

# Music to the ears of the post-war avant garde

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## Abstract

John Cage, the well-known musician, who died in 1992, and the celebrations of his life show how much he influenced—and was influenced by—some of the greats of American 20th-century art. John Cage was always clear about visual art's central importance to his career. For many years, he nurtured the idea of his most famous work, *4'33"*, 1952—four minutes and 33 seconds of silence, the beginning and end of which is marked by a musical performer—before taking courage from seeing a radical gesture by his friend and collaborator, Robert Rauschenberg. “His white paintings... when I saw those, I said: ‘Oh yes, I must. Otherwise I’m lagging, otherwise music is lagging.’”

If Cage owes a debt to the visual arts for their role in the creation of one of the great game-changing Modernist masterpieces, it has been repaid on an enormous scale. That thirst for “seeing and making things not seen before”, as he once described it, is among the many aspects of Cage's life and career that have prompted his phenomenal cultural influence. And as the centenary of his birth is celebrated on 5 September, his flame continues to burn as brightly as ever in the visual arts. So many tendencies in contemporary art, from its emphasis on time as a theme and material to the pronounced role of chance, a promiscuous leaping between media and disciplines and the bestowal of power on the viewer, were at least in part pioneered by Cage.

In his lifetime (he died in 1992), he inspired everyone from Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns to Ellsworth Kelly, the American Minimalists, the Fluxus group and the artists behind happenings and performance and conceptual art. And since his death, the momentum has continued. The variety of recent works directly inspired by *4'33"* alone is remarkable, with Philippe Parreno, Tacita Dean and Katie Paterson among those to have made reference to the work.

In the introduction to “Notations: the Cage Effect Today”, the exhibition he co-organised earlier this year at Hunter College in New York, Joachim Pissarro, the director of the galleries and a professor of art history, recalls that Rauschenberg said that he felt Cage had “authorised” him to do things he had thought impossible. “Jasper Johns said the same thing,” Pissarro tells *The Art Newspaper*. “Both of them looked up to Cage as an elder and somebody who had simply dared to do things that open up paths of thinking, of creation or ‘cross-semination’ that they didn’t think was possible. When you try to define Cage’s role in the art world, it is impossible to come up with fewer than five or six attributes: he is, of course, a composer, but he was also a thinker, a philosopher, a draughtsman, a printmaker, a lecturer and a poet. He was a pivotal force of inspiration for so many different people.”

The artist and curator Jeremy Millar, who was behind “Every Day is a Good Day”, the exhibition of Cage's prints, watercolours and drawings that opened at the Baltic in Gateshead in 2010 before touring to five other UK venues, suggests that Cage's influence is “difficult to describe without becoming pseudo-mystical”. A crucial aspect of Cage's approach was that

“he wasn’t standing in front of the work of art and then creating it from some sort of loftier position”, Millar says. “He was responding to circumstance, in the same way that a work, in its moment of coming into the world, responds to circumstance. It feels like he was material in the same way that a work is material, and they adapt to one another, and then they feed back, and you get this incredibly complex relationship.”

He cites footage of Cage making his “River Rocks and Smoke” series of paintings, in which he drew around stones on paper in watercolour. “Cage is saying: ‘Oh, my god, it is so beautiful,’” Millar says. “Ordinarily, an artist saying that about a painting they are making would be an abomination. But when Cage does it, it feels like it’s because he is watching a sunset or listening to traffic, or whatever else you might find beautiful. It feels like he is part of a process that includes the painting that is being made, and none of it has any precedence, none of it has a greater importance.”

For Joachim Pissarro, this approach is linked to Cage’s repeated definition of himself as an anarchist, who is “fundamentally about deregulating the modes of the creation of art”, Pissarro says.

The artist Christian Marclay, like Cage, has bridged the musical and art worlds, gaining attention first for his radical use of turntables in the 1980s before establishing himself as a leading video installation artist, particularly with *The Clock*, 2010, a 24-hour video constructed from samples of countless films. Marclay met Cage and worked with the composer’s partner, the influential choreographer and dancer Merce Cunningham, as well as collaborators such as the composers Christian Wolff and Takehisa Kosugi.

In August, he created a work for the Cage centenary concert at the BBC Proms entitled “Baggage”, featuring the Scottish Philharmonic Orchestra playing their instrument cases. “I titled it ‘Baggage’ because it is a pun on the musical cases, but also because John Cage can be thought of as cultural baggage, a weight that is hard to deal with, in the same way that he had to revolt against his masters like [Arnold] Schoenberg,” Marclay says. “It is always this love-hate relationship, of course—you learn so much from it, but then you have to move on. You can’t just be doing the same thing.”

Marclay says that Cage’s lesson was to make us listen. “With a classical piece of music, if you have heard it before, it triggers your memory of that past experience, so you never have that fresh ear. You can easily sit back and relax and slip into this almost unconscious state,” he says. “But with Cage, you have to be on the edge of your seat, always active as a listener. In a way, the music only exists through you, through the listener.”

This is a fundamentally Cagean idea—an insistence on the primary role of the audience. “You have to be involved as a participant and make choices,” Marclay says. “That was a lesson Cage learned from Duchamp—that the viewer continues the work of art.”

