feeling of a Nietzschian crowd, based not on a considered appraisal gained by attending the entire event but a perceived view based on whatever one felt about what one was hearing at the time.

Mention was made, for example, of the fact that while Cage was homosexual, no mention was made of it during the conference. That, as the reader knows, wasn't true since only a few days before Frans van Rossum openly discussed Cage's relationship with Don Sample.

George Lewis, composer and professor of music at the University of California at San Diego discussed Cage's work in relation to issues important to African-Americans. What he didn't find acceptable in Cage's work was its lack of a personal narrative by limiting the self in the work. Other problems concerned removing history and memory from musical sounds. According to Lewis, sounds *do* have a history and listener's memories when attached to sounds are an important part of the black musical experience. Finally, and perhaps most important, Lewis spoke about the significance of power and the utility of protest. He was particularly critical of Cage's remarks about jazz since they were not positive and, according to Lewis, ill-informed. And yet, because of Cage's position of power as a well-known composer, his views were still published. The problem goes both ways of course since, although Lewis was familiar enough with Cage's work to make the observations listed above, he is no more a Cage expert than Cage was a jazz expert. Frankly, the same could have been said about Lewis: he too is a well-known composer and it was *his* position of power rather than his knowledge of Cage that enabled him to speak at the Mills conference.

Moira Roth, Professor of Art History at Mills and a Duchamp scholar, said the following "In the middle of enjoying the Mills Conference/Festival I became a little impatient with the recurring hagiographic tone. I said to myself, well, if we are going to talk about saints, why not something about St. Pauline." She then told some stories about composer Pauline Oliveros; seven stories in fact which in total was two more stories than she told about John Cage. Leaving alone whether or not Pauline Oliveros is as worthy of sainthood as John Cage, there is no question that Oliveros is a composer worthy of attention. But why bring it up at a John Cage conference?

I believe that all of these responses point to the necessity of *context* when discussing the work of John Cage regardless of how seemingly "universal" Cage's work, or more specifically Cage's opinion about his work, was and/or is. A quotation of John Cage was used to signify the reasoning behind titling the conference "Here Comes Everybody" on the first page of the conference program:

> I have been so long in reading and thinking of *Finnegans Wake*—Here Comes Everybody'—and I think our experiences more and more are populated with more and more people and more and more things that strike our perceptions. We live in a time I think not of mainstream but of many streams or even, if you insist on a river of time, that we have come to delta, maybe even beyond delta to an ocean which is going back to the skies.

Cage's framing is contextual, and it would be a mistake (and one frequently made both at the conference and elsewhere) to think that Cage's work contextualizes in a way that lets everybody in. It doesn't. Cage once spoke about the problem of giving freedom to performers: "I've given them this freedom to do whatever they please, and generally, in order to make my work appear foolish, they turn themselves into clowns. Actually, they've succeeded in showing how foolish they are."[43] It is, of course, a rhetorical question when asking: *who* decides whether one is foolish or not. As Cage also said, "Permission granted. But not to do whatever you want."[44]

There is an "entrance fee" to Cage's work and frequently dissenters and admirers find their positions on either end of the spectrum depending on whether or not they are willing to pay the fee. Not everyone is going to be so quick to empty themselves of their likes and dislikes in order to perform or listen taking "zero as the basis."[45]

Cage's openness was legendary and his invitation to participate was certainly available to everybody. But perhaps a discussion with Cage at Stanford, a conference organized in 1992 and thus the last of its kind in which Cage himself participated, anticipated the problem at hand. A member of the audience commented on how, during a performance of Cage's *Musicircus* (1967), the musicians began listening to each other and, as a result, began to play the same thing together. Cage's response was as follows:

> I think instead of believing they've reached something positive by 'fitting in' with each other that they should remain separate . . . I always think that the center of each should remain where it is, in itself, and it should be nourished by the person who is doing it by paying so much attention to what he is doing that he can't mix with the neighbor and, say, adulterate the neighbor.[46]

There is much worth criticizing in these remarks. For a composer who was trying to free himself of his "likes and dislikes," the statement above sounds remarkably like an opinion of personal taste. Sadly, the nature of much Cage criticism has taken either the direction of studying in appreciation or of criticizing in ignorance, while in both cases

[43] Richard Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage,* 70.

[44] John Cage, *A Year from Monday,* 28.

[45] Richard Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage,* 208. "Everything is permitted if zero is taken as the basis. That's the part that isn't often understood. If you're nonintentional, then everything is permitted."

[46] Charles Junkerman, " 'nEw foRms of living together': The Model of the Musicircus" in *John Cage: Composed in America,* 57.

often ignoring the enormous complexities of Cage's work. For if Cage is right to criticize either/or polarities, who is to say that one should accept at face value his preference of "both/and"?

