

“Something like a hidden glimmering”:

John Cage and recorded sound

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1.

“What's in mind is to stay up all night reading” — this is John Cage's suggestion for his work *Empty words* (1973–1974), a chance-made rearranging of passages from the journals of Henry David Thoreau. The text is in four parts, becoming more and more fragmented as it proceeds. The first section draws phrases, words, syllables, and letters at random from the thirteen volumes of the journals; the second section dispenses with the phrases, and the third drops the words, too. By the fourth section, there is nothing left but individual letters and silences making a vocalise: pure sound. The performance instructions read like notes from Cage's own journal:

Searching (outloud) for a way to read. Changing frequency. Going up and then going down: going to extremes. . . . Instead of going to extremes (as in I and II), movement toward a center (III and IV). A new breath for each new event. . . . Making music by reading out loud. *To read. To breathe. IV: equation between letters and silence. Making language saying nothing at all.*

It is at this point in his instructions that Cage mentions the all-night reading. The plan is to time the reading (allowing for half-hour intermissions between the four parts) so that the final section will commence at dawn. At

this point all the doors and windows are to be opened, allowing the sounds of the morning to enter. When Cage performed such a reading over the radio in 1981, I did as he suggested in my own apartment. The bird songs mingled with his own vocalizations — inside and out, everyone was singing together.

Cage's orchestral work *Score (40 drawings by Thoreau) and 23 parts: 12 Haiku* (1974) is another Thoreau-inspired piece. Here, the eponymous drawings, taken from the journals, are arranged in time frames constructed according to the syllabic proportions of Japanese *haiku* poetry (5-7-5). These drawings are distributed among the twenty-three instrumental parts, so that when the ensemble plays together the complete drawings are transformed into sound. After the performance of the twelve *haiku*, we hear the sounds of dawn arriving, this time via a tape recording made at Cage's home in Stony Point, New York. The effect is almost identical to that of the open windows in *Empty words*: the outside world is allowed in.

Cage's combination of natural ambience and the text and pictures of Thoreau's journal is not haphazard. Thoreau, as his journal demonstrates on every page, was an avid walker in the woods and a keen observer of everything that he encountered there. In both Cage pieces, after hearing fragments of Thoreau's accounts of the world of nature we are ready to go out and see for ourselves. By opening the windows of the concert hall, either physically or through the medium of tape recording, Cage takes the world that we experience secondhand in Thoreau's writing and invites it inside. Why describe the thing when you can have it whole right here and now?

Cage does not use the sounds from outside as an accompaniment to his music, however. In *Score and parts* the tape is played only after the orchestra is finished; in *Empty words* the sounds of the early morning fill up the silences in his reading, overwhelming and absorbing his voice. Our attention is turned away from the figure of John Cage, composer and performer; instead our ears turn outwards, towards the world. His performance notes suggest this: "At

first face to face, finally sitting with one's back to the audience (sitting *with* the audience), everyone facing the same vision.” After staying up all night listening to his reading, everything in the world seems clear, bright, shiny-new.

Maybe I was wrong when I said that Cage opens the window to invite the world in. He opens it to let the world invite us out. We have come full-circle: Thoreau went out into the woods, then came back and wrote of his experience. Cage takes those writings and drawings, transforms them through his own artistry, then takes us back out into the world again, as if on a field trip. When we hear the morning sounds in both *Empty words* and *Score and parts*, the urge to put on our boots and go looking for birds, flowers, or mushrooms is irresistible. The beauty of it all is that Cage need do so little — nothing, really — to make this turning of our minds happen. He just opens the window, turns on the tape recorder. Like Thoreau, Cage is a master at simply noticing things.

2.

Cage's *Inlets* (1977) is for three performers, each with four conch shells: small, medium, large, and very large. Water is poured into the shells so that they will gurgle softly when the players tip and turn them about. Each begins with any shell, then, after a short time, changes to another one. A somewhat longer time is spent playing the second shell before changing to the third one, which is then played for an even longer time. The rest of the performance — the longest time period of all — is spent playing the final shell. The watery sounds of the shells are at the heart of the piece. Their unpredictable outbursts and soft burbles are mesmerizing and relaxing; the gradual slowing down of the performance mirrors the setting of our own minds. About midway through the piece the shells fall silent and the sound of fire — of burning pine cones — emerges from loudspeakers. The water gurgles pick up again, and, a little later, the sound of a blown conch shell trumpet is heard. That is the whole piece: water, fire, air. The materials are elemental (only earth is missing . . . I remember, though, that when Cage performed it he used a box of sand to catch the dribbles of water). They do not need Cage's assistance to become powerful. What they need is for him to leave them alone. Each of the elements is presented so plainly that its identity shines brightly: the splashing of the water, the crackling of the fire, the wailing of the conch trumpet.

