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English 975

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## ESSAYS<sup>1</sup> INTO SILENCE, NOISE, AND JOHN CAGE

### Movement I: False Starts: 30" worth of noisy silence

11 a. *In scientific and technical use: random or irregular fluctuations or disturbances which are not part of a signal (whether the result is audible or not), or which interfere with or obscure a signal; oscillations with a randomly fluctuating amplitude over a usually continuous range of frequencies. Also (in extended use): distortions or additions which interfere with the transfer of information.*

b. *In non-technical contexts: irrelevant or superfluous information or activity, esp. that which distracts from what is important.*  
—definitions for the word “noise” in the September 2008 draft revision of the Oxford English Dictionary.

The construction of narrative naturally means that we tell a story with a beginning, middle, and end, this was naturally Aristotle’s idea and that naturally in that story we make it seem like the three are naturally related and that later things happen naturally because of earlier things and that the things that are told are told, naturally, because they happened and cannot not be told and that naturally and that the things that are naturally not told are negligible and naturally this means that what is told is naturally beginning, middle, and end, and this is all naturally something we can naturally understand. Naturally, many people have pointed out that this is not true. In the last century, there have been few people writing naturally in or with or even against the naturally English language that have done this more naturally than Gertrude Stein.

*No, that’s not it. If you take on Stein, you’ll just end up exposing your ignorance. Remember, this is for Cyrena Pondrom’s class. She knows everything about Stein. Besides, it’s Cage you wanted, not Stein. Begin again.<sup>2</sup>*

Leonard Mlodinow has recently published a marvelous book on chance and life called *The Drunkard’s Walk: How Randomness Rules Our Lives*. Mlodinow’s intention is “to illustrate the role of

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<sup>1</sup> By which I very much mean the word as a plural of *un essai*, the French for an effort or an attempt, from *essayer*: to try.

<sup>2</sup> After this paper had been mostly assembled I discovered (while looking for something else) Ellsworth Snyder’s magnificent little essay “Gertrude Stein and John Cage: Three Fragments” which says many things I would have liked to have said and ends its introduction with the words: “Let us begin.” This is precisely what I had written in an early draft, before deciding that it sounded too much like “Lettuce, big in ...” Without the heart to write Rabbitville, I changed my refrain to “Begin again.” Any closer and I swear I’d have been Pierre Menard to Snyder’s Cervantes.

chance in the world around us and show how we may recognize it at work in human affairs” (xi). It is a thrilling book, learned and accessible, witty and engaging. It is mostly about the scientists who are trying to teach the rest of us to see the world more counterintuitively. Of course we can’t just be completely counterintuitive. There are certain rules or principles that help us know which counterintuitions can be intuitively trusted and which can’t. And so, while randomness may well rule our lives, we still need our scientists to plumb the depth and limits of the chance ruled world. Sadly, while there are many entries in Mlodinow’s index, *Cage, John* is not one of them.

*Well, let’s scratch that one then. You can’t very well start a term paper introducing a book that doesn’t even mention the author you’re trying to write about, can you? Begin again.*

Did you know that John Cage appears just once in Robert Hullot-Kentor’s translation of Theodor Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*?<sup>3</sup> Well, it’s true! Adorno writes:

Artwork that rigorously negates meaning is by this very rigor bound to the same density and unity that was once prerequisite to the presence of meaning. Artworks become nexuses of meaning, even against their will, to the extent that they negate meaning. Although the crisis of meaning is rooted in a problematic common to all art, the failure in the face of rationality, reflection is unable to repress the question whether art does not perhaps, through the demolition of meaning, throw itself into the arms of precisely that which strikes ordinary consciousness as absurd.<sup>4</sup> (154)

As Adorno continues his tortuous climb towards (or is it beyond) clarity, notice how each sentence charges and releases so much energy, building up steam and then giving it the throttle:

The dividing line between authentic art that takes on itself the crisis of meaning and a resigned art consisting ... of protocol sentences is that in significant works the negation of meaning itself takes shape as a negative, whereas in the others the negation of meaning is stubbornly and positively replicated. Everything depends on this: whether meaning inheres in the negation of meaning in the artwork or if the negation conforms to the status quo; whether the crisis of meaning is reflected in the

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<sup>3</sup> Ah, but that’s already better than the last one, the Mlodinow.

<sup>4</sup> So far so good. This seems *promising*. We’ve got paradox, we’ve got the negative dialectic, we’ve got art as a nexus of meaning, even as it seeks to resist its own meaning. That sounds exactly like Cage. We’ve even got Adorno asking in his own thorny, anxious way whether art that tries to be meaningless is absurd, which is just about the same thing that the electrician fixing the wiring in your office last week (who must have been representing what Adorno quite magnificently calls “ordinary consciousness”) said when you asked him what thought of ‘modern art,’ “Eets ree-deak-u-luss, man. It doan even make nosennse at all, juss a buncha crayzee peepull splashin painnaroun and sayeen a-lodda bullsheet. Yoo wanna see sum reel mahdern art, man, go an watch some fútbol.”

works or whether it remains immediate and therefore alien to the subject. Key events may include certain musical works such as Cage's Piano Concerto, which impose on themselves a law of inexorable aleatoriness and thereby achieve a sort of meaning: the expression of horror. (154)

*The meaning of Cage's Piano Concerto is "the expression of horror"? Seriously? Oh, hang it all Theodor Adorno, there can be but one Samuel Beckett. It's Cage I want to praise and, well, to be perfectly honest, I was with you all the way up to the positively William Carlos Williamsy "everything depends on this," and then ... on second thought, maybe Adorno's one reference to Cage isn't exactly what you're looking for as a starter, either. Begin again.*

Dear reader, let me declare right at the outset that my intention was to write this essay entirely by chance. My project was simple: I would set certain constraints and then see what kind of order or meaning might be made as the operations of fortune unfolded themselves. Here's what happened: I performed a library search, requested all the books I could find in the University of Wisconsin library system under the Library of Congress subject heading Chance, checked them out and then brought them back to my office. I left them on my desk for a few days, so they could settle. Then I ordered them, placing them into stacks, largest books on bottom and smallest books on top,<sup>5</sup> so that the pyramid would be most stable. The first book I picked up (it was the smallest and thus on top) was philosopher Nicholas Rescher's *Luck: The Brilliant Randomness of Everyday Life*. It was a haunting green and black cloth-bound hardcover book with the beautiful shape of a four leaf clover pressed into the cover. I opened the book and began reading. Near the beginning of the book was a section called "the Language of Luck" that consisted of a descriptive etymology of the English word luck.<sup>6</sup> Fair enough. I was certainly unsurprised to find that I had stumbled into a consideration of etymology. It read like a sophisticated version of the papers high school seniors crank out by the

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<sup>5</sup> Of course, dear reader, I now know that this was a mistake. Don't get too exercised. How can we properly respect the operations of chance if we fail to neglect its crowning principle: the second law of thermodynamics? If things tend towards disorder, let them (you should see my desk now). It seems so obvious now, but bear with me, please, if nothing else, at least for the sake of the story. It needs a proper beginning.

<sup>6</sup> C.F. Tristan Tzara in the Dada Manifesto: "the first thought that comes to these minds is of a bacteriological order: at least to discover its etymological, historical or psychological meaning ... A sensitivity cannot be built upon the basis of a word; every sort of construction converges into a boring sort of perfection, a stagnant idea of a golden swamp, a relative human product" (122-123).

dozen, where the author starts by putting into orbit a few definitions of key words and then uses the rest of their inquiry as a way of settling into stable meanings. What I had not anticipated was reading under the influence of chance, which manifest itself most emphatically in the following passage:

Luck as an English word is a creature of the fifteenth century and derives from the Middle High German *gelücke* (*Glück*), which (somewhat unfortunately) means both happiness and good fortune, conditions that are certainly not necessarily identical. Virtually from its origin, the term has been applied particularly to good of ill fortune in gambling, in games of skill, or in chancy ventures generally. (6)

I had commenced reading the passage with the tired, guarded skepticism of the scholar but as the words unfurled themselves this emotion gradually began to give way to an unfamiliar commingling of awe and horror at the uncanny usefulness of what chance had led me to find. By the end of the passage, I was, I confess, completely slackjawed. I was agog.<sup>7</sup> The passage fairly glowed with added meaning. Chance seemed positively determined to make everything I touched numinous, rich, and subliminal. Reader, consider how just three weeks earlier I had chanced to reread a wonderful essay on contemporary poetry entitled “Disruption, Hesitation, Silence” and had been musing for some time on the question of how I might apply some of its ideas on silence to the work of John Cage and Marcel Duchamp for this very paper. I had been unable to satisfactorily structure an imagined narrative and was at a loss, almost at the point of discarding the idea altogether. When I read Rescher’s description of the German origins of luck, however, I was overpowered by the precise fortune of chance, the sheer fortuitousness of what I had discovered, the incomparable creative power of the unintended, and quite honestly, the strange serendipity of it all. The astute reader may have guessed why, but I will spell it out for you all the same. The “Disruption, Hesitation, Silence” essay was authored by none other than lady luck herself, Louise Glück.