Duchamp's presence cannot be underestimated. According to Carlos Basualdo, who is co-organising "Dancing Around the Bride: Cage, Cunningham, Johns, Rauschenberg and Duchamp" with Erica Battle at the Philadelphia Museum of Art this autumn, Cage identified very early on with Dadaist tendencies, recognising Duchamp's importance as early as 1935.

The pair met in 1942 and became firm friends in the five years before the artist's death in 1968. Duchamp coached Cage in the art of chess, leading to a 1968 performance in which their chess moves inspired sound and light. One of the crucial weapons in Cage's armoury, his exploitation of chance events, particularly in his use of the ancient Chinese divination text, the I Ching, was a fundamental Duchampian trait.

"Duchamp was in Cage's mind, but he arrived at chance procedures independently of him," Basualdo says. Chance, he says, "allowed them to bridge the boundaries between art and life; that is the way they both employed it. I don't think Cage was really thinking about Duchamp, but then later on he recognised a lot of the elements that were important for him in Duchamp's work and so adopted him as a predecessor." It is likely that Cage also pointed Rauschenberg and Johns towards Duchamp, and thus helped to inspire the post-war rediscovery that has ultimately led to Duchamp's pre-eminence today. "The Duchamp that we know is seen through the filter of the work of these people," Basualdo says.

That remarkable New York milieu, the band of brothers of Cage and Cunningham, Rauschenberg and Johns and their collaborators, is one of the crucibles in which today's art was formed. "If you see any of that early footage of [Cage and Cunningham] driving around with Rauschenberg, it is pretty exhilarating," says the artist Tacita Dean. "There is a real avant-garde energy that you don't get so much any more." Dean feels that Cage's ability to move between disciplines owes much to that scene. "If you are hanging out with a dancer, a sculptor and a painter, you are going to widen your horizons. They were all open to each other's exchanges, and that is what gave them that multidisciplinary vocabulary. I am not sure how much they would have had that, had they been solitary people."

Dean paid tribute to that energy, and especially the lifelong relationship between Cage and Cunningham, in her film installation *Merce Cunningham Performs Stillness, 2007*, in which the choreographer, who died in 2009, performed a piece he had devised to accompany *4'33"*. Dean originally conceived the work when seeking to create a moment of silence in "Il Tempo del Postino", a sequence of performances at the Manchester International Festival in 2007. "Merce, interestingly enough, had never done a performance himself to that, but had used *4'33"* with his dancers," she says. "So it was always going to be him performing to Cage." It is a tremendously moving performance and film, as Cunningham pays homage to his late partner. "It's powerful, because you know that is what he is thinking about," Dean says. "He never expressed it verbally."

Dean acknowledges the influence of both Cage and Cunningham in her use of chance. "They had a more rigorous view of chance than I do," she says. "They had formulae for provoking chance. I am much more of a dilettante, but am entirely open and welcome chance whenever it happens. If something takes me in a different direction, then I'll follow it."

Gerhard Richter is another artist for whom chance plays a crucial role. His “Cage Paintings” are a dramatic tribute to the composer: the group of vast abstract works was so titled because Richter had been listening to his compositions while creating them. Mark Godfrey, who curated the recent Richter exhibition at Tate Modern, says that at the same time as he was making those paintings, Richter was developing other works with Cagean connections—the grid paintings formed from coloured squares inspired by his Cologne Cathedral window, which were shown at the Serpentine Gallery in 2008. “He set up a process to determine what the colours and the orientation would be in the grids,” Godfrey says. “In the studio, there were ping-pong balls with numbers on them, and he would select the ping-pong ball from a jar and the number would correspond to a colour, and that was how he determined how these small grid paintings would look. So in some ways, those works really do use Cagean processes of chance in order to determine not only what the colours are in each one, but their orientation. And what that goes to show is that two bodies of work made around the same time, but looking completely different—the ‘Cage Paintings’ made with squeegee and the others that were made as a result of the Cologne Cathedral window—have something to do with Cage in different ways.”

It seems unlikely that Cage’s significance will dwindle. When the Tanks at Tate Modern opened in July, their aim was to reflect the burgeoning disciplines of performance art, installation, and film and video, escaping from art’s traditional reliance on objects. Cage once wrote suspiciously of the tendency “to be secure in the thingness of a work, and thus to overlook, and place nearly insurmountable obstacles in the path of, instantaneous ecstasy”. Artists seeking that very immediacy have dominated the Tanks. “Always with Cage there is an ingrained fear of fetishism—fetishising the work of art, turning it into a sacred object,” says Joachim Pissarro. “He was very detached, in the best sense of the word, very much attempting not to place a burden and an oversized value on the work of art as an object.”

Jeremy Millar believes that spaces like the Tanks simply could not have existed without Cage’s pioneering work, and are a testament to his importance. Millar cites the authoritative Grove dictionary of music and musicians, which states that Cage “had a greater impact on music in the 20th century than any other American composer”. Millar says: “He is undoubtedly the most important composer of the second half of the 20th century and possibly the most influential artist of the second half of the 20th century. And to say that this might be understating things is true. It is almost as though he has changed everything—what we think of now as art—in the same way Duchamp did.”