In transmitting these vivid images, live sound has no advantages over recorded sound. The sound of the burning pine cones can be produced live (presumably offstage and then piped in) or it can come from a tape recording: Cage makes no distinction between the two. To discuss the fine distinctions between the fire, the sound of fire, and the recorded sound of fire is to miss the point entirely. The overriding concern is the clear projection of the three elements via the three sounds; the image of water, fire, and air, not the medium through which that image is imparted.

3.

I think one of the things that has happened is that it's become clear that we can be — not just with our minds but with our whole being — responsive to sound, and that that sound doesn't have to be the communication of some deep thought. It can be just a sound. Now that sound could go in one ear and out the other, or it could go in one ear, permeate the being, transform the being, and then perhaps go out, letting the next one in.

[John Cage, in conversation with Morton Feldman]

Go to the pine if you want to learn about the pine, or to the bamboo if you want to learn about the bamboo. . . . Your poetry issues of its own accord when you and the object have become one — when you have plunged deep enough into the object to see something like a hidden glimmering there.

[Basho]

Any fool knows it's a broom.

[An unidentified friend of Jasper Johns, speaking of the real broom
in Johns's painting *Fool's house*]

4.

Before Cage began his history-making work with chance and indeterminacy, he had already achieved wide recognition as a composer for percussion ensembles. His introduction to percussion music was through Oscar Fischinger, a maker of abstract films. “When I was introduced to him,” Cage recalls, “he began to talk with me about the spirit which is inside each of the objects of this world. So, he told me, all we need to do to liberate that spirit is to brush past the object, and to draw forth its sound.” Cage was inspired by this to go striking things he found around him, listening for their spirits: this exploration became his music.

I wonder whether this was also the source of his unusual scheme for classifying recorded sounds in his two tape pieces of the 1950s: *Williams mix* (1952–1953) and *Fontana mix* (1958). In both compositions he used six categories of sounds: city sounds, country sounds, electronic sounds, manually-produced sounds (including instrumental music), wind-produced sounds (including singing), and “small” sounds (that is, sounds so quiet and subtle that they need close miking and amplification to be heard). This plan is unique in that it is not based on the acoustic properties of the sounds, but rather on the identity of their sources. To properly classify a sound, Cage's system demands that one knows what produces it or where it comes from. Perhaps, in collecting sounds for his tape collages, he was more concerned with the different spirits to be discovered rather than the different acoustical profiles. I like the image of John Cage, microphone in hand, hunting for city spirits, country spirits, small spirits.

Sounds are also the spirits of places — the essence of a place can be found in its own peculiar flavor of silence. In *Etcetera* (1973), a work for mixed ensemble, a tape recording of the ambient noise in Cage's Stony Point home is

played very quietly throughout. By the time of the sequel to this work, *Etcetera 2/4 Orchestras* (1986), Cage had moved to an apartment in New York City: the tape recording played here is of the traffic noises rising from Sixth Avenue, punctuated by the ringing of the telephone. In either work the effect he sought was to use the recording of ambient noise to transform the sound of the concert hall — its silence, actually — into the sound of the place in which he had composed the work.

There is a rich poetry in so identifying the piece with the circumstances of its creation. Cage was a fastidious and devoted worker. There's a wonderful scene in Elliot Caplan's recent documentary film *Cage/Cunningham* in which Cage and Merce Cunningham are waiting in an airport. The corridor is empty and silent. The two of them are sitting at a table, briefcases open, papers out, working away. Their concentration is electric. Perhaps this is the intent of the ambient noise in the *Etcetera* pieces — to summon up the image of Cage working intensely in an empty, silent space. By hearing the same silence, we might just be brushed by the same spirit.

5.

The very first number of the *Song books* (1970) is a setting of the following excerpt from Thoreau's journal:

Saw a large hawk circling over a pine wood below me, and screaming, apparently that he might discover his prey by their flight . . . What a symbol of the thoughts, now soaring, now descending, taking larger and larger circles, or smaller and smaller! It

flies not directly whither it is bound, but advances by circles, like a courtier of the skies . . . How it comes round, as with a wider sweep of thought! . . . Circling and ever circling, you cannot divine which way it will incline, till perchance it dives down straight as an arrow to its mark . . . a will-o'-the-wind . . . the poetry of motion.

Cage's instructions for the performance of the song are clear enough:

Using the map of Concord [Massachusetts, Thoreau's home] given, go from Fair Haven Hill down the river by boat and then inland to the house beyond Blood's. Turn the map so that the path you take suggests a melodic line (reads up and down from left to right). . . . Change electronics [amplification or alteration of the voice] at intersections and/or when mode of travel changes. . . . The different type-faces [of the printed text] may be interpreted as changes in intensity, quality, dynamics.

This solo may be accompanied by a tape recording of hawk sounds.