*Jeannette over at the writing center looked up when she finished this and said, “This is a joke right? You can’t seriously want to turn this in as your final paper, can you? First of all, it sounds like bad detective fiction. Tone*

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<sup>7</sup> BeWILDered, even.

*down the theatrics or you'll lose your reader right away. Second, if you're really writing this thing by chance, you give the impression that you've spent a whole lot of time making sure that everything fits together just right and seem extra meaningful. Isn't the whole point of chance that you don't know what's going to happen next so that when it ends up happening next it's completely random?" You returned her gaze with as much dignity as you could muster under the circumstances and said, "You think I should try something else?"*

*She nodded.*

*Begin again.*<sup>8</sup>

There is something we must consider as essential to some manifestations of the avant-garde, the idea of flexibility within constraints. To start, let's begin with the idea of constrained writing. Naturally, when I say this you'll start by thinking of the most outrageous (and most famous) examples: Ernest Vincent Wright's *Gadsby*, the experiments of Oulipo,<sup>9</sup> Jackson Mac Low's diastics, John Cage's mesostics, Walter Abish's *Alphabetical Africa*, Christian Bok's *Ennoia*. I know what you're thinking. *Surely these books aren't literature. They're just games, language games, aren't they?* Before you take such a dismissive and reactionary attitude, consider this: all writing is constrained, always. What do I mean? I mean that the practice of writing within a language system necessarily involves the adoption of constraints, which appear in their smallest form as the preselected glyphs, graphemes, or symbols of that language. Such constraints are everywhere present in language: in the construction and employment of pre-fabricated words to carry our meanings, in the employment of punctuation

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<sup>8</sup> Consider how little separates the imperative "you must begin again" from "you must be born again." Instead of gi, there is a bor. If each letter were made to stand in for a number which corresponded to its position in the alphabet, the value of G + I (7 + 9) would be less than half of that of B + O + R (2 + 15 + 18). Even if the values were averaged, to begin would still be less than to be born. But if we do not stop after the first order, but carry things through then G + I would yield 16, which would in turn yield 1 + 6, while B + O + R would be merely 33, or 3 + 3. Is not the meaning of 7 well established? Are not its virtues clear? And is not the subtle deceptiveness of 6, its pale imitator, known to all? Does this not reveal something? If instead of measuring the difference, we measure the sum of their variation, what do we have? Would not it be something resembling gi-bor. Would this not seem, at the very least, gibberish?

<sup>9</sup> The *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle* (Workshop of potential literature), potential being the word of crucial importance.

marks, in syntax, in the rigid grammatical and formal disciplining that producing lines and stanzas in verse and sentences, paragraphs, and chapters in prose.<sup>10</sup>

In poetry, constraint has typically been provided by three forces: lineation, meter, and rhyme (the repetition of similar sounds). Think of well-known inherited forms used in English language poetry: the sonnet, the villanelle, the pantoum, the sestina, the ode, even the ghazal or the haiku. Some of them fix the total number of syllables, and then devise further constraints within these syllables, on the line level and below. Some require specific regular meters, others require a specific rhyme scheme, and others employ a regular refrain. Whatever their individual requirements, all of these forms operate in a similar way: they set up conventions of constraint within which the poet works skillfully to demonstrate their ingenuity with the tool called language. So-called ‘experimental’ poets have long been remarkable for both the way that they have reimagined the language constraints they are working within and the way that they have reformed reading practices in order to produce multiple compositions and receptions of their work. We would do well to remember that at one time, even the sonnet was a nonce form, and iambic pentameter was a novel invention. With that in mind, there are a number of things that contemporary poets ought to know about experiments carried out in other genres. I’d like especially to consider the consequences of the structural and compositional revolution in music initiated by Arnold Schoenberg and extended by his most famous American student, John Cage.

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<sup>10</sup> These strictures are always uneasily adhered to. Are not our favorite moments in language akin to Thoreau’s description of wildness in “Walking”: “I love even to see the domestic animals reassert their native rights—any evidence that they have not wholly lost their original wild habits and vigor; as when my neighbor’s cow breaks out of her pasture early in the Spring and boldly swims the river, a cold grey tide, twenty-five or thirty rods wide, swollen by the melted snow ... Any sportiveness in cattle is unexpected. I saw one day a herd of a dozen bullocks and cows running about and frisking in unwieldy sport, like huge rats, even like kittens. They shook their heads, raised their tails, and rushed up and down a hill, and I perceived by their horns, as well as by their activity, their relation to the deer tribe. But, alas! a sudden loud whoa! would have damped their ardor at once, reduced them from venison to beef, and stiffened their sides and sinews like the locomotive”? Aren’t our words a noisy herd?

Schoenberg's innovation was not that he imagined that he could abandon all constraints in music, but that he could fundamentally alter or reconsider the nature and purpose of those constraints in order to make a new, pantonal music. This reconception of constraints coincided with radical ideas of composition, in which music was generated from carefully structured combinations of notes within a prearranged system: the twelve-tone scale. In his serial twelve-tone compositions, Schoenberg conceived of a new kind of music without a single dominant tone around which the piece revolved.<sup>11</sup> Instead, he established a system in which all twelve tones were weighted equally. In Western music, the chromatic scale refers to the twelve-half tones arranged within an octave, and in Schoenberg's serial compositions the entire chromatic scale (all twelve half-tones) had to be performed before any of them could be repeated.<sup>12</sup> By doing this, Schoenberg effectively invented a new syntax for the manipulation of musical notes, no mean feat.

In this new system, the notes could be played at any tempo, and in concert with each other (simultaneously, as chords), just as long as all appeared once before any was repeated. Once Schoenberg had chosen a single sequence of the 12 half-tones (this ordered sequence was called a tone row), he could then do one of several things. He could transpose the notes, moving them all up a selected number of half-tones, or invert the entire tone row. At any point, he could also reverse their order (retrograde), as well as combining one or more of these permutative techniques (like

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<sup>11</sup> A key is a group of tones related to a common center, called a tonic center. Tonality, a musical system in which individual notes maintain a strict and discernable relationship to a common center, prevailed in Western music from about 1600-1900. Obviously, Schoenberg's insights did not take place in a vacuum, and it is interesting to consider how both tonality and the idea of the subject as a single coherent self began to deteriorate at roughly the same time. Cf. especially Adorno's observation in *Aesthetic Theory* that "Theoretical considerations and scientific findings have at all times been amalgamated with art, often as its bellwether, and the most important artists were not those who hesitated...Whereas in the history of art, scientific theories tend to wither away, without them artistic practices would no more have developed than, inversely, these theorems can adequately explain such practices" (337). See also Alice Fulton's essay "Of Formal, Free, and Fractal Verse: Singing the Body Eclectic," in her book *Feeling as a Foreign Language: The Good Strangeness of Poetry* (Greywolf, 1999).

<sup>12</sup> This sounds very complicated initially, but it's actually quite a simple idea. Imagine a piano. Start with middle C and then ascend until you hit the next C note. This is one octave. You'll find that there are 12 keys in that octave (called a chromatic scale). These can be written in letter notation C-D-E-F-G-A-B (the white keys) plus the five flats and sharps (the black keys), or numerically from 0-9 plus A and B, with each number or letter corresponding to one of the twelve half-tones. The diatonic scale is the name given to all the white keys in an octave (which correspond to the familiar solfège pattern: Do-Re-Me-Fa-Sol-La-Si(or Ti)-Do).

retrograde inversion). Schoenberg carried out this restructuring even further, breaking up the tone row into symmetrical half-rows, six note sequences with which he could do the same things.

However, for all his innovation, Schoenberg stopped short of compositional anarchy. His compositions were meticulously ordered, and the composer retained a strong ego presence, as he was responsible for generating the initial arrangement of pitches, as well as its various transpositions and permutations. Additionally, he largely retained conventional strategies for notation, and preserved the chromatic scale as the source of his pantonal experiments.<sup>13</sup> In this way, Schoenberg's imaginative reordering of musical constraints as a series of permutations and arrangements whose chief constraint was their adherence to a stable alphabet (the same twelve pitches that must appear in each tone row) can be seen as somewhat akin to the linguistic experiment imagined in Jorge Luis Borges' short story "The Library of Babel." In that story, Borges conceives of an infinite library made up of books containing all of the possible arrangements of a system in which there are 25 fixed orthographical characters, 80 of those characters to a line, 40 of those lines to a page, and 410 of those pages to a book.<sup>14</sup> As in Borges' imposing library, Schoenberg's experiments employed the 12 fixed pitches of the chromatic scale in order to imagine almost infinite variability within new constraints.<sup>15</sup> After Schoenberg, music was a whole new game. Because of the way that twelve tone serialism reconceived of music's governing (or significant) constraints, it emerged as a new genre of relevant, practicable music for other composers to explore. It provided evidence that a different rule

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<sup>13</sup> Pantonal because they are more dedicated to the equality of tonal emphasis as part of a common community than the destruction of tones altogether. It's like suggesting that all twelve of the apostles had equal, interchangeable power/authority, which is not the same thing as saying that everything is an apostle. That doesn't come until Cage.

