

Wanting to Say Something About John

17.02. bis 06.05.2012 // täglich 10 bis 19 Uhr
freiraum quartier21 INTERNATIONAL // MuseumsQuartier Wien

EINTRITT FREI

VORWORT

Wir feiern Geburtstag! 2012 wird das quartier21 10 Jahre alt. Wir läuten dieses Jubiläumsjahr mit einer Ausstellung zum 100. Geburtstag von John Cage ein. Warum passt Cage so gut ins Museums-Quartier Wien? Weil seine Vision eines Gleichklangs von Kunst und Leben täglich im Kulturareal zu spüren ist. Hier trifft Klangkunst auf DJ-Sounds, Street Art auf Egon Schiele, barocke Architektur auf modernes Design. Für Impulse von außen sorgen die Artists-in-Residence, die auch zum Ausstellungsprogramm beitragen. Mehr soll an dieser Stelle nicht verraten werden. Stille ist, so Cage, ein Zustand „frei von Intention“. Wenn Sie also ganz zufällig im freiraum quartier21 INTERNATIONAL vorbeikommen, sollte dieses „nicht-intentionale Ereignis“ ganz im Sinn von John Cage sein.

Wir freuen uns auf Ihren Besuch.
Christian Strasser
Direktor MuseumsQuartier Wien

FOREWORD

It's our birthday! In 2012, quartier21 is ten years old. We're ringing in the anniversary year with an exhibition celebrating the hundredth birthday of John Cage. Why does Cage fit so well with the Museums-Quartier Wien? Because his vision of the union of art and life can be felt everyday in the MQ culture complex. This is where sound art meets DJ sounds, street art meets Egon Schiele, and Baroque architecture meets modern design. The artists-in-residence bring inspiration from the outside and contribute to the exhibition program. We have lots in store for you this coming year. But this is all we'll reveal for now. Silence, said Cage, is a condition "free of intention." So if you happen to pass by freiraum quartier21 INTERNATIONAL by chance, see it as an "unintentional event" in the spirit of John Cage.

We look forward to your visit.
Christian Strasser
Director MuseumsQuartier Wien

Organizers
quartier21/MuseumsQuartier Wien
TONSPUR für einen öffentlichen raum
Federal Ministry for European
and International Affairs
Slovak Institute in Vienna
Embassy of the United States in Vienna

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Links
http://johncage.tonspur.at
www.quartier21.at

INTRODUCTION

John Cage Influenced and Influential

Cage has a certain charm as well ...
Roland Barthes in his autobiography

Do you think you could give this speech without mentioning John Cage?
Alvin Lucier asking Robert Ashley to speak about Lucier's music at Wesleyan University

Few artists have had such a profound impact on the arts in recent decades as American musician, writer, and visual and intermedia artist John Cage (1912–1992). Moreover, his concepts of open work, indeterminism, transversality, plurality, and interdisciplinarity correspond with recent discourse in the humanities, helping it overcome its metaphysical orientation and establish more liberal interpretation strategies. Formerly trained as a visual artist and musician, and later inspired by Joyce and Duchamp, modern dance, oriental philosophy, and the thoughts of Meister Eckhart, Thoreau, Fuller, and McLuhan, Cage managed to incorporate all of these inspirational sources in his work in surprising contexts, creating postmodern intermedia and multimedia art par excellence at a time when postmodernism was still in its infancy.

How is it that the cocktail mixed from such a quantity of varied ingredients does not have a resulting consistency with a bizarre taste or odour? Well, the charm of Cage's personality as well as the essence of his mastery rest in his ability to connect seemingly un-connectable phenomena with a knack for correctly estimating their relative proportions. Furthermore, although he made risky connections he ensured a result by adopting irrationality in his mental world, a tried and tested method of Zen Buddhist practice: "My concern toward the irrational, and my belief that it is important to us in our lives, is akin to the use of the koan in Zen Buddhism. That is to say, we are so accustomed and so safe in the use of our observation of relationships and our rational faculties that in Buddhism it was long known that we needed to leap out of that, and the discipline by which they made that leap take place was asking a question that could not be answered rationally. Now they discovered that when the mind was able to change so that it was able to live not just in the rational world but wholly, and in a world including irrationality, that then one is, as they said, enlightened."¹ Cage was a master at asking the right questions. He asked them whole his life. He put them directly as well as in metaphors, verbally as well as in own works: "What can be analyzed in my work, or criticized, are the questions that I ask. But most of the critics don't trouble to find out what those questions were. And that would make the difference between one composition made with chance operations and another. That is, the principle underlying