This first solo of the *Song books* demonstrates perhaps the simplest possible treatment of recorded sound. The Thoreau text is a poetic meditation on the flight of hawks; its declamation is accompanied by the recorded sounds of hawks. The tape borders on being a sound effect, except that there is no attempt here to create the illusion of being where Thoreau was. In his book *The transformation of nature in art*, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy distinguishes between artistic imitation as “simulacrum” and “simile”: the imitation of the outward appearances of phenomena versus the imitation of essences and eternal images. His discussion of this very distinction and his insistence on the divine origin of all art is, in fact, the source of an idea that Cage cited throughout his life:

However, if we suppose that all this implies a conception of art as something seeking its perfection in the nearest possible approaches to illusion we shall be greatly mistaken. It will appear presently that we should err equally in supposing that Asiatic art represents an “ideal” world, a world “idealized” in the popular (sentimental, religious) sense of the words, that is, perfected or remolded nearer to the heart's desire; which were it so might be described as a blasphemy against the witness of Perfect Experience, and a cynical depreciation of life itself. We shall find that Asiatic art is ideal in the mathematical sense: like Nature (*natura naturans*), not in appearance (*viz.* that of *ens naturata*), but in operation.

“The painters of old painted the idea and not merely the shape” — so says a Chinese writer quoted by Coomaraswamy. Cage has done the same in his hawk-song. Thoreau, watching the hawks, had his mind full of hawks: from the real one in front of him his journal proceeds to his thoughts — the inner hawks — that multiply, circle, and dive. The passage moves fluidly between these inner and outer hawks: did he see a bird dive to its mark or did he have an insight? His consciousness and hence his writing is filled with hawks. Cage, in attaching a tape of hawk calls to his music, imitates Thoreau's mental state, not the theatre that unfolded before him. It's just a hawk (any fool knows it), and yet it touches on something deeper. It is the soul of hawks, of Thoreau's thoughts. Here the very concrete acts as a window into a spiritual

insight. The clarity of vision and the simplicity of the sound produces a brilliance, a luminous quality. The hawk screams, and we begin to hear something like a hidden glimmering here, even while we hear nothing special at all.

6.

In *Roaratorio, an Irish circus on Finnegans Wake* (1979), Cage took on the daunting task of setting James Joyce's polyglot novel to music. To write a scripted version of the book — a radio play, for instance — is hardly imaginable, since the literal dramatic surface of the book is almost non-existent: it comes from the world of dreams. Instead, Cage turned to sound and its magical ability to reveal the eternal by means of the concrete. He went through the entire book, finding references to sounds and places. He then recorded those sounds, recorded the ambient sounds at those places, and mixed them on tape so that their appearance in time was proportional to their appearance in the book. This translation from novel to tape music is as straightforward as it can be: if the book mentions a cat meowing, then put in the sound of a cat meowing; if the book mentions Istanbul, then put in a recording of street noise from Istanbul. Add to this some music from a few Irish folk musicians and Cage's reading of his own rearrangement of the novel's text, and the composition is complete. The resulting cacophony is an expression of the spirit of the novel, its eternal image: the world and its entire history as filtered through the unconscious mind of a Dubliner.

Cage's use of recorded sound here, as elsewhere, is completely without guile or complication. In *Roaratorio*, his sounds are literal: a sound is “just a sound.” But, being sounds — *truly* sounds and not tokens for concepts — they have a magic that words or even literal visual images do not. The visual image of a thing shows us its surface. If the artist or photographer is good and we are lucky, then we may see through this into a deeper understanding. The name of a thing doesn't even go surface-deep: it is something applied to the thing and is not of the thing itself. The sound of an object or a place — its sonic image — goes to its heart; we can be permeated and transformed by it. The relationship between a sound and its hearer is a more intimate, a more physical bond than that between a visual image and its viewer.

Cage's achievement in his work with recorded sound is that he allows us to respond to a sound's spirit directly, without having the sound act only as an intermediary for his own designs. His realization was that sounds possess this power in themselves, and that any personal vision that he might try to saddle them with would only detract from their innate power — their living impulse would disappear in the welter of ideas (to paraphrase Frank O'Hara's assessment of Kandinsky). When we hear *Roaratorio*, we respond to the sounds — and hence the spirit — of Joyce's novel, not to Cage's vision of the novel. Cage is the perfect composer to set Joyce's writing because both of them — Jasper Johns, Thoreau, and Basho, too, for that matter — are consummate masters at connecting our mundane experience to a higher reality. Joyce finds the universe in the dream of a Dublin innkeeper; Cage translates this to a phantasmagoric music of everyday sounds — the cries of babies and seagulls. Recorded sound is a particularly appropriate medium for this kind of work. In Cage's hands it is our modern-day tool for going to the pine and the bamboo, to become one with our world.

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