<sup>14</sup> C.f. Cage's comment in *Empty Words*: "What can be done with the English language? Use it as material. Material of five kinds: letters, syllables, words, phrases, sentences. A text for a song can be a vocalise: just letters. Can be just syllables; just a string of phrases; sentences. Or combinations of letters and syllables (for example), letters and words, et cetera. There are 25 possible combinations" (11).

<sup>15</sup> Because of the numbers involved, the scale of Borges and Schoenberg's library of potential compositions differs rather substantially, though the number of each is enormous. In Schoenberg's system, the number of unique tone rows available to the composer is twelve factorial: roughly 479 million, while in Borges' story the number of unique volumes is much larger:  $25^{(80 \times 40 \times 410)}$  or  $25^{1,312,000}$ . Imagine the reading list for a Ph.D. in Babelian literature.

book had been adopted, one that opened up a new universe of the possible within what had begun to seem an antiquated and stale system.

Consequently, Schoenberg matters most for contemporary poets not because he invented a new set of pitches,<sup>16</sup> but because he set new rules for composition which conserved many of the old materials. Because he tweaked the governing constraints and opened up more than 479 million possible tone rows for others to play with, he set up new structures within which all those who followed were free to dally with new combinations, chords, and dissonances, exploring their way through the new universe of sound arrangements at whatever pace they damn well pleased.<sup>17</sup>

Now, let us return briefly to our earlier idea of flexibility within constraints as it relates to literature. In traditional conceptions of poetic composition, the intention of the author is everywhere visible on the local level, close to the poem. The poet decides to choose the genre (poetry), then makes decisions about structural constraints on form (sonnet, free verse, meter, rhyme, etc), then chooses among words (diction) and disciplines their order and arrangement on the page (syntax), as well as where (or if) the line is broken. One traditional idea was that each of these choices was made intentionally by the initiator of the work of art in order to convey the suggestion of meaning to its receiver. In other words, authorial choices were made to make the piece mean something. What Schoenberg's innovations in the field of music help us to see is that the content may be less interesting than structure. But what if we feel that Schoenberg has not gone far enough in his structural innovations? Or if we no longer find authorial intention significantly interesting? Or if we admit that stable meaning has always been illusory and imagine instead the goal of art as multiplicity,

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<sup>16</sup> Which would have been the musical equivalent of inventing a new alphabet, each pitch being like a letter, capable of being combined with other pitch-letters into chords (sentences) measures (paragraphs), movements (chapters), and symphonies (books).

<sup>17</sup> A second reason Schoenberg is of particular importance to poets working in today's digitally saturated, multi-modal age is that in his search for escape from prior patterns of organization, Schoenberg drew freely on ideas which had come from many different sources. His art reflects a distinct cross-fertilization between science and the arts, instantiating in its formal patterns some of the more compelling psychological and scientific insights of his time. In the search for new methods to communicate an inner necessity, Schoenberg, like other important avant-garde artists, did not limit himself to the historical practices of his discipline alone, but peered into other fields of knowledge.

or the proliferation of irony, indeterminacy, ambiguity, or even, to have no goal at all, so that we see the work of creation as no more than the aimless joys of purposeful purposelessness? Or if the meaning of art (whether intended or unintended) surrounded by meaninglessness to perform mimetically the appearance of a meaningless world whose seeming chaos informs us only that (impossibly!) it is impossible to evade meaning?<sup>18</sup> In such a case, authorial choice would no longer be seen as contributing to the production in an artwork of stable meanings but as the design, selection, and invention of new structures within which to conduct purposeless play.<sup>19</sup> The initiator of the art work might then seek even to hasten their own withdrawal from the production of meaning by searching for a way to use their tools of creation (sound, language, stone, etc.) without foresight, in a way that surrendered all intentionality.

If this is our view, then as exciting as Schoenberg's innovations were, they cannot be our primary point of interest, for all the reasons mentioned previously. From such a vantage point, instead of Schoenberg, the most intriguing figure for further inquiry might well be John Cage. Cage, we should remember, was not willing to limit his compositional choices to the half-tones of the chromatic scale (or even fractions of these half-tones), imagining instead an "all-sound music of the future," in which "any sound is acceptable to the composer" (*Silence* 5).<sup>20</sup> Cage makes this explicitly clear when he states that "Sounds are events in a field of possibilities, not only at the

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<sup>18</sup> C.f. Adorno in *Aesthetic Theory*: "Truly, one of the enigmas of art, and evidence of the force of its logicity, is that all radical consistency, even that called absurd, culminates in similitude to meaning ... Ultimately, art is semblance in that, in the midst of meaninglessness, it is unable to escape the suggestion of meaning" (154).

<sup>19</sup> In *Silence*, Cage writes "Though in the *Music for Piano* I have affirmed the absence of the mind as a ruling agent from the structure and method of the composing means, its presence with regard to material is made clear on examining the sounds themselves ... The mind reappears as the agent which established the boundaries within which this small play took place" (27).

<sup>20</sup> The full context for this quotation is also illuminating: "Any sound is acceptable to the composer of percussion music; he explores the academically forbidden "non-musical" field of sound insofar as is manually possible" (5). This is why Cage was so excited by the possibilities of magnetic tape. It allowed him to explode the twelve stepping-stone pitches of the chromatic scale since they are "not characteristic of the possibilities of magnetic tape, which is revealing to us that musical action or existence can occur at any point or along any line or curve or what have you in total sound-space; that we are, in fact, technologically equipped to transform our contemporary awareness of nature's manner of operation into art (*Silence* 9). Technology for Cage was in part exciting because it made possible a more perfect mimesis by admitting nature directly into art, or most/least radically, making nature art.

discrete points conventions have favored” (28). Clearly, in a system in which pitch is seen as a continuum rather than a series of harmoniously balanced steps, the idea of the tone row itself becomes irrelevant since there are far more than twelve tones from which one is choosing. The formal structure which had offered so much promise for future composers of serial music in turn takes on the appearance of merely another arbitrary and unduly constrictive formal device. Another consequence of Cage’s interest in the consequences of “all-sound music” is that he, far more than Schoenberg, was willing to contemplate (and even celebrate) the possibility of completely indeterminate art.<sup>21</sup>

What John Cage’s experiments in intentionality help us to do with both music and language (as well as the music of our language) is to realize that however we construct or conceive of intentionality in composition (the intended results of behavior that has arisen out of our *voluntary* adoption of constraints), when it takes place within a predetermined communicative system there are always already some constraints which inhere before our choice and which we may fail to perceive as chosen (language, employment of grapheme systems, shapes of sounds and symbols, and so on). Our deliberate assumption of certain formal constraints may put us at risk of unconsciously assuming other choices, or even of assuming that these choices are necessary, rather than contingent, elements of the piece’s being. In the case of Schoenberg, this means that the very constraints that had previously seemed so liberating (pantonal organization and the idea of the tone row) are recast as unnecessarily restrictive. What Schoenberg initiates and Cage extends is an ongoing reimagination and continual reconsideration of the site or sites at which constraints might be applied and removed. This musical insight correlates to writing in that we are compelled to admit that while writing can be constrained in any number of ways, no constraint is *inherently* more artificial

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<sup>21</sup> In “Composition as Process,” Cage writes, “There is a tendency in my composition means away from ideas of order to no ideas of order” (*Silence* 20). It is this largely this tendency that makes him such a compelling figure for many contemporary critics, including Marjorie Perloff, who has written extensively on Cage, ranking Cage among the preeminent twentieth century literary artists in several of her influential books of criticism.

than any other (they merely *seem* so to the degree to which they deviate from common practice or established traditions, either those of previous work within that genre or those operative in common speech).<sup>22</sup> To abandon traditional constraints is to abandon our striving to find meaning in the world, and the consequence of erasing the author as meaning-maker would be the surrender of intentionality and its corresponding struggle for signification.<sup>23</sup>

*How long winded you are? What don't you just say what you are trying to say? Aren't you just trying to say that you like John Cage and that other people would like him if they felt the same thoughts that you thought when you felt about John Cage? Why don't you just say that? All this thinking and feeling seems so very impossible, especially when in language. Can we think speech, or even see to speak feelingly? Can a man see how this world goes with no eyes?<sup>24</sup> Is there a world that goes without eyes? Without our eyes what world goes? Is this what Cage meant when he said he wanted to carry language to the point to which he had taken musical sounds, to make "something other than language from it" (For the Birds 113)? We ought to begin being born again. There's world enough, but time?*

## Movement II. imPo<sup>25</sup>ssibile Mi<sup>26</sup>ddles: 2'23" or The Middle Silence Full of Noise

*There's no such thing as an empty space, an empty time. There's always something to see, something to hear. — John Cage*

*"Why is this so necessary that sounds should be just sounds? There are many ways of saying why. One is this: In order that each sound may become the Buddha."—John Cage*

*Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes.) — Walt Whitman*

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<sup>22</sup> This is why Wordsworth's decision in the *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* to claim to speak of daily events in common, everyday speech is so important. It is both a setting up of certain imaginary constraints and an announcement that other constraints will henceforth be unimportant, insignificant, not ground for future poetic innovations. In this lens, Wordsworth's move and the more radical break with decorum initiated by the Dadaists are more differences of magnitude than of kind. Dada is a further loosening of constraints in the realm of appropriate content, a broadening of constrained topics to the point of seeming absurd.