the results of those chance operations is the questions. The things which should be criticized, if one wants to criticize, are the questions that are asked."² He addressed questions to himself, the *I-Ching*, his listeners, friends, or the social setting. To ask wisely was simply the essential part of his personality, eclectic philosophy and way of life. With a respect for tradition and a sense for experimentation, he continued to open new horizons and spaces and was instrumental in the conceptualization and intermedialization of the arts. "John opened up the door and I just opened the window a crack,"³ Morton Feldman, in whom Cage found a disputing sparring partner par excellence, once stated.³ Legendary 4'33" was also just a big question posed in the right time and context (like Duchamp's ready-made forty years before it). It can be viewed as a *milieu* vibrating with many meanings, where the American sense for experiment meets European (compositional form and institutional presentation) and Oriental (Zen tolerance and empathy for environmental aspects of all processes and situations) traditions.

But Cage did not open the door merely to new (or, better said, to newly discovered) ideas; his main purpose in opening it was to allow commonplace sounds to enter into the hermetically closed realm of sacred tones through it. And though he did not succeed in depriving sounds of their semantic aspects and providing a representational immunity for them (by aleatorics and indeterminacy), he still achieved in equalizing sounds with tones, and in so doing in elevating them to a paramountly musical state. Cage always bore in mind the social dimension of organizing the sounds, activity to which he fully devoted himself, as he had promised his teacher Arnold Schoenberg. However orthodox and intense his enthusiasm for indeterministic composing was, he failed to eliminate his own subjective input from the creative act. Instead of the dreamt-of realm of natural indeterminism he paradoxically arrived to the institutional art world, a world of ideas and intentions. Nor did the phillistine Zen practice of proclaiming the failure to be intentional help him. On the contrary, his own failure forced him to extend the sphere of "divine influences" to which music had to be helpful according to oriental imaginations: "Composition is like writing a letter to a stranger. I don't hear things in my head, nor do I have inspiration. Nor is it right, as some people have said, that because I use chance operations my music is written not by me, but by God. I doubt whether God, say he existed, would take the trouble to write my music."⁴ John Cage uttered these words in his seventies, and though he began lose his former "modernist" illusions about art as a tool of radical revolution, he never doubted in its ability to change the world: "It would be good if we could make our changes nonviolently. That's how changes in art take place. The reason why we know

we could have nonviolent social change is because we know we have nonviolent art change. We mustn't believe that you can only change by killing because you can also change by creating."⁵ This assumption, based on a quasi-Christian vision of the inherent goodness of human beings, as well as his deep belief in progress finally brought him to the theory of nonviolence and also contributed to his profound conviction in the gradual ethical self-regulation of humankind and the significant role that science, technology, media and arts play in the further cultivation of mankind. Aside from the abovementioned oriental influences, the ethical aspects of Cage's social philosophy were also formed by the environmental and globalizing world views prevalent at the time: "Now in connection with the thought of Marshall McLuhan we know that we live in a period of the extension of the mind outside of us, in the sense that the wheel was an extension of the power that we have in our legs to move, so we now with our electronics have extended our central nervous system not only around the globe but out into space. This then gives us the responsibility to see enlightenment, not in terms of individual attainment, but in terms of social attainment, so that at that point we must say that the world as we now see it is intolerable."⁶ But the social-critical feature of Cage's complex personality only seemingly opposes the deliberate involvement of a pragmatic subject and his ability to also accept and exploit adverse influences. One can see Cage's lifetime effort to achieve philanthropic-ecological synthesis behind his ambition to depolarize dichotomy "acceptable/non-acceptable". Many of his answers to the Proustian questions put him by Jacqueline Bossard in a questionnaire in 1970 prove this:

"*Où aimeriez-vous vivre?*
Where I am.
Votre idéal de bonheur terrestre?
The general presence of intelligence among human beings, and the nonobstruction of nature (ecology).
Pour quelles fautes avez-vous le plus d'indulgence?
My love of music."⁷

His love of music is of course "pardonable"; it was certainly a major gain for humankind that he never succeeded in shaking this bad habit of his. It was he who opened "Pandora's music box" in a century that would be depressing and devastating without him, as Morton Feldman once stated. Having realized that "one need not fear about the future of music,"⁸ because the sounds' existence is everlasting, was the hope left at the bottom of the box which absolved Cage of all of his "sins" that his natural curiosity had led him to commit in music.

The exhibition "Membra Disjecta for John Cage" is in a way an investigation of what is left of the Cage's legacy in the postmodern condition, when his ideas and acts are being

recycled without pathos, as they have always been here as a public source, and a natural, anonymous and legitimate strategy. The title "Membra Disjecta" refers to his famous method of treatment of various inspirational sources, as well as to the historical, aesthetic and media heterogeneity of the exhibited collection (*membra disjecta* or *disjecta membra* is Latin term for "scattered members", and is used to refer to surviving fragments of ancient pottery, manuscripts and other cultural objects). The subtitle "Wanting to Say Something About John" is meant as a paraphrase of Cage's commemorative visual homage to Marcel Duchamp. In 1969, Cage and several other artists were asked to contribute an idea in honour of Duchamp, who had died the previous year. Cage created a multiple consisting of two lithographs and eight Plexigrams, all printed with text generated at random with the help of the Chinese oracular book *I Ching* and presentable in random order, one behind the other in a special wooden frame. Finally he decided to title the work after the Jasper Johns' statement "I don't want to say anything about Marcel." The participating artists include several of Cage's collaborators and friends as well as younger artists who are inspired by his work. It consists of known works by renowned artists as well as pieces specially created for the project. The show is an ambitious undertaking juxtaposing a variety of media, with paintings, drawings, prints, collages, musical scores, texts, photographs, instructive pieces, sculptural objects, installations, videos, musical pieces and sound installations, which again corresponds with the versatile persona of Cage. The entire installation is divided into nine sections – *Silence, Happy New Ears!, Composition, Indeterminacy, Anarchy, Notations, Where Are We Eating? and What Are We Eating?, Where Are We Going? and What Are We Doing? and Writing through and Statements re* – titled after key books or essays by Cage. This was not our original intention as curators but a natural reaction to the contributions we received from the artists, a pragmatic need to sort and order the collected "membra disjecta" and to articulate the complex space of exhibition. In addition, the artists were asked to "say something about John," and their personal statements are assembled in a display that imitates Cage's original plexigram multiple.

In a special way, "Membra Disjecta for John Cage" tries to remind people of John Cage's significance and wide influence in the current "intolerable world," whose aggressive and greedy institutions turn every idea into a commodity without any reference to or respect for its author. Dear Alvin, we are sorry that we cannot do it "without mentioning John Cage."

Acknowledgments
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Jozef Cseres – Georg Weckwerth
Curators

References

- 1 Richard Kostelanetz: *Conversing With Cage*. Omnibus Press, London/New York/Sydney 1989, p.267
- 2 Ibid., p.85
- 3 Peter Gena & Morton Feldman: *H. C. E. (Here Comes Everybody)*. In: Gena, P., Brent, J. & D. Gillespie (eds.), "A John Cage Reader in celebration of his 70th birthday," C. F. Peters Corporation, New York/London/Frankfurt 1982, p.57
- 4 Richard Kostelanetz: *Conversing With Cage*. Omnibus Press, London/New York/Sydney 1989, p.74
- 5 Ibid., p.263
- 6 Ibid., p.267–8
- 7 Ibid., p.285
- 8 John Cage: *Silence*. Wesleyan UP, Middletown, CT 1973, p.8

Translations

Susan Schwarz [foreword]
Jonathan Quinn [introduction]