Cage's best work sometimes confounds boundaries of taste, the composer included; and *Musicircus,* which has no notated score, is a good example of a work that does precisely that. We know, from the above, what Cage's intentions were. Why, then, did Cage not write out a score with instructions that make such distinctions? If indeed "one man's ceiling is another man's floor," who is to say, after the fact, whether or not the musicians should play together or separately? And being that "Here Comes Everybody" was held at Mills College, primarily an undergraduate school for women, perhaps the contextual question demands yet one more distinction: what if the ceiling and floor are the boundaries of a room filled with no men at all?

In the text he read at Stanford, "Overpopulation and Art," Cage quotes, as he often did, Suzuki's statement cited earlier: "there seems to be a tendency toward the good." Cage optimistically held firm to that belief, hoping that others would see the good as being what he thought it was. And there were, and are, many people who agree with Cage in this regard and are devoted to his life and work.

Cage has now become a part of the history that Arragon said "must be invented." There were some revelations at the conference that might lead one to believe that Cage was an active participant in the invention of his own history. Literally his "memory of what happened," an accumulation of more interviews and discussion than perhaps with any other composer in history, was "not what happened."

Now it is our turn at invention. It is my prediction that Cage's framing of experience, both in his life and in his work, will more and more become the focal point of Cage biography and criticism. Cage thought his critics should look at the questions he asked in the compositional process when writing about a particular work. These questions are related to the building of a framework which is often quite determinate even if the results are not.[47] It may be that future conferences will take a contextual look at Cage using this methodological framing device in order to address what I consider to be the central characteristic of Cage's entire body of work.

[47] Richard Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage,* 85. "What can be analyzed in my work, or criticized, are the questions that I ask. But most of the critics don't trouble to find out what those questions were. And that would make the difference between one composition made with chance operations and another. That is, the principle underlying the results of those chance operations is the questions."

Mills College was an exemplary place to begin such investigations for many reasons, the most obvious being Mill's longstanding sympathies for things experimental, and Cage's lifetime affinity toward such experimentalism. Cage was once associated with the college and even tried to convince one of its presidents, Aurelia Reinhardt, to house a center for musical experiment there. If one looks at a dictionary, however, one discovers two definitions for experiment. The first is closely associated with the scientific method where one brings a preformulated hypothesis into the process; the second kind has no hypothesis at all. Cage's "I welcome whatever happens next"[48] might seem to favor that second definition, just as Mills College might also seem to favor the inclusiveness of such open-ended experimentation.

My memory of what happened at Mills College might not be what happened either. But I do often think about my walks around the perimeter of Mills College; a beautiful trail that follows the interior of a fence that surrounds the entire campus. Inside that fence, everyone seemed welcome once they got in. Similarly, once inside an agreed-to frame of a Cage composition, all sounds can indeed be music. However, when one listens as one walks around the Mills campus, one cannot help but hear the noise outside: the uncontrolled sound of the traffic, almost like the swarm of mechanical bees, menacingly circling the campus that doesn't let the outside in; because, frankly, there are real dangers that exist in the Oakland community outside the idyllic campus community of Mills. And while the sounds of traffic are potentially beautiful inside the frame of a Cage composition, outside that frame there is the very real danger of getting run over. Cage once mentioned his ex-wife Xenia's rule: "no silliness."[49] Cage also mentioned his interest in mushrooms as a contrast to his use of chance. One doesn't want to take chances with mushrooms—the results could be deadly.[50]

Serious business, this necessity of a frame; and yet even the most carefully constructed frames are transgressable, whether a mountain lion that appears during an otherwise uneventful campus walk, or

[48] John Cage, "Composition in Retrospect," in *John Cage Etchings 1978–1982* (Oakland, CA, 1982), 57. I am purposely using this first published version in which "I welcome whatever happens next" is the last line.

[49] John Cage, *Silence,* 271. "Xenia told me once that when she was a child in Alaska, she and her friends had a club and there was only one rule: No silliness."

[50] Richard Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage,* 15: ". . . during the Depression I had sustained myself for a week on nothing but mushrooms, and I decided to spend enough time to learn something about them. Furthermore, I was involved with chance operations in music, and I thought that it would be a very good thing if I got involved in something where I could not take chances."

seemingly unruly "foolishness" during a musicircus. These frames, be they compositional or institutional, attempt to keep out somebody; that much is certain. But that doesn't make the title of this conference "Here Comes Everybody" any less apt: regardless of how we attempt to frame either art or society, everybody eventually is going to get in. The question is, will they be friend or foe when they arrive? I suspect the next Cage conference will have to contend with both.

The University of New Mexico