<sup>23</sup> Cage on the options available to us in relation to the control of sound: "One has a choice. If [we do] not wish to give up [our] attempts to control sound, [w]e may complicate [our] musical technique towards an approximation of the new possibilities and awareness. Or, as before, [we] may give up the desire to command sound, clear [our] mind of music, and set about discovering means to let sounds be themselves rather than vehicles for man-made theories or expressions of human sentiments (10). He also describes the fearlessness that occurs after such a surrender to nonintentionality is made: "But this fearlessness only follows if at the parting of the ways, when it is realized that sounds occur whether intended or not, one turns in the direction of those he does not intend. This turning is psychological and seems at first to be a giving up of everything that belongs to humanity—for a musician, the giving up of music. This psychological turning leads to the world of nature, where, gradually or suddenly, one sees that humanity and nature, not separate, are in this world together; that nothing was lost when everything was given away" (*Silence* 8).

<sup>24</sup> Paraphrase of King Lear (IV.vi.151-153)

<sup>25</sup> Oh [but aye/I/eye] can be a nay? Ed. note: 'o' can be an 'a'.

<sup>26</sup> I [eye] can be a you [ewe]? Ed. note: 'i' can be a 'u'.

In the MLA publication *Profession 2007*, N. Katherine Hayles authored an incisive article entitled “Hyper and Deep Attention: The Generational Divide in Cognitive Modes”<sup>27</sup> in which she noted that we appear at the present time to be “in the midst of a generational shift in cognitive styles,” in which hyper attentivity is replacing deep attentivity as the dominant mode of engagement” (187). Hayles connects this cognitive shift to the dominant mediascape Western children now inhabit. In her formulation, actions which characterize deep attention include “concentrating on a single object for long periods...ignoring outside stimuli while so engaged, preferring a single information stream, and having a high tolerance for long focus times.” Conversely, hyper attention is characterized by “switching focus rapidly among different tasks, preferring multiple information streams, seeking a high level of stimulation, and having a low tolerance for boredom” (187). Hayles observes that both types of attentiveness have different benefits and disadvantages,<sup>28</sup> but points out that by “combining such resources as quiet with an assigned task that demands deep attention to complete successfully,” contemporary Western educational structures have normalized deep attentivity as the legitimate mode in which learning takes place to such an extent that we regularly regard hyper attention as “defective behavior that scarcely qualifies as a cognitive mode at all” (188).

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<sup>27</sup>Ought I to mention that I found this article completely by chance? I had gone up to a room on the 7<sup>th</sup> floor of the Helen C. White building, expecting to attend a mandatory staff meeting for a course that I was teaching, but instead found the room empty. I went to the department reading room, which was nearby, in order to check my email and find out where the meeting was actually being held. While using the computer, my eye wandered onto the book containing Hayles’ essay. I saw her name and felt a strong urge to read her article. Who can say why these things happen? As you will see, it was a very interesting discovery. There is a wonderful little book by the English chemist Keith Laidler called *Energy and the Unexpected*. It is a lot like the Leonard Mlodinow book mentioned in this essay’s noisy beginning (beborning), only slightly less elegant. At the end of a chapter describing the dust up between Bohr and Einstein about the role of chance in the universe he concludes: “Chance thus again plays a fundamental role. It is the essential ingredient of the structure of matter, and of how processes occur. In fact, it plays a dominant role in everything, including ourselves and our behaviour” (85). My favorite part (apart from the idea of chance’s dominance over our lives, which I heartily endorse) is how certain his voice appears. It’s not just the aggressiveness which with he asserts the idea, no it’s not that, it’s his confidence in words, or to be precise the trusts he puts in language to carry his meaning, his reliance on it metaphorical capacity (it’s ability to *carry meaning over*). Such trust strikes me as quaint and touching and rather utopian. It’s from this that I knew Laidler was a scientist.

<sup>28</sup> “Deep attention is superb for solving complex problems represented in a single medium, but it comes at the price of environmental alertness and flexibility of response. Hyper attention excels at negotiating rapidly changing environments in which multiple foci compete for attention; its disadvantage is impatience with focusing for long periods on a noninteractive object such as a Victorian novel or complicated math problem” (Hayles 187).

While such a system may have served past generations perfectly well, Hayles contends that the ongoing generational shift in cognitive styles will pose such a serious challenge to established modes of instruction that it will require both “a reevaluation of the relative merits of hyper versus deep attention ... and a thoroughgoing revision of educational methods” (188). After impressively documenting ongoing inquiries into the growing body of knowledge surrounding this shift from deep to hyper attentivity, Hayles suggests that “critical interpretation is not above or outside the generational shift of cognitive modes but necessarily located within it, increasingly drawn into the matrix by engaging with works that instantiate the cognitive shift in their aesthetic strategies” (197). She concludes that as educators and artists our responsibility is to interrogate further the many perplexing and exciting points of interaction between the two modes of cognition. Taking up this responsibility,<sup>29</sup> I would like to suggest that the work of John Cage, particularly his seminal piece *4'33"*, is particularly well suited for interrogating and simultaneously engaging both deep and hyper attentivity. With the words that follow, I will discuss how Cage's *4'33"* might serve as a potential catalyst for new pedagogical, performative, and creative insights.

Why *4'33"*? First, because its status as a piece of nonintentional music<sup>30</sup> gives it a singular advantage, which is that its unique employment of silence allows it to simultaneously cultivate both deep and hyper attentivity. Consequently, *4'33"* ought to be seen as the artwork most capable of fusing Hayles' two modes of engagement into a state of coincidental mental alertness and vacuity that will hereafter be termed *diaper attentivity* (diaper = deep + hyper).<sup>31</sup> In fact as a state of hybrid consciousness, diaper attentivity may even be said to be the ultimate product of the *4'33"* listening experience. The piece, which Cage considered his most significant composition, is probably the

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<sup>29</sup> To produce a greater “response ability,” to borrow an apt Cagean formulation.

<sup>30</sup> This is of course why it makes no difference whether *4'33"* is performed by a single pianist, an entire orchestra, or some other body (or bodies), since there is nothing to be performed.

<sup>31</sup> I am sincerely shocked that Hayles has not yet (to my knowledge) already formed such a concept. I suspect that I only just beat Donna Haraway to the punch with this one, and that it will soon be all the rage in grad schools everywhere.

fullest conceptual realization of his idea of a new music which required new listening techniques. This new listening does not entail an effort to understand the intended meanings of sound, but demands a more comprehensive attention to the activity of the nonintended sounds within one's listening environment.<sup>32</sup> We must remember that *4'33"* is placement within a performative situation that is traditionally bound to expressions of profoundly deep attention, namely, the concert hall. This setting allows the piece to incorporate an environmental feature considered constitutive of deep attention (relative silence) into a listening experience but which engages the skills and strategies of hyper attentivity by putting the mind completely at rest and asking it not to concentrate in order to accomplish the task of meaning-making, but simply to follow whatever sounds occur *without* imputing to them any intentionality.<sup>33</sup>

Because the conventions of its performance produce in the eye and ear<sup>34</sup> the *expectation* of the carefully intentioned sound traditionally associated with profound concentration the piece enacts in its listeners a heightened awareness of what is actually occurring in the sound-space that had previously passed for silence. Because we are perpetually exposed to sounds, and because the nature of these sounds is anarchic, because indeed there is no 'natural' hierarchy of sound, the listening experience connected to *4'33"* cannot but become an exercise in diaper attentivity, in which the state of deep concentration is employed in attending to the continual, irreproducible, unpredictable, and unintended sounds which occur in our listening environment. Consequently, the deep attention produced by the piece's locational setting and the audience's generic expectations are fused with the

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<sup>32</sup> Which means that no performance is of course the same, and yet all performances are exactly the same. The subject/hearer becomes composer by virtue of their concentration, by virtue of the powers of their perception. The experience is a lesson in concentration.

<sup>33</sup> A story: near the end of his life, John Cage was interviewed for a documentary film. In the film Cage sits in his New York City apartment, stroking a cat on his lap. At one point Cage says, in a slow and gentle voice: "I love sounds just as they are and I have no need for them to be anything more than what they are. I don't want them to be psychological, I don't want a sound to pretend that it's a bucket or that it's president, or that it's in love with another sound. [Laughs] I just want it to be a sound." The film, released in 1992, was directed by Miroslav Sebestik and is called *Ecouté (Listen)*.

<sup>34</sup> Cage on his early works: "They are occasions for experience, and this experience is not only received by the ears but by the eyes too. An ear alone is not a being" (31).

listening practices characteristic of hyper attentivity, in which the mind, released from the search for intended meaning and eager to forestall boredom, flits from sensation to sensation.

Furthermore, because 4'33" is emphatic in its preservation of the openness of meaning,<sup>35</sup> which coincides with both its refusal to invite, initiate, or foreclose the act of interpretation itself, it possesses a rare ability to teach its listener to consider their own lives as art. It is easy to see how it is uniquely positioned to avoid what Hayles calls the "serious incompatibilities" that "arise between the expectations of educators, who are trained in deep attention and saturated with assumptions about its inherent superiority, and the preferred cognitive mode of young people, who squirm in the procrustean beds outfitted for them by their elders" (188). If we can agree that 4'33" presents the possibility of imagining the simultaneity of deep and hyper attentivity, or of deep attention focused upon our own hyper attentivity, then we seem to have arrived at Cage's compositional goal, embodying for us the experience of the empty mind within a sound space that is never truly empty. The result is that noise becomes music by no other force than our own diaper attentivity.<sup>36</sup>

My next point, and this is of course very important, diaper attentivity makes everything utterly transparent by foregrounding the processes and conventions of art objects. If, as Cage helps us to

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<sup>35</sup> Not being one to foreclose potential avenues of meaning, let me suggest at least one other reason than has already been articulated in the main body of the text. In line with the other dominant concern of our age, it is about as green a performance as can be imagined. It requires no technology, can be performed anywhere, at any time, with (or without) any thing or things, by any one or ones, for any audience. In fact, it requires only one thing: an audience. In this sense, it is radically anarchic and open to all, with no need for any kind of formal training. All that is needed is aggregated attention (not aggravated intentions).

<sup>36</sup> I would also like to stress that diaper attentivity has a number of other applications in addition to actuating a full (by which I mean empty) appreciation of 4'33". How else are we to understand the luminous suggestion that Marcel Duchamp's (hasn't he already been introduced? I forget. My, it is noisy down here.) ready-mades are not pop art at all, but destroy pop art, and destroy the epidemic of lost concentration and destroy the terrible plague of inattentiveness, of superficiality, without understand that what these works are really doing is calling out for diaper attentivity, not an over serious one, mind you, never that, but for a real, honest to goodness diaper consideration, a soul-shaking boot-quaking depth-rocking engagement with the made object of our own making. What is discovered in using our newfound diaper attentivity to elevate ready-mades (mass-produced commercial objects with specific use-functions) to their proper status? We discover that we cannot help but encounter the myriad and vapid properties of the object being considered, said properties rendering us unable to worship it with the same fervor and intensity that our ancestors worshiped their sacred idols, their singular fetishes. This art demonstrates the folly and the brilliance that comes when one tries to put old Humpty Dumpty back together again. Even if we marshal all the king's men and house the urinal in the Louvre, there's the nagging feeling that we can't *quite* restore the aura to that auraless object, the mass produced, the readymade, the buzzing industrial silence.

see, art consists not of the materials from which the object is made, nor the intentionality of the artist, then we must conclude that aesthetic value is not a property of the object, not its content, nor even yet its form, but entirely a consequence of perception. Art is made by the way a thing is perceived, how it is seen.<sup>37</sup> Certain conventions may aid in this by preparing the mind to perceive differently, but art is also a way of perceiving, and then not merely that but of being in the world.<sup>38</sup>

*Phew. You've exhausted yourself, even. You'll not begin again this late, but you can at least resume anew.*

*Therefore, resume.*

Now, to explain. I the question was “Why 4'33”?” In addition to its general insights into the aesthetic capabilities of perception, 4'33” is the composition whose performance, more than any of Cage's other compositions, that allows its listening community as co-constructors, to understand Cage's innovative ideas regarding noise and silence. Despite its extreme simplicity, 4'33” is a piece which allows for extraordinary complexity because of the way that it confounds tradition. The most profound of these consequences is that in 4'33” noise ceases to be noise, and silence is shown to be not actually silent.

Let's take noise first. Historically, etymologically, psychologically, noise is many things.<sup>39</sup> As a word with a history in language, its root is literally *nausea*, meaning a physical sickness, discomfort, or

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<sup>37</sup> C.f. Stein on masterpieces in “Composition as Explanation.”

<sup>38</sup> This is mad and joyous core of dada; that all the word (I meant to say world, but let's let it stand) is art to those who concentrate, to those who say it is so, to those who insist on seeing anything, or even everything, as art. Who is to stop them? If, after having been informed by the honest child that he is in fact naked, the emperor still chooses to believe in the sumptuousness and elegance of his dress, does not his nudity in fact become brilliant, do not such clothes as can be but imagined materialize in his mind and make of his fleshy folds the royal raiment that befits such thoughts? Is not this the way that art is made, and beauty produced, entirely first in the eye (I) of the individual beholder/subject, and then in the eyes of many beholders by common consent? Whether the art in the object is manufactured, made, or arrived at spontaneously is of little matter other than to say that value, beauty, truth, the sacred and yes, even art are made and agreed upon, but the fact that we reach some instable consensus is not the thing that makes it art, not the consensus or accord at all, but the perception which precedes the accord, and that perception may be (and in fact always is) entirely singular, unique, and utterly alone. Art then, is atomized into the individual eye (and I) and taste and judgment are exactly what we make of them. This is meant to be no great heresy, for in no way should this be read as imputing that taste and judgment are themselves at fault for I have them both and treasure them, and daily seek to use and sharpen them as I may, by bringing them to bear on the things others have made and for which I stand daily in awe and wonder and (excepting only little) great and deep concentration.

<sup>39</sup> Note how many things are many things. Nothing, even, can be many things.

ill feeling. Preserving this historical sense, it is not surprising to find that most of the definitions of the word noise in the Oxford English Dictionary suggest in some way that noise equals disturbance. The consequence of this is we can come to imagine how noise can be seen as referring not to any quality of a particular sound experience itself, but to its effect. When used as a descriptor of sound, “noise” encodes and transmits judgments of both quality *and* effect. In other words, to call something noise is not to describe any of the sound’s own physical properties, but the properties of its physical impact upon its perceiver.<sup>40</sup> To call audible sound events noise is to imply the presence not just of a perceiver, but of a specific effect (nausea) upon that perceiver. Thus, the term noise is conventionally used as a statement of quality which contains the implication of inferiority, or disagreeability. In its popular usage, noise is non-musical sound which disturbs us, undesirable sound which we seek to avoid because it makes us sick.

Noise is also a contemporary obsession. Ours is a noisy age, and the production and amplification of sound has never been more pronounced, incessant, or ubiquitous. By way of example, the September 2008 draft revision of the OED lists thirty-five compound formations containing the word noise.<sup>41</sup> Of these thirty-five entries, only one (noise money) has an illustrative

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<sup>40</sup> How can we understand this meaning of noise? Let me tell you a story. In *Survival in Auschwitz* Primo Levi describes a moment just before his liberation from Auschwitz in which he hears the suffering of the dysentery ward in the building next to him: “Naturally I would have liked to have helped them, given the means and the strength, if for no other reason than to stop their crying. In the evening when all the work was finished, conquering my tiredness and disgust, I dragged myself gropingly along the dark, filthy corridor to their ward with a bowl of water and the remainder of our day’s soup. The result was that from then on, through the thin wall, the whole diarrhea ward shouted my name day and night with the accents of all the languages of Europe, accompanied by incomprehensible prayers, without my being able to do anything about it. I felt like crying, I could have cursed them” (166). I think you must now know the meaning of noise.

<sup>41</sup> The OED is such a delicious pleasure. The term noise has a particularly rich entry. From it, I learned that the term noise has a special meaning within the theater, where it refers to sounds produced and taking place off-stage. These sounds, “noises off,” would be events which can be heard and imagined, but whose causes are obscure, unclear, hidden from view. It also hints towards the idea that the theatergoer might be trained to consider things other than what was taking place on stage not only as part of the performance, but as integral to the artwork itself. In a Cagean context, *4’33*” is the literal presentation of a performance that consists entirely of “noises off,” since everything that happens in the piece happens off stage. Cage’s interest in the performative aspect of his music is clearly present very early in his career. (He writes, “Where do we go from here? Towards theatre. That art more than music resembles nature. We have eyes as well as ears, and it is our business while we are alive to use them,” in the late 40s) but it seems to me that there is an interesting underexplored connection between Cage’s and Samuel Beckett’s ideas of silence. I would love to read an interesting reading of Beckett’s *Breath* alongside Cage’s *4’33*”. One could begin by ‘noting’ that in French, two words

quotation dating from before 1920. Furthermore, about half of them are terms related to the control or elimination of noise, while about a third are terms related to the measurement and scientific management of sound irregularities. Only a handful (noise-generation, noise-rock, noise-pop, noise-music) have connotations that could be remotely construed as positive.

What can we conclude from these patterns of language use? First, it seems that noise has begun to occupy a much more prominent role in English-speaking countries in the last seventy years. We perceive our voices are always awash in a sea of noise. Second, while it is frequently the product of modern technologies, noise has also increasingly been coming to mean sound that we can measure, manage, and control by the use of technology. Finally, the word noise has, with very few exceptions, retained its etymological linkage to nausea and its many pejorative connotations.

So, then what is the role of the composer in the electronic age, the age of amplification, the age of perpetual, nigh inescapable white noise? This is a question that can be answered various ways, but John Cage's response is among the most interesting. Rather than defining music in strict opposition to noise, Cage dedicated himself to dismantling our habit of thinking of noise as dysphonic sound. For Cage, attending to noise is crucial towards unlocking the infinite imaginative possibilities of what he calls "total sound-space" (*Silence* 9).<sup>42</sup> In "The Future of Music: Credo," Cage writes: "Wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise. *When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating.* The sound of a truck at fifty miles per hour. Static between the stations. Rain. We want to capture and control these sounds, to use them not as sound effects but as musical

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are used to describe the sign used in musical notation we call a quarter-rest in English: *un soupir* or *un silence* and then remembering that *un soupir* is also a sigh.

<sup>42</sup> Cage writes that we can only avail ourselves of these possibilities if we are "willing to change [our] musical habits radically" (*Silence* 9). Such a change would entail the abandonment of any processes of artificially wrenching sound out of its natural being and into an ordered system of discrete steps. Cage's dedication to destroying habits is not only directed toward the act of listening. He writes for instance that magnetic tape is a useful medium for composers because it "introduces the unknown with such sharp clarity that anyone has the opportunity of having his habits blown away like dust (*Silence* 16). C.f. his later admission: "I am trying to check my habits of seeing, to counter them for the sake of greater freshness. I am trying to be unfamiliar with what I'm doing" (106). The avoidance of habit seems to be one of Cage's great personal obsessions, since habit interferes with the perpetual wonder with which we might see the world.

instruments” (*Silence* 3, italics added). While some parts of his compositional oeuvre engage in partial efforts to capture and control these sounds, in *4’33”* noise becomes a kind of musical instrument even as the desire to control it is abandoned. Through diaphanous attentivity, the perceiver of *4’33”* neither captures nor controlling nonintentional sounds, but works to simply hear them as they are in the moment they are made.

In this way, Cage puts into practice some radical ideas about the constructed, and thus arbitrary, meaning of noise. If noise is sound that results in disturbance, what if we choose not to be disturbed? The answer is that noise literally ceases to be noise. Thus, Cage writes, “WHEREAS, IN THE PAST, THE POINT OF DISAGREEMENT HAS BEEN BETWEEN DISSONANCE AND CONSONANCE, IT WILL BE, IN THE IMMEDIATE FUTURE, BETWEEN NOISE and SO-CALLED MUSICAL SOUNDS” (*Silence* 4). Exploding inherited traditions about the distinction between euphonic and dysphonic sounds is clearly delightful for Cage, since it allows him, in the process, to demonstrate how what we perceive as noise need not of itself be a nuisance.<sup>43</sup>

Whereas we may be far more accustomed to thinking of noise as being highly disruptive,<sup>44</sup> even to the degree that we can conceive of it as a debilitating weapon,<sup>45</sup> it is worth remembering that

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<sup>43</sup> One wonderful thing that the OED does is trace the flare-ups and disappearances of meanings within language. In doing this, the OED quite clearly demonstrates that while words have histories, they are not fixed to their histories or even to stable meanings. Words are uncertain referents, imprecise signifiers, and their shifting meanings are always slippery. Words mean (or don’t mean) what we want them to mean (or not mean). For meanings of words that have now fallen into disuse the OED uses the abbreviation *obs.* (meaning obsolete). Definition 3a. for noise has the following definition: “A pleasant or melodious sound.” Surprising, yes? Perhaps, until you read the three letters that follow it: *Obs.* Obsolete. The OED says that the idea of noise as a pleasant or melodious sound is obsolete. Try telling that to Cage.

<sup>44</sup> Just as Walter Benjamin conceived of the reproducibility of images destroying the aura of the work of visual art by letting artworks meet us halfway, might it also be said that it is not only the recording of sound but the possibilities of electric amplification of sound has destroyed the aura of music? Can we not clearly see now that the outrage over Dylan plugging in at Newport in 1965 was representative of a host of ills, not just the abandonment of traditional folk music? While there are still those who lament the unceasing stream of images which bombard the modern subject, the fact remains that the stream can be stopped. Subjection to them is still voluntary, after all, since we can avert our gaze or even close our eyes, unplug ourselves from seeing. It is not so easy with sound. We may cover our ears, or plug them, but absolute silence is a myth. There is no such thing as pure silence. A true silence would require the destruction of our bodies. Not to mention the death of speech and the possibility of speech, both now and in the future. Not to mention the immolation of history. Silence may be written, but writing itself takes places in the realm of the visual, not of the auditory, even if reading was originally not a silent practice (medieval monks moved their lips, or read quietly to themselves). For an elegant articulation of the widespread view of the ancients as almost entirely vocal readers see the second chapter of Alberto Manguel popular history’s *A History of Reading* (Penguin: New York, 1996). For a more

such a metaphor can be reversed. Silence<sup>46</sup> too can be conceived of as a weapon, and not simply as a technique of oppression or the cessation of a voice or sound which discomforts us, but as an

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nanced portrayal, see Steven Roger Fischerer's *A History of Reading* (Reaktion Books: London, 2003), 89-92, 159-164, and articles by AK Gavrilov and MF Burnyeat in *Classical Quarterly* 47 (1997): "Techniques of Reading in Classical Antiquity," 56-73 and "Postscript on Silent Reading," 74-76, respectively.

<sup>45</sup> Especially now that amplification technologies allow us to produce previously unrealized intensities of sound for extended durations. Consider the work of the American Technology Corporation (<http://www.atcsd.com/site/>), in developing (for potential use by governments and militaries) machines that issue "sound bullets," which are debilitating, directionally focused bursts of sound. Interestingly, there are also a number of commercially available products which promise to destroy or eradicate noise by producing sound waves out of phase with the incoming wave, essentially reducing its frequency into the inaudible (or at the very least less audible) wavelength.

<sup>46</sup> Question: what is silence? Answer: It is a word that has come into the English language from Latin via French, a word that is related to many other words. Question: How does it enter into 4'33'? Answer: By way of Cage's instruction for performers, his written directive for each of the three movements: the word TACET. This, I suppose, is a fact that could be learned in many ways, but I first learned it watching a film clip of the piece being performed on BBC 4. The occasion was the piece's first orchestral performance in the United Kingdom, by the BBC Symphony Orchestra, at the Barbican, on January 16, 2004. At some point in the film, an image is shown of the score. All you see is the word TACET.

Question: What is the word *tacet*? Answer: A Latin word. Question: What does it mean? Answer: "It is silent." It is often used in by composers to indicate the long silence of an instrument. The word is built from the Latin root *taceo*, which means "to be silent, say nothing; to be still, quiet." Question: If *tacet* means to be silent or quiet, what is silence and what is quiet? Answer: They are words that have come into the English language from Latin, words that are related to many other words. Question: What are the roots of silence, taciturnity, and quiet? Answer: The Oxford English Dictionary helpfully informs me (in that cheerfully pedantic way it has of saying things) that the Latin roots for these words are *sileo*, *taceo*, and *quies*. —ED. NOTE: What follows is an interruption.—[SILEO, TACEO, QUIES: AN IMAGINARY ETYMOLOGY: We have heard it from an ancient source that these words originated from a wandering hermit, who, emerging from his sanctum sanctorum to find the blight of a city and all its unholy noise, cried out in his madness for the city to stop, uttering the words like gift offerings—SILEO TACEO QUIES, and the words were as *Dido*—flames of the forsaken lover immolating herself on the pyre of his absence; and the words were as *Absalom*—names of sons, murdered perhaps in a city like the one before his eyes, only in his home country; and the words came because he did not find the memory murdered sons in that city, but their actual living faces (O Joseph in a stranger's clothing in a strange land, and we all hungry, and your own brother held hostage for a golden goblet!), and he was surprised to find his sons corrupted, doing trade with strangers, in a place far from home, in dress that did not suit their bodies, in bodies that betrayed their blood, in blood which seemed to converse in strange tongues with words that seemed to have no spelling, no shape, no history, because entirely unfamiliar. It was the lamentation of this man, crying out the name of his sons, so piercing, so different, so entirely other that it stopped and stilled the city. The walls of the city fell down at this man's trumpet voice, as in Jericho, and all the inhabitants turned in wonder to this man, who made a knotted whip of his voice, whose strange language had overturned the tables and cast out the moneychangers and cleansed the house of a father for the sons' toddling safety, and everything having been stilled the people then perceived the power of such words, their magic utility, the way that in their strangeness each one gave pause, caused stillness, made the whole earth to stop, the sun to retreated in the heavens the space of an hour to lengthen the day and prolong the battle, stopped time even in the cessation of tongues and speech. From this day did these people invoke these word as talismans, not knowing certainly that they were not just magic words but the name of a father's own loved children and that the recognition of faces in a surprising heartrending place was what had produced such silence. They then repeated the words SILEO TACEO QUIES to themselves and to others as they traveled, expecting that any one of the words themselves could cause for them what it had previously caused, a great silence, and the word that had begun by causing silence over time become domesticated and gradually abandoned its efficacy, so that it no longer caused things to come about but merely stood in for the description of an already established phenomenon (when one found silence accomplished it was merely enough to say SILEO or TACEO or QUIES to seal what had already been chosen, as if to claim the words themselves had done the thing enacted) and finding the word had lost its power, there were cults which sprang up devoted to its preservation, who used other means to make the silence and then mischievously, hopefully, dishonestly invoked the word and pretended it was still full of power, or there were still others who were glad at the slipping strength of the name and began to write it in their books and to buy and sell with it, to record it with glyphs and say to themselves, this is not a fearful word at all, we have signs already that can cover it, can capture and hold it and

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then they did conclude that word merely described (and did not cause) some thing that it had not itself made. After calling the name of his sons, the wandering hermit retreated again into the desert, having no further need for speech, as he had no company. The word had been born in the instant of necessity, of the shock of chance, the living breathing body's engagement with the uncontrollable, unanticipatable world.]—Ed. Note RESUME FOOTNOTE. Yes I answer (in my head of course), *sileo, taceo, quies*, repeating this talismanic trinity as if they were sacred relics, imagining in my glasseyed awe that here is something found and not made, something bright, created, eternal; words that might hold the key that would unlock the secrets of my own speech and my own silence. This of course is a lie, a bright and shining lie, but a lie nonetheless. Do the Latin roots *sileo, taceo, quies* have their own roots in language? Of course. These three words are only Latin, and Latin is merely a human language among human languages, which means of course that the roots of silence are far deeper in the crust of human history than this, its origins somewhere further off. What are the Latin words from which silent, tacit, and quiet have come into the English language? Answer: *sileo, taceo, quies*. Question: What will we do with these three Latin words? Answer: We will dig around a bit in the soil, we will plumb the depths of language, shake the trees of history and see what falls out. Question: Why will we do this? Answer: Because Latin is so often proffered as the terminal point of etymologies, the place where our language has come into being, begins first to exist, when this is clearly, patently not so. [Reader, if you know them please insert Sanskrit/Indo-European etymologies here. Don't stop until beyond Babel, till you've reach the ur-tongue.] Question: Is this really why we are doing this? Answer: No. Perhaps this is the difficulty that inheres in all language, namely our difficulty in believing that it is, at root, arbitrary. It is sometimes hard for us to admit that our language is simply what we make it, that words have no necessary being, are utterly contingent. It is especially hard when we feel that language is something that we have inherited, harder still when we admit that we cannot remember having fashioned it ourselves, and near impossible when we feel in the absence of history that it comes to us whole out of the seeming mists of history. Springing unborn out of the head of Zeus as it were. Such a problem seems particularly acute in a place as susceptible to amnesia as the United States of America, where forgetfulness since a national obsession, and where so much of our language use seems to indicate a half-formed wish to believe that words means something stable, that they came from somewhere, that if we sink down deep enough our toes will touch a solid bottom, that the linguistic quicksand will come to an end and we will place our feet solidly upon the earth and say, here is the birth of language, touch it, the word is connected to a thing and is that thing and no other and it (being both word and thing) is and are coincident, and thus true. Such seems to be the use of history in America, if it is used at all. If we give an American words like *sileo, taceo, quies*, it's sometimes all he can do to keep his from worshipping them like golden calves and damn near forgetting they started off as his wife's earrings. Is it any wonder that Moses ground the thing up and made them drink it? Ought we too ingest the words? I can only assure you they won't kill, though they may be bitter. Despite their ancient glow, they're only words. Go ahead, pick one for yourself. *Taceo*. Touch it (so near a thing to tactile). Put it in your mouth. *Sileo*. Notice the way it strokes your tongue, feel it honeying about in your ears, purring down your spine and whisker licking its way into your blood. This word, you still say, is true. It is a magic word, it is the first word, it is language uncorrupted. No. It's simply what we make it. *Quies*. Don't say it at all. Question: Does this mean then that the project of etymology is a fool's errand, is Quixotic, is tilting at windmills? Answer: Perhaps. Question: Does this mean then that such a foolhardy project ought then to be abandoned or disparaged? Answer: Certainly not. It is with this recognition wholly in mind that I wish to speak a word in praise of it, to cry from the very earth, from my well planted place that it must be continued, that such a task is wonderful, delightful, essential, even holy. What could be more wonderful than our own ability to decide on meaning, to say of a word, *no not that*, and to say of another, *let's make it mean this*. Is it dreaming to ask whether language could be a choice we all share? For if in tracing language back through the sedimented wastes of time, patching the fragments that time has cruelly or indifferently blasted or preserved, we discover some secret, something lying beneath the cover of signification, the whole tribe of speakers (language tool-users) might then rejoice and say together, *ah, this word we have it comes from somewhere*, it (the word) has itself a home in language, (not that it need be kept at home) but we might, with some comfort and hope, take of these homely tools and make ourselves whatever comfort we can gather, a home from out of language and within language, and know that it is built, yes, but that it is well-built and that we have done it with our inner-ears, [So much depends on placement. Is it in the rear or inner ear? asked the doctor holding the thermometer. Wherever you put the hypen, his patient wisely noted.] and mind-tongues, and our bodies too, and we have done wherever we have wanted to do it, and we have done it in the way we always would have liked for it to have been done, and it is not just our master's home but it is our own and we have made it and so will then live in it, not forever no, but long enough and though we will go out from it for adventures from time to time it will still be a place for us to come back to out of the sunny good weather and a place to depart from in times of storm and lightning. Might then the wild around be the source of our own dazzled discovery? Might then we feel our bodies' places in the world as the source of a new speech, a language that makes its own roots and discovers itself in its dissembling, an assemblage that we are proud to wear and equally proud to disrobe from and emerge naked, entirely without found speech, without gesture even, but with our bodies battered and intact, in a language at last of silence?

instrument which assaults our habits of perception to such a degree that we hear sounds as they are in the moment they are made.

This is within this context<sup>47</sup> that we can best understand the particular meaning of silence in *4'33"*. For Cage, silence is emphatically not a state of complete inaudibility, nor the absence of sound. In fact, Cage's insistence that absolute silence is a physical impossibility and that sound is always present is among the most important impulses behind the creation of *4'33"*. This conviction was produced by Cage's own experience in an anechoic chamber at Harvard in the late 1940s:

In fact, try as we may to make a silence, we cannot. For certain engineering purposes, it is desirable to have as silent a situation as possible. Such a room is called an anechoic chamber, its six walls made of special material, a room without echoes. I entered one at Harvard University several years ago and heard two sounds, one high and one low. When I described them to the engineer in charge, he informed me that the high one was my nervous system in operation, the low one my blood in circulation. Until I die there will be sounds. And they will continue following my death. One need not fear about the future of music (*Silence* 8).<sup>48</sup>

One of the lessons in this story is that for Cage silence is not something we make, but something we listen to. This is an idea of silence that is far from empty. Rather it is a silence which is already filled with sound, it's just that the sounds that fill it are sounds to which we are not yet attentive (which makes them noise: the sounds which make us sick). When we listen with diaper attentivity, the sound-spaces that appeared to be silences are found to be filled with intensely interesting events. *4'33"* is an object lesson designed to demonstrate that silence is not the absence of sound but the consequence of our repression of unwanted sound (noise). It is the ideal presentation of the new music imagined by Cage in which "nothing takes place but sounds: those that are notated and those that are not. Those that are not notated appear in the written music as silences, opening the doors of the music to the sounds that happen to be in the environment"

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<sup>47</sup> This context being the wondrously paradoxical capaciousness, even fullness, of sound-space we believed empty merely because emptied of all intentionality.

<sup>48</sup> Commenting on another meaning of this story, Cage remarked, "the situation one is clearly in is not objective (sound-silence), but rather subjective (sounds only), those intended and those others (so-called silence) not intended" (13-14). What then is this silence? Not an absolute point of non-sound, but the inescapable presence of sounds we do not intend.

(*Silence* 7-8). We cure the nausea of silence, not by producing sound, but by becoming attentive the sound that is always already present, by taking the nausea out of noise.

In this way, *4'33"* demonstrates how silence can be a kind of whetstone which sharpens of the spear of our listening ear. Breaking from traditional ideas of silence in musical composition, Cage's piece in which nothing is intended but silence demands its diaper attentive listeners to focus their minds upon the unintentional noises surrounding every moment of their being. In so doing, they find that these sounds they are suddenly hearing as if for the first time are not noises at all but that they have made (and are making) something else.<sup>49</sup> When silence is the substance of the work of art, the intense focusing of our concentration upon a single object is shifted from the intentional sounds produced by a performer onto the unintentional, continual sounds of our listening environment. Silence is coincident with the background of sound to which we do not ascribe musicality, the range of sound phenomena that we do not yet care enough about to consciously acknowledge. Why did Cage so often repeat the claim that his favorite sound experience was the experience of silence? Because the sound experience of silence is the experience of that which commonly passes for noise, and Cage believed that noise could be fascinating.

Cage's silences, because they are not ever silent, are invitations for non-planned sound events to be welcomed in to the musical work of art as nothing more than what they are. When Cage incorporates silence into his composition, it fulfills in the deepest of senses a commitment to

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<sup>49</sup> Surely you are wondering about the various kinds of silences that exist? Silence does not always produce mystical transcendence. It's often painful, cruel, or wrongfully imposed. To this we must concede (following Foucault) that the disciplines which silence discourse are often undesirable. We may at time, close down some important part of our identity, finding that it has no place within dominant discourse, hoping that alternative pockets for self-expression may one day exist, but nervous that until then the pressure of silence may be damaging to our inner selves. However, what if that discipline is chosen freely on behalf of the other? What if we choose to silence ourselves in order to permit the being of some other sound? What if we recognize, as we must, that by choosing silence, other sounds can fill our (and others' consciousness). Is this not a noble gesture, a gesture of respect, of dignity? We give way in silence to the speech of another person, or the sound of another animal, or even the vast background of multisourced, continuous sound that is always with us, always surrounding us. Our choice of silence allows our art to more closely approximate nature, not because it is a stricter or more technically proficient representation, nor because our power of illusion and deception more closely approaches the thing it purports to depict, but because our art becomes simply what is. Art is found, not made, and sounds that exist, that have being, are not asked to be anything other than they are, that is to say, themselves.

art in which nothing is said. The idea of absolute silence has no place in such an idea of art, but the deliberate restraint from making meaning (in this case through refusal to produce intentional sound), is crucial in stimulating the listener's decision to place their attention onto the ambient sounds of their own environment. In the case of *4'33"*, the nonintentionality of its sound-space becomes a crucial aspect of its intention, such that silence draws attention to its absolute singularity and perpetual variability. Another way to say this would be that by using noise-filled silences in order to teach a new way of listening, it changes the very experience of art into something that had previously seemed (merely!) life. The new listening that corresponds to this new music is not just the neural registration of vibrations from our ears, but a state of radical openness to all that is unintended in which sounds are permitted to simply be themselves.<sup>50</sup>

This is to me what is most wonderful about *4'33"*. The intentional abstinence from sound on the part of the performer forces the incidental sounds into our consciousness. The background ambience, the white noise that we generally ignore, the very sounds which constitute what in most musical performance settings pass for silence becomes filled with something other than silence. This is really a remarkable thing. It is not that it was difficult, or even that Cage was the only one who did or could do this. It is something that everyone can do, true to the most universal spirit of anarchy, available to all and radically egalitarian in its openness.<sup>51</sup> Not only that, if we can never stop sounds

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<sup>50</sup> C.f. Cage: "The mind, though stripped of its right to control, is still present. What does it do, having nothing to do? And what happens to a piece of music when it is purposelessly made? What happens, for instance, to silence? That is, how does the mind's perception of it change? Formerly, silence was the time lapse between sounds, useful towards a variety of ends, among them that of tasteful arrangement, where by separating two sounds or two groups of sounds their differences or relationships might receive emphasis; or that of expressivity, where silences in a musical discourse might provide pause or punctuation, or again, that of architecture, where the introduction or interruption of silence might give definition either to a predetermined structure or to an organically developing one. Where none of these or other goals are present, silence becomes something else—not silence at all, but sounds, the ambient sounds ... The mind may be used either to ignore ambient sounds, pitches other than the eighty-eight, durations which are not counted, timbres which are unmusical or distasteful, and in general try to control and understand an available experience. Or the mind may give up its desire to improve on creation and function as a faithful receiver of experience" (22, 32).

<sup>51</sup> "What can we discover when we stop trying to describe nature through our emotions or as if holding up a mirror to reflect her forms? Cage felt that we should not attempt to imitate nature's appearance (always saturated with our desires), but instead adopt her manner of operation. In that way we no longer stand apart from the rest of the world but participate in it as one among many. We join in the ecodynamics of what Cage liked to refer to as the global village

and they will continue going on without us, we begin to see that sounds may not need us in order to be. And that is why I like what Cage has done.

*Here we are now at the beginning of [another] large part of this talk. More and more I have the feeling that we are getting nowhere. Slowly, as the talk goes on, we are getting nowhere and that is a pleasure.—John Cage, “Lecture on Nothing”*

### **Section III: 1’40’’: Our shared silence comes to an end and with it the noises stop.**

*The question at issue ... was whether a law of nature, which the second law of thermodynamics certainly was, could just be a matter of chance. Every other one of the laws of nature that had previously been deduced was quite definite and straightforward. The second law was the only law that had a different basis; it was not absolutely true but was only approximately true, as a matter of chance. It was true that the chance of the law being violated was usually exceedingly remote. Some scientists, however, found it philosophically unsatisfactory that what was supposed to be a law of nature was true only by chance.—Keith Laidler, from page 70 in *Energy and the Unexpected*.*

*A work of art is never beautiful, by decree, objectively, for everyone. Criticism is, therefore useless, it only exists subjectively, for every individual, and without the slightest general characteristic ... How can anyone hope to order the chaos that constitutes that infinite, formless variation: man? —Tristan Tzara, *Dada Manifesto 1918**

The most surprising discovery we make upon hearing 4’33” is how fragile and sickly we are. For the whole of first movement we are so earnest, we try so hard to keep our silence, and then when the performer indicates it has finished, our awareness of our bodies returns and we rush to scratch the throat-itch that’s been niggling all the while, the whole auditorium erupting into fits of coughing. It is as if our bodies have suddenly begun to cast out the sounds we had been storing up in them all at once, as if our discovery of noise even in silence had made us literally nauseous. We repeat this at the end of the second movement, and again when the piece concludes. How much effort it takes to still the body even for four and a half minutes.

*Though indeed, at this point, you are no doubt exhausted, ought we not resume once more? Therefore, resume.*

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whose inhabitants—human and others—have equal value. The first requirement is thus to understand as much as possible about how nature, in her anarchic harmony, works.” Jean Retallack, “What is Experimental Poetry and Why Do We Need It?”, *Jacket* 32 (April 2007), paragraph 38.

## MANIFESTO: RESUMÉ

~~Attend to this: Artists make art.~~

*Nothing (the presence of absence, not the absence of presence) makes us attentive to art, makes art attentive.*

~~Meaninglessness = inattention.~~

*Meaninglessness = attention*

~~Absolute silence leads to sadness. It is the image of death. — John Jacques Rousseau~~

*Absolute silence does not exist outside of death. Relative silences do.*

~~Speech is human, silence is divine, yet also brutish and dead: therefore we must learn both arts. — Thomas Carlyle.~~

*Silence > speech. It is the great (w)hole from which speech emerges, the entropy towards which all speech declines.*

~~Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter. — John Keats.~~

*I have nothing to say and I am saying it.*

~~Poetry makes nothing happen. — W.H. Auden~~

*Nothing is accomplished by writing a piece of music. Nothing is accomplished by hearing a piece of music. Nothing is accomplished by playing a piece of music.*

~~The worst wheel of the cart makes the most noise. — Benjamin Franklin~~

*Noise is not a property of a sound, but a consequence of poor reception. Noise makes us sick because we don't attend to it. Noise is nothing but sound neglected.*

~~Silence comes like a poultice to heal the blows of sound. — Oliver Wendell Holmes~~

*Silence burnishes the spear blade of our minds.*

~~I will try, like them / to be my own silence: / and this is difficult. — Thomas Merton~~

*Everything we attend to is music. Our lives (what we do) our art. Concentrate.*

**END.**

**REFERENCES PROVIDED UPON REQUEST.**